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Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/linged



Changes in attitude: Evaluative language in secondary school and university history textbooks

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 October 2016
Received in revised form 1 November 2017
Accepted 11 December 2017
Available online xxx

Keywords:

Appraisal framework
History textbooks
Evaluative language
Systemic Functional Linguistics
Historical discourse

ABSTRACT

There is much disagreement among education specialists about how history textbooks should represent the past and engage with alternative perspectives toward it at different stages of schooling. This article reports findings from a quantitative study comparing the ways explicit evaluative language is used in secondary school and university history textbooks. The study examines various types of evaluative acts including judgments of people, construals of their emotions, and evaluations of inanimate historical entities. It also groups evaluative acts in terms of the discourse entities that are performing them (i.e., historical actors, the authorial voice, or other historians/interpreters of the past). Key findings include a higher overall occurrence of explicit evaluation in the secondary school texts, extensive reliance on emotional language in both groups of texts, and little difference between the two groups in their engagement with other members of the history discipline.

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1. Introduction

A great deal of research has been carried out using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) methods to examine the ways history textbooks communicate sociocultural values and position learners to take up particular views toward the past (e.g., Achugar, 2007, 2009; Barnard, 2000; Coffin & Derewianka, 2009; Cullip, 2007; de Oliveira, 2010; Derewianka & Coffin, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2014; Hashiba, 2010; Martin, Maton, & Matruglio, 2010; Moss, 2010; Myskow, 2017, in press-a, in press-b; Oteíza, 2003; Tann, 2010; Unsworth, 1999; Veel & Coffin, 1996). Much of this research has looked at how various, often contentious, historical topics are represented in textbooks across different educational contexts, showing how these books communicate ideologically-motivated perspectives of the past while presenting themselves as even-handed and disinterested repositories of knowledge. The majority of these studies have focused on ideational and textual meanings, looking especially at how nominalizations and other types of grammatical metaphor that can be used to pack information into complex noun phrases (see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) are employed by authors to “elide the human agency that lies behind events” (Coffin, 1997, p. 212), “present a deterministic view of history” (Moss, 2010, p. 71), and even “whitewash heinous actions” (Barnard, 2000, p. 3).

Few of these studies, however, have explored the actual interpersonal language of these texts, including the explicit evaluations that are performed about historical actors and past events by the authorial voice and other discourse participants (see Oteíza, 2003 and Coffin, 1997). Moreover, research up to now has been firmly focused on secondary school textbooks—though courses at the university level have also been found to “depend heavily” on textbooks (Cohen, 2005, p. 1405). Cohen’s (2005) study of nearly 800 history course syllabi at US colleges and universities found that “fully one-third of U.S. history surveys in which a textbook is assigned make use of no other books” while only “a small minority of those courses use the primary-source reader that can be purchased with their textbooks” (p. 1407). Despite the prominent role textbooks play in university classrooms, little is known about the ways these books evaluate the past and how they might differ from secondary school ones in the types of evaluations that are used and the kinds of discourse participants who perform them.

Much debate exists among history education specialists about how the past should be represented at different stages of schooling. Some scholars have offered highly critical perspectives of secondary school textbooks for their tendency to provide upbeat nation-building narratives that blur the distinction between past and present and promote national and group cohesion over rigorous historical inquiry. Seixas (2000) refers disparagingly to these as “enhancing collective memory” or “the best story” approaches to history instruction (pp. 21–22). Some have encouraged textbook authors at the university level to “resist the conservative tendencies of textbook editors” by providing more critical perspectives on past

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2017.12.001>
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events (Spring, 1991, p. 197). It is unclear, however, if these two groups of textbooks differ in this regard, as research has focused almost exclusively on secondary school books.

Another important criticism of history textbooks is that their rhetorical style is often markedly different from the way historians write, contributing to what Wineburg (1991) calls the “breach between the school and the academy”. Unlike scholarly works of disciplinary history that are characterized by a highly visible authorial voice that frequently intrudes into the discourse to offer its own evaluations of it, history textbooks “typically focus tightly on facts, events, and people” and are by comparison “voiceless” (Paxton, 1999, p. 316–317). This absence of authorial voice results in what Paxton (1999) describes as “a deafening silence that reigns between those who write history textbooks and the K-12 students who read them” (p. 333). University-level textbooks have also been a target of criticism in this regard. Spring (1991) observes that many textbooks at this level “convey the impression that scholars agree on a particular body of knowledge” and recommends instead that authors focus on producing an “original synthesis or interpretation [that] can make a contribution to their field” (p. 197). Such textbooks could provide valuable opportunities to familiarize learners with the rhetorical style and disciplinary conventions of the field, perhaps even playing a role in apprenticing them into the history profession.

The notion of ‘author visibility’ is complicated, however, by the fact it is used in the literature to describe a diverse range of rhetorical features. On the one hand, it seems to be associated with the ways authors inject themselves into the text by advancing *their own* views or “personal interpretation” (Monte-Sano & Reisman, 2016, p. 283) toward the subject-matter. On the other hand, it describes a rather different set of language features associated with explicit and implicit disciplinary engagement. Paxton (1999, p. 320) uses the term in connection with rhetorical conventions that signal explicit disciplinary activities such as the use of “footnotes, endnotes, parenthetical comments, as well as other techniques designed to lay bare the fact-finding process”. Crismore’s (1983) pioneering research on metadiscourse in history texts catalogues a number of less explicit forms of disciplinary engagement including the use of hedges (*may, might*) and other resources for modifying the author’s degree of certainty. The notion of ‘author visibility’, therefore, appears to have a very broad meaning, referring not only to how authors put forward their own explicit interpretations of the subject-matter but how they take up a more disciplinary posture by evaluating the discourse under construction and interacting with the views of others.

A third issue with history textbooks is the pedagogical concern that their language should be tailored to the cognitive and linguistic abilities of the learners who read them. Such pedagogically-motivated styles of writing are associated with what have been called “considerate texts” (Armbruster, 1984). McKeown and Beck (2010) propose various ways textbooks can be modified to make them more engaging and comprehensible to students, including greater “connectivity” between the reader and the text through the use of more overtly emotional language that “draw[s] connections between events and agents’ emotional responses to events” (p. 17). While these ‘considerate texts’ appear to contrast with the more discipline-oriented authorial voices of professional or “adult history” (Paxton, 1999, p. 321), there is at least one area where they appear to overlap. According to Crismore (1983, p. 29), a feature of considerate texts is that they provide an “author perspective on the content”. This inclusion of the writer’s own view toward the subject-matter also suggests a more ‘visible author’—but one that seems to perform a pedagogical rather than a disciplinary function to make texts more comprehensible to learners by explicitly ‘spelling out’ opinions or evaluations of the content for them.

The present study aims to provide more insight into these issues by examining various types of evaluative meanings and the discourse participants who perform them in textbooks at both the secondary school and university levels. For coding evaluative meaning, the study uses Martin and White’s (2005) SFL-based Appraisal framework (see Coffin, 2002, 2006; Linares, 2015; Linares, Morton, & Whittaker 2012, pp. 220–227; Miller, Mitchell, & Pessoa 2014, 2016; Morton & Linares, 2016; Myskow, 2017, *in press-a*, *in press-b*; Oteiza, 2003; Oteiza & Pinuer, 2013, 2016 for other studies using the Appraisal framework to analyze historical discourse). Of particular relevance to this study is the area of the Appraisal framework called Attitude, which is concerned with the types of evaluations made about people (Judgment), historical entities (Appreciation), as well as the expression of emotion (Affect). The paper also uses Myskow’s (*in press-a*, *in press-b*) Levels of Evaluation framework to track the types of discourse participants performing the evaluations (i.e., historical actors; the authorial voice of the texts; and other interpreters of the past such as historians).

Together, these frameworks provide a fine-grained analysis of evaluative language in secondary school and university level textbooks and in doing so, they offer insights into the three issues raised in this section. First, a detailed analysis of the various Attitude subcategories shows whether the university level textbooks provide more critical or contentious perspectives toward the past than secondary school textbooks. Second, the Levels of Evaluation framework, which tracks the various discourse participants performing evaluations (including the authorial voice), lends insight into the extent to which authors are made ‘visible’ by making their own views explicit or engaging with alternative views toward the past. Third, both frameworks offer insight into the pedagogical notion of ‘considerate texts’—especially the extent to which emotions and other types of overtly attitudinal language is used to evaluate the past.

To explore these issues, the article examines the following two questions: To what extent do secondary school and university textbooks differ with respect to:

- (1) Types of evaluations: people (Judgment), things (Appreciation) and construal of emotion (Affect)?
- (2) Sources of evaluation: historical actors; the authorial voice; other historians?

2. Methods and materials

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger research project exploring the evaluative language used in Canadian secondary school and university textbooks. All textbook chapters selected for analysis deal with Canada’s involvement in World War I—a topic that was chosen because of the prominent role it plays in Canadian history and its association with Canada’s ‘coming of age’ as a modern, independent nation (see Berton, 1986; Vance, 1997). Also, with the various centennials marking key events of the war and its aftermath (including its end in November 1918), the Great War was considered a timely topic for the focus of this study.

Four chapters from four separate textbooks were selected for analysis (two chapters from secondary school and two from university textbooks). The secondary school chapters are from government-approved textbooks in the western Canadian province of British Columbia for Grade 11 Social Studies (ages 16–17) and Grade 12 History (ages 17–18) (see Myskow’s (*in press-b*) for a detailed analysis of the multimodal features of the Grade 11 Social Studies textbook). The other two chapters are from prominent Canadian history textbooks used at the university level. Table 1

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