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Evaluation and instruction in PhD examiners' reports: How grammatical choices construe examiner roles

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ABSTRACT

One of the principal roles of a PhD examiner is to judge 'both the potential of the researcher and the quality of the research' (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, & Lovat, 2014, p. 986). While examiners may be guided by criteria supplied by universities, the descriptors they are provided with can often be open to interpretation. Interpreting an examiner's report can present a challenge to students and their supervisors, exacerbated by the often ambiguous use of language in the reports.

This article examines the discourses of evaluation and instruction in 142 PhD examiners' reports on theses submitted at an Australasian university. The paper draws on systemic functional linguistics, in particular transitivity (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), in order to examine the reports.

The study revealed that examiners can adopt up to 10 "roles" in their reports, each of which can be co-present in a single report. The inability to differentiate between these roles, we argue, is potentially frustrating for the audience of the reports (candidates, supervisors, departmental heads, etc.), particularly when interpreting whether a comment in the text represents an evaluation, an instruction, or an aside.

By revealing these multiple, yet co-present, roles in examiners' reports and their associated linguistic realisations, we hope to raise examiners' awareness of the implications of the language they use when writing their reports as well as draw thesis supervisor and institutional attention to the ambiguities inherent in this underexplored genre.

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1. Introduction

In the introduction to their study of academic evaluation, Hyland and Diani (2009, p. 1) note that "what academics mainly do is evaluate". A study by Langfeldt and Kyvik (2011) examined the multiple roles researchers play as evaluators in the course of their academic lives. Often these roles have a gatekeeping function as researchers "provide or deny access to opportunities for fellow colleagues to do research, to publish research, and to get tenure or promotion" (p. 199). One of the key roles identified in the study was that of "the examiner" – an assessor of doctoral dissertations. Identified as "one of the more demanding evaluation tasks for researchers" (p. 201), this high-stakes task that academics routinely perform certifies the qualifications of new academics. Yet, until recently, there has

been little research on how academics perform this task. The study reported on in this article focuses on the roles that examiners adopt in this process as seen through an analysis of the reports they submit after having examined the students' dissertations or theses.¹ The term *role*, as with most terms, is slippery and often ambiguous, often best understood through exemplifications; notwithstanding this, we perceive *roles* as the various social roles we assign ourselves (friend, mentor, adviser, acquaintance, stranger), based on our choices in language. In the context of a PhD examiner's report, these 'social roles' are examiner, institution, expert, editor, supervisor, peer, evaluator, reporter, commentator and viva examiner role, each one identifiable by the co-presence of a number of linguistic features.

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¹ We use these terms interchangeably as the North American usage favours 'dissertation', while the Australian/British usage prefers 'thesis'.

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Doctoral assessment differs from undergraduate assessment in that students are provided with the opportunity to respond to the examiners' feedback and revise the thesis. In this sense, doctoral assessment is more akin to journal peer review (Kumar & Stracke, 2017; Paltridge, 2017). Early research into the nature of PhD examiners' reports emerged in the final decades of the twentieth century (Johnston, 1997; Nightingale, 1984) and gained momentum by the mid-2000s (see, for example, Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, & Dally, 2004; Lovat, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2008). While there is a burgeoning interest in better understanding the PhD assessment processes (Denicolo, 2003) and in examining the language of examiners' reports (Holbrook et al., 2014; Starfield et al., 2015), research on PhD examination remains "slight and exploratory at best" (Lovat et al., 2008, p. 67).

According to Holbrook et al. (2014, p. 986), one of the principal roles of a PhD examiner is to judge "both the potential of the researcher and the quality of the research". In order to do this, examiners may be guided by criteria supplied by universities; however, as Mullins and Kiley (2002, p. 380) have shown, experienced examiners do not necessarily follow the "institution-specific criteria" in making judgements about thesis quality. Delamont, Atkinson, and Pary (2000, p. 41, *emphasis added*) further point to the largely tacit nature of doctoral assessment and the complexities of adhering to institutional criteria which are not necessarily well articulated, when they comment that "[T]he *real* role of the examiner is to judge whether the student has mastered appropriate *indeterminate* skills and displayed the right *indeterminate* qualities". According to Martin and White (2005, p. 138) in their work on the language of evaluation, the adjective *real*, as in this case, is being used as a linguistic resource to blur the boundaries between categories. It suggests, therefore, that there are other roles that examiners adopt when writing their reports. Although these additional and oft-overlapping roles, may be considered peripheral in the eyes of a university – because they do not align with the criteria – they may be considered equally real in the eyes of the examiners, who see their work as more complex than simply responding to university criteria.

Lovat, Holbrook, and Hazel (2002) also noted that "examiners' written reports on research theses are idiosyncratic and individualistic documents, despite efforts to standardise or structure them" and that "examiners rarely wrote their reports in a form that complied with university guidelines". In noting this tendency, Lovat et al. (2002) also drew attention to the "range of roles" that the examiner may assume when composing the written report, asking "When does the examiner assume the supervisor mantle", and, for example, adopt the role of thesis editor or teacher? Holbrook et al. (2004, p. 113) noted that examiners often tended to "adopt a 'supervisor' role", attempting to "guide the candidate as to how the thesis can be improved".

According to Kumar and Stracke (2011), examiners perceive the thesis not as a completed text, but rather as a work in progress. As such, the majority of examiners provide feedback regardless of their recommendation, thus highlighting at least the dual role of the examiner as assessor and feedback provider; that is, examiners provide summative assessment and formative feedback (Holbrook et al., 2014; Kumar & Stracke, 2011). Mullins and Kiley (2002) identified differing student and examiner understandings of the roles of examiners. Whereas examiners viewed their feedback as primarily formative, students interpreted it as summative, suggesting an absence of shared understanding of the function of doctoral assessment. Holbrook et al.'s (2014) detailed study of the content of examiners' reports identified both summative and formative content in the reports and the importance of judgement and evaluation in this process. In a recent study, Kumar and Stracke (2017, p. 2) argue that examiners need "to see their role as teachers who should provide formative feedback to doctoral candidates". Distinguishing

between summative and formative assessment may help candidates recognise some of the different roles the examiner adopts, which, in turn, may help them choose which emendations need to be attended to.

Previous research on examiners' reports has, therefore, alluded to the notion of 'role' in helping understand the nature of evaluation and instruction in examiners' reports on PhD theses, but, to date, there have been no linguistically-led analyses of these roles within a large corpus of examiners' reports. As previous research has also identified the largely tacit nature of examiner judgement and the tendency of examiners to take little cognisance of institutional criteria, our study may go some way to assist PhD students and their supervisors interpret and respond to these reports, thereby facilitating successful thesis completion. As our study suggests that examiners indeed adopt multiple roles when drafting their reports, it may serve to raise institutional awareness of the need to provide more explicit guidance to examiners and raise examiner awareness of the need to more clearly distinguish the functions of their comments.

This article analyses the grammatical choices in examiners' reports in order to identify the various roles that examiners may adopt during the process of writing their reports and to correlate certain linguistic features with these roles. Thus, we have two overarching questions: How can the multiple roles and functions of the examiner be identified from linguistic features in the reports? When linguistic features are shared by more than one role, how can the reader distinguish between the roles? By revealing these multiple, yet co-present, roles in examiners' reports and their associated linguistic realisations, we hope to raise not only examiners' awareness of the implications of the language they use when writing their reports in terms of roles but also draw these to the attention of doctoral supervisors and higher education institutions.

While previous research has begun to identify the differing functions of examiner feedback in these reports, our study draws on systemic functional linguistics (SFL), to correlate these roles with specific linguistic features (Eggs, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2007; Martin & White, 2005). The study provides a fine-grained analysis of examiners' grammatical choices, which elucidates the way in which the language of evaluation (see Starfield et al., 2015) is deployed in examiners' reports.

Before further developing the analytic framework on which we draw, and before describing our method, we present the context of our study. The roles are then introduced and explained with linguistic exemplifications from our data, after which a discussion is given in which we position our findings within previous literature on the topic. The concluding remarks suggest implications for further research.

2. Our study context

The study reported on here is part of a larger study examining doctoral assessment regimes in England and New Zealand, both countries in which a *viva voce* or oral defence is included in the assessment process (see Lovat et al. (2015) for more detail on the larger study). We examined 142 PhD examiners' written reports on 50 PhD theses submitted to a university in New Zealand. The corpus comprised three examiners' reports (apart from eight theses for which we received only two reports each) on each of the theses. At the university in question, students submitted a completed thesis which was sent to three examiners; one of these is from the University and is known as the Internal Examiner and another is external to the university but internal to New Zealand. The third examiner is typically from a university outside New Zealand. An additional person involved in the process is the Convenor, a senior academic, who manages the examination process and chairs the

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