Rhetorical Analysis of Engagement in Discussion Section of Doctoral Dissertations Written by Kurdish Native Speakers

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Abstract—**Academic writing is commonly regarded as facilitating communication between authors and readers. Therefore, scholars are expected to present information about the external world through their texts and employ language to acknowledge, construct, and foster social connections. Textual engagement requires significant linguistic and cognitive efforts, regardless of the writers' backgrounds. It involves complex knowledge, skills, and familiarity with social practices, which require explicit teaching and time. Even native English speakers find it challenging to acquire the necessary academic skills and social practices of the academic setting due to the discursive nature of higher education. This study explores the level of engagement in doctoral dissertation discussion sections written by Kurdish native speakers. To achieve this objective, the researcher analyzed eight randomly selected doctoral dissertations in English applied linguistics authored by Kurdish native speakers, employing Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory. The study identified each dialogic engagement resource's frequency of occurrence and functions providing explanations and examples. The findings indicated that the writers being studied utilized different dialogic resources to converse with their potential audience. In addition, they preferred to employ resources that fostered expansive dialog more often than those that limited it, possibly to reduce the chances of encountering rejection or opposition.**

Keywords—**Discussion section, Engagement, Kurdish native speakers, Martin and White's appraisal theory.**

I. Introduction

Academic writing is a challenging task that requires a deep understanding of the interconnected realms of knowledge (Seyyedi et al., 2023). Achieving this understanding involves identifying relevant sources, reading, comprehending, analyzing, and critically evaluating them within one's study. Formulating and either confirming or refuting a hypothesis, revising existing research, and constructing coherent arguments and discussions are all vital elements of academic writing. These tasks are challenging to achieve (Seyyedi and Amin, 2020). Moreover, the standard of scholarship expected at the doctoral level, particularly in a dissertation's discussion section, is superior to that of undergraduate and master's level students (Thompson et al., 2000).

Educational research has been widely criticized, highlighting its lack of rigor and usefulness (Oancea and Pring, 2008). Moreover, editors of research journals have raised concerns about the insufficient scholarship and basic research skills demonstrated in submitted papers (Onwuegbuzie and Daniel, 2005). Specifically, editors often find that the discussion sections of manuscripts are underdeveloped, and authors frequently struggle to effectively negotiate and refine the arguable aspects of their statements or use language to evaluate and manage interpersonal positions and relationships.

Furthermore, studies in the literature indicate that the concept of engagement in academic writing is not consistently applied and is relatively open to interpretation. According to Hyland (2005), engagement is a dimension in which authors acknowledge and interact with others, including their readers, enticing them to follow their arguments and involving them as active participants in the discourse. This idea can be distinguished from the related concept of stance, which pertains to how authors express themselves and convey their judgments, opinions, and commitments within the framework proposed by Hyland (2005). Recognizing that academic writing is a dialog in which both the writer and the reader participate, stance and engagement are crucial for developing a persuasive and effective academic document (Suleiman and Seyyedi, 2020).

On the other hand, some studies have highlighted the effects of specific engagement resources such as reader

pronouns, directives, and inquiries (Harwood and Giles, 2005). It is widely recognized that these elements enhance the connection between the writer and the reader and contribute to the overall writing quality. Regarding the engagement practices of novice academic writers, existing literature indicates that student authors significantly underutilize engagement strategies compared to experienced writers (Hyland, 2009; Hyland and Tse, 2004). However, limited studies have examined the topic of engagement specifically in the context of Ph.D.-level academic writing, particularly in the discussion section of the dissertation.

II. Martin and White's Appraisal Theory

Martin and White (2005) introduced a framework known as the appraisal framework (Fig. 1). Their aim in developing this framework was to go beyond conventional accounts of evaluating speakers and writers, certainty, commitment, and knowledge. In addition, they examined how the textual voice positions itself in relation to other voices and perspectives within the discourse. Consequently, this theoretical approach directs our attention toward analyzing "meanings in context" and their rhetorical impacts rather than focusing solely on grammatical forms. According to Martin and White (2005), language's grammar and discourse are perceived as a repertoire of resources that generate meanings rather than a set of rules for structuring communication (Martin and Rose, 2008).

Thus, the appraisal framework offers a comprehensive theoretical and descriptive system that captures the linguistic resources employed to convey the evaluative aspects of social experiences. Its goal is to enable a deeper understanding of the patterns of interpersonal meaning that extend beyond the mere expression of emotions in discourse. According to this model, intersubjectivity is constructed by individuals fulfilling specific social roles within particular social and cultural contexts, influencing and institutionalizing how emotions and opinions are linguistically encoded. In essence, the appraisal framework facilitates examining how intersubjectivity is encoded and elicited within discourse, considering both epistemological and interpersonal expressions. As appraisal operates within discourse semantics, it operates at a more abstract level than the lexico-grammatical level, allowing meanings to disperse across various lexico-grammatical systems, Martin and White (2005).

The appraisal system, operating within the discursive semantic framework presented by Martin and White (2005), provides a means of classifying interpersonal meanings closely connected to systems of speech function and negotiation (Martin and Rose, 2008). Martin (2012) emphasizes that this appraisal system complements the focus on interactive turn-taking in mood-based systems, shedding light on the "personal" aspect of interpersonal meaning. As a result, this appraisal model aligns with the emergence of a social intersubjective perspective on evaluation and introduces a supplementary understanding of interpersonal meanings that extend beyond grammar and its interpersonal systems, such as mood and modality.

The appraisal framework categorizes evaluation into three primary semantic systems or domains: engagement, attitude, and graduation. This comprehensive framework offers a systematic arrangement of the semantic resources employed in expressing and negotiating emotions, judgments, and value, as well as resources for intensifying and actively participating in these evaluations (Martin, 2004). The linguistic analysis focuses on the explicit and implicit manifestations of evaluation, which give rise to evaluative prosodies in discourse and can be encoded at a lexico-grammatical level using various resources.
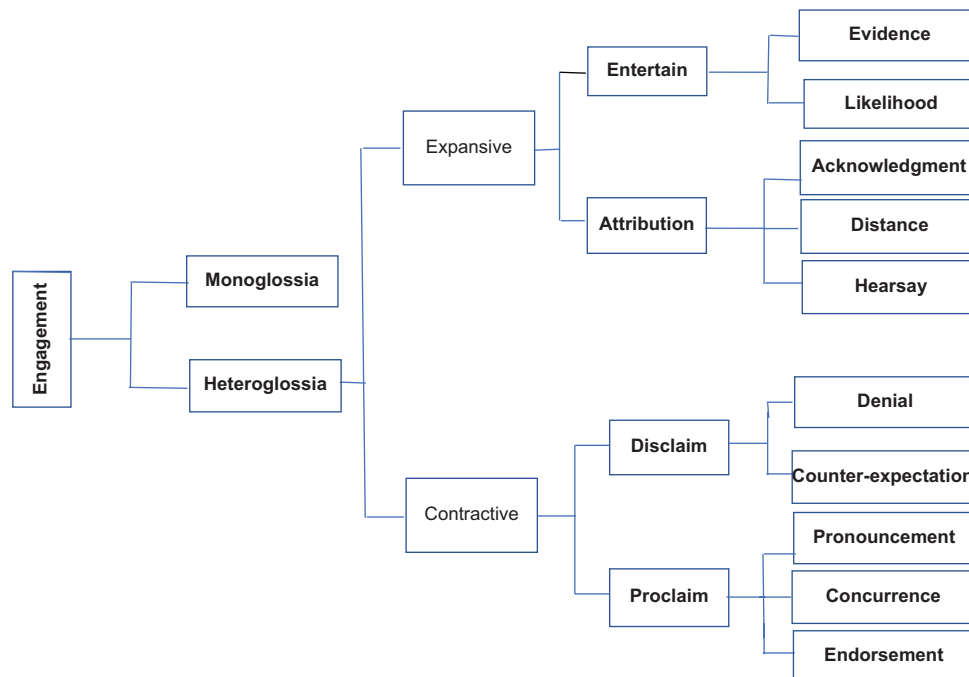

Fig. 1: The framework of appraisal adopted from Martin and White (2005).

A. Entertain

The writer or speaker employs entertain resources to indicate that their perspective is one of various possible positions or proposals. This approach creates an opportunity for dialog and allows for considering alternative viewpoints. The writer or speaker embraces these dialogic alternatives to express their subjectivity more explicitly, establishing a space for negotiating differing perspectives. These linguistic resources serve the purpose of making the text's audience aware that not everyone shares the same values being advocated. By dialogizing and validating opposing views, the writer/speaker increases the likelihood of solidarity with those holding such views. In this study, the entertain category, which encompasses likelihood and evidence, includes linguistic resources that can be observed in the following sentences from the study's corpus.

1. "Reading may be [entertain: likelihood] poorer, and frequencies of errors distinguish good and poor writing"
2. "Learners appear to [entertain: evidence] benefit from their endeavor."

B. Attribution

Using attribution, the writer or speaker distances themselves from the proposal presented within the text's internal authorial voice. This distancing is achieved by attributing the proposal to an external source through reported speech or thought, quotations, citations, or references. As Martin and White (2005) described, attribution demonstrates a dialogic quality by associating the ideas expressed in the text with external voices. However, there are different types of attribution resources employed. The authorial voice utilizes acknowledgment and hearsay attributions when it remains impartial toward the presented proposition. In contrast, distance attributions are used to explicitly separate the internal authorial voice from the cited external voice or to absolve the authors of accountability for the reported information. Instances of these attribution resources can be identified in examples 1, 2, and 3 (below), as demonstrated in the current study context.

1. "He who has proposed this idea has presented [attribution: acknowledgment] a theoretical package that……".
2. "They (2007) claimed that [attribution: distance] the internet is interactive……".
3. "The "virtual learning" [attribution: hearsay] effectively facilitates educational experiences outside a traditional classroom setting."

C. Disclaim

The writer or speaker employs disclaim to dismiss or portray alternative viewpoints as unsuitable or inadequate explicitly. This dismissal is restrictive, as it portrays the alternative positions as unjustifiable and useless. Disclaim resources can be categorized into two groups: Denial and counter-expectation. In denial (or negation), the writer or speaker brings up an alternative viewpoint, recognizes its presence, and then dismisses it. Conversely, in counter-expectation, the writer or speaker presents the current proposition as a contrasting or unexpected position about what might have been anticipated. The author provides an explicit instance of employing denial and counter-expectation within a single sentence, as illustrated in examples 1 and 2 below.

1. "Indirect speech acts are a feature of language that has nothing [disclaim: denial] in common with set expressions."
2. "However [disclaim: counter-expectation], they may come as parts of such acts."

D. Proclaim

By employing proclaim resources, the writer or speaker directly addresses and overpowers challenges or contradictions, aiming to limit the scope of alternative perspectives in the conversation. These resources serve a dialogic purpose by portraying the writer or speaker as actively involved in a dialog with their audience. Furthermore, they are considered contractive as they establish a universally accepted shared value while excluding alternative positions from the discourse.

The proclaim resources can be classified into three main groups: Concurrence, endorsement, and pronouncement. Writers or speakers use engagement resources in the concurrence category to express their agreement with their audience. Endorsement resources are employed to show that propositions originating from exterior sources are accurate, adequate, and valid. The writer or speaker employs engagement resources in the pronouncement category to overtly interject or intervene in the ongoing dialog (Loghmani et al., 2020). Examples of pronouncement exhibit dialogic characteristics as they acknowledge opposing positions and are contractive as they actively challenge, confront, or oppose those counter positions. Instances of these proclaim resources are provided explicitly in examples 1, 2, and 3 below.

1. "Participants clearly [proclaim: concurrence] indicated their consciousness of the audience, leading them to write with a focus on their intended readership."
2. "The listener can deduce or infer the intended meaning ... [proclaim: endorsement]".
3. "Thus, we find that utterances containing set expressions pose no problem for the speech act theory and can fit into the normal conditions [proclaim: pronouncement]."

III. Methodology

The study mainly aimed to examine the engagement level in the discussion section of doctoral dissertations written by Kurdish native speakers. To achieve this, the researcher randomly selected a sample of eight doctoral dissertations in English applied linguistics written by Kurdish native speakers using Martin and White's (2005) framework. The researcher obtained these dissertations from the Islamic Azad University Library in Tabriz, Iran. To ensure the reliability

and validity of the dataset and eliminate any potential inconsistencies, the researcher manually coded instances of engagement found in the analyzed texts. This manual coding process involved identifying and categorizing different sub-systems of engagement according to Martin and White's (2005) framework (Fig. 1). Finally, the researcher explained the frequency of each sub-system of engagement in the analyzed texts. Given the fact that the length of the studied discussion sections varied, the frequency was measured per 1000 words for each engagement category. This allowed for a standardized text comparison, accounting for length variations.

IV. Findings

Table I displays the frequency, percentage, and frequency per 1000 words for every engagement resource utilized by the native Kurdish Ph.D. dissertation writers in their discussion sections.

Based on the results obtained from the study, the most frequently observed type of engagement was entertainment, which occurred 70 times, accounting for 37.03% of the occurrences. Disclaim and proclaim ranked as the second and third most frequent types of engagement, with 53 and 37 occurrences, accounting for 28.04% and 19.57%, respectively. On the other hand, attribution was the least frequent type of engagement, occurring 29 times, representing 15.34% of the occurrences.

V. Discussion

This research aimed to explore the strategic positioning of Ph.D. Kurdish native-speaker students specializing in English applied linguistics in their texts, considering other voices and the potential influence of their linguistic choices on their audience. For this purpose, a corpus of eight discussion sections from doctoral dissertations was meticulously chosen for analysis. The study specifically focused on examining four elements of the engagement system (entertain, attribute, disclaim, and proclaim) within the appraisal framework.

Entertain and attribute are dialogic expansions. Uttering entertaining statements widens the dialogic space by suggesting that the author's stance is just one of several possible perspectives. On the other hand, employing attributions separates the proposition from the author's voice by assigning it to external sources. Modal expressions (e.g., may, could, possible), appearance-related verbs (e.g., seem), mental or reporting verbs (e.g., I think, X says/argues), and adverbial adjuncts (e.g., according to) are commonly used linguistic

TABLE I
FREQUENCIES AND PERCENTAGES OF ENGAGEMENT SUBCATEGORIES

Type	Order	Occurrence	Percentage
Entertain	1	70	37.03
Disclaim	2	53	28.04
Proclaim	3	37	19.57
Attribution	4	29	15.34

tools for expanding dialogic spaces. Conversely, disclaim and proclaim are dialogic contractions. Language resources that typically work to narrow dialogic space include denials (e.g., not, never), adversative or counter-expectancy markers (e.g., but, however, on the contrary), intensifying adverbs or formulations (e.g., indeed, greatly, we must), and concurring formulations (e.g., obviously, as we know), among others.

Table I displays the frequencies of the four engagement categories (entertain, attribute, disclaim, and proclaim) observed in the texts of the analyzed doctoral dissertation discussion writers, ranked from the highest occurrence to the lowest.

The results of this study revealed that the writers under examination tended to use dialogically expansive engagement resources ($n = 99$, 52.37%) more frequently than dialogically contractive ones ($n = 90$, 47.61%). This indicates that the authors preferred to expand the range of value positions in their texts. This finding aligns with Fryer's (2013) research, which similarly identified a more significant proportion of linguistically expansive resources (66.51%) compared to contractive resources (33.49%) in a corpus of medical research articles. However, these results differ from Geng and Wharton's (2016) study, in which contractive resources were reported to be 50% more frequent than expansive resources. According to Geng and Wharton (2016), the authors in their study demonstrated a tendency to narrow down the range of alternative value positions. The inclination toward contractive resources can enhance the connection between the writer and reader in cases where the readers already acknowledge the author's expertise in a particular field or have no grounds to reject the author's viewpoint. However, it can weaken the sense of solidarity between the writer and reader when the readers are resistant, possess more knowledge than the author, or have substantial evidence contradicting the author's position.

The analysis of the frequency of engagement resources per 1000 words in the entire corpus revealed that the studied authors employed a wide range of dialogic resources to engage in dialogs with other voices actively. By doing so, they recognized their readers as active participants within the academic community to which they both belonged. However, a closer examination of each text demonstrated that some authors leaned more toward expansive engagement. In contrast, others leaned toward contractive engagement, and a few incorporated elements of both expansive and contractive approaches. The results underscore the challenge of formulating broad generalizations within a particular academic discipline and across academic writing. Each academic text possesses unique dialogic features influenced by factors such as the subject matter, research methodology, and intended audience. When composing academic texts, especially Ph.D. discussions, it is crucial to adeptly employ dialogic and interpersonal linguistic resources from the engagement system appropriately, thoroughly, and convincingly. This constitutes an essential component of the communicative competence required for native and non-native academic writers.

The current study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the corpus size used for analysis

was relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study relied on the analysis conducted by only two text analysts, introducing the possibility of subjectivity or bias in the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, the focus of the study was limited to academic texts within a single academic discipline, which may restrict the applicability of the results to other disciplines or genres. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, and further research with more extensive and diverse samples is recommended to provide a more comprehensive understanding. To address these limitations, researchers in discourse analysis could collaborate on similar appraisal-based studies, expanding the scope to academic texts from various other fields of study and utilizing larger corpora. This collaborative approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how dialogic resources are employed across different disciplines and within a broader context.

VI. Conclusion

Academic writing is commonly understood as a deliberate effort to promote interaction between writers and readers. As a result, scholars are anticipated to go beyond merely presenting objective information in their texts. They are also encouraged to utilize language that recognizes, constructs, and fosters social connections among individuals.

Identifying and classifying dialogic resources can be valuable in creating writing and reading materials. Proficient authors' texts can be used as models to develop authentic materials, especially for novice writers. Similarly, analyzing texts written by novice writers can help identify areas for improvement in existing writing courses. This instruction is essential for graduate students, mainly non-native English speakers.

To be inclusive, scholars from all disciplines should acquaint themselves with dialogic resources in the English language to actively engage in their respective academic communities. Therefore, it is crucial to include audience considerations, the dialogic nature of academic texts, stance-taking, and voice presentation in English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific Purposes courses, as these elements are universal features of academic writing. This approach aims to enhance students' communication, community, interpersonal, and personal skills, in addition to the four core skills necessary for successful academic writing.

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