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**On the function of stance-neutral formulations: Apparent neutrality as a powerful stance-constructing resource.**

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Abstract
This study explores the function of expressing external viewpoints with stance-neutral frames in academic writing. While a growing number of studies have established that appropriately evaluating external viewpoints is vital in advanced academic writing, the function of using stance-neutral formulations has long been unexplored despite the fact that many external viewpoints in academic writing are introduced into the discourse with a stance-neutral formulation. This study performs quantitative and qualitative analyses on the introductory chapters of PhD theses in history to explore the functions of these formulations. It finds that because of their absence of an evaluative stance, external propositions expressed without a specific stance flexibly realize various kinds of evaluative processes. Such processes involve taking into account the reader response to a proposition since the blankness in stance plays a role in constructing a discourse that gradually persuades the reader. This paper concludes that each of the neutrally presented viewpoints in the successfully constructed text uniquely forms an important strategic process of gradual value assignment and that stance-neutrality is not a representation of the writer’s failure to clarify stance. This paper emphasizes the need to implement the strategic use of stance-neutral formulations in pedagogic settings.
1. Introduction

The role that intertextual links play in constructing academic discourse has increasingly received attention. Extensive research has established that, for an academic text to be successful in its communication, it is crucial that the writer’s stance toward cited information be made clear (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Gilbert, 1976; Hyland, 1999, 2005; Hewings, Lillis & Vladimirou, 2010; Hood, 2006, 2010; Petrić, 2007; Samraj, 2013). Developing the academic skill to interpret and evaluate cited work is considered particularly important for students because positioning one’s research in relation to previous literature allows the establishment of a research justification for new study (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Charles, 2006a; Dong, 1996; Hunston, 1993; Tadros, 1989; Thomas & Hawes, 1994; Thompson & Ye, 1991). The relationship between citation and stance taking has been explored mainly through the use of reporting verbs (e.g., Hyland, 1999; Thompson & Ye, 1991). These studies revealed disciplinary variations in stance taking and citation practices, indicating that understanding the target discipline’s practices in taking a stance toward external viewpoints is a key to successful academic writing (Charles, 2006a, 2006b; Hyland, 2002; Thomas & Hawes, 1994). They also recognized that for novice writers and non-native speakers, learning to cite and evaluate previous literature appropriately is

particularly challenging due to the complexity of skillful stance manipulation (Abasi, Akbari & Graves, 2006; Charles, 2006a, 2006b; Dong, 1996; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Petrić, 2007; Petrić & Harwood, 2013).

However, there is a gap in research concerning the writer’s stance taking toward external viewpoints in the category of reporting verb use. For example, consider a sentence like, “X concluded that….” When such a sentence is presented in isolation from its context, it is unclear where the writer stands in relation to X’s conclusion. On the other hand, in a statement such as “X demonstrated that…,” the writer’s positive stance toward the proposition made by the author is clear, and in “X claimed that…,” the writer’s detachment from it is suggested. Although it is expected that the writer’s stance toward a neutrally presented external viewpoint may be on hold at the time of the statement and will get clarified in other parts of the text (Martin & White, 2005), the complexity causes analytical difficulty in identifying the writer’s stance since it cannot be analyzed with lexicogrammatical approaches such as the ones that classify reporting verbs.

While this issue has been left unexplored in EAP studies, the prevalence of stance-neutral formulations in expressing external propositions in advanced academic

1 This study adopts the convention of referring to a person citing as the “writer” and a person cited as the “author,” as established by Thompson and Ye (1991).
writing is not at all negligible. This is evident in Hyland’s (1999) cross-disciplinary investigation of 80 research articles from leading journals in eight disciplines in which ‘evaluation’ categories for reporting verbs that classify the writer’s commitment to the reported information are proposed (p. 350). The categories distinguish between \textit{factive} (words like “demonstrate” and “establish,” used to indicate acceptance); \textit{counter-factive} (words like “fail” and “exaggerate,” used to indicate disagreement); and \textit{non-factive} (words that give no clear signal) verbs. The non-factive category has four sub-categories: \textit{positive} (“advocate,” “argue,” etc.); \textit{neutral} (“address,” “cite,” etc.); \textit{tentative} (“believe,” “suggest,” etc.); and \textit{critical} (“attack,” “condemn,” etc.). The non-factive categories do not identify the writer’s stance toward the reported information, in that they contain no stance signaling on the part of the writer but only describe the original author’s stance. Hence, the sub-categories for non-factive verbs shift the entity to be analyzed from the writer to the reported author, leaving the writer’s stance toward the proposition unanalyzed (cf. the \textit{neutral} category in Thompson and Ye’s [1991] taxonomy). The result of Hyland’s research showed that as many as 79.4 percent of the total reporting verbs used to refer to external propositions in the corpus were non-factive, while only a small proportion of factive (19.0 percent) and counter-factive (1.6 percent) verbs were used (p. 351). Given that Hyland’s corpus

... comprised research articles from leading journals, it is improbable that the non-factive instances are the result of the article writers failing to interpret the quoted information.

Little, however, is known about the function of non-evaluative expressions for external propositions. Thompson & Ye (1991: 380) mention unsuccessful cases of non-native speakers writing academic papers in which they introduce evaluation in a crude way, describing that one of their “NNS [non-native speaker] students had evolved a simple system: if he disagreed with the quoted author, he generally wrote ‘X says/states ...’ (or a similar neutral reporting verb), sometimes going on to state explicitly that the reported opinion was incorrect; if, on the other hand, he agreed with the author, he wrote ‘X rightly says/states ....’” Although many non-native and novice writers of academic texts struggle to develop appropriate stance-taking strategies, given that it was quantitatively established that non-factive reporting verbs are dominant in successful academic writing (Hyland, 1999), there must be successful cases as well, which are expected to be playing an important role in academic text construction.

It has been recently reported that seemingly non-interpersonal elements, such as conditional clauses in academic writing, are part of a stance-construction process that builds a consensus between writer and reader (Warchal, 2010). A wide range of apparently non-interpersonal elements in text, including neutrality in introducing an

external work, may also be a part of stance-building processes that has yet to be revealed. In this study, on the premise that external sources play a crucial role in constructing the research space (e.g., Feak & Swales, 2011), I hypothesize that external propositions expressed using apparently stance-neutral formulations play a role in introductory parts of academic writing, albeit a different role from the one played by the use of value-laden formulations. I also draw on the recent observation that rhetorical functions and citation functions tend to overlap (Martínez, 2008; Samraj, 2013). As rhetorical functions in the introductions of academic writing straightforwardly realize a research space (Swales, 1990), it can be further hypothesized that external propositions expressed neutrally also relate to the realization of a research space by overlapping with the rhetorical functions that justify research.

In this study, I quantitatively investigate this hypothesis by conducting a distributional analysis of stance-neutral formulations across functional units that create a research space. I then search for explanations of the results, by investigating how external propositions that are expressed neutrally eventually get evaluated by the writer, gain a specific position in the text, and contribute to the writer justifying his or her new research.

As shown in the previous investigations of reporting verbs, micro- and
lexicogrammatical approaches inevitably fail to pursue the present objective. In this study, I utilize systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approaches in order to conduct a macro-dynamic analysis that does not rely on a specific type of lexicogrammar. SFL was described as a text-oriented approach to academic discourse (Coffin & Donohue, 2012), which views “language as resource—choices among alternatives” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 19). According to this view of SFL, a deployment of a stance-neutral formulation can be considered to be the writer’s strategic choice made among alternative value-laden formulations. In the analysis, this viewpoint enables me to seek explanations as to why the choice of a stance-neutral formulation has been made and how it serves as a meaning-making resource in relation to the other parts of the text.

Approaching an element in the text as a resource further enables me to consider that “each part is interpreted as functional with respect to the whole” (Halliday, 1985: xiii). A stance-neutral formulation is thereby analyzed in relation to the construction of the larger purposeful units by associating it with different resources in different parts of the text.

To be more specific, the approach I take in this paper is in line with SFL research that considers evaluation to be a process that is built up in a discourse as the text proceeds (Coffin, 2010; Coffin & O’Halloran, 2005; Macken-Horarik, 2003; Martin

& Rose, 2003). This paper shares a similar basis with the studies on “labelling discourse” (Charles, 2003; Francis, 1994; Moreno, 2004; Sinclair, 1993; Tadros, 1994), in which the status of a stretch of discourse is labeled not immediately but in a different part of the text, where a piece of discourse not only contributes to a dynamic interpersonal meaning-making process but also serves as a cohesive device (Hoey, 2001; Winter, 1982, 1992). As Tadros (1994) pointed out, citing another author requires the writer to commit to the fulfillment of the prediction signaled to the reader—that is, bringing in an external viewpoint obliges the writer to fully clarify his or her stance toward it. With this view, well-written texts do not fail to assign the writer’s stance to viewpoints that are brought into the text. Following a similar line of reasoning, this study is conducted with the understanding that stance assignment to neutrally introduced viewpoints is fulfilled elsewhere in the introduction.

The aim of this paper is to reveal, at least partly, the functions of prevailing stance-neutral formulations, which have been unexplored in academic discourse studies. The subsequent purpose is to suggest the pedagogical implications of the strategic use of such formulations.

2. Material

The corpus of this study comprises 40 introductory chapters taken from history PhD theses produced in the time period between 2000 and 2010 and submitted to eight Australian universities (see Appendix A). The theses were randomly selected from the National Library of Australia’s Trove service (http://trove.nla.gov.au/). The total size of the dataset is 230,707 words. There are multiple reasons why the introductory chapters of PhD history theses were chosen to serve as the research material. First, students’ writing is ideal for pedagogic purposes. Second, PhD theses were the preferred material among students’ writing because the long, cumulative discourse of theses is ideal for the observation of gradual value assignment to viewpoints (Bunton, 1999; Paltridge, 2002; Petrić, 2007; Thompson, 2005). Further, the fact that PhD theses have already undergone examination suggests that they represent fairly successful academic texts, which makes them suitable material for the purpose of observing successful stance-building strategies. Being taken from the history discipline additionally makes these texts a fertile site for the present purposes because the discourse of history is known to be particularly negotiative (e.g., Anderson & Day, 2005). The scope of the research is limited to one discipline so that the corpus won’t encounter interference produced by the inconsistency of disciplinary variations. Introductory chapters are preferred for the present purposes because it is a chapter in which the careful
construction of intertextual links is required to successfully create a research space (Feak & Swales, 2011; Swales, 1990).

3. Methodology

3.1. Identifying stance-neutral formulations: “acknowledge” resources

This study uses the category “acknowledge” to identify stance-neutral formulations that introduce external viewpoints. “Acknowledge” is a category within the system of engagement, which is an analytical framework for the writer/speaker’s stance toward viewpoints introduced into the text. The system of engagement is a sub-system within the appraisal system (Martin & White, 2005), which was developed in the SFL tradition for the purpose of exploring the interpersonal nature of text construction. In this study, the “acknowledge” category is used only for the purpose of identifying stance-neutral resources and not as part of a systematic analysis; hence, the other categories within the system are not considered. Providing a summary of the engagement system may nonetheless be necessary for delineating the concept of “acknowledge” resources.

The system of engagement is based on Bakhtinian dialogism, which views dialogic functions as forming the essential dynamic forces and movements that construct a text (Bakhtin, 1981). As such, the system’s primary “heteroglossic”
categories are defined by a text’s dialogic “contraction” and “expansion.” “Contract” resources close the dialogic space without allowing alternative viewpoints. For instance, the “endorse” category, one of the sub-categories of “contract”, represents such a formulation as “Their research shows that ...,” with which the writer closes the dialogic space by aligning with an external proposition, consequently not allowing alternative viewpoints. “Expand” resources, on the other hand, open up the dialogic space for alternative viewpoints. For instance, “distance”, one of the subcategories of “expand”, is represented with a formulation such as “Their research claims that ...”; by using such a phrase, the writer dissociates from an external proposition, opening up a dialogic space between the proposition and his or her own possible alternative viewpoint.

In Martin and White’s (2005) system of engagement, the “acknowledge” category is placed under “expand” for the reason that it expresses external propositions, opening up a dialogic space between the writer and the external proposition. “Acknowledge” can be signaled with formulations that introduce external propositions that the writer does not indicate his or her stance toward, such as, “According to X, ...”; “In view of X, ...”; “X believes that ...”; “X argues that ...”; “X concludes that ...”; “X made the criticism that ...”; “In X’s account, ...”; “Many people believe that ...”; “It is commonly believed that ...”; “… is recognized as ...”; “… can be seen as
...”; and so forth.

It is important, however, that while specific formulations tend to signal specific engagement functions, they don’t serve as a primary identification criterion (Martin & White, 2005). Engagement resources orient dialogic dynamism, and as such, “acknowledge” resources are identified by their specific dialogic feature; that is, they are identified by the feature through which the speaker/writer introduces externally sourced viewpoints toward which he or she does not, at least temporarily, indicate a clear stance. This means that the same lexical features do not necessarily indicate a specific engagement feature. For example, in “Hauer did not consider Jefferson’s linguistic studies as a function of his nationalism” (Text 38: 23, underlining added), consider is coded as acknowledge, whereas in “Part Two (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) considers commercial law, and Part Three (Chapters 9, 10 and 11) considers criminal law” (Text 16: 34, underlining added), the two instances of consider(s) are not identified as “acknowledge”. This is because consider in the first example introduces a viewpoint, while the latter two don’t, without creating a salient dialogic space or serving as a key element for constructing a negotiative discourse.

Because “acknowledge” resources are defined in terms of the dialogic space

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2 Halliday’s (1985) discussion of seeking a “quoted equivalent” is useful here to make such a distinction.

the writer creates and not in terms of a specific type of lexicogrammar, such as reporting verbs, coding these resources in the corpus enables the analysis to include neutrally presented external propositions regardless of their different lexicogrammatical realizations. Being autonomous from lexicogrammar further means that the analysis does not rely on a preset unit of analysis (Martin & White, 2005) because, as presented, engagement resources are defined in terms of dialogic dynamism. To be more specific, the coding for this study presupposes that “acknowledge” resources are the points in the discourse where dialogic movements occur. That is to say, every “acknowledge” resource identified in this study is counted as a single instance regardless of whether it consists of multiple words, phrases, or one word. This way, the study can compare the distributions of “acknowledge” resources between different functional units by calculating the ratio of “acknowledge” occurrences to the number of words that constitute a particular type of unit. More detailed methods for coding and distributional measurement will be presented in Section 3.3. *Corpus processing*.

Following the engagement-analytical practice that considers non-integral citations as “monogloss” (non-heterogloss/bare assertion) (Martin and White, 2005; White, 2012), I do not take into account non-integral citations and footnotes. “Acknowledge” resources can also occur within direct quotes; however, direct quotes
are excluded from the analysis because coding their “acknowledge” resources would complicate the analysis due to the difficulty of treating the dialogic position of the original author’s deployment of these resources. Direct quotes excluded from the analysis are also excluded from the word count of the distributional analysis so as to ensure statistical accuracy.

3.2. Identifying functional units

I conduct the coding of functional units in order to examine the distributional differences of “acknowledge” resources between the two units; the first unit that asserts the importance of research is termed a “positive” unit, and the second unit that points out problems with research is termed a “negative” unit. I do this in order to explore the overlapping of “acknowledge” resources with functional units that construct research spaces. These two units—which, in this study, are referred to as “functional units”—are largely equivalent to the respective moves in the creating a research space (CARS) model (Swales, 1990, 2004); namely, Move 1, “establishing territory,” and Move 2, “establishing a niche.” I make a slight modification to the identification criteria of Move 1 and Move 2 in the CARS model in order to more comprehensively include “acknowledge” resources occurring in research justification processes. Specifically, I
include some elements that are categorized as Move 3 in the CARS model in the positive and negative units. For instance, the CARS model would classify a part of discourse that asserts the importance of a particular method, approach, or other strategy, as Move 3, “occupying a niche” (Swales, 1990; see also Samraj, 2002 for “cyclical moves” and “sub-moves”), with the understanding that mentioning such aspects of research is a part of previewing the writer’s new research. In this study, such an element would be simply classified as a positive unit since it asserts the importance of a research method that the thesis writer presents in a positive sense. Similarly, an element that points out problems with a particular method would be classified as a negative unit. These classifications also relate to the previous observation that a review of literature occurs across moves (Samraj, 2002; Lewin, Fine & Young, 2001), whereas reviewing literature in introductory sections of research articles was set as a rhetorical function of Move 2 in Swales’s original CARS model (1990). Much of the review of literature that occurs in all three moves in the original CARS model may indicate the presence of external propositions that relate to the construction of various kinds of new research justification (e.g., justification of the research method). This slight modification from the CARS model’s identification criteria for Move 1 and Move 2, therefore, enables me to comprehensively analyze external propositions that occur in the functional units that
relate to various types of new research justification in this study (see Sawaki, 2014a; 2014b, for more detailed discussion on such generic structure identification methods).

I conduct the coding of these functional units as one of the first stages of the investigation looking for the basic features of “acknowledge” resources; namely, their distributional feature in relation to the positive and negative functional units. This does not assume, however, that a viewpoint introduced with an “acknowledge” resource in a positive unit ultimately becomes aligned with the thesis writer, or that in a negative unit disavowed by the thesis writer. While the quantitative investigation can provide the patterns of occurrence of “acknowledge” resources, their exact functions in each of the functional units needs to be investigated qualitatively. I do so, in this study, using the SFL tradition of exploring a text by considering its elements as resources, highlighting the text-constructive dynamism that occurs through interacting resources both within and outside of the text. The research design of this study, hence, combines the approaches of the Swalean and SFL traditions. As Coffin and Donohue (2012) suggested, SFL approaches may complement non-SFL approaches to academic writing. This study is thus one of the attempts that complement the approaches to stance in academic writing research by providing methods of exploring the function of stance-neutral formulations through using the SFL approach.
The following excerpt is an example of a positive unit that is taken from a history thesis that uses the community history approach to look at the legal history of Queensland and California:

The community history approach is a valuable tool for legal historians because it allows a close analysis of social, political, cultural and economic relationships and interactions. (Text 16: 14)

The writer of the excerpt claims the relevance of the community history approach, which the writer deploys in his own thesis; hence, it is classified as a positive unit. On the other hand, while a negative unit similarly justifies the value of research, it points out problems that the thesis writer is going to solve. The following excerpt is an example of a negative unit taken from a thesis about the role of Lieutenant General Frank Berryman during World War II.

Not only has Berryman’s role been largely neglected, but the little study that has been made of these battles lack a detailed analysis of his impact on operations and often portray him in a negative light. (Text 12: 16–17)

The excerpt describes how Berryman has been forgotten and misunderstood, thus creating a research space for the writer to investigate the lieutenant’s role in detail. Hence, it is classified as a negative unit.

Drawing the boundaries of these units for this study is done rather liberally without setting lexicogrammatical constraints. While many rhetorical structure studies
set the sentence as a unit of analysis for practical reasons (Crookes, 1986; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Holmes, 1997; Samraj, 2002; Ozturk, 2007), there is a risk of oversimplifying the complex relationships between rhetorical functions and lexicogrammatical patterning (Bhatia, 1999; Hyland, 2002). In order to maintain the accuracy of the distributional analysis, it is important for this study not to oversimplify the boundaries of units. Hence, for example, the sentence

   Despite the fact that Australian troops made up the majority of forces in this operation and that it was a hard and bitterly fought campaign, [“positive”]

   it received little publicity at the time, and even less publicity since. [“negative”]

   (Text 12: 17)

is coded as containing two functional units for this study.

3.3. Corpus processing

I conducted the coding of “acknowledge” resources and functional units manually because the analysis requires the researcher’s interpretive coding. The coding was conducted using the UAM (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) Corpus Tool (O’Donnell, 2008). The UAM Corpus Tool is a suitable coding tool for the methodology of this study because it can double code features (i.e., “acknowledge” resources and functional
units), which facilitates the calculation of the frequency of “acknowledge” resources across the functional units. If the quantitative investigation reveals that they occur significantly more frequently in one of the functional units, the result may indicate a correlation between “acknowledge” resources and the functional unit. If the investigation reveals otherwise—that is, if “acknowledge” resources are evenly distributed between the two units—the finding may indicate that “acknowledge” resources are not inherently associated with a specific function. In either case, the quantitative results need to be investigated qualitatively so that the exact relationship between “acknowledge” resources and the realization of the functional units can be observed.

In the qualitative analysis, I seek to find the intention of the thesis writer using “acknowledge” resources and its relation to the construction of research space in the text with the understanding that the function of cited information is signaled in the other parts of the text (e.g., Tadros, 1994). In fact, as Samraj (2013) pointed out, this is the approach taken in search of the writer’s intention by the majority of citation studies (Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Petrić, 2007; Samraj, 2013) because, given that the writer’s intention should manifest in the fairly successful academic text, interviewing the writers is not always necessary.
4. Quantitative results

The size of positive and negative units explored for the distributional analysis of “acknowledge” resources in the corpus turned out to be 79,309 words and 34,414 words, respectively. “Acknowledge” resources occurred 1,418 times in positive units and 801 times in negative units. The mean figure of “acknowledge” resources per 1,000 words in negative units is slightly higher (20.34) than in positive units (16.97). The range of means in positive units is 108.89 and in negative units 65.42. The result of the quantitative analysis is displayed in Table 1.

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Table 1 shows that the distributions of “acknowledge” resources are not uniform across the texts: the total density of “acknowledge” resources vary between the texts; also, some of the texts contain much denser “acknowledge” resources in one functional unit than in another. Thus, I statistically examined the result with a paired t-test to find out if there is a significant difference in the distributions of “acknowledge” resources between the two units. The result of the paired t-test showed that the difference is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.88; SD = 15.02), as this p-value is much higher than the conventionally set significance level (p-value < 0.05).

Based on the distributional variations of “acknowledge” resources across the texts in Table 1 and their statistically even distribution between the two functional units in the entire corpus, we can infer that “acknowledge” resources do not have an inherent function in relation to the realization of a specific functional unit. “Acknowledge” resources may play a role in realizing the functional units that construct a research
space; however, because they do not have an inherent function, the way they do it may not be so straightforward as constructing a research space by simply overlapping their functions with a specific functional unit in which they occur. Some additional complex meaning-making processes must be operating with “acknowledge” resources, which is investigated qualitatively in the next section.

5. Qualitative investigation

It needs to be noted that I did not find any of the “acknowledge” resources as failing to assign the writer’s stance during the coding, although it is my interpretation. In the qualitative analysis, I explore the writer’s intention of choosing an “acknowledge” resource over value-laden alternatives. I further examine—as it has been shown in the quantitative analysis that the external propositions introduced with an “acknowledge” resource are not associated with a specific functional unit—how and if the choice to use “acknowledge” relates to the construction of positive and negative units and the construction of the research space. In order to analyze the maximum number of instances from the corpus, the excerpts provided for this section are reduced to the minimum length, with some of the parts deemed unimportant for the present analysis omitted. The instances of “acknowledge” resources with their co-texts from the corpus
are provided in Appendix B. An additional qualitative analysis that could not be included in the main body of the paper is provided in Appendix C.

5.1. Partial alignment and partial disalignment

Excerpt 1 is taken from the beginning of the introductory chapter of a thesis about the history of black conservative intellectuals in modern America, which starts with a proposition by Sowell, a renowned economist who is African American and conservative.

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**Being a black conservative is perhaps not considered as bizarre as being a transvestite, but it is certainly considered more strange than being a vegetarian or a bird watcher.**

So, in 1980, wrote Thomas Sowell, free-market economist and unofficial godfather of the ‘black right,’ delivering a stinging rebuke to the liberal critics of modern black conservatism. Although amusing, Sowell’s penchant for sarcasm in this instance masks an interesting point. … the existence of powerful conservative black spokespeople is indeed quite astonishing. … the obvious question becomes: ‘what does it mean to be both ‘black’ and ‘conservative’ in America?’ The inevitable corollary to that question is another—‘what do black conservatives actually want to conserve?’ (Text 11: 1, underlining added)
The proposition by Sowell is introduced with the non-evaluative verb *wrote*. Then, by assigning a positive value to the proposition by calling Sowell the “unofficial godfather of the ‘black right’” and by evaluating the proposition as “delivering a stinging rebuke and amusing,” the discourse gradually and rather subtly asserts the relevance of the writer’s research topic and thereby makes this an “acknowledge” resource occurring in a positive unit. The discourse then moves on to a negative unit where an issue is pointed out: “Sowell’s penchant for sarcasm in this instance masks an interesting point.” This assigns a partially negative value to the same proposition. The final words of the sentence, “an interesting point,” are particularly strategic, because the point being referred to, the history of black conservative intellectuals in modern America, is the research topic for the writer. Interesting and as of yet unrevealed, the point that the writer needs to uncover is maximized, successfully creating a research space. Choosing to place this phrase in the final position of the sentence enables the discourse to segue smoothly into the following positive unit, which states that “the existence of powerful conservative black spokespeople is indeed quite astonishing.” By once again stressing that Sowell’s proposition is indeed true, the writer further establishes the value of the research topic. Finally, the writer leads the discourse to the goal, the research question, of the paragraph: “what do black conservatives actually want to conserve?”
Hence, the proposition that occurs in the positive unit does not simply constitute the functional unit it is placed in but continues to actively construct the following functional units by being evaluated differently. There is thus a rationale that the proposition is introduced with an “acknowledge” resource at the start. The writer partially aligns with and partially dis-aligns with the proposition, and so the proposition has to be introduced neutrally and then parts of it aligned with and parts of it disaligned with one by one. A concrete stance exhausts the flexibility of external voices. It is the very neutrality of “acknowledge” resources that enables different values to be repeatedly assigned to the same external proposition, through which a research space is effectively and efficiently created.

5.2. A strategic gap creation with “acknowledge” resources

The deployment of “acknowledge” resources can be particularly useful when writers want to disalign with an external proposition, which may be one reason why they were slightly denser in negative units. One such instance is Excerpt 2, taken from a thesis about the history of colonial domestic service analyzing male domestic servants from a variety of ethnic groups, forming a negative unit. In the passage preceding the excerpt, the writer points out that “masculinity in the home” requires more attention because
“the literature dealing with male domestic servants in the colonies and former colonies is a field which is still emerging” (Text 8: 22).

Research which looks at the relationship between male servants and male employers is even less developed than that dealing with male servitude. … In the context of colonial India, Banerjee has concluded that in middle-class Bengali households the relationship between the master and servant was exactly the same as that between the mistress and servant. I am inclined to suggest that this field of research is not developed to the extent that we can draw such conclusions more broadly. (Text 8: 22–24, underlining added)

While the description of Banerjee’s conclusion is expressed with the “acknowledge” resource, “has concluded that,” the writer’s disalignment with Banerjee’s conclusion is constructed through the surrounding discourses. In fact, it is because of the deployment of this seemingly stance-free reporting verb, “conclude,” that the writer’s negative stance toward Banerjee’s conclusion is effectively created. The discourse preceding this sentence points to the lack of research on “male domestic servants in the colonies and former colonies,” and further points out, “Research which looks at the relationship between male servants and male employers is even less developed.” By this point in the discourse, the reader should be persuaded that there is little research in this area. Then,
Banerjee’s conclusion is thrown into the discourse, followed by the writer’s explicit value assignment toward the conclusion: “this field of research is not developed to the extent that we can draw such conclusions more broadly.” This successfully creates a need for research for the writer who aims to show the different relationships formed by male domestic servants from a variety of ethnic groups.

In Excerpt 2, it is the interaction between the verb in “has concluded that” and the surrounding sentences that assigns the value to the proposition that creates the research space. By choosing to use “conclude” in this context, the writer successfully creates the oddness of Banerjee’s conclusion, which is reached without sufficient research, in that “conclude” is a verb that is commonly used when adequate evidence is gathered. Thus, this is a type of meaning other “acknowledge” formulations such as “argue” or “hypothesize” cannot create. The oddness created is context dependent because “conclude” does not always create this kind of negative stance in other contexts. Further, resources that suggest the writer’s distancing from a proposition occurring in the same context, such as “claim,” would fail to create this oddness despite being able to successfully imply the writer’s possible negative stance toward the proposition, while it may make it a little more offensive to the original author.

Compare this with the instance of “concluded that” in the Excerpt 3, which is

taken from the latter part of the introductory chapter of a thesis on Australian penal history. In this excerpt, the writer introduces a conclusion of another history thesis. He positively frames this reference for the purpose of asserting the relevance of his own research.

3

John McGuire’s 2002 PhD thesis on the processes of penal change in Queensland from 1859 to the 1930s puts flesh on the bones of Garton’s observation. On the basis of his meticulous survey of the primary evidence—a rarity in the Australian historiography—McGuire concluded that ‘penal trajectories were determined by more than just the will to reform’. My thesis is squarely based on this insight—that reform proceeds in response to a range of conflicting pressures, some of which have little to do with penal policy. (Text 14: 29, underlining added)

Despite the apparent neutrality of a proposition expressed with “concluded that,” it is clear from the surrounding text, which forms a positive unit, that the writer agrees with the author’s viewpoint. Expressions such as “puts flesh on the bones of Garton’s observation” and “his meticulous survey of the primary evidence” predict a positive evaluation of it. Following these expressions comes “this insight,” again positively labeling the neutrally introduced proposition (see Charles, 2003). All of these positive
signals that add characterization to the neutrally introduced proposition successfully support the basis of the writer’s research that will be introduced. The oddness of “concluded that” in the Banerjee excerpt is not present in the previous excerpt, marking a sharp comparison between these two passages. Propositions introduced with the same reporting verb can be assigned with completely different stances depending on the surrounding texts.

5.3. “Acknowledge” resources as a process of reader persuasion

There are instances of neutrally expressed external propositions where the status goes through a process of negotiation with the reader and as a result the writer distances external propositions he or she originally expressed neutrally. The following instance is taken from a thesis on the history of the Indies in which the writer takes the comparative approach.

4 Advocates of transnational history have criticised the comparative approach for the reason that it does not transcend the boundaries of nationalist historiography. This is a valid criticism of comparisons.... This is not the fault of comparison itself, but the purpose for which historians have used it. Done carefully, comparative history can complement the aims of transnational history by demonstrating shared influences and exchanges across national boundaries.
Here, the writer introduces the argument against the comparative approach with an “acknowledge” resource, “have criticised,” without clarifying her stance toward the criticism. Then, the writer concurs with the criticism by saying, “This is a valid criticism,” up to which point the writer has formed a negative unit in which the writer introduces the negatives of the comparative approach the writer is going to use. Then, the writer counters the negatives by shifting the problem: “This is not the fault of comparison itself.” The writer thereby allows the comparative approach to escape from the criticism by shifting the blame to “the purposes for which historians used it.” The discourse is now ready to grant the validity of the comparative approach, which it does by stating, “Done carefully, comparative history can complement the aims of transnational history.” By this point, the writer has increased the value of the comparative approach so that it is safe to make a strong positive statement about the approach—suggesting that it can “demonstrat[e] shared exchanges across national boundaries.”

Interestingly, the writer uses a gradual persuasive process starting with an “acknowledge” resource. It can be assumed that the writer had the image in mind of a
potential reader—among the possible readers who may prefer diverse historical approaches—who is an advocate of transnational history and is critical of the comparative approach. With such an image in mind, it would not be wise to simply rebuff the criticism. Instead, it is more strategic to persuade such a reader by first acknowledging the existence of criticism in a neutral way. The writer’s strategy of concurring at least partly with the criticism puts the writer in alignment with the reader, which facilitates persuading the reader that the comparative approach can be useful if deployed carefully.

This process also allows the writer to demonstrate her wide knowledge of the current views on approaches to history research so that possible readers, including the thesis examiner, might gain a credible, scholarly image of her. These observations I have made confirm what Duszak (1997) and Lorés-Sanz (2011) emphasized— the importance for an academic writer of being recognized as a credible academic who has a specialist’s knowledge of the research community. This recognition allows him or her to remain in a dialogue of partnership and eventually reach a consensus with readers (Hunston, 2005; Warchał, 2010). Thus, the possible negative responses of the reader are negotiated so that they become non-problematic, which enables the academic writer to remain in a partnership with the readers with diversity of views existing in the discipline.

which further helps justifying the new research.

The writer’s choice of using the neutral frame for the external proposition at the start even though the writer is eventually going to separate herself from it was therefore made in order to establish an alignment with the imaginary reader who may not accept the writer’s position without negotiation. Compare it with the following instance taken from a thesis on the history of interracial marriage in Australia.

5

Although Rolls made the valuable point that ‘the majority of Chinese who married in Australia married European women’, he still returned to the standard claim that ‘many of them were Irish girls who could not read or write and who otherwise faced bleak marriages with brutal European labourers’. Despite growing evidence to the contrary, for the most part discussions of relationships between white women and Chinese men continued to rely on the well-known stereotypes, as Rolls did. (Text 10: 21, underlining added)

The writer introduces into the discourse the external viewpoint that many of the white girls who married Chinese men did so due to their low social status by using the phrase “he still returned to the standard claim that...,” immediately assigning a negative stance to the proposition. Using an “acknowledge” resource in the same sentence, for example, “he stated that many of them were Irish girls who could not read or write,” and then

denying or distancing the proposition elsewhere would be inefficient and unnecessary. This is because the reader of the thesis is assumed to have little or no racial stereotypes, and hence, negotiation with the reader is unnecessary.

The choice between neutral and evaluation-charged resources, therefore, also has to do with the relation between writer’s the image of the reader and the stance he or she intends to assign to an external proposition. When the writer assumes that the reader will be in line with the stance toward an externally oriented proposition without persuasion, he or she will choose to use an evaluation-charged resource to express that position immediately; on the contrary, when the writer assumes that some of the readers may disagree with the stance, he or she will engage in a step-by-step persuasion to eventually persuade the reader to agree with stance.

6. **Discussion**

The finding from the quantitative analysis suggesting that “acknowledge” resources are not specifically associated with positive or negative units can be partially explained by the additional findings from the qualitative analysis that “acknowledge” resources flexibly realize both positive and negative units. Propositions expressed using “acknowledge” resources often did not only realize the unit where they occurred but
also realized the surrounding units, assigning different stances to the same proposition. Thus, “acknowledge” resources, as Halliday (1981: 37) suggested concerning interpersonal elements, “are not discrete elements that belong at some particular juncture, but semantic features that inform continuous stretches of discourse.” This also relates to what Halliday (1981) called the prosodic nature of interpersonal elements (see also Firth 1957), suggesting that interpersonal meaning is made in the similar way phonologic prosody makes meaning by contrasting between falling and rising tones (for applications of such prosodic understanding, see Louw 1993; O’Halloran & Coffin; Sinclair 1991; Stubbs 1995). This was clearly observed in Excerpts 2 and 3, whereby the propositions framed with the same lexical item “concluded that…” were assigned with different evaluations depending on the surrounding discourses.

This explanation supports this study’s finding that “acknowledge” resources themselves are not associated with a specific stance or function in that they do not have an inherent function but are built into the text. It also leads to the suggestion that by informing continuous stretches of discourse, propositions expressed with “acknowledge” resources can manifest themselves across different functional units, enabling the realization of multiple functional units in text.

By manifesting themselves across different functional units, they also gain a

cohesive function that ties together different parts of discourse. This supports the view that external propositions create cohesion in text (Bakhtin, 1981; Tadros, 1994); that is, intertextual ties create intratextual ties through the interaction between interpersonal elements and textual functions (Halliday & Hasan, 1976; Martin & Rose, 2008; Thompson & Zhou, 2000). The deployment of “acknowledge” resources for the purpose of taking advantage of their cohesive function in creating ties between positive and negative units, then, is a skilful academic strategy; by constructing an overarching tie between these two units, the academic text can efficiently create a research space.

Notably, it has been observed that the choice between using “acknowledge” and value-laden resources for a proposition relates to negotiating with the reader outside of the text. As observed in Excerpts 4 and 5, the way an external proposition is presented changes depending on the relationship between the external proposition, the writer’s viewpoint and the writer’s imagined reader’s viewpoint. This relates to the Bakhtinian understanding of discourse as being “responsive,” whereby the writer regularly takes into account the reader’s response, actively sensing his or her “resistance or support” (Bakhtin, 1981: 280) and allowing the anticipated response to construct the text (Bakhtin, 1981; Hoey, 2001; Sacks, Schlegloff & Jefferson, 1974). Hoey (2001: 43) compared the reader and writer to “dancers following each other’s steps” and
emphasized the importance of the writer’s taking “the trouble to anticipate what the reader might be expecting.” Taking into account the reader’s reception was previously emphasized as a crucial skill in constructing successful academic texts (Coffin & O’Halloran, 2005; Hyland, 2010; Thompson, 2001; Warchał, 2010). Importantly, one way of achieving this, as the present observations have affirmed, is by making a strategic choice between the deployment of “acknowledge” or evaluation-charged resources.

It needs to be emphasized that the successful deployment of “acknowledge” resources requires disciplinary expertise. Successful anticipation of the reader’s reactions to an external proposition, enabled by the writer’s accurate and current knowledge of the discipline is a starting point for effectively guiding the reader to the writer’s goal. As observed, when the goal of the writer is to deny an external proposition he or she anticipates that the reader will also disagree with, the proposition can be distanced at once without the need to persuade the reader. On the other hand, when the writer aims to align with an external proposition that he or she expects the reader will disagree with, a step-by-step negotiation needs to take place; in such a case, initially expressing it with a neutral stance by using an “acknowledge” resource is useful.

Along with having disciplinary knowledge, it is equally important to
understand the high potential of external propositions in text construction. As I observed in the analysis of Excerpt 1, just one external proposition that was originally expressed with an “acknowledge” resource powerfully created the research space. Taking advantage of the potential of “acknowledge” resources in constructing the text, therefore, is one of the useful skills academic writers can achieve.

7. Conclusion

This study has identified in the successfully constructed texts that neutrally presented viewpoints are not a representation of the writer’s failure to clarify a stance. Rather, each of them uniquely forms an important strategic process of gradual value assignment. Such viewpoints play a crucial role in constructing stance as well as research space by dynamically interacting with other resources both inside and outside of the text. It has also been identified that the interpersonal function of assigning a stance to a neutrally presented proposition simultaneously has a textual function of tying together different parts of the text, which further plays a role in constructing the text.

The findings of this study support Bakhtin’s (1981) insightful suggestion that even seemingly “neutral” words and forms do not remain neutral in actual discourse, and hence, the text’s external references, once incorporated into the new text, get
consumed into the text’s intention. Deploying an evaluation-charged formulation cements a proposition with a concrete stance, consequently consuming or exhausting its constructive possibility, whereas introducing a proposition neutrally enables the proposition’s potential to be continuously manipulated to serve the text’s intention.

In order to take advantage of the high potential of neutrally expressed external propositions, it becomes important for academic writers to choose the right external sources and the kind of propositions that can be maximally consumed into the intention of the new text. Academic writers also need to be aware that a singular stance to an external proposition does not always apply. A skilled academic writer can make a sophisticated judgment as to how to exploit an external proposition depending on the possible relationship between the proposition, the writer’s intention, and the current views in the discipline. A skilled writer is aware that an external proposition can be multifunctional in a new text—and sometimes assigning multiple stances to a proposition by evaluating different aspects of it across continuing units of discourse can neatly contextualize it and create a research space and cohesion at the same time. Importantly, it is “acknowledge” resources that provide the means for the realizations of these functions.

Developing such a refined skill in managing external viewpoints, therefore,

needs to be set as one of the goals in pedagogic settings. It will be useful for EAP instructors to explicitly teach students that expressing an external viewpoint without a specific stance can be a strategic choice for academic writers. As proposed by Petrić and Harwood (2013) and Samraj (2013), it will be also useful for EAP instructors to have students analyze the writer’s intention of referring to external propositions in advanced academic texts in their own discipline. Analyzing various instances of “acknowledge” resources deployments in advanced academic writing may increase student’s awareness of the complexity of both successfully managing external viewpoints and negotiating with the reader while conforming to disciplinary practices.

The scope of this paper has been limited to the analysis of introductory chapters of history theses, and the paper’s length did not allow a large amount of qualitative analysis. Further extensive research on this topic is necessary to provide a more generalized account of the function of stance-neutral formulations and possibly to identify functional categories for such resources, so that more fruitful pedagogical implications can be provided.

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