Abstract

The present study aims to describe the ways in which argumentation is constructed in a small corpus of introductory chapters to linguistics textbooks with a view to answering the question of whether a register or functional variety is identifiable and, if so, how it is realized, what its characteristic features are.

Elements signalling the argumentative structure are variously ascribed in the literature to the plane of discourse sometimes called metadiscourse (Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen 1993 elaborating on Vande Kopple 1985; Hyland 1999, 2000, 2002a, 2002b), or else plane of evaluation (Thompson and Ye 1991; Hunston 1994; Hunston and Thompson 2000), whose main function is to express the writer’s opinion and value-system, to construct and maintain writer/reader relations and to organize the discourse (Hunston and Thompson 2000: 6).

Studies such as Myers (1992), from the standpoint of sociology, and Hyland (2000) have focused on the writer-reader relationship in academic genres, showing how in textbooks this is constructed primarily as expert-novice relationship through both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse aimed at elucidating propositional connections, clarifying content and informing, thus highlighting the interrelation between social practice and written texts. Cross-disciplinary variation in various
academic genres/registers is the focus of other corpus-based studies such as Bondi (1999, 2001) who has explored the discourse of economics.

Little has been written on the language of linguistics apart from Tadros (1993) study of one aspect of interaction between writer and reader, namely text averral and attribution in three different texts drawn respectively from the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis.

This paper focuses on the language linguists use, particularly on the rhetorical choices made by textbook writers in introducing the fundamentals of linguistics and in engaging with their readership. A comparison is drawn of the introductory chapters taken from 10 textbooks in linguistics, i.e. general introductions for undergraduate students, stressing both peculiarities and commonalities. The computer-readable corpus has approximately 161,000 words and consists of introductory chapters taken from Aitchinson, Akmajian et alii, Brown, Crystal, Lyons, Radford et alii, Robins, Wallwark, Widdowson and Yule.

Corpus processing via Wordsmith Tools (Scott 1997) involved a three-stage investigation, such that analysis is both quantitative and qualitative. In fact, both analysis of repeated linguistic behaviour, that is, of frequencies and of more delicate variation accounted for by rare phenomena can shed light on how a register is constructed, as both the distillation of typical and of rare behaviour of a word or phrase (or cluster) is relevant.

The first stage, the least comparative one, is concerned with identification and discussion of the argumentative strategies devised by textbook writers in the introductory chapters and the various lexico-grammatical resources deployed to realise such strategies. Special emphasis is put on features like Processes, nominalizations, Mood and Comment adjuncts, logical connection and interpersonal pronouns signalling the argumentative dialogue that, though implicit, construes the writer as teacher/researcher, and the readership as students and/or members of the scientific community. This initial stage does not take into consideration any stylistic differences across the textbooks. Furthermore, it is more qualitative than quantitative in that the items chosen for exploration were derived partly from an initial analysis of the wordlist, and partly from the previous studies mentioned above.

The second, more properly comparative stage of the investigation makes use of Wordsmith’s Keywords tool to compare the corpus under study with the written part of the British National Corpus (BNC). Wordsmith’s Keywords tool allows one to pick out words in a text, whose frequency is outstandingly high (and outstandingly low) with respect to a reference corpus, which is considered to represent the norm (Scott 1997). The comparison of such small potentially register-specific corpus with a much larger cross-registerial corpus, which is considered to be a
representative sample of written contemporary English, was made with a view to find elements, namely keywords, that could account for register specificity.

The third and final stage of the analysis first compared each individual textbook with the rest of the corpus, which thus provided background data, and then with the written part of the BNC. The search for outstandingly frequent words, again keywords, identified peculiarities of each individual writer.

As a result of the analysis carried out, it emerges that:

i) the core notion of a “lexico-grammar of argumentation” strictly linked to the expression of writer evaluation can be put forward, which realizes a representation of linguistics as scientific enterprise of the scientific and discourse community;

ii) computer-assisted corpus analysis using WordSmith Tools requires integrating the vertical reading of the corpus with constant going back to the actual text and actual reading of it. Of course, this is something known to both theorists and practitioners of corpus linguistics as stressed in Tognini Bonelli (2001). However, it seems to me to apply all the more to an investigation of the forms and functions of evaluation and to the EAP potential of the notion of a lexico-grammar of argumentation;

iii) as to the role of small specialized corpora and the study of register variation, a point can be made that small corpora such as the one analysed enable one to identify stylistic, in the broad sense of the word, that is ideological, methodological and rhetorical variation more than overall registerial variation; that is to say that the frequency of occurrence together with the keyness of particular constructions accounts for differences between writers, revealing something of their academic positioning and personality, of their way of teaching and arguing linguistics, ultimately of their rhetoric.