Clause Relations and Explicitness in Evaluation in Book Reviews and Articles in the Economic Journal across Time

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Aim
Academic book reviews are interesting in the context of this conference because their overall purpose is evaluation. This paper aims to look at the explicitness and degree of foregrounding of evaluation in such reviews using an approach which is complementary to those of Hyland 2000 and Motta-Roth 1995(etc.) and to examine whether changes in related genres and the producing community have any effect on these characteristics.

Material
The material to be examined is book reviews – and more superficially articles -- from the 1893, 1913, 1973, and 1993 volumes of the London Economic Journal (the journal examined for example by Henderson & Dudley-Evans 1990 and Bloor and Bloor1993).

Background
Motta-Roth gives a genre analysis of academic book reviews, showing that evaluation occurs in several segments, but is concentrated in moves whose onset is signalled by an overtly evaluative act. Hyland examines a corpus of reviews and discusses the topics evaluated (showing that criticism is often directed at specifics, while praise is often global), the balance of praise and criticism and of topics evaluated across disciplines, the vocabulary and types of evaluation, and the mitigation of criticism. We thus have valuable global and atomistic characterisations.

But Hyland often says that interpretation ‘depends on context’ and mentions one specific local structure called ‘praise-blame’. This suggests that an important part in evaluation is played by intermediate-level textual (rather than generic) structures such as Hoey’s Whole-Part, Concession, Contrast, and Matching. These structures enable some evaluation to be implicit, in that only the clause relations of the act make it clear what the intended valuation is. We can also look at the way evaluative items are placed in focus or non-focus positions in the sentence, and at the directness of strength of criticism and praise. All these things might be expected to reveal ideological presuppositions, or rhetorical decisions to represent things as presupposed (Fairclough 1989), as well as aspects of the writing community.

The writing community
The earlier volumes of the Economic Journal reflect different conventions and a different community from later ones in several ways. First, as Henderson and Dudley-Evans have shown, articles in the EJ from the early part of this century tended to have a different generic form from those in current issues, with less intertextuality and effort at creating a research space. Others (Gunnarsson 1997, Salager-Meyer1999, 2000) have shown that this type of difference is typical of the development in other communities and other genres. Given that reviews occupied a somewhat larger proportion of journal space than now, it seems worth investigating whether some of the construction of a research narrative and profiling of different camps which is now done in article introductions used to appear in reviews.

This is more likely because of a difference in the nature of the communities involved. The 1893 volume of the EJ included some 120 items: 21 articles, 65 book reviews, and 34 ‘notes and memoranda’, written by a total of 52 people, many of whom contributed several items. In the 1993 volume there were 73 articles, three review articles, some 103 reviews of books (mainly) and software, and fifteen items in ‘Policy Forum’, but the 194 items have more than 200 authors, very few of whom contributed more than one item. The 1893 writership was smaller and connections
were more multiplex than the 1993 one, and given the strongly interpersonal nature of reviewing one might expect this to affect the texts written.

Method Outline

The method is as follows. Ten reviews and five articles are taken from the first number of each of the four volumes. The major part of the project concerns the language and textual structures around autonomous-level (Hunston 2000) evaluation of texts. Episodes of evaluation of the target text or its author are identified and examined in context. Autonomous-level evaluations of anything else are ignored, as are all interactive-level evaluations of propositions at this stage. The text evaluation acts (sometimes more than one per episode) are then divided into ‘implicit’, ‘explicit’ and ‘flagged’. These are classified functionally into praise and criticism, global and local, and plain, mitigated or boosted, and subcategorised by the Hoey clause relations of the episode and, where appropriate act.

Sample Analyses

The majority of evaluative acts in 1993 were explicit, that is they contained overtly evaluative items, but some are implicit. Consider this example:

On the whole, there was remarkable consensus, and little that was new, in the explanations as to what went right. First, there was the technical gap, or catching up effect, though there was also the curious belief expressed that...

Here we have two explicit evaluative episodes. The first there was remarkable consensus, and little that was new is most revealingly taken as two acts. The second is explicitly evaluative: little that was new can only be negative within the general value system of publishing. But the first is only implicitly negative. We can see that remarkable consensus constitutes negative evaluation, but that is not inherent in the words and we would not know it was negative if it was not matched with the other judgement. The second episode there was also the curious belief expressed that... is in a clause in a general-particular relation with the first episode, though this is not particularly important for its interpretation because it is inherently evaluative. Furthermore, the most evaluative item -- curious -- is backgrounded by its attributive position, presupposing our agreement that it is curious.

The most overt types of evaluation are flagged by a topicalised element declaring them to contain an evaluation of a certain kind. (These include some of Hyland’s metadiscoursally mitigated criticisms). An example would be

It is perhaps to be regretted that the conference never came firmly to grips with......

This example would be classified as a flagged item containing an explicit one, on the grounds that come to grips with is itself evaluative. By contrast

The book never comes to grips with... would be simply explicit, and

It is to be regretted that the book’s approach is Keynesian would be simply flagged (negatively), on the grounds that only the flagging tells us that being Keynesian is a bad thing. A sentence We welcome the book’s Keynesian approach would be positively flagged and show that being Keynesian was good in this context.

The least overt evaluations are classified as implicit:

Several of the authors also express concern that Thatcherism forced the ‘intensification of labour’ upwards. This Indian approach to productivity reaches its extreme form with NAME who even regards unfavourably the rise in the intensity of work of dockers after the abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme.
The first sentence establishes the status (Hunston 2002: interactive status) of a proposition as questionable by ascribing it to the authors. The second evaluates it unfavourably (Hunston’s interactive value) against a presupposition that ‘Indian’ (presumably Ghandhian, but to say that would be misleadingly positive) values are inappropriate and that the National Dock Labour Scheme caused dockers to work too little. The grammatical item even and the word extreme (the ‘triggers’) alert us to the evaluative nature of the sentence, and lead us to construct or evoke (Ducrot 1980, Nølke 1992) the necessary presupposition (‘topos’), which enables us to infer the intended evaluation of the text: ‘Some of the ideas in this book are old-fashioned or unrealistic.’ The evaluation relies on us being able to retrieve the appropriate presupposition.

Conclusions

I cannot pretend to have results yet. But the hypothesis I am testing is that there are three sorts of development.

2. The development of the writership would suggest a need for greater explicitness because of fewer shared values.
3. The changing role and format of the article may mean that some types of evaluation (and particularly reference to authorities in evaluation) have moved from one genre to the other.

The following extract seems to contain a strength of criticism and reliance on shared values for the recognition of irony that was possible in 1913 and perhaps not in 1993:

The first [paper] is on the Bank of England, by NAME. It shows how all is for the best in the best of all possible banking systems. Then follows one by NAME on the British System of Taxation. It indicates, not obscurely, to the benighted foreigner how superior is the British system of taxation for revenue only.....to the sort of thing they ought to be groaning under in their own countries

References