Aspects of evaluation in intertextual reference

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This paper examines different aspects of evaluation involved in instances of what Fairclough (1992) has termed ‘manifest intertextuality’ (the explicit reference within a text to other texts) in PhD theses, across different disciplines.

The ability to make appropriate references to the literature is an essential aspect of successful academic writing. The citation of other texts can be seen to serve a range of purposes, among which are the following:

- to provide support for one’s position, and show the novelty of one’s work (Hyland 2000)
- to delineate what the present state of knowledge is, so that the writer can locate his or her claims within the larger disciplinary framework, and establish a narrative context (Myers 1990)

In analysing the evaluative load of any reference to another text (or writer), we need to assess the ownership of propositional responsibility for a statement (Groom 2000), which can be discussed in terms of averral or attribution (Tadros 1993). In a fully averred proposition, the writer takes full responsibility for the proposition, while in a fully attributed statement (a block quotation, for example), the responsibility lies with the quoted author. In academic writing, the majority of propositions involving citation lie somewhere on a continuum between averral and attribution.

This paper first presents a taxonomy of citation types based on both formal and functional features. The corpus used for this study contains PhD theses written in the Departments of Agricultural Botany, Agricultural Economics, and Psychology, at the University of Reading. The texts in the corpus have been tagged for citation type, as well as for information on the use of tense and voice in the verbs associated with a cited author. Quantitative analysis of the proportion of citation types across discipline and also across rhetorical section of the texts reveals the tendency of the observation-based disciplines represented here to construct new knowledge out of mosaics of attributed ‘facts’, tending more towards the attribution end of the continuum, while the theory/model-based disciplines build their arguments around discussion of other’s propositions, techniques and models. In one sense, such an observation is tautologous, but it can also be seen to clarify the starkly contrasting approaches to academic activity that either tendency adopts, and to highlight the diversity of text construction practices within written academic discourse.
Two of the citation types described in the taxonomy are verb-controlling; that is, the cited text or author is the agent of a verb phrase in the sentence. For example, in the following sentence the cited authors ‘Hatanaka and Wallace (1980)’ control the verb ‘proposed’: “a lag specification technique base on ‘free form’ estimation of low order moments as proposed by Hatanaka and Wallace (1980)”. These verbs carry an evaluative load, indicating the degree of the writer’s endorsement of what the authors proposed or did, at one level, and also conveys the writer’s attitude towards the authors’ ideas or actions (Thompson and Ye 1991). Quantification of the verbs used in the corpus shows a narrower range of verbs used in the applied science portion of the corpus, with an apparent tendency towards endorsement and a neutral attitude, but it is clear that quantitative information alone is inadequate. It is necessary to return to the text and to do close textual analysis of particular rhetorical sections, to see how the citations fit into the writer’s wider rhetorical purposes. The paper will present a sampling of analyses that demonstrate the structuring strategies that writers employ in the building of their arguments, and the ways that apparently neutral attributions can function within those arguments to position the writer and, as Myers (op cit) proposes, to establish a narrative context.

References