

# Developing a Framework to Analyse Master's Students' Projection of Authority through Written Argument at a UK University: Insights from a Pilot Study

Dalia Cohen, School of Education, University of Leeds

## Abstract of the Article

This article will discuss a pilot study used to develop a novel framework to analyse master's students' projection of authority in argumentative academic writing. The projection of authority will be presented as a vital component of student success, as it allows the student to make a meaningful contribution to the disciplinary discourse community. If students fail to project authority in their writing, they run the risk of producing written work which is characterised by description rather than evaluation. The pilot analysis of five student essays from the BAWE corpus resulted in the creation of a triadic framework for the analysis of textual authority focusing on the following aspects: 1) The way students construct written argument 2) The way students negotiate the argument in the context of a disciplinary conversation 3) The way students position themselves in relation to the argument and how they project an authorial self

## Keywords

Academic writing,  
Textual authority,  
Argument,  
Authorial self,  
Voice

## Introduction

All students in the higher education setting need to become skilled in academic writing if they are to be successful in the academy. However, academic writing is often an area that students struggle with. Successful student academic writing requires students in the academy to move beyond 'knowledge telling' to 'knowledge transformation' (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1987). Academic writing at all university levels, from undergraduate student writing to published research articles invariably requires the writer to project authority through their text, so that the writer portrays themselves as someone who has "something to say" (Clark and Ivanic, 1997) and who has something meaningful to contribute to the disciplinary conversation in which they are operating. In attempting to project authority, a central tool academic writers draw upon is the construction of a written argument (Lea and Street, 1998, Wingate, 2012).

However, successful argumentation in academia is complex in that it requires more than simply a logically sound argument: as academic writing is inherently dialogic, the writer must locate the argument they are advancing within the discourse community of the relevant discipline, often through the synthesis of published sources (Martin and White, 2005; Tang, 2011), while also portraying how they position themselves as writers in relation to the argument at hand. Through the construction of argumentation in academia, writers aim to project textual authority through the way they appraise other sources while also asserting their own voice through the argumentation.

The manifestation of authority in student written assignments can therefore be regarded as having three interrelated aspects

which will form the basis of this research:

1. The way students construct written argument
2. The way students negotiate the argument in the context of a disciplinary conversation
3. The way students position themselves in relation to the argument and how they project an authorial self

This pilot study has informed the design of my PhD project and resulted in the development of an analytical framework which will be used in the data analysis. The main project will take a qualitative, longitudinal approach that seeks to investigate how and the extent to which individual students project authority in their written assignments for their master's degree, and the reasons behind their rhetorical choices. Students will be asked to submit their master's written assignments to the researcher at the end of each semester, which will be qualitatively analysed for the three aspects of textual authority as described above.

## Importance and Aims of the Pilot Study

The pilot study was instrumental in developing a novel triadic framework for the textual analysis. As this project aims to analyse the projection of textual authority in student writing, it was essential to use the pilot to develop a robust coding system that can be used in the main project. The pilot allowed for the development of a coding system and for this to then be trialled for effectiveness before deployment in the main study. Furthermore, coding and analysis of the texts need to have taken place before any other aspects of the methodology in the main project take place, such as text-based interviews, as interviews will be based on the textual analysis, and so piloting the coding

**CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:** D.COHEN@LEEDS.AC.UK

HILLARY PLACE PAPERS IS AN OPEN ACCESS JOURNAL AND IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY-NC 4.0. INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS RETAIN THEIR RIGHT TO BE RECOGNISED AS AUTHOR AND COPYRIGHT HOLDER FOR THEIR RESPECTIVE WORKS

for textual analysis was an important first step.

### Pilot Study Procedure

In the pilot study, examples of student essays from the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus were analysed. Five student essays at master's level were chosen for analysis, across the following subjects: three in sociology, two in business and one in literature. These disciplines were chosen as they dealt with topics which were accessible to a non-specialist reader, such as the global food system, unemployment and racism, making the textual analysis process smoother.

These were read thoroughly and analysed for aspects of textual authority. The aim was to reach saturation point and produce a list of codes for the framework that can be used in the main study.

In the first round of the pilot, the main focus of analysis was on the first two aspects of textual authority as mentioned above:

1. The way students construct written arguments (initial codes based on Toulmin's (1958) argument structure)
2. The way students negotiate the argument within a disciplinary conversation (initial codes based on Tang's (2011) engagement strategies)

This is because at this stage in the research process, the original plan was to focus only on the first two aspects for analysis of textual authority. However, through the process of coding the texts for the first two aspects, it became apparent that there were other rhetorical features present in student texts that did not fit into the first two categories but seemed to also contribute to the projection of authority, such as first-person pronouns, stance markers, boosters and hedges (Hyland, 2005). At first these were coded separately in a category titled 'other', however this ultimately led to the development of the third aspect of the framework: in relation to the ways students position themselves in relation to the argument and project an authorial self.

This was based on Clark and Ivanic's (1997) contention that a piece of writing is always inevitably imbued with the writer's individual voice.

### Refining the Codes

Subsequently, a second round of coding for the pilot took place, using each of the three aspects of the framework in turn, to ensure that each of the three frameworks were given equal prominence in the analysis without one dominating over another. The second round of coding also resulted in some adaptations to the original frameworks, and some additional codes:

### Analysing the way students construct written argument

Toulmin's original scheme for analysing the patterns of arguments, which is rooted in the formal logic tradition (1958), was initially used in its original form as follows (examples added by the author):

- Claim (the main argument) Example: The death penalty should be abolished.
- Data (the evidence to support the argument) Example: Innocent people are sometimes executed due to mistakes
- Warrants (the link between the claim and the data) Example: It is ethically wrong to kill the innocent
- Backing (support for the warrant) Example: Killing the innocent is considered wrong in the moral codes of most

cultures.

- Qualifiers (conditions under which the claim is true, or where the claim's truth may be limited) Example: The death penalty may have some benefits
- Rebuttals (situations in which the claim is not true). Example: The vast majority of those executed are in fact guilty.

However, the pilot study demonstrated that the basic Toulmin elements alone were not sufficient when analysing the authority projection in academic, university level essays, as the essays tended to include multiple claims, developments of claims and rebuttals, and instances of the writer restating their main claims at different points in the text or making links back to certain claims. This is typical of university level writing, which often deals with multiple ideas at once with the writing perhaps going in different directions, in contrast to lower-level writing such as secondary school assignments which tend to be more linear in structure. Therefore, in addition to coding main claims, sub claims were also coded, as student academic writing is more complex than the legal arguments which Toulmin's structure is originally based on and tends to include multiple claims which are developed and linked together.

A further feature of argument building in academic writing noticed in the pilot is the way in which across the disciplines, students wrote about the background to their topic in order to contextualise their argument, before introducing the main claims. This tendency was a common feature across all the student essays, and is a distinctive feature of academic writing. For this reason, an extra code of 'contextualisation' has been added, as the contextualisation plays an important role in foregrounding the students' argument and demonstrating its relevance.

While Toulmin's original structure also includes 'rebuttals' as a feature, the pilot revealed that this framework will need to expand the rebuttals element to make this more appropriate for the genre of academic writing. Toulmin's argument structure was originally developed in reference to legal argumentation, and so when Toulmin refers to rebuttal he means conditions under which the warrant would no longer connect the data with the claim. However, the way in which writers in the academic genre must position themselves as part of a wider conversation with the discourse community, makes Toulmin's notion of rebuttals too limited and not fit for purpose in this context. Therefore, it will be more appropriate for this study to refer to counterarguments, concessions and refutations (examples and code tables are available from the author on request).

### Analysing the way students negotiate the argument in the context of a disciplinary conversation

When students put forward their claims, and at sites of dialogue with other sources, Tang's (2011) framing of expansive and contractive engagement strategies was used in the pilot to analyse how the writer is positioning themselves within the discourse community through the construction of the argument. Dialogically expansive strategies 'expand' dialogic opportunities by acknowledging other stances in the literature which may be different from students' own viewpoints, and through this, students embrace a diversity of viewpoints. Dialogically contractive strategies still involve acknowledging other viewpoints, however this is done in a dismissive way which does not acknowledge them as viable, thereby 'contracting' dialogic opportunity. This aspect is concerned with the way the argument will be per-

ceived by the discourse community.

A key aspect of Tang's (2011) engagement strategies that were tested in the pilot was the way writers engage with other sources in their work, as follows:

- Acknowledge: Writers attribute the ideas being put forward to a named person or persons in a neutral manner
- Distance: Writers attribute the ideas being put forward to a named person or persons in a distancing manner, using non-factive reporting verbs.
- Endorse: Writers align themselves with and endorse a named, possibly more authoritative, source.

However, the pilot revealed three further strategies student writers tend to use when engaging with other sources, which were used frequently and also have the potential to expand or contract the dialogue: 1) integral citation 2) non-integral citation 3) direct quote. While these strategies do not feature in Tang's original framework of dialogic engagement strategies, their inclusion is relevant to this analytical framework as they were identified as a key feature across the pilot texts. It seems that students do not always employ strategies such as 'endorse' or 'distance' when engaging with other sources, but they often simply write the idea (perhaps with an attempt at paraphrasing) followed by a citation, or quote directly from the text. These strategies also have the potential to expand or contract the dialogue depending on how they are used, and were therefore added to the final set of codes.

#### **Analysing way students position themselves in relation to the argument and how they project an authorial self**

Clark and Ivancic's (1997) concept of the authorial self was used to analyse the way the writers portray themselves as "someone who has something to say" (p.152) and how they see themselves in relation to both the argument they have constructed and the discourse community in which they are positioning themselves. The codes for this aspect were mainly based on Hyland's (2005) framework which separates stance into the following elements: hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions. The following elements were noted in the pilot (*italics indicates additional features identified in the pilot but not present in Hyland (2005)*):

- First person pronoun use
- Hedging language
- Boosters
- Epistemic phrases
- Solipsistic voice
- Passive phrase
- Signposting language
- Conjunctions

While the elements above are not specifically mentioned by Clark and Ivancic (1997) as aspects of authorial voice, the pilot revealed that in the context of academic writing they help to portray how the writer sees themselves in relation to the argument they are putting forward. For example, first person pronoun use presents an assertive authorial voice who is confident in their propositions and is willing to risk loss of personal credibility in the event of being proved wrong. The use of boosters has a similar effect, in that they portray the writer as

being strong in their convictions. Conjunctions which are used to emphasise the link between data and claim were also identified as a way in which a writer can assert their presence in a text, as they can serve to highlight the writer's conviction in the strength of the data they are putting forward in relation to the claim. Furthermore, signposting, in which the writer guides the reader through the structure of the text, also helps to convey the writer's authorial presence as it asserts the writer's ownership of the text, and portrays the writer as its 'architect' (Tang and John, 1999).

However, other linguistic features may have the opposite effect and undermine the writer's authorial voice. For example, hedging language and passive phrases on one hand can serve to expand the potential for dialogue when viewed through the lens of Tang, however they can also portray the writer as unassertive or uncertain in their own convictions, particularly if overused. Furthermore, the use of solipsistic voice, in which the writer refers to evidence for their argument in their own words without referencing or acknowledging the source, poses a risk to the integrity of the writer's authorial voice, as it blurs the distinction between the writer's voice and that of the source writer's.

#### **Reflection on the Pilot Study**

The pilot was extremely beneficial to the development of my research methods and in refining the coding system which is central to my research. It helped to identify a third aspect to the analytical framework, resulting in the triadic framework, as it was only when I started to look for linguistic features of authority during the pilot, that it became apparent that authorial voice also played a prominent role in the projection of authority. In addition, by trialling the original frameworks from Toulmin (1958) and Tang (2011) in the context of master's level academic writing during the framework, it was clear that adaptations were needed to make them more applicable to the type of academic writing focused on in this study, which has resulted in some novel adaptations to these frameworks.

However, the pilot also presented some challenges. At first it was challenging to develop an efficient and clear system for coding the texts across the different frameworks, and in the first round I attempted to code for multiple aspects of authority simultaneously. However, this proved to be inefficient and did not allow me to capture all the necessary codes. I therefore went back and repeated this round of coding, this time dealing with each aspect of authority separately and in turn. In addition, for the first attempt at coding, colour coding in Microsoft Word was used, however I switched to the UAM corpus tool software in the second round, which made the annotating process more effective.

#### **Conclusion**

This pilot study played an important role in the development and refinement of the codes which will be a central aspect of my analytical framework. The pilot allowed me to test whether the three theoretical concepts that underpin my research can be successfully applied to the analysis of the projection of textual authority in student written texts, and the results demonstrated that modifications to the theoretical frameworks were needed to make them applicable to my context. The results of the pilot study have allowed me to justify these modifications in my methodology, which enhances the novel contribution of my research. The pilot study has demonstrated that when devel-

oping a coding system for text based qualitative research, it is invaluable to spend time testing out the codes during a pilot so that saturation point can be reached and a robust coding system for the project can be created. This will equip the researcher with confidence when proceeding with the data collection and analysis stages of the project.

### References

- Clark, R. and Ivanič, R. 1997. *The politics of writing*. London: Routledge.
- Hyland, K., 2005. Stance and engagement: a model of interaction in academic discourse. *Discourse Studies*. 7 (2), 173-192.
- Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V. 1998. Student writing in higher education: An academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*. 23(2), pp.157–172.
- Martin, J.R. and White, P.R. 2005. *The language of evaluation. Appraisal in English*. New York: Palgrave.
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. 1987. Knowledge telling and knowledge transforming in written composition. In: Rosenberg, S. 1987. *Advances in Applied Psycholinguistics, Vol. 1. Disorders of First-Language development; Vol. 2. Reading, Writing, and Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 142–175.
- Tang, R. 2011. A dialogic account of authority in academic writing. In: Charles, M., Pecorari, D. and Hunston, S. 2009. *Academic writing : at the interface of corpus and discourse*. London ; Continuum, pp.170-188.
- Toulmin, S. 1958. *The uses of argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wingate, U. 2012. 'Argument!' helping students understand what essay writing is about. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. 11(2), pp.145–154.