Perspectives on the disciplinary discourses of academic argument

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Abstract

Studies of student writing indicate disciplinary variation in the frequency of metadiscourse (Hyland 2005:57). For example, English student essays use 'less metadiscourse to explain the shape of the essay and less overt direction of the reader towards the arguments' than Sociology essays (Bruce 2010:162). As a central purpose of Essay genres is to develop an argument (Gardner and Nesi 2008; Nesi and Gardner forthcoming), searches for text introduced through framing metadiscourse indicates more about the nature of academic argument in Sociology than in English.

This study aims to redress this imbalance and uncover disciplinary differences in propositional discourse of academic argument across Classics, English, Law, Philosophy and Sociology in university student essays in the BAWE corpus. The findings from various specific searches, key word analyses and collocation searches are compared. Although for English informative examples are those where key words collocate, this technique also does not work equally across disciplines. This underscores the benefits of multiple perspectives in discourse analysis.

Keywords: disciplinary discourses, academic writing, essays

Introduction

The development of the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus involved not only the collection of university student assignment texts (Alsop and Nesi 2009), but also the classification of these texts into genre families (Gardner and Nesi 2008/forthcoming; Nesi and Gardner forthcoming). As the corpus is now available to researchers through the Oxford Text Archive (http://ota.ahds.ac.uk/headers/2539.xml) and can also be accessed through the online corpus query tool *SketchEngine* at http://the.sketchengine.co.uk/open, the work of describing the nature of student writing has begun in earnest (see References).

The aim of this paper is to show that while the description of metadiscourse leads us to an understanding of argumentation in some disciplines, in others an account of the discourse is needed to gain understanding of the distinctive disciplinary nature of argumentation in Essays. Together insights from these different perspectives on argumentation reinforce the value of multidimensional analysis of the complexities of academic registers.

Essays in the BAWE corpus

The BAWE corpus consists of over 6.5 million words from 2858 assignment texts written by 1039 students as part of their regular studies at university in England. The assignments are from over 30 disciplines, stratified over four levels of study from first year undergraduate Bachelors degrees to first year taught postgraduate Masters degrees. The texts have been classified according to their purpose and staging into thirteen genre families, the largest of which is Essay.

Essays are similar in some respects to Explanations, Critiques and Research Reports. Like Explanations, Essays are intended to demonstrate students' disciplinary knowledge and understanding, but students are also expected to develop an individualised argument in Essays, using evidence to support their argument, and thus developing powers of independent reasoning. Like Critiques, Essays are intended to demonstrate students' ability to evaluate entities, theories or processes, but whereas a book review or product evaluation focuses on one entity, Essays tend to relate entities – the titles involve two main participants. Like Research Reports, Essays expect students to refer to relevant literature, but Research Reports are more extensive in their expectation of a significant literature review, and expectation that the student research reported will contribute to the field. In contrast, Essays are generally written for pedagogical purposes for an audience of university lecturers. The general nature of Essays can be inferred from the questions they set out to answer:

Examples of Essay questions in the BAWE corpus

- Did Hitler's 'charismatic rule' make the Third Reich stronger or weaker as a dictatorship? (History)
- Do we need to solve the problem of induction? (Philosophy)
- To what extent should policy be used to stabilise the economy? Discuss with examples from the UK. (Economics)
- Why has it proved so difficult to obtain convictions for rape? (Sociology)

In Essays students develop arguments in discipline specific ways. Thus the Economics question would be answered differently if it were set in a Politics course, just as the Sociology question would be answered differently in a Law course. It is not only that they draw on different theories and construe evidence differently, but the way claims are made on the basis of evidence also differs, as we shall see.

Metadiscourse of argumentation

Essays typically consist of an introduction, a series of arguments and a conclusion. Towards the end of the introduction there is often a statement of purpose, which can be found through searching for strings such as 'this essay', as in Table 1.

Table 1. 'This essay' and 'in conclusion' across disciplines

	this essay	*In conclusion*
Law 85 essays	84, 99% In ***this essay*** I would be talking about the role of principles in deciding cases and if its use would bring about coherence or incoherence in the legal system.	13, 15% ***In conclusion***, given that reliable evidence is one of the key aims of the criminal process, due process safeguards are clearly an essential feature of police interrogation.
Sociology 91 essays	86, 95% In ***this essay*** I will look at what racism is, and how it is defined in contemporary society, and I will then explore why it still persists	30, 33% ***In conclusion*** then I would argue that it is useful in practice to make a distinction between 'class', 'status' and 'power' as separate elements of stratification
Philosophy 98 essays	84, 86% In ***this essay*** I examine Popper's criterion of falsification contrasted against Kuhn's puzzle-solving criterion	10, 10% ***In conclusion***, it is hard not to agree with Simmel that Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will is a result of a deeply felt intuition of the world as unified.
Classics 76 essays	60, 79% But each hero had a varying view on fighting, and what it meant to be a hero, and this is what I will look at in ***this essay*** .	27, 36% ***In conclusion*** it can be seen that the aims of the Carthaginians differed greatly between the First and Second Punic Wars.
English 89 essays	52, 58% In ***this essay*** I will explore the ways in which problems of interpretation and the abuse of scripture have been translated into dystopic fiction and the issues that are consequently unveiled.	11, 12% ***In conclusion***, the similarities of opinion concerning the politics that construct social identity, expressed by the examined authors, suggest that the construction of the self may have fallen into cultural stasis
439 essays	366 instances	91 instances

In a comparison of Essays from English and Sociology in the BAWE corpus, Bruce points out that English student essays use 'less metadiscourse to explain the shape of the essay and less overt direction of the reader towards the arguments' than Sociology essays (2010:162). This claim is supported by evidence in Table 1 which shows 86 instances of 'this essay' in 91 Sociology essays, compared with only 52 in 89 English essays; and 30 instances of 'in conclusion' in Sociology compared with 11 in English. Collocations of 'this essay' include, 'I will explore/ discuss/ analyse/ argue' each of which leads us to the arguments being developed.

Because 'I' is often used metadiscursively as in the examples above, it may be tempting to assume that where students use '*I*', they are using it metadiscursively.

Table 2 'I' in Essays

	Instances	Relative Frequency
Philosophy	829	487%
English	662	389%
Classics	420	319%
Sociology	300	170%
Law	240	112%

Here, however, English has 662 instances of 'I' compared to Sociology's 300 instances, and is therefore more than twice as frequent. So either Bruce's claims about metadiscourse in Sociology vs English are mistaken, or 'I' is not used metadiscursively to a great extent in English.

An exploration of 'I' in Philosophy and English shows that it is often found in the evidence used to support argumentation, ie in the discourse of argumentation, as in these concordance lines.

I in Evidence

Philosophy

- I have a body and I can understand that **I** have a hand. This does not mean that
- that it is right to uphold my promises, **I** have a normative reason to uphold
- qualities directly. On this account, when **I** have a perceptual experience of a
- A quasi-memory is something **I** have if I hold a belief about a past

English

- Cannot be damn'd; Alas; why should **I** bee? (Sonnet IX, 1-4) *<p>* John Donne,
- female gendered activities, "**I** began with cooking." Freud proposed
- he is telling. 'This is the saddest story **I** have ever heard' (p.13) is how Dowell
- see that thou art angry with me; I know **I** have given thee just cause of anger;

In none of these examples is 'I' used self-referentially to refer to the student writer; it is being used in Philosophy in a generic way to mean 'anyone' or 'people', and is being used in English within quotes which shows it is taken from another text. These uses point us to important differences in the nature of evidence across disciplinary discourses.

Given these differences in the nature of evidence, it makes sense to suppose that the way argumentation builds on this evidence is also discipline specific. This can be explored through conditionals such as 'if... then'.

Philosophy: 'abstract' logical deduction
If Descartes' argument is guilty of circularity **then** it can be entirely dismissed because, being self-contained, it is impossible to prove one way or another.

Law: legal implication
Therefore the courts have made the presumption that **if** agreements are made in a social/domestic context **then** there will be no intention, and the reverse will be true in commercial contexts.

English: - persuasive 'logic'
If Mrs Alving represents modernism, **then** Pastor Manders is the voice of Victorian values.
If female is multiplicity **then** man is unity according to much feminist criticism.

Archaeology: - hypothetical deduction
If this was why they were hunting them **then** you would expect to see occupation during summer and autumn

If we compare the meaning and the logic of the conditionals, we begin to understand the very different types of reasoning in each discipline. The reasoning in Philosophy could be described as abstract logical deduction, while that in Law could be characterised as a more factual legal implication. In English the argument is simply persuasive asking the reader to follow along, while in Archaeology there is more of a hypothetical deduction, based on evidence. These examples indicate the very different process of inferential argumentation across disciplines. The same connectors acquire very different meanings in the different disciplinary contexts.

To move explicitly beyond metadiscourse, we turn to key work analysis in Table 3 to see what can be revealed about disciplinary discourses and registers.

Table 3 Key adverbs and verbs in undergraduate Essays

Law	Philosophy	Sociology	English	Classics
Adverbs				
alone	absolutely	Arguably	Away	Actually
arguably	actually	critically	certainly	all
better	causally	ever	constantly	alone
consequently	certainly	fundamentally	entirely	away
course	else	historically	essentially	BC
entirely	entirely	importantly	ever	certainly
essentially	essentially	increasingly	ibid.	completely
ever	ever	instead	immediately	eventually
ibid	exactly	is	indeed	ever
increasingly	independently	largely	instead	instead
legally	infinitely	longer	merely	later
merely	logically	merely	never	never
necessarily	merely	naturally	perhaps	once
neither	morally	no	similarly	particular
nevertheless	necessarily	predominantly	specifically	probably
no	really	socially		rather
potentially	somewhat	today		really
right	surely	totally		there
surely	truly	truly		today
ultimately	ultimately	whereby		yet

Verbs				
acknowledge	accept	challenge	Capture	attack
afford	admit	cite	convey	born
assert	appeal	constitute	depict	defeat
bind	claim	criticise	desire	defend
commit	commit	dominate	die	depict
deem	concede	embed	emphasise	desire
deter	conceive	embody	escape	die
enforce	criticise	embrace	evoke	fight
impose	deny	emerge	explore	kill
intervene	distinguish	legitimise	force	let
justify	doubt	oppress	hear	love
prohibit	entail	police	imagine	marry
protect	imagine	portray	imply	portray
refuse	justify	question	love	remind
rely	perceive	redefine	portray	rule
	possess	reinforce	read	send
	postulate	reproduce	refuse	tell
	reason	retain	speak	translate
	refute	shape	witness	win
	shall	transcend	write	worship

From Key adverbs it seems that argumentation in Law is distinct in its focus on what is *consequently, legally right*; in Philosophy on what is *absolutely, morally,* or *logically accepted*; and in Sociology on what is *arguably, fundamentally, increasingly, importantly, socially* and *predominantly challenged.*

The key verbs suggest that laws which can be *binding, enforced,* and *justified* enable states to *impose, deter, prohibit* and *protect.* In Philosophy student writers are concerned with concession (*accept, admit, concede),* critique *(criticise, imagine, question),* entertainment *(claim, imagine, postulate),* justification *(entail, justify)* and renunciation *(deny, doubt, refute*) in their search for truth, while the distinctive features of argumentation in Sociology focus on how theories and ideas '*embrace, reproduce, shape, transcend, reinforce, redefine, legitimise, question, portray* and *challenge*' our understanding of Society. In English the key words point to a concern with verbal processes (*read, speak, write*) and how authors *capture, convey, depict, emphasise, evoke, explore, imagine, imply, portray* and *witness*; whereas in Classics the debate is worded more in material processes of life (*born, die*), love (*love, desire, marry, worship*) and battle (*attack, defeat, fight, kill*).

Clusters of Several Key Words in Context

Grouping key words together in semantic fields such as life, love and battle gives us insights into disciplinary discourses in ways that make sense.

In contrast, if we examine how key words cluster in running text, we can begin to understand the registers of disciplinary discourses. In these examples we see collocations such as 'legally impose' and 'arguably be construed as' which typify the disciplinary discourses.

Law

> *To conclude, State A cannot **legally impose** a new tax on imported furniture, whether or not it is being dumped. (0307a)*
> *Action against their respective State to **enforce** the directive they are **relying** upon. Usually the Commission takes action against (0086f)*

Sociology

> *The depiction of the street child as a social menace **could arguably** be **construed as** a conscious effort to maintain the flourishing child labour market. (0314e)*
> *Giddens outlines four **key** principles that shape the Third Way (2001, p.50-56). Firstly and most **fundamentally**, the Third Way rests on the belief that both globalization and Thatcherism have brought **profound** change.. (0075a)*

English

> *Eliot 'others' Hetty by **portraying** her as **never** fully human; she is **consistently referred to as** a 'cat' or 'kitten' (3001e)*
>
> *is an; 'animated image of death carved out of ivory.' The image of white bones **evokes** notions of fossils, thus **implying** that humanity faces moral extinction if ethical (3008i)*

Classics

> *Another source of evidence that can **tell** historians about the way of **life** in fifth century Athens is archaeological evidence, mainly the discovery of decorated pottery that **shows** scenes of Athenian everyday **life**. (6039d)*
>
> *In W.K. Lacey's 'The Family in Classical Greece', we are **told** of two stories that **present** these types of situations. (6039d)*

The processes used as in Law (*legally impose, enforce*) and in English (*portray, imply)* are an entry point to the way meanings are construed in the different disciplinary discourses.

Conclusions

The ability to develop a personalised argument and support it with evidence in the manner conventional in the specific discipline is crucial for success in student Essay writing. As Essays are the most widespread and frequent of all thirteen genre families, particularly in the Humanities, it is essential to understand how this is done in successful written assignments in the disciplines. The BAWE corpus affords insights in the following ways:

1. **Framing metadiscourse indicates the purpose of essay argumentation more in some disciplines than others:**
   As evidenced from the Thesis statements in Introductions and Conclusions identified through motivated searches (*in conclusion, this essay*)

2. **First person 'I' indicates either the metadiscourse or discourse of argumentation differentially across disciplines.**

It collocates with 'will explore/ discuss/ analyse/ argue' which frames the argument, but also appears within evidence, as in 'I have a hand' or 'Alas, why should I bee' which indicate differences in the evidence used to support arguments.

3. **Disciplinary differences in Argumentation can be seen through comparisons of conditionals**
As evidenced through searches for discourse markers (*if … then…*) which acquire disciplinary meanings in context.

4. **Metadiscourse is not enough; differences revealed through key word searches by discipline are also needed, particularly for the Humanities, to grasp the discourse through different semantic fields and evaluative resources used.**
As evidenced through key word searches (here adverbs and verbs) of Essays in particular disciplines, compared to the BAWE corpus as a whole.

5. **Distinctive disciplinary registers can be identified where key words co-occur.**
The collocation of several key words provides an important window on how disciplinary discourses are realised in ways that would be hard to access otherwise.

Acknowledgement

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