The semantic patterning of grammatical keywords in undergraduate History and PIR (Politics & international Relations) essays: a corpus-driven investigation

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The poster reports results from a PhD project completed at the University of Warwick which involved a comparative lexico-grammatical analysis of third-year student writing belonging to the Essay genre family (Nesi and Gardner, 2012) in two disciplines, History and PIR (Politics and International Relations), from two UK higher educational institutions. The project adopted a corpus-driven approach which was developed by Groom (2007) in his analysis of professional academic writing in Literature and History: a keyness analysis was used to identify statistically significant grammatical words, and the phraseological patterning around these was then qualitatively analysed and phraseologies categorised according to their semantic purposes. The concepts of 'semantic sequence' (Groom, 2007; Hunston, 2008) and 'semantic motif' (Groom, 2007), with their focus on 'semantic similarity but formal variation' (Hunston, 2008, p. 292) are crucial in this bottom-up phraseological method: they allow a wide-lens view of groupings of semantic functions and the range of ways in which these can be realised linguistically within texts.

In the project five grammatical keywords - of, and, that, as and this - were analysed across four sub-corpora each consisting of student writing from one of the two disciplines at one of the two institutions. It was found that there were more similarities than there were variations in the semantic patterning of grammatical keywords across the four disciplinary/institutional sub-corpora, and that these similarities could to a large extent be explained in terms of the shared features of student Humanities and Social Sciences writing (Durrant, 2017). The variations that occurred fell along disciplinary rather than institutional lines and can to an extent be explained by differences in the kinds of essay focus favoured by the two disciplines (e.g. focus on specific actors, contexts or phenomena in History vs. focus on general concepts in PIR) and can also be linked to Gosden's (1993) model of subject role domains.

It is argued that Groom's (2007) approach is a useful one to take in analysis of student writing as it uncovers lexico-grammatical features which occur very regularly within student texts and thus, from a pedagogical perspective, are of high value in terms of how much of the text they 'operationalize' (Bruce, 2011, p. 6).

References

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