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Research Article

Is this Too Polite? The Limited Use of Rhetorical Moves in a First-Year Corpus

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Structured Abstract

- **Background:** The researchers conducted a corpus analysis of 548 research-based argument essays, totalling 1,465,091 words, written by first-year students at The City College of New York (CCNY). The purpose of this study was to better understand the ways in which CCNY students were constructing arguments in research essays in order to better support our instruction of the research essay. Curricular guidelines for the research assignment are general. Instructors are directed to require a research-based, persuasive argument that includes conflicting points of view. Model assignment sheets are provided to instructors, but they are free to write their own. Assignment sheets are not collected or approved. In the fall semester in which this corpus was collected, over 70 part-time instructors taught approximately 120 sections of the first- or second-semester composition course.
- **Literature Review:** The study of The City College of New York Corpus (CCNYC) partially replicates and relies on the analysis of three corpora of academic writing conducted by Zak Lancaster (2016a) in his examination of Gerald Graff's and Cathy Birkenstein's textbook *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (2014). The current study also compares the CCNYC findings to studies of stance and voice markers frequency conducted by Ken Hyland (2012) and Ellen Barton (1993) and suggests the classroom use of corpus analysis as described by Raith Abid and Shakila Manan (2015), and Maggie Charles (2007).

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- **Research Questions:** The study was guided by a narrowly-focused interest in learning whether or not the CCNYC would demonstrate the range and distribution of rhetorical moves that Lancaster found in his study of academic writing (2016a). The analysis of the corpus consists of frequency counts; we did not conduct other statistical analyses. Since we had little prior experience with corpus analysis, we wondered what would be revealed about students' writing practices by a partial replication of Lancaster's study. We did not reproduce Lancaster's analysis but relied on his publised results. This study served as an assessment tool, providing a microscopic view of a limited number of rhetorical moves across a large corpus of student essays. As a result of our study, we hoped to be able to create assignments for research essays that responded directly to the patterns that we saw in our students' essays.
- **Methodology:** Modeled on Lancaster's study and the templates of rhetorical moves offered by Graff and Birkenstein, concordances of terms used to *introduce objections, offer concessions, and make counterarguments* were drawn from the CCNYC and then analyzed to confirm that the rhetorical form was in fact functioning as one of the above rhetorical moves within the context of the essay in which it was found.
- **Results:** Our study demonstrates that CCNY students use fewer linguistic resources than their peers at other institutions, a finding that helps shape faculty development seminars. The corpus analysis reveals that while CCNY students introduce objections to their arguments at about the same rates as in other corpora, they are less likely to concede to those objections. In addition, when students made counterarguments, they used only a limited range of the linguistic resources available to them.
- **Conclusions:** The low rate of engagement with opposing points of view and the limited use of linguistic resources for counterarguments all suggest the potential value of focused, corpus-based instruction.

Keywords: corpus studies, rhetoric and composition/writing studies, writing analytics, writing assessment, writing in the disciplines

1.0 Background

In the fall of 2015, the writing program at The City College of New York, a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, approved the use, on an optional basis, of Gerald Graff's and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say* (2014) for students enrolled in either the first or second course of our two-semester composition sequence. Individual instructors could choose to assign this text along with the required text, the *Norton*

Field Guide to Writing (Bullock, 2016). The English Department made the decision to allow instructors to assign the text almost exclusively as a result of pressure from the instructors themselves, of whom there are over 70 teaching composition on a part-time basis during any given semester.

During the first semester that the text was officially available, I collected a corpus of 4,327 essays (of which 548 were the final draft of a research-based argument essay) written by students enrolled in the first semester of our composition sequence. Subsequently, the publication of Zak Lancaster's "Do Academics Really Write This Way? A Corpus Investigation of Moves and Templates in *They Say/I Say*" (2016a) captured my attention. Using the terms from *TS/IS*, Lancaster focuses on the use of words and phrases that academic and student writers use for "*entertaining objections* and *making concessions while still standing your ground*" (p. 438). In brief, writers entertain objections when they introduce an opposing point of view; these objections are often introduced with phrases such as "some might argue," or, less frequently, "this specific group (e.g., "biologists") argues" or, even less frequently, "this particular person argues."

I originally collected the essays both as a faculty development effort—instructors were required to use the Blackboard Course Management System to collect the essays—and as the basis of a large-scale revision study that never materialized. Lancaster's article suggested another use for the corpus: A corpus study could offer insight into how our students—many of whom are from linguistically diverse backgrounds—made use of the rhetorical moves that Lancaster studies in his article. The current corpus analysis is aimed at developing a better understanding of how our students use the rhetorical moves necessary in argument essays.

2.0 Literature Review

The frequency of how often writers call into play an objection that might be made in the name of a general entity (the non-specific pronoun *some* followed by a hedge such as *might*, for example) as opposed to how often they call into play a specific group of people or even a particular individual (*biologists* or *readers* or someone by name) is central to Lancaster's essay. Lancaster persuasively demonstrates that in the corpora that he studies, all writers are more likely to invoke non-specific entities that might object to their central claims. Following the work of linguist Geoff Thompson, Lancaster suggests "that this formula is pervasive in academic discourse because it works to project a reader-in-the-text with whom the writer can negotiate meanings without impinging on the reader's face" (2016a, p. 448). Writers, then, are interested in creating positive interpersonal relationships with their readers, and "leaving open the source of the alternative view reflects interpersonal tact" (p. 448).

In his corpus analysis, Lancaster learns that writers entertain objections along a six point scale that is "more direct" at one extreme and "less direct" at the other, a scale that describes "how overtly the alternative view is attributed to an external source--the reader or a specific group" (pp. 447, 446). At the "more direct" end of the spectrum, as noted above, writers directly address their readers ("some *readers* may question,") or even name a specific person. The

"hypothetical-real" category lies at the other end of the scale, and includes constructions such as "at first glance," a hypothetical proposition in which no entity at all is named. Lancaster's study of three corpora reveals that "all three groups preferred less direct options" (p. 448). In other words, when noting objections to their claims, writers were much less likely to name their readers directly than they were to invoke an entity (even a non-specific entity, such as *readers*) that might possibly object to their claims.

The unwillingness to name an objector, while promoting interpersonal relations, might also, especially in student essays, lend the writing an air of generality, as if students are unwilling to take any particular stand on their subjects. Because the rhetorical moves that students make to develop an argument also function as voice and stance markers—words and lexical bundles that make clear the relationship between the writer and the research that she is presenting—the air of generality is exacerbated, or enhanced, depending on your perspective, when students make limited use of them. By never really making clear their stand, students minimize the risk of offending their primary audience, which is most often their instructor. It may well be this rhetorical consideration—overlooked in our program's extensive discussion of audience—that renders so many student essays more general and sometimes lifeless than we would like them to be.

Of these rhetorical moves, only the more direct—the moves least likely to be used in all of the corpora—are described in *TS/IS.* The least direct options—the moves most likely to be used—are not included in the textbook. Without questioning the value of *TS/IS*, which he calls "useful and well-intentioned," Lancaster instead aims to "extend the *TS/IS* focus on rhetorical moves by offering a systematic, descriptive analysis of how writers use language when they make certain kinds of moves" (p. 440). He is interested in learning, as his title indicates, whether or not academics really write this way.

In order to offer that analysis, Lancaster conducted a corpus study of the Academic Subcorpus of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which contains published, scholarly articles from over 100 disciplines. He also studied the First Year Corpus (FY), which contains over 19,000 application essays written by high school seniors as a part of their application packets to the University of Michigan and Wake Forest University. Finally, his study included the Michigan Corpus of Upper Level Student Papers (MICUSP), a collection of 829 high-graded essays written by seniors and graduate students in multiple disciplines at the University of Michigan. The study began with a count of the occurrences of the rhetorical forms and reasonable variations of them in *TS/IS*, and it also relied on "form/function matching" to ensure that the form being counted fulfilled the function under scrutiny. As Lancaster puts it, for example, "in many instances the formulation *It could be argued that* functions to entertain an objection; in other cases it is used to suggest the writer's own view in tentative terms" (p. 445). As I will discuss in more detail below, Lancaster learned that the forms listed on the templates in *TS/IS* were infrequently used in any of these corpora, even when the search was expanded to include reasonable, expected variations such as including in the search for *readers may challenge* variations such as "*some/many readers, readers may/might/could* + verb, and so on" (p. 445).

Similar to Lancaster's study, this study relies upon work in rhetorical genre studies, composition, linguistics, education, and communication. Drawing on scholarship in multiple disciplines, work by Ellen Barton (1993), Anis Bawarshi (2000), Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff (2010), Amy Devitt (2014), Carolyn Miller (1984), and John Swales (1990), among others, has long established the discipline's interest in genre as an object of analysis and a subject for instruction. Genre has also been the subject of study by scholars working in English for Academic Purposes and English for Specific purposes, such as Ken Hyland (2012), who demonstrates that the detailed study of genre can help equip non-native speakers of English with an understanding of how genres function in their academic disciplines. As Devitt (2014) writes, genre instruction can "give students access to and control of particular genres . . . help students learn how to learn any unfamiliar genres . . . [and] help students see the cultural and ideological nature of genres in order to make their own choices and gain critical understanding" (p. 147). In our study, then, we aimed to better understand how our students constructed their argumentative essays so that they could make connections between what they were doing—which we would be able to show them—and the linguistic formulas that other students and professional academic writers used in their essays.

3.0 Research Questions

The study was guided by an interest in learning more about how our students make use of the rhetorical moves for which Graff and Birkenstein provide templates in their textbook and that Lancaster studied in three separate corpora. The study is narrow in scope; it focuses on a specific group of rhetorical moves in a limited number of essays written during the fall semester of 2015. Because of limited resources, no statistical analyses were performed. The study was viewed as a type of writing program assessment, similar to the trait-based portfolio assessment in place at City College. In that assessment, we record evidence of specific writing traits from one year to the next. After the assessment is complete, we host faculty development workshops based on the results. We discovered, for example, that in Fall 2016 introductory sections of composition, just 23.26% of the portfolios showed evidence that students had used our library's databases. In faculty development workshops, we encouraged instructors to make better use of the databases, and we also provided examples of how to cite them. In Fall 2017, 65% of the portfolios showed evidence that students had used the library's databases. This is a significant improvement, made more significant in the context of our high rate of instructor turnover—about 30% of our instructors are new to our campus each year.

Our experience with faculty development based on portfolio assessment suggested to us that we might learn equally valuable information from a large scale corpus study. Lancaster has shown one way to look at a specific group of the rhetorical moves that students can use to make an argument. For better or worse, the general argument essay remains central to our writing program's pedagogy and, on our campus, to other disciplines' understanding of what composition classes are supposed to teach students how to do. Since this genre dominates the curriculum and forms the basis of how our field and practices are viewed from other

departments, it's useful to be able to talk in more specific ways about how these arguments are built and how our students compare with both student and professional academic writers. This information, if illuminating, could also be used as the basis for internal faculty development workshops and presentations to other departments and administrators.

4.0 Research Methodology

This study of the CCNYC relies on Lancaster's study of the FY, MICUSP, and COCA. Because of limited resources, we did not rescore any of the essays from Lancaster's study. To search the corpus, we used Lawrence Anthony's free software AntConc (2018). The software allows the researcher to toggle between a concordance of the search terms and the full essays. We began by searching for individual terms or lexical bundles, copying the concordance into a spreadsheet, then toggling between the concordance and the full essay to code the function of each usage. Once the first researcher had completed coding the occurrences, she would hide the codes so that the second researcher could repeat his analysis. Once both researchers had completed their analysis, they would meet to discuss the results.

How the students were using a term was often a subject of debate. In order to determine whether a term was being used to introduce an objection to a main argument, we had to identify the main argument by reading the essay from the beginning. The researchers weren't always in agreement about the essay's main argument, and thus not always in agreement about whether or not an objection was being introduced. We followed this same model of search and analysis for all of the terms listed in the Table 1. The figures in the FY, MICUSP, and COCA columns in our Table 1 are drawn from Lancaster's Table 3 (p. 451). These columns for our Table 2 are drawn from Lancaster's Table 4 (p. 453); the data in these columns for our Table 3 are from Lancaster's Table 5 (p. 455). While a corpus study cannot capture every instance of the rhetorical moves that it aims to study, it does offer insight into how common phrases and constructons are used in the text, and it offers a means for comparsion across corpora.

5.0 Results

The present study shows similar patterns of objection, concession, and counterargument that Lancaster describes in his study. CCNY students entertain objections at about the same rate as in the reference corpora, but they are much less likely to offer concessions. In addition, CCNY writers use significantly fewer linguistic resources to offer concessions and make counterarguments than are evident in the other corpora. Whatever the reasons for the restricted use of linguistic resources, the evidence that the corpus provides offers direction and support for specific pedagogical tools and professional development meetings.

Table 1 shows that CCNY students were more likely to use the *TS/IS* wordings (6.8 occurrences compared to the next highest rate in the FY corpus of 1.4 occurrences), and about as likely as the students in the FY corpus to use the alternative wordings. The table suggests that CCNY students entertain objections in their essays at more or less the same rate as students in

the FY corpus, perhaps an unsurprising result given the similar ages of writers in these two corpora.

Table 1

Frequency (per million words) of Wordings for Entertaining Objections

	CCNYC	FY	MICUSP	COCA
TSIS Wordings				
"Some readers may challenge"	0	0	0	0
Search Wordings				
readers may-VERB	2.0	0.1	0	0.2
readers (might/could/would/will)-VERB	1.4	0	0	0.1
TSIS Wordings				
"Many will probably disagree"	0	0	0	0
Search Wordings				
some/many will *ly-VERB	0	0	0	0
TSIS Wordings				
"Many ____ would probably object that"	0	0	0	0
Search Wordings				
some/many * would *ly VERB that	1.4	0.1	0	0
some/many * would VERB that	2.0	1.1	0	0.1
TSIS and Search Wordings				
Name/Group "would certainly take issue with"	0	0	0	0
Name/Group "may want to dispute my/the * that"	0	0.1	0	0
Name/Group "will probably suggest"	0	0	0	0
Sub-total	**6.8**	**1.4**	**0**	**0.4**
Alternative Wordings				
Some would/may/might argue that	17.1	14.2	3.3	1.0
On the surface	1.4	9.5	8.8	8.4
At first glance	10.2	8.9	6.6	5.1
It could be *d that	3.4	4.2	8.9	8.5

	CCNYC	FY	MICUSP	COCA
Sub-total	**32.1**	**36.8**	**27.6**	**23.0**
Total	**38.9**	**38.2**	**27.6**	**23.4**

Significant differences between the CCNYC and the other corpora emerge in Table 2.

Table 2

Frequency (per million words) of "Concession" Wordings (first concession element)

	CCNYC	FY	MICUSP	COCA
Direct Signals				
Although I/While I *	4.8	37.5	25.4	4.6
Yes,	17.7	28.5	5.6	4.0
It is true (that)	13.7	17.5	6.6	10.6
While it is true	4.8	5.7	1.9	1.2
True,	0	4.3	1.4	2.7
I grant/concede/admit that	0	0.1	0	0.1
On (the) one hand (,) I agree	2.7	0.1	0	0
Proponents of X are right	4.8	0	0	0
Sub-total	**48.5**	**93.7**	**40.9**	**23.2**
Indirect Signals				
Of course,	9.6	26.1	20.7	21.1
Clearly,	0	21.8	25.4	14.0
Obviously,	0.7	16.3	11.8	5.5
Undoubtedly, without a doubt	0.7	10.5	3.3	1.6
Certainly,	0.7	3.8	9.4	6.3
Sub-total	**11.6**	**78.5**	**70.6**	**48.5**
Total	**60.1**	**172.2**	**111.5**	**71.7**
Concessions per Objection	**1.54**	**4.51**	**4.04**	**3.06**

As was the case with the writers in Lancaster's study, our students preferred the more direct signals to the indirect signals to offer concessions. In contrast to ways CCNY students introduced objections, though, here the students offer concessions at a much lower rate than their FY and MICUSP counterparts and slightly less often than in the COCA. And, even though the

CCNY students offered objections at about the same rate as the COCA writers, they offered only about half as many concessions per objection as the COCA writers. For every objection they entertained, the CCNY students offered only 1.54 concessions, as compared with 3.06 for the COCA writers and 4.51 for the FY writers. Our students, then, are one-third as likely to offer concessions in this form as writers in the FY corpus.

Table 3

Frequency (per million words) of "Counter" Wordings

	CCNYC	FY	MICUSP	COCA
On the other hand (,) I still * that	0	0	0	0
On the other hand (,) I	0.7	1.4	1.4	0.6
I still VERB that	0.7	2.5	1.0	0.4
It does not (necessarily) follow that	0	0.1	1.4	0.8
Sub-total	**1.4**	**4.0**	**3.8**	**1.8**
Other Counters				
Yet,	13.0	51.6	59.3	28.4
Nevertheless,	25.9	29.0	46.6	56.9
(Even) Still,	5.5	17.7	20.2	33.7
Regardless,	4.1	7.0	10.8	1.6
At the same time,	18.4	19.2	38.6	41.4
Sub-total	**66.9**	**124.5**	**175.5**	**162.0**
Total	**68.3**	**128.5**	**179.3**	**163.8**
Counter Wordings per Concession	**1.14**	**.75**	**1.6**	**2.28**

While our students make fewer concessions, they make more counterarguments than their FY peers, but still are more similar to these writers than they are to the more advanced writers in the other corpora. Moreover, these two tables show that when students do offer concessions and make counterarguments, they do so with a much smaller range of linguistic resources. They are either unaware of or unwilling to use indirect signals such as *clearly*, *obviously*, *undoubtedly*, and *certainly*, relying instead heavily on *of course*. There are also some striking gaps in their very limited use of *yet* and *still* in their counterarguments.

6.0 Discussion: Stance and Voice in First-Year Research Essays

The rhetorical moves that students make in these essays fall into the broad categories of stance and voice as defined by Ken Hyland (2012) in his study of final reports written by undergraduates in their third and final year at Hong Kong University. Hyland's corpus analysis of 64 reports is augmented by "interviews with students in eight fields" (p. 137). In this study, Hyland argues that "*stance* largely involves the writer's expression of personal attitudes and assessments of the status of knowledge in a text and that *voice*, on the other hand, acknowledges the authorized ways of speaking as a community member" (p. 134). As he explains, voice is more "reader-oriented, concerning the use of a disciplinary-appropriate system of meanings by recognizing 'how things are done,' whereas stance is more author-oriented, concerning how writers actually use these to say something new" (p. 134). Voice, then, in this definition, consists of the rhetorical moves that writers in any given context make, and stance is an expression of the writer's opinion of the information that they present. While the words *true* and *obviously* can make the same rhetorical move of offering a concession, and thus represent the author's voice, they also indicate different opinions about what they will introduce, and thus are expressions of the writer's stance toward the information.

The concepts of voice and stance, and Hyland's definition, inform the discussion of the CCNYC primarily because our students use these resources less frequently than their counterparts at other universities, and they use them less frequently than academic writers across the fields represented in the COCA. The definition of voice here also offers a counterpoint to the widespread emphasis on the abstract concept of voice and the importance of its development that current and former MFA students who teach composition at CCNY regularly emphasize in their discussions of student writing. This voice, though never defined, suggests the importance of individual self-expression rather than mastery of or experience with genre-specific rhetorical moves. In other words, the MFA discussion of voice pushes students away from the study of genre-specific rhetorical knowledge and toward an ill-defined focus on creative self-expression. I don't want to argue against creativity either generally or specifically, since creative and critical thinking should inform any academic essay. I do want to distinguish, though, between creative writing, with its emphasis on self-expression and the development of a unique voice that aims to make individual authors recognizable, and the voice and stance that I discuss here, which instead emphasize the value of recognizing and making use of a given set of rhetorical moves in a specific genre. As our study of the CCNYC suggests that our students make limited use of the linguistic resources available to make persuasive arguments, a focused discussion with students on the concepts of voice and stance as Hyland defines them and of the rhetorical moves that academic writers make might provide support for students in pursuit of strong academic arguments.

Research suggests that students make limited use of voice and stance markers in various contexts (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Chen & Baker, 2010; Jiang, 2015; Lancaster, 2016b; Pérez-Llantada, 2015). Ellen Barton's (1993) study comparing student essays with argument essays published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* describes the limited use that the student writers

make of evidentials, or stance markers, in combination with various rhetorical moves—problematization, the construction of a persona, citation, claims and counterclaims—and suggests that students' limited use of rhetorical moves in argumentation demonstrates differences between academics' and students' epistemological stances. Barton uses the linguistic term "evidentials" to describe some of the various ways that writers mark their attitudes toward the information they present, and writes that evidentials function "in the representation of epistemological stance—the underlying perspective on knowledge represented in a text" (p. 746). These evidentials, which Barton also describes as validity and attitude markers "include hedges such as *perhaps*, emphatics such as *clearly* . . . and phrases such as *surprisingly*. . ." (pp. 745-746).

In her essay, Barton compares the rhetorical moves in 100 essays written by academics in a variety of fields for the "Point of View" section of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with 100 required essays written by students from multiple majors to demonstrate writing proficiency. Barton writes that the essays are comparable because both fall within the genre of argumentation (p. 747). She focuses on how students generally fail to use evidentials to delineate their epistemological stance. I share Barton's overall aim of developing a better understanding of students' epistemological stance through analysis of their use of evidentials, but I want here to focus more closely on problematization, citation, and argument. In these areas, just as at CCNY, the students in Barton's study underuse the available rhetorical strategies. Barton reports in her study that one "of only three absolute consistencies in the *Chronicle* essays is the use of the rhetorical strategy of problematization: every one of the 100 essays initiated its argumentation by problematizing its topic" (p. 748). Of the student essays, however, "only 60 problematized their topics, and of these, only 29 highlighted the problematization through the use of an evidential of contrast" (p. 755).

The same pattern is apparent in the differences between the ways academics and students introduce citations. As with problematization, all 100 of the *Chronicle* essays included citations (p. 750). Moreover, the academic essays, in contrast to the student essays, use evidentials of citation to establish an epistemological stance toward their sources. The students' essays, however, which had a "read and respond framework . . . referred to the reading passage using conventional forms of citation" in just 68 of the essays, and "32 did not include conventional references at all" (p. 759). And, of "the 68 essays that use source material in conventional ways, over half (38) limited their use of source material" only as a means to frame their essays; they didn't return to the source material anywhere else (p. 761). Barton's students' use of counterargumentation again follows the pattern revealed in the CCNY corpus, noting that only "24 essays included explicit counterargumentation" (p. 762).

The low incidences of problematization, citation, and counterargumentation all suggest, as Barton notes with regard to citation, that "the student writers generally maintain a neutrality in the use of evidentials of citation . . . evidentials of citation which do not incorporate the perspective of the student writers" (p. 761). In her discussion of argumentation, Barton notes that for "these student writers, providing specific evidence or examples might well detract from the

wide-ranging applicability of the generalizations. . . . Student writers seem to want to construct arguments that have the widest possible application" (p. 763). One possible perspective on the CCNY corpus, then, is not that students are unaware of the available rhetorical moves, but rather that they are consciously limiting their engagement with the material in order to please as wide an audience as possible.

Such a conclusion is explicitly suggested in Hyland's (2012) discussion of stance and voice in his study of "project reports," or capstone research essays, written by students in eight fields; Hyland also interviewed the students and "searched for key features of stance and engagement," comparing the student corpus of 64 reports (630,000 words) "with a larger reference corpus of 1.3 million words from research articles in closely related disciplines" (p. 138). Students, Hyland notes, make significantly less use than their professional counterparts of three rhetorical features that help establish authorial stance in academic essays. Similar to both the student and professional writers in Lancaster's study, these students were not inclined to directly address the reader with *you* or *your*. As one of Hyland's interview subjects puts it, science writing "is neutral. I know my supervisor will read my project but I cannot talk to him like in the tutorial" (p. 139).

These students, like the students in Lancaster's study, seem to not want to engage in face-threatening acts (p. 448), opting instead to demonstrate their understanding of the material without directly addressing the reader. And, like the students in Barton's study, by not directly addressing their readers, they broaden their potential audiences and avoid alienating their instructors. Similarly, and for the same reasons, students in Hyland's study were only half as likely as professional writers to use directives, which are "most usually imperatives, obligation modals or adjectives expressing necessity, which instruct the reader to perform an action or to see things in a way determined by the writer" (p. 141). As a student notes of their reason for not using directives, the "words are too strong. It is like a demand" (p. 142). Similarly, Hyland notes that there were "substantial differences in the ways experts and students used questions and not all student writers seemed comfortable with their directness and possible impact" (p. 144). As one student notes, "I never think to ask a question in the report. How can I ask a question in my report? Teachers ask questions and I am answering the questions" (p. 144).

7.0 Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

More study of the students themselves, including interviews and longitudinal studies, would improve our understanding of students' motivation. What's clear from this study, however, and multiple other studies, is that CCNY students demonstrate an unwillingness to use, or a lack of understanding of the necessary rhetorical moves, or a lack of know-how, or techné, of how to use them. Given the wide range of student writing that these corpora contain—second language learners and native speakers at public, private, and international institutions—one obvious conclusion is that the failure to use these rhetorical features is a conventional attribute of students who are learning to master academic discourses. Hyland notes that while "typically taken for granted as straightforward and unproblematic by subject tutors, not everyone has equal access to

the conventional forms associated with a competent academic self" (p. 136), and others (Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011) have also shown that non-native speakers have access to fewer linguistic resources than native speakers. This aspect of student performance may be especially relevant for CCNY students. As I note above, City College is a federally recognized Hispanic Serving Institution and Minority Serving Institution. According to *The New York Times*, the median parent income for CCNY students "born in 1991, approximately the class of 2013, in 2015 dollars," was $40,200 (Economic, 2017). City College students have diverse language backgrounds; they come from 173 different countries (The City College of New York, 2017). Some informal, first-day-of-class surveys suggest that as many as 90% of our students are fluent speakers of more than one language, with a language other than English being dominant in their homes, and that more than half also read and write in more than one language.

While professional and student writers alike are generally unwilling to directly challenge their readers, the CCNY students, in contrast to their peers at other institutions and to professional writers, also use many fewer concession and counterargument wordings, and they offer many fewer concessions per objection than their peers and professionals. Since we want students to engage more fully in dialogue with their sources, we have provided instructors with a Rhetorical Moves assignment (Appendix A) that informs students and instructors with the findings of this study and offers activities for expanding the range of available rhetorical moves and linguistic resources. That these are examples drawn from and activities based on a corpus of CCNY essays certainly resonates with instructors, and it might well resonate with students.

The corpus collection and analysis highlights the value of the students' essays; it makes visible the ways in which the study of our students' writing informs the pedagogical stance of our writing program. Raith Abid and Shakila Manan (2015) and others have persuasively argued that taking the corpus study into the classroom provides students with a hands-on method for looking closely at the rhetorical moves that writers make to position themselves epistemologically with regard to their subjects and thus more fully engages students in one kind of research while also developing their ability to analyze texts critically (Charles, 2007; Cotos, Huffman, & Link, 2015; Poole, 2016). As Aull (2017) notes, "identifying patterned discourse in academic writing can help make writing expectations and ontological orientations more transparent" (p. 9). Such efforts—investing the time and energy to collect and analyze student essays, developing assignments based on that analysis, and engaging students in corpus linguistics research—all represent a radical departure from the usual writing program administration and composition pedagogy, in which, in the flurry of staying above water, we lose sight of the enormous volume of work that has been generated, and ask students to engage in the tasks associated with writing essays as if they were the first students on our campus to write.

Author Biography

Thomas Peele is an Associate Professor at The City College of New York, where he serves as the writing program administrator; he also coordinates the writing across the curriculum

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Appendix A

Structuring Arguments: The Rhetorical Moves We Make to Entertain Objections, Make Concessions, and Counter Arguments

Writing a persuasive academic argument is a complex task. During the writing process, the author develops a main point (often called a thesis). The author must also conduct research to support that point. To be persuasive, though, the author also needs to address opposing views. Acknowledging that there are differences of opinion and offering answers to questions that readers might have both show respect for your audience. Readers who see that the writer has not anticipated their objections will stop reading your argument; you won't be able to persuade them.

A recent study of essays written by CCNY students shows that while they are very good at entertaining objections (in other words, including arguments that *oppose* the point that they are trying to make) they don't very often *make concessions* or *counter* arguments. When writers *make concessions*, they are basically saying "yeah, you kind of have a point. . . " When they *counter* arguments, they continue that thought with something like "but I also think that . . ." Everyone is familiar with this structure—think of any time you've had a friendly conversation about a movie, for example. Maybe your friend didn't like the movie as much as you did, and she tells you why. You counter with "yeah, I see your point, but I also think that . . ." The structure (but not the language) is the same for academic arguments. Although the stakes can sometimes be a lot higher than they are in a discussion with a friend, the idea is very often the same: respect and acknowledge opposing viewpoints, then make connections between those viewpoints and your own. In this context, an argument is a discussion, not a fight.

The most common rhetorical move among CCNY students for ***entertaining an objection*** is "some/many/others object/disagree/argue that . . . ." By rhetorical move, I don't mean these specific words (though these are often the words that students use), but rather the structure: a non-specific noun (some/many/one/people/others, and so on), followed by a verb or verb combination (might/could/may object/disagree/argue) as a set up for a statement. Try some of these alternatives to this rhetorical move; feel free to change the words to something you like that accomplishes the same goal:

On the surface,
At first glance,
It might seem that,
It could be argued that,

To ***make a concession*** (that is, to agree with part of an objection), CCNY students are most likely to use “of course.” This is a good one, but consider some of these other options when you want to make a concession:

Although I/While I
Yes,
It is true (that)
While it is true
True,
Clearly, obviously,
Undoubtedly, without a doubt
Certainly

Finally, when CCNY students want to ***counter an argument*,** they are most likely to use “yet” or “nevertheless,” which are both great choices. You might also consider using these counters:

Still,
Regardless,
At the same time,

None of these words are fixed in any of these categories. You’ll use them in different ways depending on your preferences and personal style. Remember, though, that you’re entering a conversation, and conversations always go better when all parties are respectful.

Exercises

1. Go to CCNY’s “Opposing Viewpoints in Context” and find two opposing Viewpoint articles on a subject that interests you. Right now, for example, under Global Warming there is one article called “Fracking Does Not Contribute to Global Warming” and another one called “Fracking Contributes to Global Warming.” Read the articles either alone or in groups and identify the rhetorical moves that the writers make to support their own claims, entertain objections to their claims, make concessions to these objections, and offer counter arguments to these objections. What language do the authors use? Is it different from or similar to the suggestions on this page? Once you’re done with your move analysis, make sure to see who wrote the essay and what their credentials are. In your opinion, do the writer’s credentials make them a believable (credible) source?

2. Find a short article, such as a *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* editorial (CCNY students get free subscriptions to both), then read and discuss it in class. As with the first exercise, look for the rhetorical moves that the writer makes. Then, write an informal

response to the article. First make a concession to the author’s point, then counter their argument. What moves did you make to respectfully disagree? What counter arguments did you make? Finally, be sure to look up the credentials of the editorial’s author. Are they credible?