

The expression of obligation in student academic writing

Benet Vincent
Coventry University

Recent years have seen a growing focus on the expression of interpersonal meaning in academic prose as in other registers. However, while studies in this area typically mention obligation in passing, it remains generally overlooked. This is a problem for learners and teachers of academic English, since there is a lack of empirical studies and therefore lack of guidance as to which forms might be best suited to which functions.

In terms of forms, the framework presented in Halliday & Matthiessen (2004: 260) covers the main lexicogrammatical resources of obligation, associating them particular realisations with 'orientations' which indicate levels of responsibility indicated by the speaker for the imposition of the obligation (this progressively decreases from 'subjective, explicit' to 'objective, explicit':

- Subjective, explicit: *I want John to go*
- Subjective, implicit: *John should go*
- Objective, implicit: *John's supposed to go*
- Objective, explicit: *It's important for John to go*

This framework is then combined with the expressions for each orientation which index different 'values' (e.g. median *should* vs. high *must*).

In terms of functions, Hyland's (2002) framework based on academic prose complements Halliday's semantic distinctions. This framework¹ distinguishes between 'Physical Acts' (PA: reference to 'Real World' and 'Research Process' actions) and 'Cognitive Acts' (CA: 'Rhetorical' and 'Emphatic' uses) that the addressee is directed to perform. The imposition is seen by Hyland to increase from PA to CA, suggesting an interesting parallel with the Hallidayan framework. However, Hyland is less interested in the lexicogrammatical realisations for each function than the extent to which functions/directives differ by discipline and genre.

Thus, we have two relatively robust frameworks which have been under-utilised in research, but which when combined suggest interesting possibilities for investigating the expression of obligation in academic writing.

This study therefore aimed to address the following questions:

- Which of the Hallidayan lexicogrammatical realisations of obligation are most frequent in student academic writing?
- Which of Hyland's functions is each realisation most closely associated with?

This study investigated these questions using the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus (accessed via Sketch Engine). The first stage involved the use of CQL queries to identify the most frequent realisations for each orientation. Since the phenomena in question (e.g. *must*) are typically polysemous, samples were retrieved to check precision and filter out false hits before extrapolating based on overall frequencies in the corpus. The results of this first stage indicate the overall prevalence of modals and semi-modals used for the expression of obligation in student academic writing.

¹ Minor adaptations have been made to this and to the Hallidayan framework.

A qualitative follow-up analysis based on the samples extracted then determined the proportions of each sample from the first stage associated with each of Hyland's functions. The results here show a clear preference for objective, explicit expressions (introductory *it*) to realise 'Cognitive Acts' while other orientations are far more likely to be used for 'Physical Acts'. This presentation will also highlight the limitations of this approach and present some phraseological implications.

References

- Halliday, M. & Matthiessen, C. (2004) *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd edn. London: Hodder Arnold.
- Hyland, K. (2002) 'Directives: Argument and Engagement in Academic Writing'. *Applied Linguistics* 23(2): 215-239.