

The expression of obligation in student academic writing

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A language is interpreted as a system of meanings, accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be realized. The question is ... “how are these meanings expressed?” (Halliday 1985: xiv)

... in particular contexts of use

In this case, how is obligation expressed in student academic writing?

What is 'obligation' (a.k.a. 'deontic modality')

- 'interpersonal meaning'; part of system of modality (with *inclination, usuality, probability*)
- Most definitions focus on moral/social necessity of some 'action' being carried out; perhaps better to define as 'desirability of state of affairs being realised'
- Analyses have attempted to distinguish between obligation coming from speaker (subjective) or from another source (objective: morality, physical etc.), performativity or otherwise and strength of obligation (e.g. *should* v. *must*)

Why 'obligation'?

- importance of interpersonal meanings in academic discourse: hedging, evaluation, stance etc.
- Many studies mention obligation (e.g. Biber et al. 1999, Thompson & Hunston 2000) but little direct attention has been paid to it in this context
 - because expressing obligation is potentially FTA (Giltrow 2005)
 - due to distinction between 'proposition' (likelihood) and 'entity' (appraisal) (e.g. Thompson & Hunston 2000) overlooks Lyons' (1977) 2nd-order entities (states of affairs, events)

Lack of information about forms typically used to express this meaning

Main forms: Halliday's framework (1994)

presented as coming from speaker

Subjective

Objective

presented as coming from other source

explicit

implicit

implicit

explicit

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	<i>explicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>	<i>explicit</i>
obligation	I want John to go	John should go	John's supposed to go	It's necessary to go*

Originally: **It's expected that** John goes

- Very rarely attested
- Most likely to have *likelihood* not *obligation* meaning

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presented as coming from other source

Subjective

Objective

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obligation	I want John to go	John should go	John's supposed to go	It's necessary to go*

Plausible deniability – 'I didn't command it'

Main forms: Halliday's framework (1994)

takes responsibility ←  → avoids responsibility

Subjective

Objective

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obligation	I want John to go	John should go	John's supposed to go	It's necessary to go*

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	Subjective		Objective	
	<i>explicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>	<i>Explicit</i>
obligation	I want John to go	John should go	John's supposed to go	It's necessary to go*
Other exponents ('value')	<i>order</i> <i>urge</i> <i>beg?</i>	<i>must</i> <i>ought to</i> <i>has to</i> <i>needs to</i>	<i>required</i> <i>expected</i>	<i>important</i> <i>vital</i> <i>essential</i>

Issue for corpus research: most of these forms are [polysemous](#)

Polysemy/multifunctionality of obligation forms

- **Must:**

obligation (deontic)

- *You **must** also specify a date not less than 21 days from the date of service*

likelihood (epistemic)

- *He concluded that the cathode rays **must** be lots of tiny particles of matter*

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	<i>explicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>	<i>implicit</i>	<i>Explicit</i>
obligation				necessary to
Other exponent ('value')	<i>beg?</i>	<i>has to</i> <i>needs to</i>		important <i>essential</i>

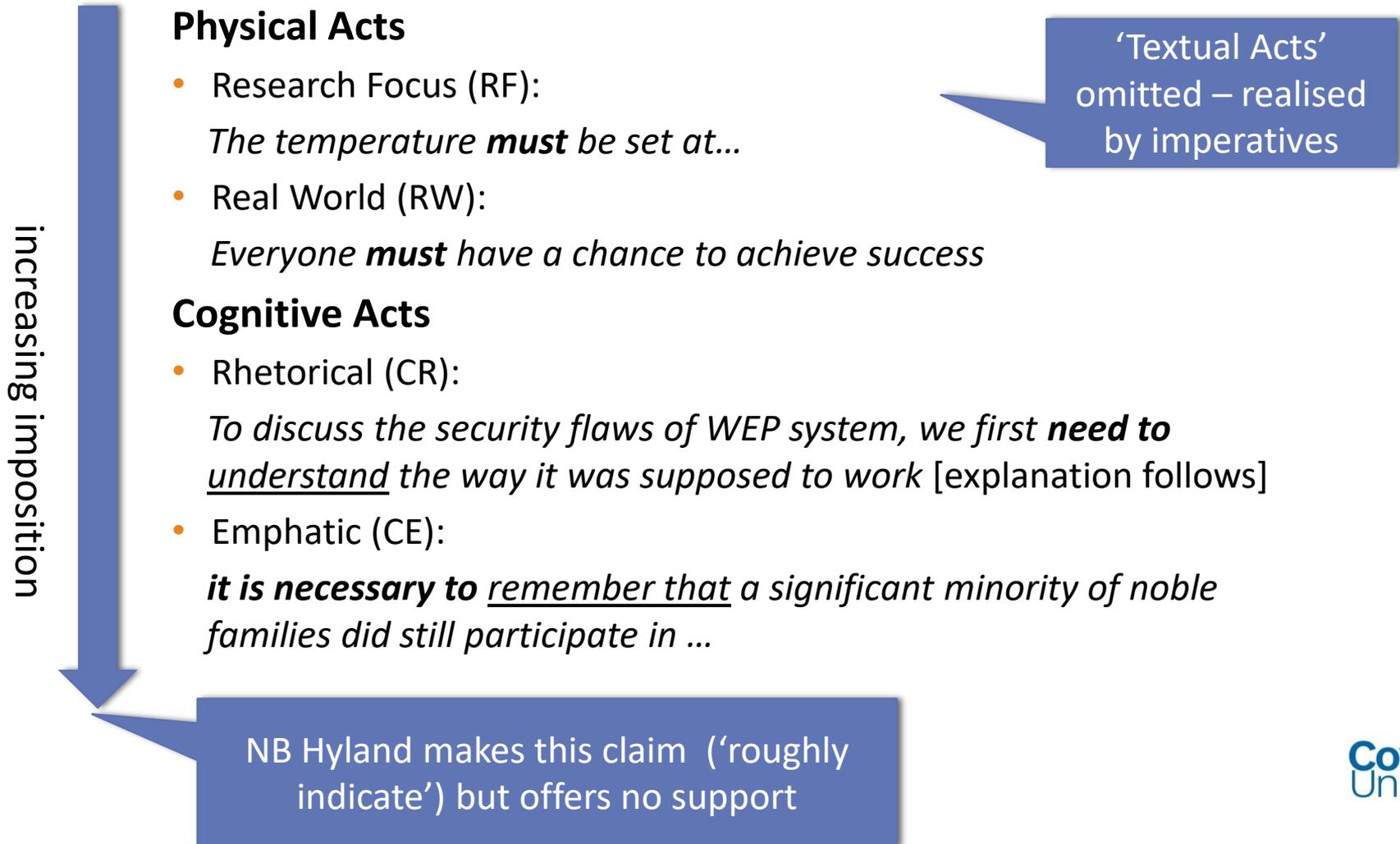
choices are meaningful – means of expression associated with different contexts

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Why is choice of obligation expression important?

- Assuming EAP learners are aware of these forms, how to choose in specific context?
- Implications of choosing wrong form
- Is it best to simply avoid responsibility using low value forms (*it is important to...*)?
- Need for functional framework to show uses to which obligation expressions may be put in writing (within a single text)

Hyland's (2002) functional framework (adapted)



Research Aims

In student academic writing, as represented by the BAWE corpus:

- investigate whether Hyland's 'increasing imposition' (on reader) is reflected in obligation form chosen

Relationship is implicit in both models but not investigated

Results may:

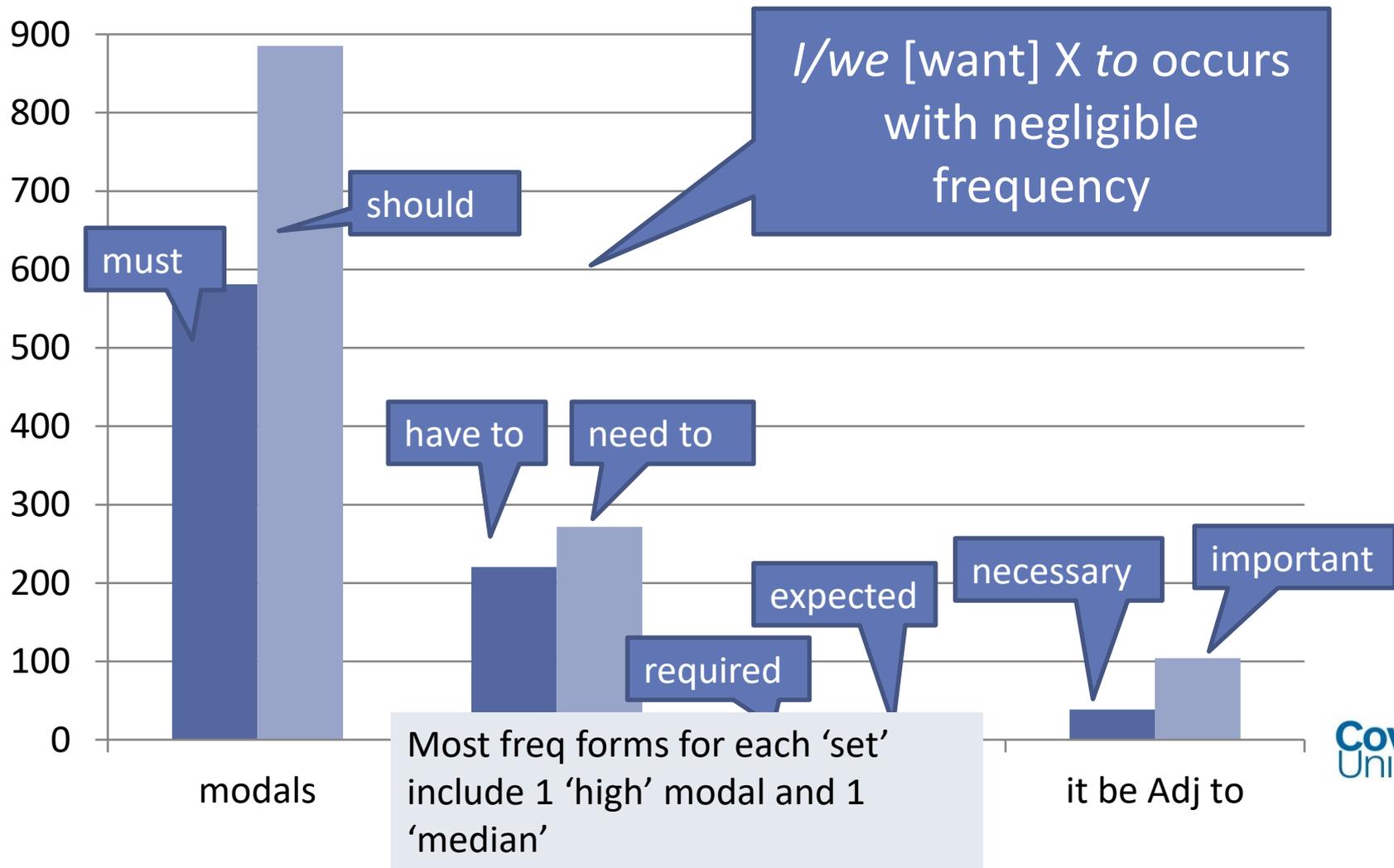
- indicate what Halliday's framework overlooks
- have pedagogical implications

Methods, stage 1

- Retrieval of forms:
 - CQL queries to retrieve items of interest (Sketch Engine)
 - Modals / Semi-modals: fairly straightforward
 - For other forms: pattern-based searches used, e.g.
 - "it|It" []? [tag="VBZ"] [word=".*" & !tag="XX"]? [tag="JJ.*"] [tag="TO"]
 - The most frequent 'obligation forms' (e.g. *necessary, important, crucial, advisable*) identified
 - Re-do search just with forms identified: find most frequent
 - Save a random 100-line sample of most frequent forms to separate instances of obligation from irrelevant lines

NB only present tense instances retrieved

Extrapolated frequencies (pmw)



Methods, stage 2: functional analysis

Remaining lines classified using Hyland's (2002) functional framework:

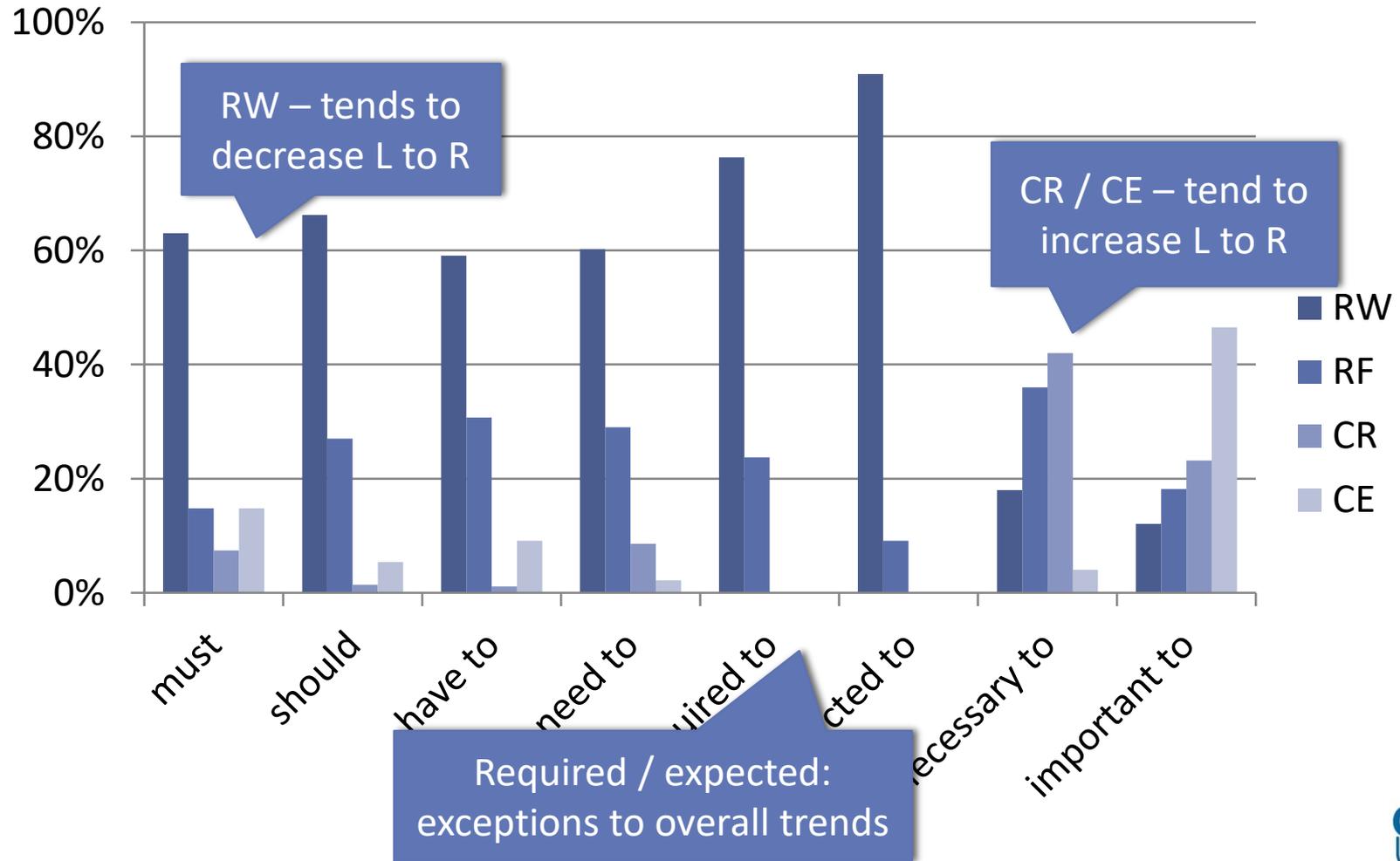
Physical Acts

- Research Focus (RF)
- Real World (RW)

Cognitive Acts

- Rhetorical (CR)
- Emphatic (CE)

Results by function / form



Interim summary

- Level of imposition seems to be reflected in choice of form in that higher proportions of 'low responsibility' forms realise functions with higher imposition

But not quite as simple as that:

- *Required / expected to* clear exception to pattern
- Not a clear-cut picture even with remaining items; need for qualitative analysis of instances

required / expected to

Far lower frequency: perhaps not in competition with other forms; more likely comparable with 'explicit subjective' / ***[want] you to.***

- We don't *require/expect* someone to *note/consider/understand* something
- Typically reports of third party requirements:
 - *companies **are required to** pay a monthly fee of ...*
 - *Employers **are expected to** increase the level of employee commitment*

Realisations – by function

Emphatic

- **It is important to** note all organisms are capable of producing more offspring that can survive
- **it should be** noted that the latter time limits are non-binding
- Forecasting of demand **must also be** taken into account...
- **one has to** acknowledge the fact that a shock on inputs has a permanent effect on growth
- **we must** recognize that many political scientists doubt the novelty and the very existence of this process.

Realisations – by function

Emphatic

- **It is important** to avoid directly involving reader as being obliged
- **it should be noted** that the latter time limits are non-binding
- Forecasting of demand **must also be** taken into account...
- **one has to** acknowledge the fact that a shock on inputs has a permanent effect on growth
- **we must** note the novelty of

i.e. not *just* about ‘responsibility’; also

Only exception is distanced in a different way
As Schein argues, "*you must not assume that more or stronger culture is better.*"

Similar pattern is seen for 'Rhetorical' instances

- In order to address this question, **it is first necessary to** define standardisation.
- **It needs to be** explained why men were also tried and found guilty...
- In order to investigate the possibility the topic **needs to be** examined
- To fully understand and manage risk **one must** first understand what underpins risk, uncertainty.
- **We should** however consider the lack of homogeneity regarding religious practice during this period...

Research Focus

- To calculate the variance of a given population, **it is necessary to** first calculate the mean of the scores
- When placing circles on a sampling grid some adjustments **have to be** made
- If necessary, the value of AQL **should** take into account safety aspects.
- To construct an argument for Q, **one must** prove that Q is true in order for P to be true
- As a result, **we have to** use another way to measure responsiveness
- policymaking and its analysis is hard and **policy makers must** take everything into account when making decisions

Research Focus

- To calculate the variance of a given population, **it is necessary to** first calculate the mean of the scores
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- To construct a responsibility or directly address reader is true in order to
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Still tendency for students to avoid responsibility or directly address reader

Real World

- Therefore, **it is necessary to** market the hotel via traditional and electronic channels
- Tasks **should be** allocated according to employees' capabilities.
- **The manager has to** be able to handle the tension between an individual's ability and...
- **sellers need to** understand that there are...
- **You must** also specify a date not less than 21 days from the date of service of the notice
- Having demolished the current utopia with the weapons of realism, **we still need to** build a new utopia of our own
- Facts that are used **should be** correct

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- Tasks **should be** allocated to individuals based on their capabilities.
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- **sellers need to** understand that there are...
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- Having demolished the current paradigm of realism, **we still need to** build a new paradigm of our own
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Less constrained in terms of active subjects (e.g. *you*)

Again these aren't always 'acts'

Conclusion

- Hallidayan framework + Hyland framework = useful way of approaching expression of obligation in academic discourse
- EAP learners wanting to use these expressions should be aware of pragmatic restrictions on usage
- The 3 functions (CE, CR, RF) most constrained in terms of realizations also
 - the most important for students in terms of argumentation / demonstrating subject knowledge
 - and thus (?) the most liable to cause issues if poorly expressed
 - hence should be most carefully introduced (but are they?)

Limitations

- This study is neither discipline- nor genre-specific
- Haven't considered some other potential means of expressing obligation – extend to imperatives, *it is important that* for example
- This sort of research is laborious (and raises issues of reliability); from corpus perspective it would be helpful to find ways of improving precision of retrieval process

Therefore...

Further research **needs to / must / should** be carried out

It is necessary / important / crucial to conduct further research

~~You are required to carry out further research~~

Thanks for listening

Any questions?

References

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