The expression of obligation in student academic writing

Benet Vincent, Coventry University
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>explicit</td>
<td>implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>implicit</td>
<td>explicit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Main forms: Halliday’s framework (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>explicit</strong></td>
<td><strong>implicit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligation</td>
<td>I want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Originally: *It’s expected that* John goes

- Very rarely attested
- Most likely to have *likelihood* not *obligation* meaning
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>explicit</td>
<td>implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligation</td>
<td>I want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John to go</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Plausible deniability – ‘I didn’t command it’
### Main forms: Halliday’s framework (1994)

- Takes responsibility
- Avoids responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>obligation</strong></td>
<td><em>explicit</em></td>
<td><em>implicit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I want</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John <strong>to go</strong></td>
<td>John’s <strong>supposed</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>implicit</em></td>
<td><em>Explicit</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John <strong>should go</strong></td>
<td>It’s necessary to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>go*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

*Coventry University*
Main forms: Halliday’s framework (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Objective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>explicit</strong></td>
<td><strong>implicit</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligation</td>
<td>I want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other exponents (‘value’)</td>
<td>order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>urge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beg?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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
Polysemy/multifunctionality of obligation forms

- **Must:**
  
  **obligation (deontic)**
  
  *You must also specify a date not less than 21 days from the date of service* (legal context)

  **likelihood (epistemic)**
  
  *He concluded that the cathode rays must be lots of tiny particles of matter*
Polysemy/multifunctionality of obligation forms

• **Must:**
  
  obligation (deontic)
  
  • *You must also specify a date not less than 21 days from the date of service* (legal context)

likelihood (epistemic)

• *He concluded that the cathode rays must be lots of tiny particles of matter* (experimental conclusions)
Main forms: Halliday’s framework (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Takes responsibility</th>
<th>Avoids responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjective</td>
<td>Objective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explicit</td>
<td>implicit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obligation</td>
<td>needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other exponent</td>
<td>important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(‘value’)</td>
<td>essential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choices are meaningful – means of expression associated with different contexts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Issue for corpus research: most of these forms are polysemous
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)

Physical Acts
- Research Focus (RF):
  *The temperature must be set at...*
- Real World (RW):
  *Everyone must have a chance to achieve success*

Cognitive Acts
- Rhetorical (CR):
  *To discuss the security flaws of WEP system, we first need to understand the way it was supposed to work* [explanation follows]
- Emphatic (CE):
  *it is necessary to remember that a significant minority of noble families did still participate in ...

‘Textual Acts’ omitted – realised by imperatives

NB Hyland makes this claim (‘roughly indicate’) but offers no support
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

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)

Most freq forms for each ‘set’ include 1 ‘high’ modal and 1 ‘median’

I/we [want] X to occurs with negligible frequency
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Trend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RW</td>
<td>Tends to decrease L to R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR / CE</td>
<td>Tend to increase L to R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Required / expected: exceptions to overall trends
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’ I [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 note** that all organisms are capable of producing more offspring than they 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.

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.
• 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.
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.
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.

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


