

**Managing the subjective:  
Exploring dialogistic positioning in  
undergraduate essays**

Nayia Cominos

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## **Abstract**

One of the challenges that novice writers in the academic register face is how to manage subjectivity in academic discourse, and in particular, dialogic positioning in relation to expert sources and the putative addressees. While there is a growing body of research on this aspect of academic literacy from a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) perspective, the focus has been on professional academic writing and Non-Native Speaker of English (NNSE) undergraduate and postgraduate texts.

This study is a qualitative analysis of dialogic positioning in a NSE undergraduate student's three summative essay tasks, from the first to fourth semesters in the Discipline of Linguistics. For the analysis, an adapted SFL Discourse Semantics layered methodology was used, incorporating elements of Genre Theory and Appraisal Theory. The task directives were analysed using Genre Theory to establish the communicative purpose of the task and the potential responses it could elicit. The student's text was divided into propositions, and the typology and distribution of the dialogic formulations they contained were analysed, using the Engagement framework from Appraisal Theory. The formulations were classified in terms of rhetorical function in the staging and argumentation of the texts.

Several salient points emerged from the analysis. The communicative purpose analysis showed that semantic tensions and ambiguity in the formulation of task directives could result in more than one appropriate generic response. This was displayed in the student's choice of a legitimate Exposition macro-genre response to each of the tasks, even when there was a task directive *to discuss*. The student's understanding of the task requirements determined the type and degree of dialogic positioning in the text, so those stages, such as the Introduction and Conclusion, which served a factual function, or asserted key propositions, were expressed predominantly through monoglossic Assertion and Presupposition, whereas those stages or sections of stages,

which involved analysis or theorisation showed a higher degree of heteroglossia. The student used a range of dialogically contractive and expansive formulations, adapting their frequency and distribution from one text to another.

The classification of the formulations when they were considered in terms of their rhetorical function rather than a given semantic value and the implications for our theoretical understanding of the academic genres, are discussed.

## **Declaration of originality and consent**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Nayia Cominos and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signature of candidate:

.....



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