

# “I rest my case”: Linguistic resources used by successful young writers of persuasive texts

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## Abstract

This paper investigates persuasive strategies used by 15 Tasmanian year 5 students who scored highly on the written component of the 2011 NAPLAN test. The texts were analysed with two frameworks, the first drawn from APPRAISAL theory and the second from classical rhetoric. Initially, the ENGAGEMENT system (see White, 2003; Martin & White, 2005) was used to examine linguistic resources deployed by these students to adopt stances toward the views of others and to include their readers as discourse participants. Secondly, the analysis sought to uncover figures of speech from STYLE, the third canon of classical rhetoric (see Aristotle, trans. 2004), deployed by the students to achieve a number of persuasive effects. Lastly, the analysis was used to outline how resources from each tradition were sometimes deployed in pairs or clusters by the students. This paper presents work-in-progress for the development of a systematic picture of students’ rhetorical capabilities across years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

## 1 Persuasive Writing in Australian Schools

Since 2008, all Australian students in years 3, 5, 7, and 9 have been required to complete a series of standardised tests known as the *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy* – or *NAPLAN* for short (ACARA, 2011). In 2011, the written component of these tests shifted from its traditional focus on narratives to persuasive writing for the first time, with students from each grade tasked with responding to the prompt that *Australians are spending too much money on toys and games*. Such a corpus of work provides unique opportunities for researchers seeking to investigate Australian primary and high school students’ persuasive writing strategies.

## 2 A Functional Approach to Persuasive Writing

Halliday’s (1977) influential approach to language – known as Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereafter SFL) – seeks to explain the variety in language use across social practices. Central to SFL is the notion that all languages are metafunctionally organised, in that they feature three semantic components, or metafunctions, that operate simultaneously (Halliday & Hasan, 1993). The first two metafunctions – known as the *ideational* and *interpersonal* – relate to phenomena outside language, while the third – known as the *textual* – involves the phenomena created by language itself (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997). Specifically: the *ideational* metafunction is concerned with the linguistic resources used to construe experiences with the world; the *interpersonal* with interactions between people, including the grammatical resources for enacting social roles, dialogic interactions, and interpersonal relations; and the *textual* with the presentation of *ideational* and *interpersonal* meanings through text creation (Matthiessen & Halliday, 1997; Halliday, 2003). As this paper seeks to explain the strategies students use to stance texts and position their readers, this involves an examination of resources found within the *interpersonal* metafunction.

At the interpersonal level, meaning is co-articulated by three discourse semantic resources – known as INVOLVEMENT, NEGOTIATION, and APPRAISAL (Martin & White, 2005). While INVOLVEMENT is concerned with non-gradable resources for negotiating tenor relations, such as solidarity (Martin & White, 2005), and NEGOTIATION is concerned with interactive aspects of discourse (Martin, 1992), APPRAISAL focuses on the resources used

by speakers and writers to present attitudes, judgements and emotive responses (White, 2001). As APPRAISAL theory allows researchers to “explore, describe and explain the way language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, and to manage interpersonal positioning” (White, 2001, p. 1), it is highly relevant for examining students’ persuasive writing strategies.

## 2.1 The APPRAISAL Systems

APPRAISAL theory is composed of three systems “along which a writer’s intersubjective stance may vary” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 1)<sup>13</sup>. One of these systems – known as ENGAGEMENT – can be used to explore the linguistic resources used to “adopt a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text and with respect to those they address” (p. 92). This system is of particular relevance when examining persuasive texts, as it indicates how authors acknowledge and engage with the views of others to position their audience as discourse participants. As suggested by Swain (2010), persuasive writing involves “comparing and contrasting positions, expressing degrees of agreement and disagreement, and acknowledging and refuting other points of view” (p. 296), and from a functional perspective, ENGAGEMENT plays a vital role in achieving such processes.

### 2.1.1 ENGAGEMENT

White (2003) proposed a system network to outline the resources of ENGAGEMENT, as follows:

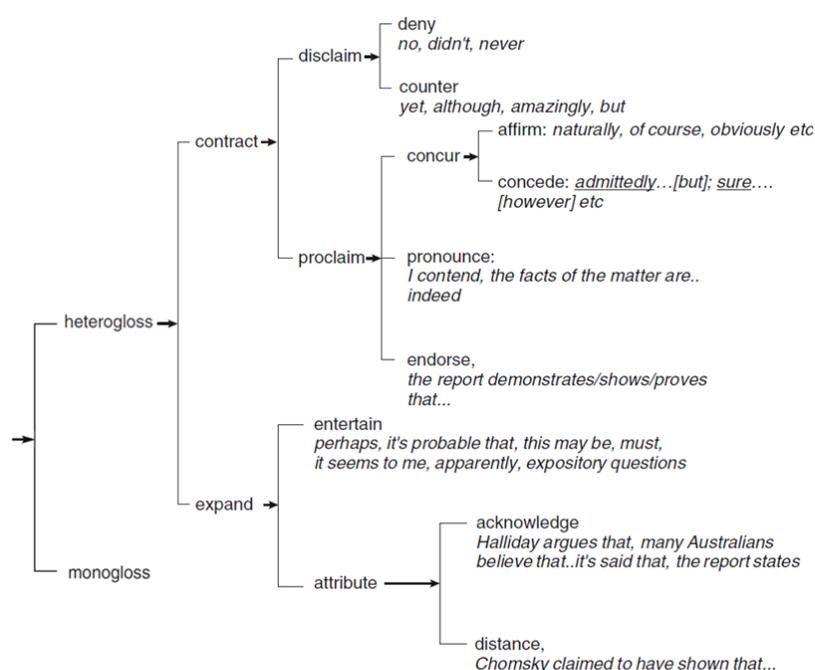


Figure 1: The ENGAGEMENT system (adapted from Martin & White, 2005, p. 134)

ENGAGEMENT is inspired by Bakhtin’s (1981) perspective on dialogism and heteroglossia (Martin & White, 2005). The framework’s first line of distinction is drawn between the dialogically engaged heterogloss – utterances which acknowledge more than one view – and the undialogised monogloss – which do not acknowledge such diversity (Miller, 2004). Heteroglossic resources are categorised as those that contract or expand dialogue (White, 2003). In this way, utterances can acknowledge more than one view, yet increase or

<sup>13</sup> For in-depth descriptions of each APPRAISAL system see Martin and White (2005).

decrease an interpersonal cost for any reader who objects to the position presented by the authorial voice (Martin & White, 2005). While a detailed account of each resource can be found in White (2003) or Martin and White (2005), this short paper highlights the four most commonly used ENGAGEMENT resources in the data set, namely: monoglossic utterances; ENTERTAIN; DENY; and AFFIRM.

### 3 Classical Rhetoric

The second view of language used to examine the data set is *classical rhetoric*, the origins of which lie in 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC Greece (Kennedy, 1999). Classical rhetoric is chiefly associated with persuasive discourse, and consists of numerous linguistic resources that assist speakers or writers to persuade others (Corbett & Connors, 1999). For pedagogical purposes, classical rhetoric has been split into five canons, or parts, which can be drawn from to assist speakers and writers to *invent, arrange, stylise, memorise, and deliver* persuasive texts. Important to the third canon, known today as STYLE, are a number of linguistic rules that can be used to add a sense of balance to arguments, emphasise and restate key points, achieve smooth transitions between parts of a text, improve syntax and clarity, increase dramatic elements, and produce euphony and rhythm in the language used (Harris, 2003). In fact, Corbett and Connors (1999) described the basis of STYLE as the composition of words in phrases or clauses, with specific rules outlined for speakers and writers to achieve numerous rhetorical purposes. These rules for stylising text are commonly referred to as *figures of speech*.

#### 3.1.1 Figures of Speech

All figures of speech are classified as *schemes* (meaning *form*) or *tropes* (meaning *to turn*) (Corbett & Connors, 1999). Schemes are characterised by a *transference of regular word order*, as in Winston Churchill's speech in the House of Commons, when he stated:

*We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing-grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills* (June 4, 1940).

This is an example of *anaphora*, a figure of speech where the same word or words are repeated at the beginning of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences (Harris, 2003). Alternatively, tropes are characterised by transference of regular meaning, as in *metaphor* where two different things are compared by speaking of one in terms of the other (Harris, 2003). Although more than 200 figures of speech have been identified (Joseph, 1947), 33 were selected for this research from the work of Harris (2003) and Corbett and Connors (1999), as being particularly relevant for modern day students. Corbett and Connors (1999) stressed the need for teachers to draw attention to this aspect of students' writing, as it increases their awareness of the figurative resources they deploy, often unconsciously. In addition, the principles of rhetoric can be used to analytically break down the persuasive texts of others, exposing the rhetorical strategies they used to stylise their arguments (Corbett & Connors, 1999). This paper highlights four commonly used figures by the year 5 students, and explains where they were paired with resources of ENGAGEMENT.

### 4 Data Analysis

To discover the linguistic resources used by the fifteen year 5 students, their texts were imported into NVivo 9 and coded for instances of the 17 ENGAGEMENT resources (White, 2003; Martin & White, 2005) and the 33 figures of speech (Harris, 2003; Corbett & Connors, 1999).

## 4.1 Results

Monoglossic utterances were the most common ENGAGEMENT resource, deployed by all students a total of 117 times. Monoglossic utterances “do not overtly reference other voices or recognise alternative positions”, but are rather construed as single voiced and undialogised (Martin & White, 2005, p. 99). Here are two examples as deployed by students<sup>14</sup>:

*Peter<sup>15</sup>: Expensive toys are a parent’s worst nightmare.*  
*Teresa: Buying too many toys is just as bad as gambling!*

Such bare assertions are presented as factual, without dialogistic alternatives. The students deployed numerous figures of speech alongside bare assertions, the most common being *alliteration*. This type of scheme involves the repetition of initial consonants in two or more adjacent words, and is useful for contributing to the euphony and structure of verses (Corbett & Connors, 1999). An example from the texts of this pairing is as follows:

*Rachel: Learning how to save is crucial for their future financial safety. Furthermore...*<sup>16</sup>

According to Harris (2003), *alliteration* calls attention to a phrase, emphasises it, and fixes it in the reader’s mind. Overall, this scheme was deployed by all students a total of 51 times. Aside from bare assertions, the 15 students also deployed a total of 168 heteroglossic utterances that acknowledged a diversity of viewpoints. The most common of these was the expansive ENTERTAIN, deployed by all students a total of 70 times, as in the following examples:

*Rachel: Spending too much money on toys and games might lead to an unhealthy society.*  
*Anna: Toys and games can be very educational.*

Here, the authorial voice indicates that its position is “but one of a number of possible positions and thereby makes dialogic space for those possibilities” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 104). So while Rachel has stated that spending too much money on toys *might* lead to an unhealthy society, this entertains the notion that it also *might not*. A number of figures were deployed alongside ENTERTAIN, including a scheme known as *metabasis*. Nine students paired these resources across 19 statements. *Metabasis* consists of a brief statement of what has been said, or of what will be said, and serves the function of keeping discussions ordered and clear (Harris, 2003). The following example features ENTERTAIN and *metabasis* deployed in the same proposition:

*Aaron: Now to my final topic, people may need a game or two to help build a relationship.*

*Metabasis* here serves to transition readers smoothly to the writer’s final topic, while his use of ENTERTAIN serves to show that playing games is but one of many methods people may use to build relationships. *Metabasis* was deployed by 13 of the students 46 times. Following ENTERTAIN, the next most common ENGAGEMENT resource was the contractive DENY, deployed by 14 students a total of 34 times, as in the following examples:

*Shelley: You can take a book anywhere, while you do not see people lugging TVs around, do you?*  
*Rachel: Saving money is a big part of that education that is not taught in schools!*

As these examples show, DENY involves the authorial voice directly negating an opposing view (White, 2003), in Shelley’s case that people can be seen lugging TVs around,

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<sup>14</sup> Students’ spelling or grammatical errors have been corrected for ease of reading.

<sup>15</sup> Pseudonyms have been used in place of students’ names.

<sup>16</sup> Underlining in this example indicates alliteration.

and in Rachel's that saving money is taught effectively in schools. The most common figure of speech deployed alongside DENY was *metaphor*, with these resources paired 10 times by six students. *Metaphor* is a well known trope that involves an implied comparison between two things of unlike nature (Corbett & Connors, 1999). An example of DENY and *metaphor* deployed alongside each other can be seen in the following example:

*David: Adults are also held under the spell of toys and games, not only children.*

Here David uses the *metaphor* of being *held under a spell* in reference to the often addictive and harmful nature of toys and games, whilst simultaneously *denying* a challenging viewpoint that this issue only affects children. Considered separately from DENY, *metaphor* was used by 14 of the 15 students, 41 times. Following DENY, the fourth most commonly used ENGAGEMENT resource – and the last for this short paper – was the contractive AFFIRM, deployed by two thirds of students across 22 propositions, as in the following:

*Jacob: What would you do, and how would you feel, if you woke up one Christmas morning to find everyone had deserted you?*

*Samuel: Do you want to live longer, or not?*

While these examples do not follow the regular AFFIRM formulation – namely those propositions featuring locutions such as *of course*, *naturally*, or *certainly* to announce the agreement of some projected dialogic partner – the effect of these rhetorical questions is the same in assuming an obvious response (Martin & White, 2005). In this way, the audience is positioned to respond to Samuel's question that *of course* they want to live longer! The use of AFFIRM presents writer and audience as so thoroughly aligned that their agreement is essentially taken for granted (Martin & White, 2005). While not commonly deployed alongside AFFIRM, a well-known trope named *hyperbole* featured prominently alongside many ENGAGEMENT resources. This figure involves “the use of exaggerated terms for the purpose of emphasis or heightened effect” (Corbett & Connors, 1999, p. 403). An example of AFFIRM and *hyperbole* used in the same statement is as follows:

*Jacob: If kids have no toys, the most likely thing they will be doing is housework. How would you like to die a painful death of boredom?*

The notion that doing housework will lead to a *painful death of boredom* is clearly hyperbolic, while the use of AFFIRM aligns the reader with the writer and positions them to respond that such an experience would not be pleasant. Harris (2003) stated that while examples of *hyperbole* such as the above have a useful place in English classes today, it should be handled with care. Overall, *hyperbole* was deployed by 13 students in 47 statements, making it the second most commonly used figure within the data set.

## 5 Conclusion

In a study comparing high and low scoring persuasive texts written at the tertiary level, Swain (2007) found that successful students drew on a “wider range of resources from the different subsystems of ENGAGEMENT, and showed a more even balance between expanding and contracting resources” (p. 292). The present study is consistent with Swain's findings, demonstrating that even at the primary level, children as young 11 or 12 can successfully persuade readers with a range of ENGAGEMENT resources from each subsystem. Young writers who hold a command over these and other linguistic resources are advantaged in being able to draw upon them in any circumstance – even stressful conditions such as NAPLAN tests. While this paper sought to highlight the range of ENGAGEMENT resources deployed by successful young writers in one context, and how they sometimes paired these with various resources from STYLE, the scope of this paper prevents a fuller

account of how such pairings served to align or disalign readers with the propositions advanced by the authorial voice and/or those of others introduced into the text by attribution, and indeed how such pairings enabled the author to establish points of solidarity with readers. Instead, it is intended to open up possibilities for further exploration into how successful primary students combine resources from across APPRAISAL systems, metafunctions, and even systems beyond SFL, in their efforts to persuade others. Exciting work remains in analysing the resources used by other successful students from years 3, 7 and 9, to determine whether even younger writers can deploy a similar range of resources, whether students at each grade level pair resources differently, and to compare their strategies in stancing texts and how these position readers. Additional research in this area is needed to discover whether students use these resources by accident or as a result of teaching, and whether the skills they demonstrate match those outlined in the Australian English Curriculum. If it is found that successful students use linguistic strategies that are not specified in the Curriculum at the appropriate grade levels, this may be to the detriment of less successful students who haphazardly engage in the art of persuasion.

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