

Spacious Grammar: Agency and Intention in the Teaching of Research Writing

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Article

Spacious Grammar: Agency and Intention in the Teaching of Research Writing

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Abstract

Standardized academic English is now understood to be rooted in histories and practices that are colonial, classist, nationalist, heteronormative, ableist, and sexist. Current teaching of academic English carries an ethos of making practices of research writing accessible to students from marginalized backgrounds through explicit attention to language patterns and genre structures. In the context of both ideological critique and explicit pedagogy, I discuss three pragmatic elements of research writing—positionality, citation, and evaluation—with examples from one of my courses. I present these elements and my approach to teaching them as a practice that is attentive to both details of published scholarship and students' agency and intentionality in shaping their own writing projects, claims, and arguments. My work is framed by a functional approach to grammar where grammar is not interesting as a standardized apparatus but as a code that provides a range of options for producing performative effects. I call this spacious grammar.

Introduction

For a considerable time, English language studies have challenged, countered, and critiqued ingrained traditions of lament about students' writing (Shaughnessy, 1977; Milroy & Milroy, 2012). The kind of lament that focuses on student errors, highlights perceived deficiencies, and diagnoses lack of command of standardized or academic English is now understood to be rooted in attitudes that are colonial, classist, nationalist, heteronormative, ableist, and sexist. In its pedagogical research, the field of writing studies has moved away from approaches that are based on stipulating prescriptive rules and correcting students' use of grammar. Ongoing scholarship examines the

relationship between expectations of standardized forms of writing and exclusionary and oppressive social structures (Price, 2011; Inoue, 2015; Martinez, 2020; Baker-Bell, 2020). In place of standardized forms, this scholarship works towards liberatory practices that are meant to bring about new forms and relationships for scholarly engagement.

Nonetheless, there is some tension in that different branches of writing studies share the goal of increased accessibility and student agency but diverge in strategies for attempting to achieve it. On one hand, there is criticism that envisions a future containing entirely new forms of texts, a future where historically marginalized writers will create different scholarship than what is currently and predominantly produced (Waite, 2017; Banks et al., 2019). On the other hand we find approaches in critical pragmatics, English for academic purposes, and systemic functional linguistics that pursue detailed study of corpora of academic texts, with the aim of describing dominant patterns and making grammatical tools more explicit and accessible to a wider range of students and future scholars. While the latter strategy has produced a rich body of language-focused research and resulted in detailed strategies for teaching, its attention on current disciplinary conventions and grammatical patterns tends to reward the status quo.

My discussion will maintain the detailed focus that these latter approaches offer while, at the same time, resisting the tendency to enforce current disciplinary conventions. I will consider three pragmatic features of research writing—positionality, citation, and evaluation—which open possibilities for students to inhabit critical positions and new directions for scholarship within their chosen disciplines. Or, as Mya Poe puts it elsewhere in this volume, I show ways in which “classrooms can be spaces for moments in time where we talk about options, where we try border thinking” (Poe, 2022, p. 166). The suggestions I make here are placed within a context of ambitious ideological critique as they model more precise grammatical aspects that, when made explicit, invite students to inhabit such critique.

We can distinguish between grammar as structure or code (which is not my primary concern) and grammar as choice within the structure or code—the range of possibilities that writers have at their disposal. As Debra Myhill et al. note, the latter is a “rhetorical view of grammar, interested in how language choices construct meanings” (Myhill et al., 2013, p. 104). Before delving into pragmatic inferences and the construction of meaning, I advocate taking note of the grammar of relevant phrases: what phrasal constructions express positionality, by what range of structures is citation carried out, and what types of words are used to convey evaluation? Pragmatic possibilities follow from attention to grammatical construction (Ariel, 2008): which words can be shifted in and out, how

can elements of the grammatical code be rearranged, what can be added? Through such play with grammatical form we can ask, what pragmatic effects do these possibilities unfold? In this view, student writers are agents who design texts not only in conventional but also in creative ways. They pursue questions, develop ideas, and make grammatical choices that are meaningful to them. In what follows, I briefly outline the institutional context of the course from which my examples for this discussion are drawn. I then sketch out the theoretical and pragmatic grounding of how I teach both analysis of and play with grammatical structures. Finally, I turn to a range of examples from my research writing courses, organized around the three pragmatic features: positionality, citation, and evaluation.

The Scene

One aim of my teaching is to make students' world of grammar more spacious and expand their awareness of critical positions and how to construct them. The examples I discuss here come from my own courses and from the teaching materials I have developed. Curricular frameworks for university courses create some constraints as to where and how a desire for ideological spaciousness can cleave open grammatical possibilities. The curriculum and constraints with which others are working will likely differ from mine.

Allow me to set my scene. The course on which this analysis builds is a first-year research writing course that functions as a requirement for several programs at my university. Each year, we teach many sections of this course to several thousand students enrolled in undergraduate programs in arts and social sciences as well as in natural, applied, and health sciences. The brief calendar description for the course reads, "Writing and reading in disciplines across the academy, focusing on practices that research disciplines share and those that differentiate them." In other words, the mandate of the course is not writing in a generalized way but writing, more particularly, in research disciplines and related to knowledge production (Giltrow et al., 2021; Thieme, 2019). It is not a remedial course in any way. The structural, well-scaffolded elements that faculty have agreed to implement (an agreement open for periodical revision) focus on genres such as note-taking and summary, research proposals, types of presentation, and final papers which may be a literature review, an argumentative paper based on a set of secondary sources, or an analysis that includes evidence from primary material. This collectively developed framework also asks that students read and analyze published scholarship from a range of research fields which are relevant to a broad

cross-disciplinary question or concept chosen by the instructor. Each section of the course is focused on one such question or concept; mine have included empathy, oral history, Olympics, and surveillance.

The published scholarship that forms the course readings is analyzed for genre structures and pragmatic language features. It provides larger-scale textual models for the students' smaller-scale projects; it serves for investigation of variation in methods of analysis and styles of writing. The course includes low-stakes work that scaffolds towards higher-stakes assignments as well as incorporates extensive feedback and peer review. As a starting point for my course sections, students share a literacy narrative with the class (without being assessed), an opportunity to foreground elements of their identity and experience as well as present themselves in a critical frame and with stylistic expression of their choice (Scott, 1997; Alexander, 2015). This assignment helps students get to know each other as writers with particular histories. It situates student identities, particularly marginalized identities, locally and in our specific context (Poe, 2016). Such knowledge is deepened through further interactions and close collaborations; it becomes the basis for a reciprocal practice of linguistic attention and grammatical spaciousness in encountering each other and each other's writing.

Part of what my teaching focuses on are the grammatical formations which are typical in research writing but which, because they differ across fields, projects, and authors, open possibilities to broaden conceptions of how grammatical structures can be used in academic texts. The course encourages students to adopt relevant metalanguage with which to engage in both critical discussion and playful practice of grammatical options. The metalanguage that the course introduces supports students' decision-making around language. We observe, for instance, the use of integral and non-integral citation, reporting verbs, phrases that characterize cited speakers or relate them to each other, metadiscourse to structure argument and highlight genre moves, forms for definition, conceptual levels and semantic waves, use of noun phrases, hedges, boosters, modal expressions, first-person pronouns, and evaluative terms.

By making grammatical choices visible and explicit, broadening the repertoire of possibilities, and providing metalanguage which students can use to analyze writing wherever they find it, this pedagogy develops students' metalinguistic understanding of writing and genre (Berry, 2005; Negretti, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2013; Driscoll et al., 2020). While some teaching of grammatical structures invests primarily in identification, description, and definition of linguistic components, a functional approach is more attentive to the range of effects that words, phrases, sentences, and

paragraphs typically have. As a result, the choice of metalanguage is flexible; it can shift from course to course and instructor to instructor (Matruglio, 2020). What I suggest here is contained by the curricular framework within which this course is designed; I also note that it is my choice to work predominantly within pragmatic approaches to and functional analysis of grammar, both framed for students through rhetorical genre theory (Thieme, 2016, 2020). There are other variations and approaches in how to focus one's teaching and analysis in this and related courses. In other words, your mileage may vary.

Playing with Grammar

To demonstrate grammar as functional, rather than standardized, opens up—for students and instructors—new ways of perceiving, using, and questioning it. Through focus on function, learning about grammatical structures becomes more constructive and creative: grammar is a resource with which we create expression, mold our words for readers and situations, and enact our stylistic ambitions. This approach opens discussion for the social and political work that research writing does and can do through textual choices. As Janet Giltrow notes, the process of learning genres, including research genres, does not occur via “adherence to rules” and is not possible by “being instructed in the form” (Giltrow, 2010, p. 35). Rather, it requires experiencing a research situation. It is a “linguistic experience of roles, material circumstances, and personal histories,” and it is also “prone to revision and adjustment” (Giltrow, 2010, p. 35). The purposes of research need to be experienced, disciplinary priorities require being internalized, and political possibilities should become evident in the process of producing research genres. Nuanced genre awareness is when one reaches an understanding of “how a genre's conventions help to achieve its purpose(s)” (Driscoll et al., 2020, p. 80). When students inhabit the role of research author, they should be given space to bring their experience, goals, and intentions to their research writing. They deserve to be made aware of grammatical tools and disciplinary strategies to help negotiate how their experience and goals can be made to matter even if—and especially when—their type of knowledge and intention is not already present in or validated by the research conversations they enter.

As speech act theory and rhetorical genre studies teach us, the performative effects of our writing depend on how that writing is taken up by others (Freadman, 2002; Thieme, 2006; Freadman, 2020). Students are never merely mimicking accepted writing conventions, even if it may appear so. Rather, with a varying sense of agency and intention, they position themselves for uptake in both directions:

looking backward by taking up others' work (such as through citation), and looking forward towards how their work might be taken up (such as in peer review, instructor feedback, and also beyond the course). It is up to us as instructors to demonstrate and create a more spacious and creative sense of possible uptakes in both these directions. The question is, how much space do students recognize they have and what possibilities are they encouraged to explore as they orient themselves and their writing through these processes (Artemeva, 2005; Skaar, 2015).

The prospect of uptake (beyond assessment) highlights agency and counters the perception of mere copying or uncritical reproduction. Uptake points to the performative effects of research writing. It places students in the role of the author who has grammatical choice in maintaining, championing, or challenging dominant genre practices. The habits of academic communities assert a powerful pull not only on the claims that disciplinary research makes, but also on the language in which these claims are expressed and how research genres are positioned for further uptake. Functional attention to grammar becomes part of the interface with which students' thoughts can be apprehended by their peers, their instructors, their other audiences. The question of what to do with grammar turns into: how do we encourage students to use grammar to shape the meaning of their work? How do we do so while making them aware of disciplinary discourse in a way that aids uptake of their work?

Ken Hyland cautions that inductive, discovery-based approaches to writing—approaches that provide students with maximum freedom to write—do not exactly “liberate them from the constraints of grammar in constructing social meanings in public contexts” (Hyland, 2003, p. 150). In the service of uptake, typical choices for grammar vary across disciplines and speech situations, and with that so do opportunities for grammar play. The constraints posed by disciplines, curricula, and genres partially shape but do not fully determine how and what researchers can write (Ädel, 2022). These constraints allow for grammatical choice and expressive space. As Hyland notes, an author’s “ability to create meaning is only made possible by the possibility of alternatives” (Hyland, 2003, p. 152). Rather than viewing constraints as at odds with agency and change, we should view both forces as “mutually sustaining,” helping us counter “assumptions about unproblematic genre adherence in homogenous communities of practice” (Makmillen & Riedlinger, 2020, p. 169).

Courses like mine build relevant metalanguage and pragmatic terminology so that students can recognize options and possibilities as well as support each other’s writing with precise observations. Hyland characterizes this type of genre-based pedagogy as explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical, and consciousness-raising (Hyland, 2003, p. 150). Engaging in

analysis of published writing, observing distinctions in use of language, discussing the social actions of these texts, all this leads to conversations about students' participation in research culture. What research questions do they want to ask; in what disciplinary landscape are they confident to place their work; what can they argue on the basis of their evidence; and how do they want to express and evaluate their claims? Putting these questions to students counters "old certainties of cognitive homogeneity" and acknowledges the "considerable social and demographic change" in higher education (Hyland, 2003, p. 149). The explicitness and detailed language of this approach is aimed to be of particular benefit for students who are in disadvantaged positions as regards academic literacy practices (Myhill, 2005; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993). In that way, my course fits neatly within long-standing discussions in rhetorical genre studies and English for academic purposes (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010).

What I offer here as my contribution is using detailed analysis of grammatical choices as part of the cleaving of positional space for students. Such opening of space proceeds through, first, analysis of published research and, second, practice and play with how students wish to make their experience, positionality, and evaluation matter in their work. Writing studies research sometimes falls short of exploring the different ways in which students want to take up the language features that are associated with academic discourse. Much of this scholarship is tempted to place the use of those features on a scale of more or less professional or disciplinary form, especially when quantitative analysis is involved. Student writing is investigated for where it falls on a spectrum from inexperienced beginner to practiced professional. Despite the dismantling of the deficit model, such scaling tends to imply a sense of deficit in the relation between student writing and professional research (Walsh Marr, 2021). Many corpus-based analyses of academic genres suggest that their findings can be used for the purposes of teaching, but few describe what such use looks like and what its potential is for enabling students to write in agentive ways. Or, as Giltrow notes, producing "a full inventory of the formal features of target genres" does not lead students to "experience the situation," the "culturally embedded" practices of making knowledge (Giltrow, 2010, p. 35). An approach focused on formal conventions misses its pedagogical goals. Put more starkly, this tendency to create grammatical inventories and scale them toward disciplinary expectations produces a "culturally assimilationist" approach that proposes to deliver powerful research genres to marginalized groups (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 16).

I counter these tendencies with sustained focus on student agency and intention. Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff describe the concept of intentionality in relationship to rhetorical genre theory:

“intentionality is an act of object-directed cognition,” an act of “making something available to our consciousness” (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, p. 66). Genres bring situations, texts, and turns of phrase to our consciousness, and thereby they help form our intentions (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010, p. 67). In turn, the possibilities of expression we encounter through and within genres shape how we manifest our minds in relation to others. In other words, a course sets the scene for students to shape their thinking and manifest their intentions. In my case, it requires them to do so in the context of academic research and it provides the genres with which students are to accomplish that. These are the constraints; they are set by curriculum committees and course designers. But within those constraints, there is freedom. To delineate the shape and possibilities of this freedom needs to be part of our instruction. We cannot know our students’ intentions in advance, nor should we want to. Neither will students fully know their own intentions in advance. They are set to discover and develop what those intentions are and can be in encounters with various examples of writing and in relation to disciplinary versions of scholarship. We can make available the tools of language through which a range of intentions can be manifested; we can bring this range to our students’ consciousness. In turn, this language becomes available for students to develop their intentions, to lay open their minds in a public, or semi-public, way, and to control the effect their writing has inside and outside the course.

Positionality: Bringing Experience to the Research Journey

Positionality as a concept in research writing is different from position (more on position in the below discussions of citation and evaluation). Positionality means the researcher’s identity in relation to research participants or the research topic. It is often related to reflexivity about one’s research process, for instance when Gillian Rose writes of the need to “situate myself and my interpretations. . .by reflexively examining my positionality” so as to avoid “false neutrality and universality” of the claims made (Rose, 1997, pp. 305, 306). Positionality comprises facets of the self—institutional privilege, social identity, economic status—that situate one’s knowledge-making and use of evidence. According to Donna Haraway, positionality is the power that enables a certain kind of knowledge, knowledge that is thus situated and cannot claim universality (Haraway, 1988). Though the boundaries are not always clear, researchers’ presentation of positionality can be distinguished from the positions they take. For those authors who reflect on their positionality in their writing, the two are closely linked. In fact, the concept of positionality compels such linkage: the

claims one makes—i.e., the positions one takes—are partly conditioned by one’s positionality. Scholars do not usually express their positionality if they think it has no effect on their questions and claims. On the other hand, scholars who think their positionality does not have an effect on their work, or who simply do not declare their positionality, still take positions. We can thus look to elements of language that express one or the other, or both together.

Where most pedagogy implies that language choices are universally available for all who join, this approach allows for a critical separation between recognizing how others use certain language structures—including those that express positionality—and whether one should take up those same structures in one’s own writing. For instance, particular aspects of how Indigenous scholars present their positionality emerge from Indigenous protocols and the researcher’s relation to community (Makmillen & Riedlinger, 2020; Thieme & Walsh Marr, forthcoming; Younging, 2018). On the one hand, such expressions of positionality are not an instruction for non-Indigenous writers to present themselves in the same way and with the same phrases. Teaching students such awareness is part of counteracting “the failure of colleges and universities to prepare (white?) students. . .by not teaching them to be sensitive in their representations of difference” (Condon & Young, 2016, p. 6). On the other hand, for Indigenous students, validation of these expressions of positionality can address some of the “uncertainty, anxiety and resistance at the way they feel constrained to position themselves as academic writers” (Makmillen & Riedlinger, 2020, p. 166).

Readings for a version of my course which focuses on oral history are rich in examples of authors reflecting on their positionality. Researcher positionality is a key consideration in interviewing participants and interpreting the stories they share. In an article on lesbian lives in the pre-Stonewall United States, Ellen Lapovsky Kennedy notes: “The life stories we collected for the most part were breathtakingly beautiful documents of survival and resistance in very difficult situations. At first my proletarian bias led me to assume that this was because most of the interviews were with working-class lesbians” (Kennedy, 1995, p. 61). Maria Holt, in an oral history of the decolonization process in Aden, says about her participants: “A few were suspicious about my motives. Since I am British, they assumed I might have a ‘hidden agenda’ or that it might be discourteous to speak negatively to me about the British” (Holt, 2004, p. 100). Or, as a third example, Scott Stonington notes how his ethnography of end-of-life decision-making in Northern Thailand was enabled by his positionality: “During some of my time in the field, I was able to attend medical school and rotate through Thai hospitals as a medical student. Fortunately, participants were able to understand my role as that of a student—a student simultaneously of medicine and of Thai culture—and I was warmly welcomed

into people's lives to learn about what mattered most to them" (Stonington, 2012, p. 838). Conventionally, few types of research invite such detailed reflection on facets of the researcher's identity in relation to how data is gathered and analyzed. However, students can be asked to practice this kind of positioning even if the writing in their discipline or of their course project does not currently solicit it. As Makmillen and Riedlinger note, "teachers of writing have a growing role in supporting students to explore and negotiate their subjective and collective identities as writers" (Makmillen & Riedlinger, 2020, p. 181). Students will also encounter the need to include positionality in oral and informal commentary—as Poe points out, research articles, grant submissions, and proposals are not the only textual practices that support research communication (Poe, 2022). In other words, expressions of one's positionality are relevant whether one is able to use them in written scholarship or elsewhere.

Depending on the programs in which students are enrolled, they will have more or less experience with the concept of positionality. It might be a more familiar and purposeful concept for those who take courses in, for instance, gender and sexuality studies, Indigenous studies, or anthropology. The concept will seem more foreign to students in engineering, geology, or computer science. In the fields where it is most common, it is sometimes phrased as an imperative for researchers to reflect on and write about positionality in relation to their work. More truthfully, however, writers decide whether and how to speak about their positionality from situation to situation, from genre to genre. Expressions of positionality are a potent language tool with varying effects, and they are employed as needed or wanted. When academic authors put themselves forward as particular persons, they enact certain intentions. While positionality is always at play behind the scenes of writing, it is only sometimes put forward with intention, made explicit. Students have space here—what intention might compel them to declare their positionality and what grammatical form could this intention take? If students decide to make the radical move of employing expressions of positionality in texts and contexts where they are not typical, the work they do in a course like mine will help them advocate for the intentions that their expressions of positionality enact.

Citation: Determining the Research Landscape

Whereas expressions of positionality are accepted practice only in some research fields and even there are not always present, citation can be considered a universal feature of research writing (Hyland, 1999). Citation practices are central in all disciplines even as those practices differ widely

(Russell et al., 2020). Where some disciplines are focused on supporting conceptual and factual claims with paraphrases only and group entire lists of authors into parentheses, others bring authors into their sentences, attribute conceptual work to particular names, and position their sources in specific relations to each other. Whereas some fields cite others' work almost exclusively as a form of validation, others are more explicit in marking agreement or disagreement with the work they cite. Nigel Harwood and Bojana Petrić have described citing behaviour as performance, in Erving Goffman's sense: "skilled performers manage the impressions they give to others to project the image they desire by imagining how their audience may see them" (Harwood & Petrić, 2012, p. 56).

Practices of citation form a fully dimensional landscape; many directions are possible within that landscape. As professional scholars, we know about freedom in this landscape, about the room to maneuver. Perhaps too often we talk about citation in terms of tight strictures and formal stipulations—disciplinary conventions, supervisory instructions, journal requirements, peer reviewer demands, critics' complaints. Such interest in strictures and style guides should not determine our teaching. An interdisciplinary course on research writing is welcome ground for experimenting with promiscuous practices of citation. The questions students bring to the course are often related to style guides. Students can be surprised to learn that, despite the strictness communicated by citation styles, most aspects of citation are malleable and that individual researchers' citation habits tend to be "private, subjective, and opaque" (Harwood, 2008, p. 1010). Even when authors, sometimes reluctantly, sense that certain sources must be cited on a topic, there is much choice for how to cite them: how many words of paraphrase will these mandatory authors be given; where in the argument will they be placed; will their names appear as structural part of the sentence and might appraising modifiers be added; will they be cited with a direct quote; will one's agreement or disagreement with the cited author be signaled through terms of evaluation; will they be invited to speak again in a later part of the text?

We as instructors can make students aware of the range of citing behaviour that is at their disposal. But we cannot presume for students what the impressions are that they intend to give their audiences. The goal is to guide students toward knowing a fuller range of citation practices, observing its grammatical forms, and recognizing the potential of those forms in the particular situations in which their writing attempts to intervene. Course scaffolding, particularly the consistent use of peer review, should convey that citation is not primarily a way to perform in front of one instructor for the purposes of assessment. Rather, it is a way to embody the position of researcher who makes agentive choices vis-à-vis multiple audiences. Harwood and Petrić remind of a playful aspect of

Goffman's view: "that it is equally important for individuals to represent themselves as possessing a certain attribute as to actually possess it" (Harwood & Petrić, 2012, p. 80). Citation practices are how students convey attributes of research agency, intention, and argument. We should encourage them to play with a fuller range of possibilities than ingrained disciplinary conventions sometimes call for.

With a pragmatic analysis of citation in mind, students can more knowledgeably align themselves with the citation trends of their chosen discipline, and they can also go against the grain where that serves their intentions. For the sake of play, I ask students to practice using integral citations—even if their research field tends not to use them—to explore the critical potential of bringing specific authors into one's sentences and characterizing their work with the help of modifiers (Thieme & Saunders, 2018). I point to examples in our readings where authors evaluate others so as to better position their own project in a research landscape. In one of my course readings, Josh Lauer adds weight to his historical project in this characterization of another author: "Leading surveillance scholars such as David Lyon (1994), have championed the relevance of historical perspective, but studies of past practices and technologies remain at the margins of surveillance studies" (Lauer, 2012, p. 569). Likewise, in an article that is dense with very short paraphrases and frequent parenthetical references, Alice Marwick, Claire Fontaine, and danah boyd use the following rare moment of integral citation to highlight their alignment with a cited author: "Daniel Solove (2007), who has written extensively about this argument, points out that it compares the relative value of security versus privacy, as many people are willing to give up a certain amount of privacy for possibly increased security protection" (Marwick et al., 2017, p. 11). I ask students to take one of our course readings as source and play with modifiers and integral citation such that it either elevates the source or diminishes its role and questions it. In other words, not every cited author is positioned at the same level in the research landscape. Students have room to play with how to position their sources and thereby characterize and evaluate others' work as well as place their own in relation.

Evaluation: Taking Argumentative Paths

Choices of evaluation extend from what words to use for expressing certain values to how frequently to use them and in which parts of an argument. Aside from expressing an author's stance, evaluation also guides readers through a project and pinpoints key claims and contributions. Questions about evaluation present themselves at each turn in the writing process; they are a central topic for peer review and instructor feedback. Scholarship that is highly critical or even polemical in relation to its

topic might, on occasion, be peppered with terms that express negative evaluation. Whereas most other articles or articles in other disciplines will use evaluation more sparingly. Evaluation is also deeply blended into shared values of each research field, so deeply as to become nearly invisible. Evaluation is always present. Quietly agreeing with the deeply embedded values of a field or subfield is still an evaluative choice.

One of the course readings that I use to discuss evaluation does not immediately make it obvious that its authors write in an evaluative way. In a discussion of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), their military and civic applications as well as underlying international and national law, Rachel Finn and David Wright spend a substantial portion of the text in neutrally worded discussion of those unmanned aircraft systems' technical capabilities, their legal frames, and privacy concerns (Finn & Wright, 2012). It is only at particular moments that it becomes clear that the authors' stance is not neutral towards these systems. One such place is the last paragraph of the introduction, where their overall argument is stated. They assert that "despite the heterogeneity of these systems" it is "the same 'usual suspects'" who are targeted: "the inadequacy of current legislation mechanisms results in disproportionate impacts on civil liberties for already marginalized populations" (Finn & Wright, 2012, p. 185). Similar phrases are repeated at the very end of the paper: "the heterogeneity of UAS surveillance devices" creates "safety, privacy, and ethical concerns" that are "not adequately addressed by existing regulatory mechanisms" (Finn & Wright, 2012, p. 194). In between the assertion of this main argument, evaluation is expressed only occasionally, through distancing quotations when the authors write, for instance, of British police using drones to "police 'public order' and 'prevent anti-social behaviour'" and of German police who "monitor 'alleged hooligans' in urban areas" (Finn & Wright, 2012, p. 188).

With its sparing use of evaluative terms and occasional distancing quotation, this article is not unusual in its field. Yet, there is an evaluative stance that distinguishes this argument from others and that links this research to a political position. Students can choose to be more, less, or equally sparing in asserting their evaluation. Placing evaluation more exclusively and selectively can ameliorate student concerns of not being expert enough. For instance, evaluation can be placed to highlight what the argument of the paper is, leaving other sections in more neutral language, like Finn and Wright do. Evaluation can be expressed in the terms of a chosen branch of research—the values embedded in phrases that are typical for particular discussions or approaches—so that a student researcher does not have to stand alone or apart when expressing a position. In a version of the course focused on the topic of surveillance, taught in several iterations in online format throughout

our pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, some international students in my courses had very direct and personal concerns about the evaluative stances they should or could use in their projects. These students—who researched surveillance while residing in authoritarian home countries—were highly aware of personal and political implications of how they expressed themselves in their writing. Some rightfully asserted their need to use only neutral language while making carefully researched claims. In contrast, and equally legitimate, other students in the course declared their intention of being more openly and critically evaluative. They did so, for instance, by choosing research questions close to their own experience, including on how youth perceive being digitally surveilled at school or how those who surveil former romantic partners justify that practice in online confessions.

Concluding Thoughts

I have forwarded functional analysis and the teaching of pragmatic features of research genres as potentially contributing to critical and liberatory writing pedagogy. I have called this approach by the term “spacious grammar” in order to capture both analytic attention to typically used grammatical structures and playful practice of phrases that signal critical questions, positions, and interventions. Where the teaching of academic writing proceeds from close study of published genres, it need neither uncritically reproduce current practices nor maintain the status quo. Instead, it can look for fresh spaces and new openings as it attends to the analysis of established patterns and typical structures. I have provided detailed discussion and examples from my own courses on three such pragmatic features: positionality, citation, and evaluation.

Students will notice the pull of disciplinary practice and grammatical convention. They will also register how research writing adapts and is in need of change. They will want to participate in disciplinary practices as well as in the work toward change. We should enable such participation particularly from students who are from backgrounds and have identities that are underrepresented in the academic fields they enter. At the same time, this pedagogy aids students’ ability to apprehend the arguments and intentions of others. In my teaching, I never suggest that research writing is or should sound objective. My approach does not maintain that academic publications do or must produce neutral stances (though students might choose to aim for such stances based on their own intentions). I encourage students to attend to how stances are expressed, to recognize that all research is situated, to be alert to when and how researchers make their positions explicit, and to use those observations in navigating their own positionality and position.

It becomes clear to students that none of what they are writing is apolitical. Rather, it is replete with grammatical choices, choices which have social and political implications and which are theirs to make and remake. I want to pause at the end on the word “remake”: students deserve to know and need to be able to feel that they can reshape their position, that they are invited to search for and play with how to express their stances, especially within an academic context where grammatical structures can appear overly formal, stifling, and intimidating. The processes of proposing, drafting, peer reviewing, revising, consulting, and presenting are opportunities to play with options. These options are present on a deep and structural level—they go to the heart of what a student’s project is about, what it asks, how it assesses evidence, what it claims—and they are also present on the level of language when written submissions are fine-tuned and edited. The research process is serious. It is also playful. Attempts will be made and made again. Some will go better than others. Students have the chance to try, try, and try again on the path to manifesting their minds and clarifying their intentions in forms of research writing.

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