Linguistic Tools for Written Communication

An Applied Approach

Reshmi Dutta-Flanders

Linguistic Tools for Written Communication

"In this groundbreaking interdisciplinary study, Reshmi Dutta-Flanders examines the ways in which the linguistic deviations of non-native speakers inform and shape the writing of academic essays in English. By following the processes set out across this book, teachers and markers will be able to adopt more inclusive methods and provide feedback that is more relevant to the needs of individual students. The methodological framework that Dutta-Flanders puts forward is thus an important one that reveals the cultural, social and psychological aspects of secondary language use in an academic context."

—Joanne Pettitt, *University of Kent, UK*

Reshmi Dutta-Flanders

Linguistic Tools for Written Communication

An Applied Approach

Reshmi Dutta-Flanders
ELL Honorary
University of Kent
Canterbury, UK

To my late father

Acknowledgements

Contents

Abbreviations

BD	Branching Direction
C element	Circumstantial element
CD	Communicative Dynamism
FSP	Functional Sentence Perspective
NP	Noun phrase
PP	Prepositional phrase
TP	Thematic progression
VP	Verb phrase

List of Tables

1

Introduction

Many World English speakers grow up bilingual or multilingual, using different languages [at any one time] to fulfil different functions in their daily lives (Jenkins 2003: 17). Such individuals usually can speak more than one variety of English language (e.g., pidgin, creole varieties) and will choose the variety they speak depending on the context (Kirkpatrick 2007: 10). Standard English is a global reality, [especially] concerning written language (Crystal 1999) in Davies (2005: 147). However, World Standard Printed English (WSPE) follows mostly the *Superstrate* L1 norm (notes i and vii in Chap. 2) in written communication, which is globally taught by the teachers of English (English as International Language, EIL).

1 Why About Proficiency and Expertise: An 'Overt' Focus on WE

There is an increasing need to distinguish between the *proficiencies* in English rather than a speaker's bilingual status (Graddol 2006: 110 in Jenkins 2010: 23). This is akin to one's 'expertise' in using the English language (the English for Academic Purposes/EAP context), because,

there is an 'emerging' argument that there are both 'competent' native and non-native speakers in an academic context for written discourse. The markers of academic essays also reflect the varying degrees of expertise at the structural level concerning style and expression in an essay. As international English language testing schemes, ILTA and TESOL reflect on proficiency in English language use necessary for academic pursuits for international students. To put it differently, just like L2 and L3 speakers/writers of English, there is a degree of proficiency amongst the L1 speakers of English in the major varieties like American, British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, and South African English. Considering these as 'nativized' varieties, some features of specific regions are manifested in lexis, syntax, and semantics.

In the World English, context, Singaporean English (Jenkins 2010: 25) is a native variety learnt as a second language (L2) and is termed 'New English'. As a group, New English includes varieties like Indian, Philippine, and Nigerian English, to name a few, though European English and Japanese varieties are not included. European, Japanese, and Chinese English is used professionally, unlike the above-listed L2 varieties taught as a second language.

Each variety has its nativized features localized by adopting linguistic features culturally specific to the region where used, such as the intonation patterns, word order, sentence structures, expressions, and other tendencies marked in the order of phrases and clauses as a 'norm' in written discourse, which may deviate from the 'established' L1 (major varieties) norm explored in academic essays in this book.

Advocates in WE summarize a comprehensive list of nativized tendencies, such as Jenkins (2010), Kirkpatrick (2007), and others. However, as linguistic features, it is found that the written tendencies are not specific to any variety in academic essays, although the English language users are categorized either as English as a native language (ENL/L1 variety), English as a second language (ESL/L2 variety), or English as a foreign language (EFL/L3 variety). The use of English globally in this way brings into focus the diverse use associated with its nature of global spreads through mainly colonization and in more recent times for research and academic pursuits in English-speaking Western countries.

The contexts for using English may be academic conferences, business, commerce, diplomacy, educational institutions, tourism, manufacturing, audio-visual media, or mining. Accordingly, the English language is used in at least three different ways (Kachru and Smith 2008: 2):

- As a primary language, such as American and British (the L1 variety),
- As an additional language for intranational as well as international communication in multilingual communities, such as Indian, Nigerian, Singaporean (the L2 variety)
- Exclusively for international communication, such as the Chinese and German speakers of English (the L3 variety, note vii, Chap. 2).

Teachers of L2 and L3 varieties (or what Kirkpatrick calls *nativized varieties* 2007: 5) teaching EFL (English for Speakers of Foreign Language) in their native countries have not necessarily experienced the English language in a country where English is the primary language, like in the US, UK, or Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. These *superstrate varieties* are distinct from each other with reference to grammar and vocabulary. Those speaking English in an international context (like the L3 speakers of English in a conference setting) have a 'natural linguistic state' (**linguistic behaviour**) against which an individual accommodates or reconfigures syntactic and semantic representations when communicating in the primary varieties, such as mentioned above, which is motivated by the L2 and L3 speaker's nativized practices synonymous in their primary language or their mother tongue.

Deviating from a primary norm can create comprehension problems, as Kachru and Smith suggest:

> Variations in discourse patterns as interactional features, more than grammatical differences, can create ambiguity with comprehension or perception of one's partner in communication. (2008: 100)

In other words, the adoption and diffusion of English emerged through the local and multilingual population. The English language went through the processes of nativization in new contexts (e.g., **Euro-English** as a language used for utilitarian purposes such as business, commerce,

and tourism; but it also serves as a medium for academic, cultural, diplomatic, legal, political, and scientific-technological discourses). Hence, culturally influenced linguistic practices that emerge affect the application of grammatical elements addressed in features such as phonology, lexis, grammar, and pragmatics, such as spoken discourse (Kirkpatrick 2007). However, unlike written communication, spoken discourse is more random in structure and function; therefore, the question is, like the linear norm (Subject-Verb-Object-Comment), are there **multinorm** strategies in written discourse, especially in multilingual contexts? The multilingual context is an outcome of the mixing of varieties due to an increased nature of 'economic' migration taking place in recent times mostly between the Eastern and Western varieties of English (es).

Also, English language users in the multilingual context habitually communicate in more than one language depending on the context and domain, such as business and academic domains. Therefore, again the question is,

If there are multinorm practices in written communication,

What does this 'multinorm' discourse pattern look like in academic contexts (i.e., in student essays)?

This book aims to comprehend and familiarize readers with this 'multinorm' as it emerges in written discourse in an academic domain because students writing in English are increasingly from multilingual backgrounds. Though the written structure is not random, the structure and function at the micro and macro levels impact the comprehension process, like in a spontaneous and informal spoken context.

If studying English grammar is about learning rules, including those associated with structuring sentences, paragraphing, punctuation, and spelling, then such a process of development is universal. Nevertheless, if an individual's native language is not English, it is the assumption that this individual has an *internalized system of rules* that accounts for their language ability influenced by one's native tongue, defined as *grammar* in Kolln (2003: 2). One must then consider how one writes about any given topic, i.e., the *rhetorical situation*, which is about the audience, purpose, and the topic that may determine linguistic choices concerning sentence structure, vocabulary, and punctuation which together influence coherence.

Rhetorical grammar (Kolln 2007: 2) is about an individual's choices influenced by one's culturally nativized practices that constitute an internalized system of language rules because of the ways in which linguistic rules from one's native tongue creep into one's written communication. The key word is 'creep' into one's communication. Consequently, variations in grammatical use, as communicative strategies in multilingual contexts, are at the level of syntax and semantics (Chaps. 2, 3, and 4) and may be critiqued as grammatical differences in an L1 linguistic context in the major varieties of English listed above.

In other words, the linguistic differences, which stem from a cognitively internalized system of rules, influence the user because they are familiar with the English language that is spoken around them outside its native setting (a **culturally nativized setting** with its norms). This nativized norm, in other words, is familiar to the users of that specific setting, but not necessarily to those outside that culture of language use, e.g., the expression, *same-to-same* (meaning similar) in Indian English is sometimes used by a British English user (incidentally a multicultural society like London in England).

What does this tell an analyst working or interacting with different varieties of English (es) from a research perspective?

Grammar is a cognitive process that influences the way the user processes language, which is intrinsically a subconscious process. Linguistic features as linguistic tools in the chapters enable one to account for this internal and, like one's linguistic behaviour (practice naturalized), sheds light on the ways in which sentences deviate from a (linear) syntactic norm that affects the **meaning potential** at the semantic level. For instance, the information flow in clause-initial and clause-final subordination influences the branching direction (or the linear flow) of grammatical elements as a subordinated comment clause at the micro level, which subsequently affects the meaning potential generated at the semantic level in each paragraph, which is at the macro level in student essays evaluated in this study.

2   What Is the 'Genre' of Academic Writing?

Essays, reports, journal articles, book reviews, research proposals, dissertations, and posters are all listed under academic writing genres (Smith 2019). Academic English also has spoken genres (lectures, seminars, presentations, dissertation defences/viva voce etc.), as well as academic written genres like essays and reports. These written forms normally follow a standard format based on the type of discourse such as a report or an essay in an academic setting. A common genre for undergraduate study is essays, which can be of different types, such as compare and contrast type, cause and effect, argument and classification types. Each type of academic essay has its designated written form, like in other genres listed above. The most common genre for undergraduate study is the essay.

An academic essay as a genre has a standard written form irrespective of the geographical region where it is written, such as an introduction, main body, and conclusion. An overview of the structural components of each three segments in the essay (following the English for Academic Purposes/EAP foundation course) are:

Introduction: General statements and a thesis statement introduce the topic or central argument of the essay. This is followed by background information on the discourse topic, with an ending that indicates the overall plan.

Main body: Topic sentence, supporting and concluding sentences (at the paragraph level). An essay will have a few paragraphs on the central argument in the essay title, each following the format for the main body stated above.

Conclusion: Summary of findings and final comment.

The quality of each essay section (introduction, main body, conclusion) is evaluated at the level of structure and coherence at the micro and macro level of text in an academic essay, where the first and the last paragraphs, though not always signposted, are deemed as the introduction and the conclusion, respectively. The rest of the paragraphs are regarded as the essay's main body. Following this format, the aim is to focus on linguistic 'tendencies' at the micro (sentence/clause level) and the macro levels (in each paragraph for clarity and coherence constituted in the

overall discourse), which then reflects on the proficiency and expertise of an individual that influences the scores achieved by the essay writers using these assessment criteria: 'Structure and Coherence' criterion for the 'Accuracy of Writing' (amongst others not considered for evaluation). These two criteria are from the EAP programme pursued alongside their degree programme. The cohort of students attending the EAP course are from different disciplines. The students' essays selected for analysis are mainly from the Humanities division because these students tend to write argumentative essays in these disciplines, which are more discursive than experimental. Each selected essay is evaluated for their respective scores achieved for their 'Structure and Coherence' for the 'Accuracy of Writing'. These criteria are used in the EAP programme, in which the students' essays are selected.

3   An Overview of the Study: Linguistic Tools as Communication Strategies

The linguistic features in each chapter as 'linguistic tools' are employed to reveal tendencies that differ from the universal norm of writing schema in the L1 context when standard grammatical sequences, such as non-standard phenomena like *embedded inversion* (note ii), are reconfigured and simplified. Consequently, a multinorm **writing schema** challenges the assumptions about a correct, acceptable, or standard language that deviates from a universal norm, just like in spoken discourse, e.g., when a circumstance for leave (*my mother is sick*) comes before the actual request (*may I have a few days off*) in the L3 Chinese variety of spoken English.

Such study of linguistic features as 'communication strategies' is therefore not about language rules that examine grammatical elements in the form and function of the English language for (written) study skills purposes; rather, the aim is to evolve the individual's written skills in cases where their linguistic practices move away from the standard (linear) norm for the English language in written communication. The main features of the proposed monograph are:

- An approach to grammatical variations from a functional perspective,
- Step-by-step analysis of student assignments from different disciplines,
- Linguistic tools for written communication skills in the academic domain.

An interdisciplinary linguistic and stylistic approach is beneficial because English is used more in language-contact situations than others. It is also helpful for a coordinated study of grammatical differences in the form and function of grammatical elements because language is *a fluid construct* (Galloway and Rose 2015: 72) with different English language varieties (like Indonesian English different from Indian English, etc.). Often, these varieties have very little in common regarding socio-cultural histories concerning the use of the English language variety in specific domains (Siemund 2013: 6). For instance, how the English language entered the country initially influences specific domains like business, education, etc.

This study is also not about the history of the English language, but about the structure of language affected by one's cognitive processing of the language in its form that influences the function for a desired effect, and is the assumption that is synonymous with a function in one's primary language like the request schema mentioned above. No linguistic tools account for non-standard tendencies that deviate from a dominant pattern (such as the linear norm S>V>O), which are not grammatically incorrect. An integrated approach to linguistics with stylistic output will make one aware of variations manifesting non-standard phenomena like *embedded inversion.*[1] As mentioned above, the grammatical deviations due to variable relationship setups at the levels of syntax affect the semantic value of the grammatical elements in a sequence. Such deviations at the structural level are investigated and evaluated at the functional level of the grammatical elements in each chapter using student essays.

The investigation of the variations in the use of grammatical elements in this study is not limited by geographic or linguistic boundaries (i.e., L1, L2, and L3 speakers/users of the English language). The language investigated 'in action' in (mainly argumentative) essays is because, if there is a more *plural* grammatical relationship setup at the micro level that influences the **meaning potential** generated at the level of syntax in

clauses and then at the level of semantics in higher ranking units like in the paragraphs in a text, such an acquisition process impacts the development and comprehension of a **discourse topic** at the textual level (the essay), because in Kachru and Smith (2008: 5; emphasis added):

> [A more] plural, **non-linear model** is a more accurate depiction of the diversity in which … a more democratic approach to the social realities of English [is a positive development] in the 20th Century.

Non-linear depictions as diversities in discourse open the debate of multinorm 'linguistic practice', which, as a linguistic behaviour, is connected to the primary language through which a writer stages their communication pattern. For instance, when certain grammatical elements (like prepositions) are absent in an individual's native tongue, such as in the Bengali language in the Indian subcontinent, the lack of such grammatical elements is compensated, and consequently, such diversities influence the English language use at the functional level.

This study will consider sentences against the **principle of 'linearization'** (a superstrate norm in the L1 context) in the essays of students from multilingual backgrounds with variable English language skills who are undertaking an EAP programme to improve their written communication skills whilst pursuing their undergraduate studies. An applied approach is adopted in each chapter so that one can apply the features (introduced in the EAP programme) from a functional perspective to monitor the meaning potential created through the varieties of grammatical relationships that deviate from an established norm in rankings units (sentences and paragraphs) and affect the overall comprehension process at the text/discourse level.

Chapter 2 is, therefore, about the issue of free-word-order or freer phrases and clauses at the micro level in a text (student essays), defined as **pan-simplification** in the World English context for spoken discourse. At the functional level in **reverse instantiation**, the changes in word order create semantic values that differ from a linear order of the same grammatical elements in a linear relationship setup, such as the S-V-O-C or interpreted as a **subject-predicate clausal setting** in the Universal Grammar (UG henceforth). For example, from a functional point of view, the reversal of the Topic-Comment linear parameter setting reviewed

as a **reverse instantiation** of a comment clause as a *circumstantial* element (Halliday 1994); note iv, Chap. 2) is a prepositional phrase/PP in UG against which the main process (or the verbal element or action) takes place. A 'reverse instantiation' (RI) of a Circumstance/Comment clause in the clause-initial position is argued as functionally foregrounding or emphasizing the writer's comments/point of view concerning a topic; otherwise, it is about subordination in a complex sentence in the EAP context in academic essays.

Chapter 3 is about the **information flow** in the linear order of grammatical elements, now considered as *Theme* > (followed by) *Rheme*, which is a linear **Left Branching Direction** (LBD) in contrast to a non-linear **Right Branching Direction** (RBD) of the information flow. The BD in a paragraph as a unit measures the communicative competence set up in the word order carrying the highest degree of communicative dynamism as a context-independent grammatical element (the Rheme) distinct from the context-dependent element as a Given/shared information (the Theme) in a functional perspective. In the functional perspective, structurally the shared information as the **Given information** is followed by the Rheme, the **New information** concerning the Theme in the Subject position; and the linear sequence is as follows: Given > New information where the New information carries the highest degree of **communicative dynamism** (CD henceforth) relating to the Subject element in the Theme. Such is a brief structural analysis of the branching direction of grammatical elements in a paragraph compared with the paragraph structure analysis in the **EAP context** composed of a topic sentence > supporting sentence [as examples or evidence statements] > conclusion (Oshima and Hogue 2006; Sheldon Smith 2019).

There is **perspectivization** of the speaker's focus (as a point of view), which is about the decision-making process monitored in the semantic collocation of phrases in clauses in a relationship setup contributing to a coherent reading process, normally achieved linearly in the LBD information flow. However, deviation from this linear LBD norm in RBD alters the degree of CD in the word order and, subsequently, the semantic value of a phrase in a clause from the writer/author's point of view (as a background statement, a circumstance/C element in functional grammar) followed up in the next Chapter.

Chapter 4 takes up the concept of the point of view in the **Thematization**[2] of the clause-initial elements functionally as the 'point of departure' of the Theme (a **'subject element'** in the clause), which is different from the '**topic Theme**', such as in the topic sentence of each paragraph. Distinguishing the topic Theme from the **subject Theme** is to draw up the thematic connection of a **local topic** as subtopics at the paragraph level, i.e., when the Rheme in the previous sentence is taken up (or not) as the Theme in the following sentence (usually LBD). To trace this cohesive link at the sentence level, deviation from a linear flow (of Theme > Rheme > Theme > Rheme) changes the grammatical setup and, consequently, the semantic value of a setup in an information flow staged in the paragraph, such as for the purpose of emphasis and focus.

Inspired by this paper on *Functional Nativeness in Outer and Expanding Circles* (Dutta-Flanders 2012) using news discourse from BRIC countries, the analysis of parameter settings at the micro and macro level of discourse (Chaps. 2 and 3) is taken up further, also from a functional sentence perspective in academic discourse to inform stylistic features like the point of view linguistically, and the overall staging process in essays (Chaps. 4 and 5 respectively). This is in keeping with the focus on a **'multinorm' schema strategy** that highlights the variations of a universal norm in written communication in an academic context.

To summarize, the concept of **deviation** from the process of **linearization** (like the request schema in spoken discourse, Chap. 2: note vii) is discussed at the micro level of discourse in Part 1, and the process of **thematization** (Thompson 2014: 156–7) at the macro level of discourse is evaluated in Part 2, in the issues considered from the perspective of 'language in action'. By adopting a functional approach to the 'linear' order of grammatical elements, the linguistic practices used by students in their essays written for the EAP programme are also reviewed with reference to the EAP context (Cox and Hill 2004; Oshima and Hogue 2006). Such a method of analysis also provides insight into grammatical elements as linguistic practices in non-native English language use in an academic setting. The student essays evaluated are from a single cohort of students pursuing the EAP programme alongside their undergraduate study.