

**Evaluative Speech Acts of Ghanaian Graduate Students:
A Case Study of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana**

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Abstract

This paper describes an aspect of language use in the Ghanaian academic community, specifically investigating the use of evaluative speech acts in the review language of graduate students at the University of Cape Coast (UCC). The study is situated in Hyland's (2004) conceptual framework of evaluative language. Using a content analysis approach to corpora, the study revealed that the reviews of the graduate students contained both positive and negative evaluative speech acts as well as linguistic mitigating strategies meant to soften criticisms that were face-threatening. However, it is worthy of note that the positive speech acts or praises were recorded in a higher proportion than were the criticisms. More intriguing was the discovery that much more of both the praise and the criticism were focused on the text, rather than on the author. Overall, the pattern of evaluative language use discovered in this analysis, if generalisable, renders the academic discourse culture of the Ghanaian graduate student more akin to Asian linguistic cultures than to Western ones.

Key words: evaluative language, mitigation, reviews, Ghanaian academic community

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**Actes de Discours Évaluatif des Étudiants de Cycle
Supérieur de l'University of Cape Coast, Ghana**

Résumé

Cet article décrit un aspect de l'utilisation du langage dans la communauté académique ghanéenne, en examinant, notamment, l'utilisation des actes de discours évaluatif dans le langage des étudiants de cycle supérieur de

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l'University of Cape Coast (UCC). Cette étude se situe dans le cadre théorique conceptuel de Hyland (2004) relatif à l'utilisation du langage évaluatif. En utilisant une approche pour l'analyse du contenu appliquée au corpus, l'étude a révélé que les évaluations des étudiants de cycle supérieur comprenaient à la fois les actes de discours positif et négatif ainsi que certaines stratégies atténuantes linguistiques adoptées pour adoucir les critiques qui étaient menaçantes pour la face. Toutefois, il est important de noter que les actes de discours positif ou d'éloges étaient enregistrés dans une proportion supérieure à celle des critiques. Il est aussi intéressant de noter que, selon la découverte faite, la plupart des éloges et des critiques étaient concentrés sur le texte, plutôt que sur l'auteur. En général, le schéma d'utilisation du langage découvert dans cette analyse, si généralisable, rend la culture de discours scolaire de l'étudiant ghanéen de cycle supérieur plus comparable aux cultures linguistiques asiatiques qu'à celles de l'Occident.

Introduction

Evaluative language is positive or negative language (University of Sydney, 2012:1) that expresses judgement on the worth of something. It entails the use of language to communicate opinions and feelings, to appraise the quality of objects, such as literary creations and texts, and to render judgements on persons. Evaluation can be in an explicit or implicit mode. Romanyshyn (2006) hints at the implicit nature of some evaluative elements. Although evaluation has always characterised human endeavours, the understanding and practice of it continue to be fraught with inadequacies. As remarked by Steele (1970:5), our view of what constitutes evaluation may be small. She adds, perhaps, as a form of the still-needed guidance, that evaluation ought to be purposeful and not merely for its own sake. After decades, since Steele's observations, the problems with evaluation still persist, warranting a work like Rosenthal (1995). Rosenthal provides comprehensive insights into writing meta-analytic reviews. The writing of meta-analytic reviews, an integral to the element of evaluation, continues to be an exercise that is crucial in academic documentation.

The use of evaluative language has gained importance in academic reviews. As put by Itakura and Tsui (2009: 2), evaluative language plays a critical role in academic discourse. Depending on the manner in which language is employed to rate and comment on the writer's own as well as other

researchers' academic contributions, the writer exacts authority, establishes credibility and forges interpersonal relationships within an academic community.

To evaluate means to judge the worth, desirability, effectiveness or adequacy of something according to definite criteria (Steele 1970:6). By reviewing the worth of a scholarly work, reviewers use evaluative language that expresses their attitudes (positive or negative) towards it. This research investigates how evaluative language is employed by a section of graduate students at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), Ghana. This is partly motivated by the argument that contrastive analyses of academic discourse reveal cultural variations in linguistic devices and structures employed in individual genres and their underlying cultural conventions (Itakura & Tsui, 2009: 2; Salager-Meyer & Ariza, 2004). This is somewhat in consonance with the hint by Afful (2017: 16) that cultural competence plays a significant role in academic writing. In this regard, it has, for instance, been shown that indirectness in evaluative language is more prevalent in Asian cultures than in Western ones, although the reverse of this situation is also sometimes registered, as typified in Kong (2005).

Studies have established that any linguistic system learned or acquired on the note of a second language cannot claim absolute indemnity from the influence of the non-native speaker's first language (Wardhaugh, 1970; Selinker, 1972; Brown, 2000). This idea has been explained in various, but related perspectives, as projected in Wardhaugh's (1970) *Cross-linguistic influence* and Selinker's (1972) *interlanguage*. Therefore, the fact that English is a second language in Ghana, but serves as the principal medium in formal education and academia makes this study unique in terms of the linguistic culture on which it is set. This is particularly intriguing, if one also considers the fact that the cultural differences in the manner of giving praise and criticism does not favour the direct transfer of conventions from one language to another. In academic reviews, any such attempt is bound to result in inaccurate projections and misinterpretations of an author's academic

credibility and of the value of the item being reviewed (Itakura & Tsui, 2009, p. 5). This study investigates the use of evaluative language as pertains among a section of graduate students of a Ghanaian academic community — the UCC. Alternatively put, this study potentially offers a useful insight into the sociolinguistics of language use among socio-cultural groups (Hudson, 1996; Holmes, 2001; Wardhaugh, 2006; Oladipupo & Akinjobi, 2015); in this case, ‘how evaluative speech acts are deployed in the review discourse of graduate students of the Master of Arts (M. A) in Communication Studies at the UCC. It is worth also indicating that this study (in a broader sense), possibly, has relevance for the Ghanaian and, for that matter, the African context where there has not been a critical attention paid to the practice of academic writing in tertiary institutions (Nimako, Danso & Donkor, 2013; Afful, 2017). More specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- a. What forms of evaluative speech acts are used by graduate students in evaluating or reviewing Bhatti and Zegarac’s (2012) article, *Compliments and refusals in Poland and England*?
- b. What is the focus of the evaluative speech acts?
- c. What linguistic mitigating strategies are employed by graduate students in the corpora analysed?

Some Perspectives on Reviews

Depending on how a piece of work is reviewed, it could stimulate further research that will contribute to the existing body of scientific knowledge or help refine it (Sniderman, 1999; Vandenbroucke & de Craen, 2001). Scholarly reviews, therefore, tell an educated audience of the significance of a text or film within the context of a discipline, field of study or a particular subject or course (Academic Writing Skills Centre, 1996) and helps to advance knowledge.

As such, today’s researchers and scientists who wish to keep up-to-date with new and relevant information in their fields of enquiry face a daunting task from the ever-increasing amount of research being published. Since it is not all

information that may be reflective of the situation or issue investigated, due to, perhaps, wrong methodology or approach to data gathering, it is essential for researchers to be selective of the information within the pool of informative sources available, based on scholarly review of written work. According to Belcher (1995), reviews have contributed to improvement of medical and scientific research in general, and have played a more important role in the construction of scientific knowledge than the actual research articles. For Belcher, within the academic context, reviews have accomplished an important and informative role in several disciplines with an ever-increasing number of publications that broaden knowledge in various fields.

It is also argued by Hyland (2000) and Motta-Roth (1996) that despite the relatively short length of reviews, they are interpersonally complex and represent a carefully crafted social accomplishment. Hence, their opinion that a good review need not only offer a critical and insightful perspective, drawing on considerable knowledge of the field, but must also respond to the complex demands of a delicate interactional situation. Valor (2000), therefore, draws attention to the fact that the study of scholarly reviews, especially the discursive aspects, should be a concern for linguists because their specifics are a matter of unarticulated conventions.

Since reviews make use of evaluative language, opinions are automatically inputted on a piece of work. Hunston and Thompson (2000) indicate that there is a useful distinction between opinions about entities and opinions about propositions in a scholarly review. For them, opinions about a piece of writing or entity are canonically attitudinal and involve positive and negative feelings, whilst opinions about propositions are canonically epistemic and involve degrees of certainty. Hunston and Thompson note that the former tends to be realised lexically and the latter grammatically. Following the foregoing perspectives extolled, one cannot but concur that evaluative language is indispensable to the task of academic reviews.

Evaluative Language and Mitigation Strategy

To evaluate something is to give an opinion on its quality or worth based on predetermined indicators or expectations. As posited by Hunston and Thompson (2000), opinions about a piece of writing are attitudinal and involve positive and negative feelings. These attitudes either influence reviewers' appreciation of the text and advance their knowledge or expose their academic pedigree (weak or strong) in a field.

The subject of evaluation has become relevant in academia based on the opinion that whenever speakers or writers say anything, they encode their attitude towards it (Hyland & Diani, 2009: 9; Stubbs, 1996: 197). The term, 'evaluation' can, therefore, be used to refer to the speaker's or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities that he or she is discussing (Thompson & Hunston, 2000: 5). Evaluative language is, therefore, defined as descriptive words which are either positive or negative (Hyland, 2004; University of Sydney, 2012). This broad conceptualisation of evaluation, according to Alcaraz-Ariza (2010), permits the inclusion within the concept of evaluation not only appraisal, modality or stance, but also the values ascribed to the entities and propositions which are evaluated (Alcaraz-Ariza 2010: 138). Evaluative language, consequently, makes judgement on the worth or otherwise of a research work or publication.

On its part, the term 'mitigation', according to Martinovski (2000), originates from the Latin word 'mitigare', which means to make mild. Despite the ubiquitous application of the term in different linguistic contexts in present times, it is held that its initial usage was linked mainly to environmental sciences and contexts (example: risk mitigation, mitigation of mining impact) (ibid). Nevertheless, the contemporary use of the term, in a linguistic respect, suggests its association with negative expressions in discourse situations. As such, Martinovski et al. (2005) agree with Caffi (1999) that within the context of the study of discourse, mitigation is defined as a weakening or downgrading of interactional factors which affect allocation of rights and obligations, as a way to ease anticipated unwelcome effect (Fraser, 1980, p.344) or as the

reduction of vulnerability (Martinovski, 2000). Mitigation, therefore, serves as a rhetorical device which aims to soften the impact of an unpleasant aspect of an utterance (Danet, 1980: 525).

Mitigation strategies refer to the various linguistic approaches used by reviewers to soften potentially face-threatening remarks. These strategies occur in social interactions when interlocutors engage in a negotiation of face relationships (Scollen & Scollen, 2001) and employ strategies to express a series of communicative acts in conversation (Cesar, 2006). These strategies may differ from one academic environment to another, based on the cultural differences in the use of evaluative language. The attested cultural relativities in mitigation strategies are, for instance, evinced in the discovery that English reviews have higher percentages of direct criticism than Japanese ones (Itakura & Tsui, 2009, p. 8). This study aims to reveal how evaluation is undertaken in reviews of graduate students of M. A. Communication Studies at the UCC.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual frame for this study is Hyland's (2004) treatment of evaluative language as discussed in Itakura and Tsui (2009). A theoretical framework of affinity to Hyland's is the discourse evaluation paradigm set up by Slager-Meyer and Ariza (2004). By extension, therefore, the present analysis also draws on Slager-Meyer and Ariza.

In examining evaluative language use in academic review discourse, Hyland (2004) cited in Itakura and Tsui (2009: 2) considered praise and criticism as semantic units or speech acts. Hyland's analysis further incorporated categories such as content, style and author as the targets of evaluation. He also looked at the use of directness and indirectness in the rendition of praise and criticism in book reviews. In addition, Hyland devoted a reasonable level of attention to the type of mitigation devices used for evaluative acts. Similarly, in a trilingual comparison of negative evaluation of book reviews in English, French and Spanish, Slager-Meyer and Ariza (2004) posited, as units of analysis, modal verbs of possibility (such as, *may*, *might*, *could*, *would*), semi-

auxiliary verbs (to appear, to seem, etc.), adjectives, nouns and modal-related adverbs (e.g., *probably*, *perhaps*) among others. Slager-Meyer and Ariza looked at these devices as strategies for softening or mitigating criticism in negative evaluations.

As will be revealed in the analysis that follows, this study falls in with the conceptual notions espoused in Itakura and Tsui (2009) as well as Slager-Meyer and Ariza (2004). This is because, in the present analysis, we also examine evaluative speech acts and mitigation strategies used in the review discourse of the Ghanaian graduate students concerned in much similar ways, as was done in these previous flagship analyses here referenced.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive investigation of the discourse-linguistic phenomenon in question: ‘The use of evaluative speech acts in academic reviews of graduate students of the MA Communication Studies programme at UCC’. This notwithstanding, the study also potentially has relevance in the ongoing debate by African scholars on the broader issue of the state of attention to academic writing in Ghanaian and African tertiary institutions generally (Nimako, Danso & Donkor, 2013; Afful, 2017). A randomised-purposeful sampling was used to select review compositions of 25 students out of a total of 40 that constituted the class. Purposive sampling was used because the pieces that were of interest to the researchers were those composed by indigenous Ghanaian members of the student group concerned. In the present research context, the researchers conceptualised ‘indigenous Ghanaian’ as a member of the class who is a Ghanaian national by any means and, more importantly, has so far had all or most of his or her formal education on the shores of Ghana. The randomness of the selection process was to the extent that each member who met the defined subject characteristics had an equal chance of having his or her review piece selected and incorporated in the analysis. The desirability of a random sample in the present analysis is for the permission of extrapolation of findings from the representative sample to the

larger population (Buchstaller & Khattab, 2013: 77). The purposeful sampling technique also became the preferred option as it allowed the researchers to choose participants that would typify Ghanaian academics (Best & Khan, 2006: 19). Further to this is the fact that in a multi-national and multi-ethnic institution like the UCC, any scientific investigation that has recourse to national, ethnic, cultural or social variables could justify the deployment of purposeful sampling. Again, these sampling techniques that this study used were dented with a dimension of convenience as the researchers were somewhat restricted to only the write-ups of subjects who were willing to volunteer their compositions for the study. Content analysis was used in the investigation of the students' use of evaluative language in their review or evaluation of Bhatti and Zegarac's (2012)¹. Positive and negative speech acts as well as linguistic strategies used to mitigate the effects of criticisms, which were face-threatening, were marked for analysis.

A positive speech act is defined as an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic attribute, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the writer (Hyland, 2000: 44). On the contrary, a negative speech act is a statement that reflects a difference between the opinions or stance of an author and a reviewer who has an idea or understanding of the concept the former dealt with in his or her book or research work.

In arriving at the frequencies and percentages presented in sections 8.2 and 8.3, the evaluative speech acts (negative and positive as well as direct and indirect) and the mitigation strategies were coded and entered onto grids (one grid each for the evaluative speech acts and the mitigation strategies). The data collated onto the grid were further analysed into frequencies and percentages. The frequencies were ascertained by manual computations whilst the

¹ The corpus for this analysis was sampled from outputs of a review/critique of Bhatti's and Zegarac's (2012) *Compliments and refusals in Poland and England* done by UCC graduate students in the MA Communication Studies programme during the second sandwich session of 2015/2016 academic year.

percentage calculations were done with the aid of an online percentage calculator.

Research Context

The University of Cape Coast is one of the two public universities in the Central Region of Ghana, and among several nation-wide. Popularly referred to by its acronym, UCC, the institution is located in Cape Coast, Ghana's Central Regional and one-time colonial capital. The UCC was established in October 1962, with the original mandate of producing professional teachers for educational institutions in the country. In later years the institution diversified into other academic and professional programmes of study (Afful, 2006a: 78). It remained an affiliate of the University of Ghana until 1st October 1971 when it was upgraded into an autonomous university by the coming into force of The University of Cape Coast Act, 1971 [Act 390]. The UCC currently has a total student population of 74,720, out of which the graduate student population is estimated at 5,327 (<https://www.ucc.edu.gh>). This population comprises both local and foreign/international students. The UCC has five colleges, namely, Agriculture and Natural Sciences, Distance Education, Education Studies, Health and Allied Sciences, and Humanities and Legal Studies. Each of the colleges is sub-structured into faculties and departments.

Again, the population of the UCC community can be stratified into students, faculty/academic staff and non-academic staff, of which the student category is under the searchlight of this study. Contingent on an academic criterion, the student population can further be sub-grouped according to programmes (e.g., Business, Arts, Agric Science, Communication Studies, etc.) and levels of study (undergraduate and graduate). At present, it is the graduate students of Communication Studies that attract our attention.

As a state-owned university operating in an African country that has adopted English as the official language, the UCC conducts its teaching, learning, research and other formal activities in English. That aside, other indigenous Ghanaian languages are spoken in and around the university

community, where Fante (a variety of Akan) is the predominant indigenous mother-tongue.

For the essence of this study and, taking a cue from Afful (2006a), it is plausible to divide students' use of the English language in the UCC into academic and non-academic. The non-academic uses may characterise contexts such as halls of residence, cafeterias, religious gatherings, gardens, and car parks, among others. On the other hand, academic uses of the English language among students can be associated with contexts and purposes such as lectures, tutorials, seminars, writing of long essays/dissertations, assignments, examinations, etc.

Review of Related Studies

The scale of intellectual engagement in evaluative language studies seems comparatively low, especially in the Ghanaian academic landscape. This is confirmed in the apparent rarity of 'local' literature in the exact topic area. However, such a reality appears paradoxical, given the conspicuous upsurge of interest in higher learning that has led to the explosion of academic documentation. Since academic documentation cannot be divorced of reviews, the situation culminates in the provision of a fertile ground for the exploration of evaluative language usage. As hinted in sections 2.0 and 3.0, reviews naturally call into use evaluative language.

In considering literature relevant to the present investigation, Kohandani et al. (2014) is of interest. This is an evaluation of the conversation sections of a *Top Notch 1* textbook from the pragmatic perspective of language functions and speech acts. In the study by Kohandani et al., 10 conversations were randomly selected from the *Top Notch 1* textbook designed for false-beginners and the two pragmatic models of Halliday's (1975) language functions and Searle's (1976) speech acts applied in analysing the functional domain of the conversations. Kohandani et al. discovered that the conversations investigated in the textbook were functionally inappropriate from a pragmatic viewpoint. Consequently, the researchers proffered certain measures to teachers and

material developers to help reduce the inefficiencies of the conversations in *Top Notch* series. The connect between Kohandani et al. and the current task hinges on the fact that both are theoretically affected by the Hallidayan model(s) of language functions and again tend to be focused on language in academically couched corpora, as in the language of the textbook and the language of academic reviews by graduate students. On the other hand, divergence between the two works may be considered in terms of implications of findings. Thus, whereas the results of the present investigation may have sociolinguistic, sociocultural or socio-pragmatic implications, those of Kohandani et al. bear pedagogical implications.

The *Sociophonic study of young Nigerian English speakers* by Oladipupo and Akinjobi (2015) is yet another material to consider. This study engaged in a statistical analysis of the connected speech processes (CSPs), r-liaison and boundary consonant deletion with the view to confirming the hypothesis that CSPs can be socially distributed in a speech community. The participant social groups involved in Oladipupo's and Akinjobi's study were young educated Nigerians, evenly stratified along gender and class lines. Although Oladipupo and Akinjobi's study can be delinked from the current task for the difference in research setting and the linguistic variables of focus, a claim can be made to a general affinity between the two. This affinity is anchored on the fact that both studies seek to reveal how certain linguistic patterns or variables manifest in the use of the English language by particular socio-discourse groups.

Also, a work worthy of attention is Ntsane's (2015) investigation of *The management of writer-reader interaction in newspaper editorials*. The centrality of Ntsane's study was to identify and, to some extent, appraise the use of dialogic engagement resources in newspaper editorials in Lesotho (*Lesotho Times*) and South Africa (*Sunday Times* and *Mail Guardian*). Using quantitative and qualitative models of analyses, Ntsane found that these editorials used both contractive and expansive resources, with the former being more slightly used than the latter. Again, Ntsane's findings indicated that editorial writers tend to limit dialogic space rather than open it up. The reason,

he speculates, is that the writers mostly pass on their opinions to their readers while also being conscious of the need to position these readers as sharing the same opinion. In the analysis, *Lesotho Times* was adjudged to have the highest frequency of engagement resources and with editorials that seemed to carry a more conversational tone.

Some synergies can be thought out between Ntsane (2015) and this study. First of all, both studies attempt to ascertain the state of certain discourse devices with respect to text genres. Secondly, although Ntsane's study is not directly on evaluative language as the current one strives to do, one can still say that Ntsane's analysis has an evaluative drive as it also assessed the extent and communicative effectiveness of the engagement resources used in the sampled editorials. Despite such a relationship, there is still a case for the present study as it serves as a metalanguage material specifically on evaluative speech acts in academic reviews composed by a section of graduate students in a Ghanaian university.

Fosu (2016) is a direct description and evaluation of the newspaper language in Ghana. It triangulates methods from corpus linguistics and readability studies, the former of which is much related to the case in point now. Fosu engages in a structural description of the language used in some Ghanaian newspaper editorials — *The Chronicle*, *Daily Graphic*, *Daily Guide* and *Ghanaian Times*. The structural descriptions served as a means to ascertaining whether the newspapers use language in a manner responsive to the informative needs of the citizenry. Fosu found that the language used in these newspapers to communicate socio-political news is highly complex in structure. The ramification is that the Ghanaian newspapers may be failing in their information transmission bid as many of the readers will find the language difficult to decode.

The current study could draw inspiration from Fosu (2016) as an analogy holds between the two. This is for the reason that both are corpora-based studies, except that while the present study seems to end at how the investigated speech acts manifest in the review corpus, Fosu goes a step further

to posit the de facto effects of the newspaper language style on the readers and on the information mandate of the media in Ghana.

Finally, a study that cognates with the present one and deserves mention or making reference to is Romanyshyn (2006). Romanyshyn's investigation examined the distinctiveness of semantic and pragmatic meaning of evaluative speech acts realised in inner monologue form. Emphasis is placed on the link between participants of communicative event and the components of the evaluative utterance semantic structure. A valuable dimension that Romanyshyn brings on board is the claim that evaluative utterances can be categorised into three, namely: 1) Utterances that express evaluation of the addressee; 2) Utterances that express evaluation of the addresser (i.e. self-evaluative); 3) Utterances that express evaluation of the third person or object. This categorisation of evaluative utterances can be linked to Hyland's (2004) targets of evaluation discussed in section 4. Our corpus-driven analysis is related to Romanyshyn's third type of evaluative utterance. In our current engagement, we present how graduate students in a Ghanaian university evaluate third parties (authors and text) to the readers of their (graduate students') reviews.

The Present Analysis

The following excerpts are a reflection of speech acts — negative, positive and mitigating strategies that featured in the review corpora analysed. In all, 418 instances of evaluative speech acts and 67 mitigating strategies were identified. Since it does not seem feasible to attempt representing all these instances of speech acts and mitigating strategies that were contained in the reviews of the graduate students, a representative size of twenty-five (25) tokens are extracted and cited as below. It is also relevant indicating that the 25 tokens comprised at least a sample token from each student reviewer/evaluator (EV) whose write up was part of the corpora analysed. The examples 1 to 11 are negative speech acts whilst examples 12 to 21 are positive speech acts. The examples 22 to 25 reflect mitigating strategies.

EV 1: *The style of writing of the authors is difficult, especially with the paragraphing and their style of sentences, which make reading uninteresting and less attractive.*

EV 2: *The authors introduced quotation marks on the titles of books, a format which is alien to APA.*

EV 3: *The caption given by the researchers for section 3 was not appropriate.*

EV 4: *A close look at the abstract of the study does not really fit for an academic journal's abstract.*

EV 5: *The paper should have stated the research objectives and questions to help give a direct focus on what were to be done.*

EV 6: *The paragraphs were too long, which made reading slow and very difficult to extract the meaning of what was presented.*

EV 7: *A good research paper should present the findings accurately and logically. It can be found out that there are some fundamental inaccuracies in the presentation of the findings and analysis in the pilot study under discussion on item 4.1.*

EV 8: *Here, the summation of the respondents of direct and indirect English respondents will give you 31 instead of 30. This observation alone tells you that there is something wrong with the data.*

EV 9: *Besides the above, the write-up failed to address some key words and terms used in preparing the document.*

EV 10: *The study exhibited weakness in the write-up in terms of spelling or wrong usage of words.*

EV 11: *The sentences in this research work were too long and ambiguous.*

EV 12: *In the introduction, Bhatti and Zegarac clearly spell out the order in which the work is organised and I think that is something appreciable since it depicts the chronology of events to its readers.*

EV 13: *The researchers did very well to consult a lot of sources or materials for their work as it is seen in the number of sources cited under the various major sections of the work.*

EV 14: *Bhatti and Zegarac in their study have given insightful knowledge on cross-cultural difference and resemblance with regards to compliment and refusal.*

EV 15: *The researchers should be commended for using the appropriate research technique, that is, the Discourse Completion Task.*

EV 16: *First of all, the researchers Joana Bhatti and Vladmir Zegarac should be commended because the work is related to the topic.*

EV 17: *Finally, it is noteworthy to say that the references were well cited using the Modern Language Associations (MLA) approach for referencing.*

EV 18: *The article is very detailed, elaborative and informative.*

EV 19: *The research topic itself was supported by a literature from Blum-Kuka, House and Kasper as seen paragraph one of section 2.*

EV 20: *The variables of the problem are clearly explained.*

EV 21: *One remarkable thing is that the tables were duly discussed and very much compared with the two groups.*

EV 22: *Also, although the authors collected data on age, gender and occupations, their relevance were not demonstrated in the findings.*

EV 23: *The abstract even though was well written lacked some key elements.*

EV 24: *The second paragraph restates the main objective of the study. Though it is a good reminder, it is believed that restatement of the objective in out of places section does not augur well.*

EV 25: *Even though the research contributed to the pool of knowledge in the area of compliments and refusals, there is the need for a further research to fine-tune what has been done.*

The examples (1), (2) and (3) of the negative evaluative statements from the corpora analysed have a direct focus on the authors. Their directness is face-threatening. Nonetheless, examples (4) to (11) have their focus on the text and are, therefore, indirect.

The reflection of positive evaluative language in the corpus is seen in examples 12 to 21. Out of these, examples 12 to 16 overtly and directly, commend the authors. This attributes credibility to the authors for their scholarly work.

However, example 22 highlights two evaluative speech acts: one positive, focusing on the authors' decision to collect certain data and the other one negative, focusing on the irrelevance of such data to the findings.

Results and Discussions

On examining all the above-mentioned examples, it is explicit that evaluation was formulated by means of the standard semantic, either positive or negative. This clearly resonates with Hyland's (2004) theoretical scheme of evaluative language.

Quantitative Analysis of the Speech Acts

An examination of the randomly selected corpus shows that all the reviews contained both positive and negative evaluation, which is normal, for instance, with book reviews where reviewers are expected to point out some of the merits and defects of the book, identify problems, ask questions, and present positive or negative implications of the analyses contained in it (Linguist List, 2009: 2). It was, as indicated in the table 1 below, found that the total evaluative speech acts (positive and negative) in the study stood at 418, of which 217 are positive and 201 are negative. Both the positive and the negative have direct and indirect formulated evaluations, with the concentrations or focus on the authors (A) and the text (T) respectively.

Table 1: Number of Evaluative Speech Acts

Evaluative Speech Acts	Positive	Negative
Directly formulated (focused on author)	95(44%)	72(36%)
Indirectly formulated (focused on text)	122(56%)	129(64%)
Total	217(52%)	201(48%)

The above table contains a breakdown of the positive and negative evaluations, as reflected in the corpus analysed. A statistical analysis of the text shows that the reviews contain more praises (52%) than criticisms (48%). Out of the positive (52%), 44% of the praises are directed at the authors, whilst

the 56% (indirect praise) is focused on the text². Based on the data presented, it can be stated that the focus of the praise was more on the text (being indirect), instead of the authors (direct) who generated the text.

In terms of the criticisms (48%) of the evaluative language in the reviews, 36% of the criticisms focus on the authors, but 64% focus on the text. It is, therefore, clear from the analysis that more of both the praise and the criticisms are directed at the text (indirectly at the authors). The reviewers were, therefore, more appreciative of the contents of the article than the efforts of the authors who undertook the research. This is a rather striking discovery in this study, as the authors directly received less praise (44%) as against the indirect praise (56%).

Also, direct positive speech acts (44%) were more than direct negative speech acts (36%). However, indirect negative evaluations (64%) were more than indirect positive evaluations (56%). There is, therefore, a striking balance in the discrepancies reflected in the data, as the direct positive evaluations rated higher than the direct negative evaluations in the same manner as the indirect negative speech acts rated higher than the indirect positive evaluations.

Whilst the direct positive outweighed the direct negative evaluations by 8%, the reverse, indirect negative evaluations (64%), also outweighed the indirect positive evaluations (52%) by (12%). Even though there is a slight percentage difference in the data presented, the fact that the direct positive evaluations were higher than the direct negative, while the indirect negative (on its part) was also higher than the indirect positive evaluations, presents an intriguing distribution in the evaluations, in terms of focus on the authors and the text in the reviews examined. Generally, an observation can be made that the relatively higher rate of occurrence of indirectness in reviews of these Ghanaian graduate students is very similar to what is reported about Asian

² In the tables under 8.2 and 8.3, the figures outside the brackets are the corresponding frequencies for the percentages in the brackets. An explanation of the process is provided under 5.0 (methodology).

language speakers like the Chinese, the Japanese and the Taiwanese (see Itakura & Tsui, 2009).

Mitigation Strategies

In all, 67 mitigating elements were found in the 25 reviews analysed, in which it was realised that three categories of linguistic-rhetorical strategies were employed by students in mitigating the effects of the criticisms: (1) the use of modal verbs: *could, might, should* and *would* among others. (2) the use of contrasting conjunctions: *although, even though, however, though* and (3) the use of adverbs: *probably, maybe, etc.* The frequency of each strategy is represented in table 2 below:

Table 2: Mitigating Strategies

Mitigating Strategy	Frequency
Modal verbs	17 (25%)
Adverbs	22 (33%)
Contrasting Conjunctions	28 (42%)
Total	67 (100%)

The above strategies functioned as hedges, as the students were hesitant in presenting propositional judgement or information categorically. Example (22), as indicated under section 8.0, reflects this: *Also, although the authors collected data on age, gender and occupations, their relevance were not demonstrated in the findings.* By using the word, ‘although’, students sought to soften the illocutionary force of the criticism (Belcher, 1995). The use of contrasting conjunctions: *even though* and *although*, for example, often simultaneously went with praise and criticism (paired) in the compound sentences. This created a balance of praises and criticisms in the review of the

article. For Brown and Levison (1987), where a criticism is prefaced by praise, it serves to lessen the face-threatening effect of the speech act.

Conclusion

The study found that the corpora analysed contained 418 evaluative speech acts: positive (44%) and negative (36%). In terms of linguistic-rhetorical strategies, the corpora, again, contained 67. Adverbs (e.g., *probably*, *perhaps*), contrasting conjunctions (e.g., *although*, *even though*, *however*) and modal verbs (e.g., *might*, *would*, *could*) were employed by reviewers as linguistic strategies for mitigating the effects of criticisms. With regard to the focus of the evaluative language, it was found that both the praise and criticism acts focused less on the authors and more at the text, though indirectly at the authors.

The generalisability of the findings of this study is enhanced by the cultural transmission feature of language where language is passed on from one generation to another (Ofori et al., 2013:23). The possibility here is that the approach in the evaluative language of the present generation of Ghanaian graduate students could have been a tradition inherited from the past or predecessor generations. Likewise, the present pattern of evaluative language usage by these graduate students stands the chance of being passed down to future generations. That notwithstanding, we suggest that, in order to gain a fuller insight into how evaluative speech acts are projected in the reviews of graduate students in Ghana's universities and the attendant underlying reasons, further research, involving bigger ample sizes, be undertaken into the phenomenon.

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