Conference Report

EAP Conference: *No Innocent Bystanders: Stance and Engagement in Academic Discourse* - University of St Andrews 24 February 2018

Getting to Grips with Stance and Engagement in Academic Discourse

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Mention St Andrews and most people will think of golf or more recently of where Prince William met Kate. The Northpoint Café in St Andrews is a little more specific, indicating that it is 'Where Kate Met Wills (for coffee).' However, visitors from around the world on Saturday February 24 of this year were attracted to St Andrews for reasons other than golf or the chance of a selfie in front of the Northpoint Café sign. The University of St Andrews was hosting the 7th annual EAP Conference, organised by Kerry Tavakoli from English Language Teaching (ELT) which drew attendees from as far afield as Japan, Vietnam and the United States, as well as from Europe and many parts of the UK. Such widespread interest may have been due in part to the conference theme *No Innocent Bystanders: Stance and Engagement in Academic Discourse*. As Kerry mentions in her Welcome in the online programme, *stance and engagement* are central to argumentation, yet remain 'particularly difficult to get to grips with.' I cannot claim to have 'fully come to grips' with the term *stance* but that is more a personal failing than due to any shortcomings on behalf of the conference presenters who offered interesting and varied perspectives on the idea of *stance and engagement*.

The following summary includes brief mention of the pre-conference seminar; the plenary *Stance and Judgement: What Discourse Analysis Reveals About Successful Student Writing in the Disciplines* by Dr Zak Lancaster from Wake Forest University, North Carolina; *Stance, structure, and significant others: getting personal about position* by Dr Jonathan Leader from Southampton University; *Importance marking in lectures: confronting EAP coursebooks with real lectures* by Dr Katrien Deroey from the University of Luxembourg and *A preliminary investigation into the rhetorical function of 'I' in different genres of successful student academic writing* by Helen Taylor from Coventry University. As with any conference

with parallel sessions, it was not possible to attend all the sessions so my summary can only be partial.

The pre-conference seminar, led by Zak Lancaster, was held on the Friday and was well attended by both conference delegates and the Masters students who were assisting Kerry. It provided an opportunity for a wide-ranging discussion on a number of issues related to stance. Lancaster encouraged active participation by all attendees, starting with the invitation to complete the following sentence: An "academic stance" means adopting a stance in your writing that is _____, _____, and _____. The responses lead to an open-ended discussion that raised other issues related to stance. There was general agreement that more time needs to be dedicated to students learning how to 'read the genre,' as well as learning how to 'write in the genre' and that there needs to be more of a focus on how stance is realised in the particular genres in which students are writing in their disciplines. Picking up on the theme of the conference, *No Innocent Bystanders,* there was a reminder that students are not simply learning skills and strategies in the writing classroom but learning 'habits of mind' and that it is of vital importance for teachers of writing to understand which 'habits of mind' are valued in the disciplines. Towards the end of the seminar, Lancaster displayed a quote from Mary Soliday's (2011 p.36) *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments Across the Disciplines*: "To judge whether a student fulfils motive, teachers respond to the writer's presence in a text; the quality of this presence helps them decide whether a student has learned something in the course." It is a useful exercise to consider how to complete Lancaster's opening sentence, bearing Soliday's quote in mind.

In the opening remarks of his plenary, Lancaster listed different terms related to stance - *ethos, persona, style, voice, identity* and *positioning* - and emphasised the interpersonal meanings associated with stance. In other words, for Lancaster, the linguistic resources that a writer uses influence how the writer projects himself or herself and how the writer projects the reader. Drawing on the work of Systemic Functional Linguists such as Halliday and Martin, Lancaster outlined three different dimensions of stance: epistemic (stance towards the evidence), attitudinal (stance towards ideas) and interactional (stance towards readers and other voices). Based on this understanding, Leader has conducted case studies with academics in Political Theory, Economics and Philosophy at Wake Forest University, to investigate whether a writer's stance is considered when academics are evaluating argument in student writing. He has found that academics do make judgements of the writer's stance

but these judgements are often tacit. Using discourse analysis, he has been able to uncover these tacit judgements to reveal a difference between what faculty say they 'value' in student writing and what they actually value. For example, when asked what was valued in Philosophy, the professor claimed that a 'blunt and assertive' stance was valued. The professor was looking for writing that was 'concise, direct, assertive and straightforward.' Lancaster's analysis showed that in the writing of 'higher performers,' hedges were more frequent and dense, objections were entertained tactfully and that the writers projected humility when guiding the reader. The Philosophy professor has responded positively to the research findings and now embraces hedging, providing a list of 'good' and 'bad' hedges to the students. Philosophy is not the only discipline to respond proactively to Lancaster's research. He is working with academic staff in different disciplines to include writing in their assessment goals and to make their expectations more explicit to students in the assignment briefs and in their evaluation of writing. For readers who are unfamiliar with Lancaster's work, I have provided two references from the journal *Written Communication*.

Conference delegates can be quite divided in terms of what they expect from a presentation with some looking for theoretical insights, others for references to follow up and many hoping for something to put into practice on Monday morning. Jonathan Leader's presentation had 'something for everyone.' He provided the theoretical framework for his understanding of stance, explained how his 'influences' (Biggs & Collis 1982; Godfrey) shape his classroom practice and detailed how his approach plays out in the classroom. Echoing Kerry's observation about the 'slipperiness' of stance as a term, Leader believes that it is not easy to formulate the meaning of stance. He believes that it is difficult to 'pin down' the meaning of stance because it is bound up with the quality of thinking evident in writing. Differentiating stance from position, Leader argues that stance emerges from the writer's position. Elaborating on this idea, he explained how stance reflects certain qualities: evidence-based thinking, independence of thought and an aspiration towards 'original' thought or sophisticated thinking. In the classroom, Leader asks students to identify relationships in a text. He asks students to firstly identify the type of relationship – is there agreement (convergence) or disagreement or partial agreement between the views of different authors. The students are then asked to evaluate these relationships and to position their own views in relation to their evaluation. This relative position however, is only a 'temporary lodging' prior to students formulating their own stance. It would be remiss of me not to mention the eloquent way in which Leader describes textual analysis, referring to 'authorial

geography,' moving from 'significant others to making others significant' and the text as a 'tangle of potential connections' to name just a few.

In opening her presentation, Dr Katrien Deroey identified the problems faced by EAP practitioners seeking to provide models of lecture organisation. EAP listening material is rarely similar to academic lectures and commercial textbooks tend to over-simplify the structure and language of lectures which does a disservice to students. In her research of 25 coursebooks and 160 lectures drawn from the British Academic Spoken English corpus, Deroey was interested in the representativeness of language, lecture authenticity and what she refers to as 'research-informedness.' Her particular focus in this session was importance markers which she defines as lexicogrammatical devices that overtly indicate the importance of both verbal and visual points. Comparing the type of importance markers in coursebooks with importance markers used in lectures, Deroey identified the following in coursebooks: "The important point is" (21.2%), "I want to stress" (13.5%), "Remember that" (11.5%), "You have to remember" (11.5%) and "It's important to note that." In lectures the following were identified: "Remember, notice/note" (33.7%), the point/question is" (20.7%) for highlighting importance and when wanting to be more explicit in indicating importance, lecturers used: "I want to emphasise/stress; (as) I (have) pointed out" (8.9%), "The important/ key point/ thing is (8.2%) and "You have to remember" (5.2%). Summing up, Deroey recommended working with authentic lectures as soon as possible with pre-listening work on vocabulary and content, support through transcripts and skeletal notes, simplifying tasks and incrementally increasing the length of the lectures and the speech rate.

Helen Taylor's presentation showcased her Masters research which was a response to the Research Question: Does genre affect the function of the first person singular pronoun (I) in successful business student academic writing? Her data was drawn from Successful Writers in the British Academic Written English (BAWE) corpus which she analysed according to genre and Hyland's (2002a) pronoun typology. Taylor firstly outlined the different genres examined in her case study and their corresponding central social purpose. For example, she suggests the social purpose of an explanation genre is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, whereas the social function of a research report, literature survey or a methodology recount is to develop research skills. She then explained how she mapped these genres onto Hyland's continuum of pronoun use from least powerful authorial presence (acknowledging support and expressing gratitude) to the most powerful authorial presence

(stating results and claims). Taylor pointed to the limited scope of her investigation and thus the tentative nature of any conclusions, although she did offer teaching implications. Firstly, she suggests students learn to be discourse analysts 'lite' and secondly, she recommends that in-sessional courses be taught according to genre.

The concluding comments made by Lancaster in relation to *stance* at the end of the conference are worth considering. As has been mentioned above, it is important to determine the sorts of stance that are valued in the field and for students to learn how to identify stance in assignment prompts. However, the focus needs to be on reading as well as writing. To that end, classroom practice should include drawing attention to instances in the reading material where the writer's stance is effectively stated. Lancaster also recommends providing samples and encouraging students to 'play with stance' by rewriting a piece adopting a different stance.

After the conference, I took the bus to Leuchars railway station. When looking for the connecting bus at the bus station, I saw that it was leaving from Stance 11. Well, that certainly got me thinking all over again about *stance and engagement.* Attending a conference can unsettle your thinking, raising more questions than providing answers. In that way, a conference keeps conversations about ideas alive and evolving.

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