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Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

Research Article

Authorial Authority and Reader Positioning in Doctoral Theses Across Disciplines: Pedagogical Implications From a Diachronic Study

Marii Abdeljaoued[1] & Akila Sellami Baklouti[2]

[1] Corresponding author, English Department, The Higher Institute of Languages of Nabeul, University of Carthage, Tunis, Tunisia; Laboratory of Approaches to Discourse, University of Sfax, Sfax, Tunisia; *abdeljaouedmarii@isln.ucar.tn*

[2]English Department, The Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sfax, University of Sfax, Sfax, Tunisia; Laboratory of Approaches to Discourse, University of Sfax, Sfax, Tunisia; *akila.sellami@flshs.usf.tn*

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Abstract

This diachronic, cross-disciplinary study examines how doctoral theses vary over time and across academic disciplines in their use of evaluative language. Drawing on the Engagement subsystem of the Appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005), the analysis is based on a corpus of 24 British theses, representing both soft and hard fields across three historical periods: 1950–1952, 1982–1984, and 2014–2016. The findings indicate a marked increase in the use of monoglossic resources, rising from 7.5% to 19% across the time span. This points to a movement toward more authoritative and assertive expressions of stance. Disciplinary differences also emerged; although heteroglossic resources remained prominent in both areas, students in the soft disciplines more frequently employed *attribute* and *acknowledge*, while those in the hard sciences favored *entertain*, reflecting epistemic caution even in evidence-driven writing. By focusing on the underexplored doctoral thesis genre, this study highlights how novice scholars negotiate rhetorical positioning both diachronically and across disciplinary contexts. The results carry pedagogical implications for English for Academic Purposes and supervisory practice. Thesis extracts and discipline-specific models can be used to heighten students' awareness of stance strategies, support their progression from expansive to more contractive positioning, and equip supervisors with a shared metalanguage for offering feedback.

Keywords: Appraisal; Engagement; Authority; Diachrony; Disciplinarity; SFL; Thesis Writing.

1. Introduction

The doctoral thesis or dissertation holds immense significance in the student's academic journey. It serves not only as a demonstration of scholarly merit but also as a means of gaining insider status within disciplinary communities. As a postgraduate genre, the thesis is shaped by diverse institutional and cultural traditions. Hyland (2009) notes that the terms 'thesis' and 'dissertation' are often used interchangeably across contexts, with thesis preferred in the UK and dissertation more common in the USA. This article adopts the term thesis to align with the UK-based corpus and institutional context of the texts analyzed.

Writing a thesis is a demanding rhetorical task. Students must produce extended texts that meet formal, generic, research novelty, and institutional standards, while also structuring arguments persuasively through discoursal markers (Abdeljaoued, 2024). The complexity of this task lies not only in content but also in guiding readers, supervisors, examiners, and disciplinary peers through coherent, persuasive arguments. Academic writing is therefore not a neutral presentation of facts but a persuasive activity requiring careful rhetorical, grammatical, and lexical choices to secure acceptance within scholarly communities (Hyland, 2009). A key dimension of this persuasion involves managing stance and engagement. Research has shown that thesis writers must balance impersonality with interaction, employing strategies such as hedging and rhetorical mitigation to present arguments cautiously while engaging with readers (Hyland, 1998). While traditional academic discourse emphasized objectivity and impersonality (Hartley, 2008), more recent studies

identify shifts toward subjectivity, colloquialization, and greater dialogic interaction (Hyland & Jiang, 2017), reflecting broader changes in global academic discourse (Leech et al., 2009). This shift underscores Bakhtin's (1981) view of writing as dialogic, positioning readers within a dynamic negotiation of meanings.

Despite growing research into stance and engagement in academic discourse, relatively little is known about how these features evolve diachronically across disciplines in doctoral theses. Much of the literature has focused either on single disciplines or synchronic snapshots, leaving underexplored the ways engagement resources function across time and fields of study. This study addresses this gap by examining diachronic and cross-disciplinary patterns of engagement in a corpus of doctoral theses. In doing so, it contributes both to genre theory and to pedagogy, offering insights into how doctoral writers manage rhetorical challenges over time and across disciplines, and how supervisors and EAP practitioners might better support them.

A critical aspect of a thesis is the use of evaluative language, which involves strategically employing stance markers and rhetorical resources to build persuasive arguments and open dialogic space. Despite extensive research on scientific writing, diachronic studies on evaluation markers remain limited. Banks (2008; 2019) highlighted this gap, noting that few studies have explored the diachronic analysis of scientific writing. Atkinson (1992) traced medical research writing's evolution over 350 years, showing a shift toward more informational, abstract, and community-focused discourse. Salager-Meyer (1999) observed a move toward standardized disciplinary conventions in medical English. More recently, Hyland and Jiang (2016a) examined stance markers in research articles over five decades, revealing disciplinary differences in authorial presence; some fields favor explicit stance-taking, others prefer a detached style. However, large-scale diachronic studies of evaluative language and reader positioning in doctoral theses remain scarce. While much of the literature has focused on research articles (Hyland & Jiang, 2016a, 2016b), undergraduate essays (Wu, 2007), and coursework texts (Soliday, 2011), only a few studies have addressed theses specifically (Thompson, 2012, 2016; Geng & Wharton, 2016). This gap underscores the need to investigate how authority is negotiated in the doctoral theses genre with a view to informing the design of academic writing courses for novice scholars. The present study addresses this gap by examining diachronic and cross-disciplinary patterns of Engagement resources in doctoral theses and exploring their pedagogical implications. It examines how Appraisal resources can inform academic writing instruction and support students in developing persuasive arguments and establishing scholarly authority. This study builds on the doctoral research of the first author, conducted under the supervision of the second author. While the original work focused on describing how student writers construct stance and engagement in academic discourse, the present study extends these findings by exploring their pedagogical applications. It examines how Appraisal resources can inform academic writing instruction and support students in developing persuasive arguments and establishing scholarly authority.

SFL studies how language functions in real-life situations and how people use it to interact and create meaning. It views language as a social event shaped by context and interaction, where dialogic effects are central. Developed by Halliday in the 1960s and refined by his students and colleagues, SFL builds on Firth's concept of language as a network of systems, structures, and choices for meaning-making. Here, meaning is not confined to isolated words or sentences but arises from patterns of choices shaped by context. Within the interpersonal metafunction of SFL, Appraisal Theory offers a robust framework for analyzing evaluative language in discourse (Matthiessen et al., 2010). It is "probably the most theory-grounded study of the functions and forms of evaluative meaning in English" (Hunston, 2011, p. 2) and "the most systematic analyzing tool that offers a typology of evaluative resources available in English" (Hyland, 2005, p. 174). Martin (2000) defines Appraisal as "the semantic resources used to negotiate emotions, judgments, and valuations... " (p. 145), and Martin and White (2005) emphasize that appraisal meanings function as "elements in integrated complexes of meaning" (p. 159). These meanings work together to create rhetorical impact through specific combinations and sequences. By integrating appraisal into texts, writers convey attitudes, emotions, and judgments that shape tone and stance. This contributes to textual richness and invites reader engagement, contributing to the rhetorical effectiveness and interpersonal force of academic and other forms of writing.

A key component of this study is the application of the Appraisal Engagement subsystem to analyze authority and evaluation markers in theses. Engagement resources show how writers position themselves in relation to other voices and perspectives. This makes it a valuable tool for tracking the evolution of dialogic interaction in academic writing (Lancaster, 2014). Furthermore, this research will adopt a diachronic and cross-disciplinary approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods to assess evaluative language in theses. By examining assertions, hedging strategies,

and heteroglossic resources, this study investigates how students construct persuasive arguments, engage with the audience, and establish scholarly authority. The findings contribute to our understanding of the evolution of academic writing and can inform pedagogical practices related to stance and evaluative language.

The examination of authority and stance-taking in academic writing falls within the broader debate on conservatism versus change in scholarly discourse (e.g., Abdeljaoued, 2024; Biber & Gray, 2016). This discussion considers the tension between the traditional, rigid conventions of academic writing and the shifts that have introduced greater subjectivity, self-promotion, and interactivity. By tracing these diachronic developments, this study aims to find out whether theses have undergone massive changes. It focuses on the evolution of authorial stance-taking. It also examines evaluative language, reader engagement, and positioning strategies using Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Engagement resources. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How have Engagement strategies evolved in doctoral theses over time?

RQ 2: What are the disciplinary variations in the use of Engagement markers?

RQ 3: How do shifts in evaluative language reflect broader changes in academic writing conventions?

RQ 4: What pedagogical implications can be drawn from diachronic and disciplinary variation in Engagement strategies?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Authorial Stance: A Diachronic Perspective

The present study tracks diachronic changes in the use of stance and evaluation markers in theses. Gillaerts and Van de Velde (2010) applied Hyland's (2005) stance model on a corpus study of 72 abstracts from the Journal of Pragmatics (1980–2010), sampled at five-year intervals. They tracked hedges, boosters, and attitude markers. They noticed a decline in interpersonality over time. This was attributed to soft disciplines like Applied Linguistics increasingly emulating the discursive norms of hard sciences. The authors also noted a shift from an authoritative "omniscient academic" stance toward more cautious claim-making, signaling a transformation in the genre's interpersonal dimension. Similarly, Ayers (2008), analyzing Nature abstracts from 1991 to 2005, documented structural shifts. While hedging remained in results and conclusions, it was sometimes omitted from abstracts, even when present in the full articles. The abstracts also increasingly foregrounded contributions to disciplinary knowledge and omitted methodological detail, a trend Ayers linked to the journal's digital evolution. Khany and Tazik (2010) show that rhetorical moves in introductions and discussions differ by sub-discipline and by journal context. This supports our view that disciplinary norms shape stance strategies at multiple textual scales.

A substantial body of longitudinal research by Hyland and Jiang has revitalized diachronic studies of academic writing. Their 2.2-million-word corpus, compiled from top journals in Applied Linguistics, Biology, Engineering, and Sociology across three periods (1965, 1985, 2015), supports analyses of stance (2016a), engagement (2016b), informality (2017), citation (2019), self-citation (2018a), and lexical bundles (2018b). In their 2016a study, tracking 140 stance features from Hyland's (2005) taxonomy, they found rising explicit stance markers in some fields but varied trends overall. Applied Linguistics and Sociology showed increased self-mention but declines in other stance markers; sociologists exhibited stronger authorial presence but fewer epistemic and attitudinal devices, while applied linguists grew more impersonal. In hard sciences, stance markers increased substantially: Biology saw a 6% rise overall and a 150% rise in self-mentions (1985–2015); Electrical Engineering experienced nearly 200% growth in stance markers (1965–2015). Their 2016b engagement study noted a general decline with a resurgence post-1985, differing by discipline.

2.2. Engagement Resources in Student Writings

The Engagement framework has been pivotal in distinguishing effective from less effective argumentative writing in university student texts (Swain, 2009; Wu, 2007). It enables detailed analysis of how students position their claims relative to their readers. Martin and White (2005) explain that Engagement reveals how writers establish interpersonal stance by aligning with or distancing themselves from other voices in the text. As an analytic tool, it tracks interpersonal development across disciplines, showing how students engage with alternative perspectives over time.

Pedagogically motivated studies like Lancaster (2011) and Swain (2009) employed the framework to assess student writing, with Lancaster linking nuanced engagement patterns to higher grades. McCabe et al. (2009) explore how SFL approaches, such as appraisal theory, can be applied to educational texts to assess and improve student literacy development. Other research, Soliday (2011), North (2005), and Lancaster (2014), used the Appraisal System's Engagement dimension to explore how students express attitudinal meanings, especially when responding to external or opposing viewpoints anticipated in academic discourse.

Soliday (2011) notes that students are encouraged to assert their positions and offer evaluations but are warned against seeming "biased." Lancaster (2011) emphasizes that Engagement analysis reveals patterns reflecting the writer's identity and style, yet balancing dialogic expansions and contractions is essential for rhetorical success. Overusing contractive options leads to a rigid stance that blocks alternative views and narrows dialogic space, limiting reader engagement. Conversely, excessive expansion weakens the writer's voice, producing a non-committal, unpersuasive stance (Lancaster, 2011; Soliday, 2004, 2011). Thus, balancing monoglossic (single-voiced) and heteroglossic (multiple-voiced) expressions is vital to achieve communicative goals. Wu (2007) examined undergraduate essays' use of problematization, a rhetorical strategy that challenges dominant ideas, through the Engagement system. Higher-rated essays showed more strategic use of Engagement resources to question assumptions and build nuanced, persuasive stances, underscoring the pedagogical value of this analytical approach in academic writing.

Swain (2010) examined 26 discussion-type essays written by non-native English-speaking undergraduates under exam conditions, using mixed methods to analyze engagement and attitudinal markers. The essays, ranging from 450 to 1,000 words, revealed a higher frequency of expanding (302) than contracting (260) resources. The most common system was "*entertain*," followed by 'attribute: acknowledge'. Among contracting resources, 'disclaim: counter' and 'deny' were next in frequency, while the least used was 'attribute: distance'. High-scoring essays employed over 33% more Engagement resources than low-scoring ones and demonstrated a more balanced use of expanding and contracting options. In contrast, low-scoring essays used about 33% more expanding than contracting resources overall. This suggests that effective argumentative writing involves not only a greater use of Engagement features but also a strategic balance between dialogic expansion and contraction. These findings highlight the importance of nuanced stance-taking in academic writing and the value of the Engagement framework in evaluating student performance.

North (2005) examined disciplinary differences in stance-taking by analyzing undergraduate essays from a History of Science course at the Open University (UK). The essays were grouped by students' academic backgrounds: (1) arts, social sciences, or education, and (2) mathematics, science, or technology. Essays from the first group earned higher grades, which the writer attributes to their use of more textual and interpersonal themes. This reflects their training in argumentative epistemologies that view knowledge as constructed and open to interpretation, rather than fixed facts (North, 2005). Writers in this tradition actively persuade readers, engaging critically with ideas. North (2005) suggests that textual and interpersonal themes demonstrate the writer's active role in meaning-making and discourse intervention. Higher-rated essays, thus, framed knowledge as interpretive and dialogic; hence, they align with academic expectations, which value critical engagement and rhetorical sophistication. Devira and Westin (2021) apply genre analysis and the Appraisal framework to classroom critical reviews. They show that evaluative lexis from the Appreciation subsystem (valuation, composition, reaction) drives students' critique moves. Their small, classroom study found that a tutor model text plus explicit guidance helped students produce clearer critiques and better balance positive and negative evaluations. Jalilifar et al. (2012) analyzed 80 Introductions from Iranian and international English research articles and found that international writers employed a wider range of Attitude and Graduation resources, whereas Iranian writers tended to draw on a more restricted repertoire. Their findings underscore the culturally situated nature of stance and the ways evaluative strategies reflect community-specific discourse conventions. Banari et al. (2017) compared attitudinal language in English and Persian applied linguistics texts, showing that writers in both languages were reluctant to express affect or judgment directly, instead favoring appreciation as the dominant evaluative resource. This preference for coding evaluation through the appraisal of objects rather than people underscores the disciplinary norms of academic discourse. Collectively, these studies confirm the centrality of stance and attitudinal positioning across diverse genres and cultural contexts. However, there remains limited understanding of how such resources function in doctoral theses, particularly from a diachronic and cross-disciplinary perspective.

Although existing research has illuminated diachronic shifts in stance-taking in journal articles (e.g., Hyland & Jiang, 2016a, 2016b; Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010) and explored student writing through the Engagement framework (e.g., Lancaster, 2011; Swain, 2010; Wu, 2007), these two strands of scholarship remain largely disconnected. Diachronic analyses have focused almost exclusively on published research articles, while investigations of student writing are often cross-sectional and confined to short assignments or coursework. As a result, little is known about how doctoral theses, a genre that is simultaneously a site of apprenticeship and a marker of disciplinary entry, have evolved in their use of stance and Engagement resources over time. This leaves an important gap in our understanding of how novice scholars construct authority, negotiate dialogic space, and position readers across disciplines. Addressing this gap, the present study examines diachronic and disciplinary variation in doctoral theses using the Appraisal framework, thereby contributing to both the theorization of stance and Engagement and the pedagogy of academic writing.

3. Methodology

The Appraisal framework serves as a valuable toolkit for understanding the layers of dialogic awareness expressed in writing (Lancaster, 2014). Engagement, as one of the three simultaneous subsystems in Appraisal, reflects the writer's dialogicality with other voices (heteroglosses) or lack thereof (monoglosses). It offers a comprehensive conceptual framework for analyzing how writers employ discursive strategies. This framework enables speakers/writers to actively engage with or refrain from engaging with other perspectives involved in the evaluative process within the communication context. While the term 'Engagement' is relatively new, it draws its roots from the Bakhtinian notion of dialogicality, which views texts as dialogic spaces where multiple voices contribute to meaning construction. This dialogism, or heteroglossia, underlies all communication as it involves referring to something and taking up a position that anticipates responses from an actual or imagined audience. Within this understanding, academic arguments exist against a backdrop of already-existing claims, requiring writers to acknowledge and consider other perspectives before presenting their own (Miller et al., 2014).

The three-year blocks were chosen based on two factors. First, the 1950s emerged as the earliest period with enough data to build a viable empirical corpus. As Berkenkotter (2008) suggests, researchers should collect genre samples from periods at least 20–30 years apart to trace changes over time. Hilpert and Gries (2016) also emphasize the significance of observing periods of stability interspersed by intermittent surges of development. Therefore, a 30-year timeframe appears adequate for detecting significant changes, if any, in the use of interactional markers of stance-taking and SFL Engagement values. In each corpus, a sample of 8 theses was chosen using random selection methods in most cases.

This study classifies disciplines using Becher and Trowler's (2001) four-layer typology of disciplinary 'intellectual territories,' which maps fields along the hard–soft and pure–applied knowledge axes. However, classifying academic disciplines remains complex, as no single system has universal scholarly consensus. The conventional hard–soft distinction, while useful, does not always fully capture disciplinary complexities; some disciplines share traits with other seemingly unrelated fields rather than with their traditional 'sister disciplines". Nonetheless, Hyland (2004) argues that despite its limitations, the hard–soft distinction remains "a convenient way of examining general similarities and differences between fields without positing rigidly demarcated categories" (p. 30). Economics is often debated as a borderline case between hard and soft sciences (Mäkinen & Hiltunen, 2016). For the present study, it is pragmatically classified as a hard discipline.

The dataset (see Table 1) comprises approximately 1.09 million words of naturally occurring academic discourse, drawn from eight disciplines evenly split between the hard and soft sciences. It includes 748,917 words from the soft disciplines (Applied Linguistics, History, Literary Studies, and Theology) and 339,120 words from the hard disciplines (Cell Biology, Electrical Engineering, Mathematics, and Economics). The corpus consists of 24 doctoral theses, distributed equally across three timeframes. Although substantial, the corpus is not intended to be fully representative of UK doctoral writing, given the vast number of theses produced over seventy years and the growing diversity of student authorship due to international enrolments. Rather, it is designed to be indicative of broader disciplinary trends and sufficiently robust for exploratory analysis. As with most corpus design, pragmatic factors such as accessibility, internal balance, and parity across sub-corpora were prioritized over perfect representativeness. The dataset thus provides an illustrative sample of academic language and epistemological orientations characteristic of the selected disciplines. While its size necessarily limits generalizability, the findings are best viewed as exploratory and

indicative, revealing tendencies across time and 'disciplinary tribes'. The theses were collected in 2019 from multiple British universities, primarily via EThOS, the UK's national repository for doctoral theses.

Table 1. *Corpus Composition by Discipline and Time Period*

Discipline	Type	1950–1952	1982–1984	2014–2016
Applied Linguistics	Soft	18675	57636	67107
History	Soft	43537	71866	71153
Literary Studies	Soft	69827	88404	84482
Theology	Soft	30054	96252	49924
Cell Biology	Hard	52142	29031	21048
Electrical Engineering	Hard	25909	13467	21544
Mathematics	Hard	24853	15107	17840
Economics	Hard	45792	37169	35218
Soft Subtotal		162093	314158	272666
Hard Subtotal		148696	94774	95650
Total per Phase		310789	408932	368316

It is also worth stressing that, following most of the recent literature (Thompson, 2012), this study will treat theses as wholesale texts. This decision is motivated by the fact that there are different types of theses and different organizational patterns across disciplines. Except for the introduction, abstract or synopsis, conclusion, or summary chapter, theses across disciplines do not have the same rhetorical structures (Thompson, 2016).

The process of annotating Engagement resources using the UAM Corpus Tool offers a valuable means of identifying evaluative language and reader positioning within theses. However, this approach does come with its challenges. The broader Appraisal system necessitates a comprehensive analysis of subjective language, and effectively using the UAM Corpus Tool requires a deep understanding of its framework and functionalities, as well as manual annotation of the corpus to identify all instances of Engagement resources. The Engagement subsystem was coded following Martin and White's (2005) taxonomy (Figure 1 below) from left to right. The study identified monoglossic and heteroglossic formulations and further coded heteroglossic formulations into subcategories. Monoglossic formulations were explicitly coded as [Mono], while heteroglossic formulations were indicated by specific subcategories. The eight categories represent slight modifications of the Martin and White (2005) categories in Figure 1, including collapsing certain distinctions for simplicity due to the relative infrequency of some instances.

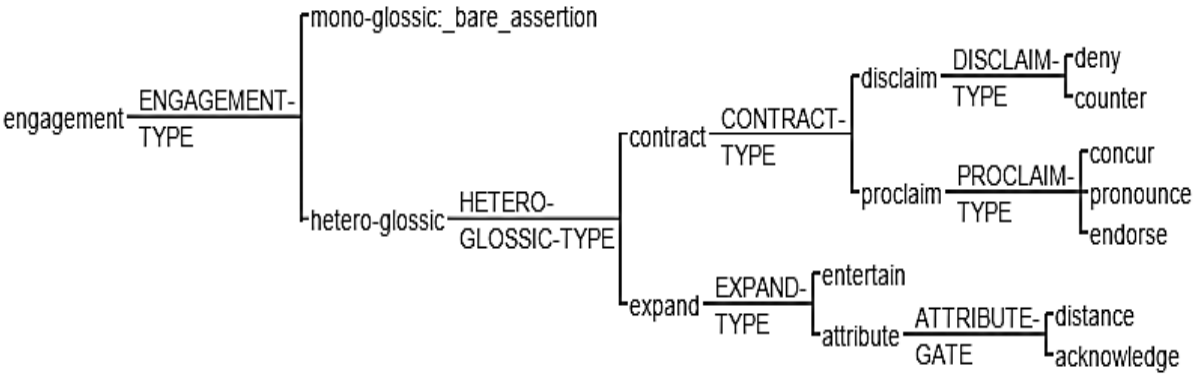


Figure 1. UAM Annotation Scheme for Engagement Resources

Monoglossic formulations were explicitly coded as [Mono], while heteroglossic formulations were annotated using subcategories adapted from Martin and White's (2005) Engagement framework. The system was slightly modified for analytical clarity and feasibility. The eight categories applied in the annotation reflect different ways writers manage dialogic space. Table 2 below provides brief definitions for each category, accompanied by illustrative corpus examples to ensure transparency and clarity. Recent literature cautions against assigning language chunks to multiple categories; Graneheim and Lundman (2004) stress avoiding overlapping classifications. However, given the complexity of human experience and its varied expressions, this study adopts a more conservative approach to corpus annotation, allowing

multi-layer annotation where a single chunk may belong to more than one category. Although sentences are extensive grammatical units, this study transcends sentence-based analysis, aligning with Thompson and Ye's (1991) view that "evaluation is best seen as working at the discourse level of text" (p. 367). Engagement realizations extend beyond lexicogrammatical units to include condensed language chunks and content spanning below and above the sentence level.

Table 2. *Engagement Categories in The Corpus*

Category	Definition	Examples from the corpus
Monoglossic [Mono]	Bare assertions that present information as fact without acknowledging alternative perspectives.	"Gene expression therefore must be [a] regulated process, namely genes must turn on and off"
Disclaim: Deny	Rejects or negates an opposing view directly, typically through negation.	"This need not give rise to fluctuations in consumption.."
Disclaim: Counter	Acknowledges an expected or conventional viewpoint, only to contrast or replace it.	"While the model... has gained much experimental support, it has been noted that positional information may also play a role"
Proclaim: Concur	Strong agreement with a presumed shared belief, reducing dialogic openness.	"Indeed, direct measurement of the DNA sequence homology between plasmids has confirmed..."
Proclaim: Pronounce	Expresses strong authorial commitment or evaluative stance, often marked by self-mention or intensifiers.	"I believe, however, that much advance could be made along this line"
Proclaim: Endorse	Aligns with a cited source, treating its position as valid or authoritative.	"As Vygotsky famously stated, 'what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow"
Entertain	Presents a proposition as one possibility among others, often using modals, hedges, or tentative language.	"It seems to be a crucial aspect of how students engage with material"
Attribute: Acknowledge	Reports external voices neutrally, without indicating alignment or disalignment.	"Wright (1949–50) claims that dominance deviations have to be large before they detract.. "
Attribute: Distance	References external voices while disassociating from them using distancing verbs like claim or allege.	"Some researchers claim that competition fosters innovation"

Annotating Engagement resources is a meticulous and time-intensive process that requires context-sensitive judgment and careful co-textual analysis. It involves extensive corpus navigation and interpretive decisions, which limit the feasible size of the dataset. As McEnery, Xiao, and Tono (2006) and Geng and Wharton (2016) argue, manually tagged corpora are best kept small for manageability. Accordingly, this study analyzed 24 doctoral theses, eight from each of three periods (1950–52, 1982–84, and 2014–16), chosen based on prior lexical-grammatical investigations of diachronic stance. The use of UAM CorpusTool for annotation necessitated a focused sample, enabling depth of analysis into heteroglossic and monoglossic patterns. While larger corpora offer broader generalizability, this study aligns with best practices favoring smaller, well-curated datasets for revealing nuanced rhetorical trends.

The annotation involves applying additional information to corpus data to make linguistic features analytically accessible. At this stage, Engagement resources in the theses were manually coded for quantitatively oriented analysis using UAM CorpusTool, following an interpretive, context-sensitive approach. This decision was motivated by literature on Appraisal analysis in student writing (e.g., Lancaster, 2012, 2014; Geng & Wharton, 2016), which emphasizes the nuanced nature of Engagement, particularly in advanced student writing as they develop their academic identities. It is also important to stress that abundant literature has called attention to the subtle nature of Appraisal resources and particularly 'Engagement'. Such subtlety is perhaps more particularly so with advanced student writing, given their process toward shaping their academic identity. For example, Lancaster (2012) and Swain (2009) found a quasi-systematic correlation between more advanced student writing and the use of a wide range of contractive and expansive resources as ways of engaging the reader.

Appraisal values are inherently 'messy,' prompting scholars like Lancaster (2014) to position the system at the level of discourse analysis rather than lexicogrammar. Lancaster (2014) highlights that Appraisal is often realized through patterns associated with other discourse constructs, including denials, concessions, attributions, hedges, modality, and evidentiality. As Martin and White (2005) observe, these values tend to "splash across a phase of discourse irrespective

of grammatical boundaries" (p.10), which complicates their identification. A single sentence may contain multiple overlapping Engagement resources, many of which are not overtly marked and must be interpreted in context. While some, such as *deny* or *entertain*, are lexically cued, most require nuanced, context-sensitive judgment. This functional nature introduces coder subjectivity, though careful application of the scheme and re-rating can help improve inter-rater reliability. To ensure consistency, this study employed intra-coder reliability checks: the first researcher re-annotated a 10% delayed chunk of the corpus (selected from across disciplines and time periods) approximately three weeks after the initial coding. The agreement rate exceeded the accepted threshold for qualitative corpus annotation (over 85%), confirming the stability of the coding scheme. This approach aligns with best practices in manual Appraisal analysis, where the nuanced and context-dependent nature of Engagement resources makes intra-coder reliability a widely used validation strategy (cf. McKay & Gass, 2005). The interpretive demands of annotation are further illustrated in the following excerpt.

> (1) In fact, the effectiveness of suppressor macrophages in vivo remains the subject of considerable debate [PROCLAIM-ENDORSE]. (2) Anaclerio et al. (1978) showed that spleen cells from tumor-bearing mice had a depressed proliferative response [PROCLAIM-ENDORSE], (3) it was attributed to suppressor macrophages [PROCLAIM-ENDORSE]. (4) Although this limited data does not rule out their role [DISCLAIM: DENY], (5) it seems unlikely they induce generalized anergy [ENTERTAIN]. (6) Their suppressive activity may require close contact with lymphocytes [PROCLAIM-CONCUR + ENTERTAIN]. (8) However, they are unevenly distributed in tumor-bearing animals [DISCLAIM-COUNTER + DISCLAIM: DENY], so few lymphocytes may encounter them in vivo [ENTERTAIN]. (Cell Biology, 1982)

The excerpt illustrates three key aspects of Engagement annotation. First, it shows that clauses may carry multiple values, such as example (6) with both PROCLAIM-CONCUR and ENTERTAIN, and (8) with DISCLAIM-COUNTER and DENY, reflecting the embedded nature of discursive moves within single sentences. Second, it demonstrates that Engagement often transcends surface-level lexicogrammatical cues, functioning across clauses and beyond explicit markers. Third, the analysis emphasizes the need for interpretive judgment grounded in co-textual understanding, reinforcing the preference for manual annotation over automated tools. Due to their layered, context-dependent nature, Engagement values resist computational detection and require nuanced human analysis.

4. Results

4.1. The Diachronic Evolution of Engagement Markers

To gain a macro-level understanding of diachronic trends in Engagement, it is helpful to visualize overall patterns. Figure 2 presents a mosaic plot depicting shifts in Engagement expressions across the three time periods. A visual reading, particularly in the vertical dimension, suggests that while heteroglossic expressions remain dominant, monoglossic realizations have steadily increased. This shift is reflected in a see-saw pattern across periods, with the proportion of heteroglossic forms gradually shrinking over time. Despite their continued predominance, the relative decline of heteroglossic resources highlights an evolving rhetorical stance in academic writing.

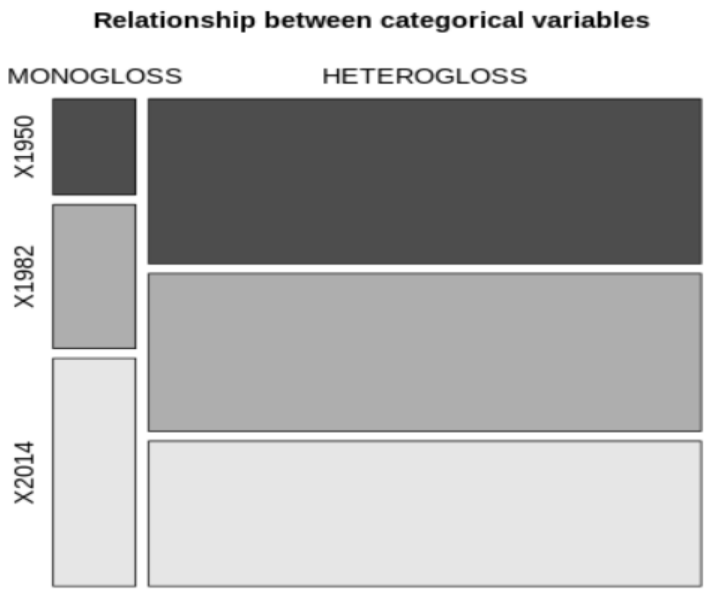


Figure 2. Engagement Resources over Time

Table 3 presents the raw counts, percentages, and normalized frequencies (per 1,000 words) of Engagement features across the three subcorpora. A key trend is the steady increase in Engagement resources over time: from 18.2 occurrences per 1,000 words in Phase I to 19.25 in Phase II, and 21.45 in Phase III. This rise suggests that Ph.D. writers have become more rhetorically attuned to engaging alternative voices and emphasizing evaluative positioning. The increase is especially pronounced between Phase I and Phase III, likely reflecting cumulative diachronic change over an extended time span. Notably, a diachronic analysis reveals a substantial increase in monoglossic resources over time, escalating from 7.5% in Phase I to 11.11% in Phase II, and reaching 19% in Phase III. For instance, a thesis from Phase I notes, 'It may be suggested that this outcome is possible under certain circumstances' [ENTERTAIN], whereas a Phase III thesis asserts, 'This result clearly demonstrates the validity of the proposed model' [MONOGLOSS]. These examples illustrate the shift from tentative, dialogically expansive formulations toward a more assertive, contractive stance-taking. This shift suggests not only greater certainty and a more authoritative tone but also an increased level of commitment to claims. In rhetorical terms, the evolution of thesis writing is therefore marked by an overtly assertive demeanor and a move away from subtle, layered modes of expression.

Table 3. *Diachronic Evolution of Engagement Resources*

	Phase I (1950-2)			Phase II (1982-4)			Phase III (2014-6)		
ENGAGEMENT	5627	%	per 1k	7815	%	per 1k	7809	%	per 1k
MONOGLOSS	445	7.5	1.24	868	11.11	1.85	1480	18.95	3.48
HETEROGLOSS	5482	92.5	15.23	6947	88.89	14.84	6329	81.05	14.89
CONTRACT	3319	56.0	9.22	706	47.4	7.92	3033	38.84	7.14
EXPAND	2163	36.5	6.01	3241	41.47	6.93	3296	42.21	7.76
DISCLAIM	1441	24.3	4.00	1715	21.94	3.66	1495	19.14	3.52
PROCLAIM	1878	31.7	5.22	1991	25.48	4.25	1538	19.70	3.62
DENY	423	7.14	1.18	307	3.93	0.66	210	2.69	0.49
COUNTER	1018	17.2	2.83	1408	18.02	3.01	1285	16.46	3.02
CONCUR	292	4.93	0.81	142	1.82	0.30	81	1.04	0.19
PRONOUNCE	1039	17.5	2.89	1494	19.12	3.19	896	11.47	2.11
ENDORSE	547	9.23	1.52	355	4.54	0.76	561	7.18	1.32
ENTERTAIN	1681	28.4	4.67	2142	27.41	4.58	1572	20.13	3.70
ATTRIBUTE	482	8.13	1.34	1099	14.06	2.35	1724	22.08	4.06
DISTANCE	69	1.16	0.19	42	0.54	0.09	89	1.14	0.21
ACKNOWLEDGE	413	6.97	1.15	1057	13.53	2.26	1635	20.94	3.85

Heteroglossic realizations, though still dominant, declined from 92.5% in Phase I to 89% in Phase II and 81% in Phase III. Their normalized frequencies stayed stable at about 15 per 1,000 words. Contractive and expansive heteroglosses evolved differently: dialogic contraction dropped from 56% (9.22/1,000 words) in Phase I to 39% (7.7/1,000 words) in Phase III, while dialogic expansion rose from 36.5% to 42.3%. Contractive markers were more frequent in Phases I and II, but expansive ones became dominant in Phase III, showing writers opened more dialogic space over time. 'Disclaim' remained the main contractive option, though less dominant in Phase III. Within 'proclaim', 'pronounce' was most frequent, and 'concur' least. In 'disclaim', 'counter' overtook 'deny', suggesting 'deny' is less favored rhetorically. For expansive markers, '*entertain*' was more common early on, but 'attribute' became dominant in Phase III, reflecting greater awareness of claim attribution. This aligns with synchronic studies by Geng and Wharton (2016), Swain (2010), and Lancaster (2014).

4.2. Engagement Resources Across Disciplines

In order to get more into the use of Engagement resources, Table 4 provides detailed data on Engagement types across hard and soft disciplines, comparing the total occurrences, percentage distributions, and frequency per 1,000 words for various Engagement strategies. It presents figures for each strategy, such as monogloss, heterogloss, contract, expand, disclaim, and others, under both hard and soft categories. Table 4 also indicates statistical significance between the two categories using symbols "++" and "+++", suggesting notable differences in the frequency of certain Engagement types between hard and soft disciplines. In general, the data reveals that soft disciplines tend to show higher total frequencies of Engagement expressions, especially in heteroglossic and expanding strategies, while hard disciplines exhibit a slightly more consistent and narrow range of Engagement usage. These patterns highlight the diverse ways in which engagement is utilized across different academic fields. Such a finding is counterintuitive given that hard disciplines typically emphasize factual reporting and logical reasoning. Yet, students in these fields still draw substantially on heteroglossic resources, especially *entertain* (11.2 per 1k vs. 7.5), *pronounce* (5.0 vs. 5.8), and *endorse* (2.9 vs. 2.2). Conversely, students in soft fields, who work within interpretive and abstract frameworks, use *attribute* and *acknowledge* more heavily (6.1 vs. 3.8; 5.7 vs. 3.6 respectively), possibly reflecting greater sensitivity to sourcing and dialogic openness.

Table 4. *Engagement Resources across Disciplines*

Category	Hard Total	Hard %	Hard per 1k	Soft Total	Soft %	Soft per 1k	Stat Sig
ENG TYPE	7091			14460			
MONOGLOSS	911	12.85	2.31	1882	12.97	2.21	
HETEROGLOSS	6174	87.15	15.71	12578	87.03	14.88	++
CONTRACT	3219	45.40	8.20	6838	47.29	8.02	++
EXPAND	2960	42.34	7.51	5740	39.72	6.82	+++
DISCLAIM	1492	20.99	3.78	3159	21.85	3.66	+++
PROCLAIM	1728	24.33	4.43	3679	25.49	4.39	++
DENY	397	5.60	1.01	543	3.76	0.63	++
COUNTER	1095	15.43	2.79	2616	18.10	3.02	++
CONCUR	184	2.59	0.46	331	2.29	0.39	
PRONOUNCE	981	13.83	2.51	2448	16.93	2.89	++
ENDORSE	563	7.94	1.44	900	6.23	1.12	+++
ENTERTAIN	2232	31.47	5.62	3163	21.88	3.75	+++
ATTRIBUTE	728	10.27	1.90	2577	17.84	3.06	+
DISTANCE	30	0.42	0.08	170	1.18	0.22	
ACKNOWLEDGE	98	9.84	1.81	2407	16.64	2.86	

The proportions and normalized frequencies of Engagement subsystems reveal subtle cross-disciplinary differences. At first glance, usage appears stable across the hard-soft spectrum, as overall Engagement rates show only minor statistical differences at the macro level. However, closer inspection of heteroglossic subcategories uncovers nuanced variation. For instance, monogloss frequencies remain nearly equal, 4.6 per 1,000 words in hard disciplines and 4.4 in soft. Heteroglosses dominate both, comprising 87% of all Engagement features. Yet small differences emerge in heterogloss frequency: 31.4 per 1,000 in hard disciplines versus 29.8 in soft. Comparing 'contract' and 'expand' reveals a consistent preference for contraction across disciplines, more pronounced in soft fields (48% vs. 38%). This aligns with prior studies (e.g., Wu, 2007; Swain, 2009) and reflects the diachronic trends observed earlier. In hard disciplines,

however, contraction and expansion are more balanced at 43% each, suggesting an equal emphasis on limiting and opening dialogic space to convey authorial stance.

Within the 'proclaim' subsystem, the use of 'concur' was markedly lower than that of 'pronounce' and 'endorse'. As with the diachronic perspective, 'pronounce' was the most frequent across all disciplines, followed by 'endorse', and lastly 'concur'. Disciplinarity appears to exert a stronger influence on these patterns. As previously stated, 'concur' signals a deeper level of stance and Engagement, requiring self-confidence and a developed academic identity, qualities often still emerging in Ph.D. students. The rare use of 'concur' may thus stem from their limited rhetorical and linguistic repertoire. In the 'disclaim' subsystem, 'counter' was more frequent than 'deny', particularly in soft disciplines. This contrast is especially sharp in soft-pure disciplines, with normalized frequencies of 0.53 for 'deny' and 3.17 for 'counter'. Within expansive heteroglossia, '*entertain*' appeared more frequently in hard-pure disciplines than elsewhere, with frequencies of 4.17, 7.07, 4.28, and 3.22 from hard-applied to soft-pure fields. Example 7.10 from Cell Biology illustrates how 'deny' and 'counter' are employed to acknowledge and reject contrary positions, either by directly denying them or invoking and subverting expectations.

5. Discussion

The results revealed three key diachronic and disciplinary trends. First, there was a steady rise in Engagement resources overall, with a notable increase in monoglossic realizations, pointing to greater authorial certainty over time. Second, heteroglossic strategies, while still dominant, declined in relative proportion, with contraction decreasing and expansion becoming more prominent in the most recent period (Phase III). Third, the study reported disciplinary variation in the use of engagement resources. Soft disciplines displayed heavier reliance on *attribution* and *acknowledgment*; this points to a preference for dialogic openness. Hard disciplines, on the other hand, showed a more balanced distribution between contraction and expansion, with frequent use of *entertain* and *pronounce*. In fact, these findings highlight diachronic shifts toward greater assertiveness as well as disciplinary variation in the management of dialogic space in doctoral writing.

This study's findings largely support earlier research highlighting the prominence of heteroglossic strategies in student academic writing, especially the frequent use of *entertain* as a means of epistemic moderation. This aligns with Lancaster (2014), Geng and Wharton (2016), and Wu (2007), who found that high-performing students favor expansive markers that preserve dialogic space. Similarly, Fryer (2013) reported dominant use of *entertain* in medical articles despite the genre's technical nature, suggesting that even in data-driven fields, writers remain sensitive to the need for rhetorical openness. More importantly, this study revealed a subtle shift toward monoglossic expressions. This may reflect broader academic cultural changes, growing emphasis on projecting authority amid competitive publication pressures and evaluation criteria valuing clarity, assertiveness, and impact (Abdeljaoued 2018). This study has shown a dynamic balance between dialogic expansion and contraction. The increased use of *disclaim*, especially *counter*, mirrors Lancaster's (2014) findings that U.S. students strategically employ these to anticipate and rebut alternative views, reinforcing epistemic control. In addition, our findings accord with Loghmani et al. (2019), who report a strong use of dialogically contractive resources in doctoral Discussion sections. Unlike their chapter-level focus, our whole-thesis view shows expansion rising in the most recent phase, which suggests a genre-scale shift toward more dialogic openness in recent theses.

Interestingly, the relatively balanced use of *disclaim* and *proclaim* across phases contrasts with Lancaster's (2014) findings, where *proclaim* was unevenly distributed. This may reflect national or institutional norms, particularly American academic writing's emphasis on assertiveness and individuality (Bazerman, 2006). Cultural context shapes how students negotiate authority, with Western-trained writers more prone to direct assertion. Geng and Wharton (2016) suggest that monoglossia can be a strategic adaptation rather than a sign of rhetorical naivety. While Wu (2007) links overuse of unqualified claims to lower-quality essays, our diachronic data show a more complex trend: monoglossic use increases with disciplinary enculturation. This may reflect early overcompensation that evolves into a more calculated rhetorical stance over time. Disciplinary differences also matter. Soft fields maintain dialogism in line with their interpretive epistemologies (Hyland & Jiang, 2016a). Yet, the convergence of soft and hard-applied fields, driven by empirical methods and the technologization of discourse, may explain diminishing contrasts, as even interpretive disciplines adopt more data-driven, closed rhetorical strategies.

This epistemological drift is exemplified in linguistics' evolution from theoretical abstraction toward methodological hybridization. The rise of "hyphenated linguistics", e.g., computational, forensic, neuro- has introduced positivist elements that reshape the field's discourse norms. This hybridization might explain why writers in formerly dialogic disciplines now increasingly adopt monoglossic stance-taking. For instance, in Applied Linguistics theses from Phase I, we observed frequent dialogic *entertain* markers such as *perhaps* and *it seems*; in Phase II, these had begun to give way to monoglossic boosters such as *clearly* and *of course* that signal methodological certainty; and by Phase III, such boosters were further reinforced by categorical metadiscourse like *this study demonstrates*. This demonstrates a commitment to empirical and methodological rigor and responds directly to the expectations of funding bodies, review panels, and interdisciplinary collaborators. While this study confirms prior observations about the heteroglossic tendencies of high-performing academic writers, it also nuances those claims by demonstrating how genre, disciplinary epistemology, and academic culture interact to shape rhetorical stance. The increase in monoglossic expressions should not be interpreted as rhetorical failure, but rather as a strategic negotiation of academic authority in an evolving scholarly ecosystem. What emerges is not a wholesale shift from dialogism to monologism, but a complex, discipline-inflected recalibration of stance, one that reflects changing norms of academic legitimacy. This study extends prior diachronic research (Geng & Wharton, 2016; Hyland & Jiang, 2016a, 2016b) by focusing on doctoral theses as a genre and foregrounding novice scholars' rhetorical development. The finding that monoglossic resources rose significantly sets this work apart, as it documents a shift toward greater certainty and self-assertion in doctoral writing—an important contribution to understanding how doctoral theses differ from both undergraduate writing and published research articles.

6. Pedagogical Applications

The patterns of Engagement resources identified in this study have direct implications for EAP and composition-rhetoric courses at the doctoral level. Grounding instruction, feedback, and supervision in evidence from actual theses enables practitioners to design support strategies that align with disciplinary norms and diachronic trends, rather than relying on intuition. Table 4 reveals clear contrasts: hard disciplines rely more heavily on *entertain*, which foregrounds alternative perspectives and hedged interpretations, while soft disciplines show greater use of *attribute* and *acknowledge,* reflecting a stronger orientation toward intertextual alignment and dialogic openness. These findings suggest that stance is not merely an individual stylistic choice but a rhetorical reflection of disciplinary epistemologies. A practical pedagogical application is the use of parallel thesis extracts to illustrate these contrasts and to demonstrate how a single clause can carry multiple Engagement values. For instance, excerpts from Cell Biology (1982) (Examples 1–8) can be used in teaching to show that a clause may simultaneously report a fact, attribute findings, *entertain* possibilities, or counter claims. Instructors can also ask students to identify the Engagement markers in each clause, classify markers as expansive or contractive and discuss how hedging and attribution coexist with interpretive reasoning. For example, a methods section in a hard discipline such as Chemistry or Electrical Engineering may include clauses with *entertain* markers like "it may be inferred that…" or "this suggests that…," highlighting provisional claims and the negotiation of uncertainty. By contrast, a literature review in Applied Linguistics or History may feature attribute and acknowledge markers ("as X argues," "it has been noted that…") that build authority through engagement with prior scholarship. Using parallel samples, students can annotate each clause for multiple Engagement functions, reflect on the rhetorical effects of these patterns, and consider why certain markers dominate in different disciplinary contexts. This approach not only strengthens students' analytical awareness of disciplinary conventions but also equips them with practical strategies for constructing nuanced arguments in their own writing. By explicitly connecting theory to observable text practices, doctoral-level instruction can foster critical thinking about stance, intertextuality, and the strategic use of language in academic writing.

Building on this, EAP practitioners can design discipline-specific model texts and writing templates that capture typical "engagement signatures." A model Applied Linguistics paragraph, for instance, might illustrate how to attribute and acknowledge a range of perspectives before asserting a claim, while an Engineering template could demonstrate how *entertain* resources signal caution and openness in interpreting results. Such models provide concrete scaffolds for drafting and revision, and enable supervisors to give feedback that resonates with disciplinary norms rather than relying on intuition. Supervisory training can also draw on the Appraisal framework. Introducing the Engagement taxonomy in workshops provides supervisors with a shared metalanguage for discussing stance. Margin-coding of draft sentences as *entertain*, *counter*, *attribute*, or *pronounce* can clarify feedback, expose underlying rhetorical choices, and help doctoral

writers see why particular strategies may be more valued in their field. Finally, doctoral writing support can adopt a developmental trajectory for stance-taking. Early-stage proposals may appropriately favor expansive strategies (*entertain*, *attribute*) to keep inquiry open and dialogic. As projects mature, drafts can increasingly incorporate contractive strategies (*pronounce*, *endorse*) to consolidate findings and project authority. Classroom activities to foster this progression might include "engagement mapping" of sample texts, peer-review role-plays adopting hard vs. soft disciplinary stances, and revision exercises that rebalance expansive and contractive strategies according to genre expectations.

7. Conclusion

This study used engagement resources to explore diachronic and disciplinary variation within the Appraisal framework. Findings confirmed that this approach provides robust evidence of temporal shifts in Engagement use, with disciplinarity emerging as a key factor influencing variability. Quantitatively, Engagement proportions changed over time and across disciplines, while qualitative analysis revealed how these resources co-articulate to manage dialogic space, express stance, and secure claim acceptability. Diachronically, the marked rise in monoglossic assertions points to an increasingly assertive and self-promotional academic style. Although heteroglossic resources remain dominant, their relative proportion has declined. Statistically significant variation across Engagement subcategories suggests shifting rhetorical norms and evolving voice negotiation strategies. Disciplinary analysis showed that while monoglossic use remained steady, heteroglossic patterns varied: soft-pure disciplines favored contraction, whereas hard-pure fields balanced contraction and expansion, reflecting rhetorical equilibrium. Overall, these findings underscore the interplay between diachrony and disciplinarity in shaping Engagement strategies, with the rise in monoglossic use signaling increased authorial presence and evolving academic identity.

Corpus limitations, such as missing contextual data, are acknowledged. As Hunston (2002) notes, corpus data may not capture the full complexity of language use. This study attempted to mitigate such limitations through a discursive approach that allowed for interpretive intervention and avoided reliance solely on statistical frequencies. To deepen analysis, future research could incorporate metadata, historical context, and writing manuals to better understand how disciplinary and cultural shifts influence writing. Interviews with senior scholars may also shed light on evolving thesis writing practices and the role of L2 socialization in shaping stance-taking strategies.

This study tested the 'conservatism hypothesis' in Ph.D. writing via Engagement analysis. The findings suggest that while thesis writing remains conservative, it has gradually accommodated a more pronounced authorial presence. Yet, conservatism in academic writing is not absolute; rather, it should be evaluated in terms of its evolving components and implications. Over the past seventy years, stance markers have remained relatively stable, but the exponential rise in self-reference suggests growing rhetorical awareness among doctoral writers. Thus, while academic writing continues to emphasize rigor and restraint, it is not impervious to change. An intricate view, one that recognizes both the continuity and transformation of scholarly discourse, is necessary to appreciate how authors construct their presence and authority over time.

The diachronic and cross-disciplinary engagement patterns evidenced by the findings of the present study can help academic writing course instructors develop discipline-tailored activities and pedagogical materials. By drawing on corpus evidence from authentic doctoral theses, instructors and supervisors can design targeted interventions that reflect the rhetorical realities of different disciplinary communities and their evolving epistemologies. Such applications underscore the value of empirically grounded pedagogy, one that moves beyond generic models of "good writing" to cultivate doctoral writers' awareness of how stance and engagement resources operate as field-specific rhetorical choices. Incorporating these insights into course design and supervision can promote a more reflective and strategic approach to argumentation, helping novice scholars understand not only *what* linguistic choices are made in their disciplines but *why* they are made and *how* they position the writer within an academic conversation.

To support more informed pedagogical practices, there is a growing need for systematic research into academic writing, particularly studies that are diachronic, cross-disciplinary, and grounded in corpus-based approaches. Such research offers empirical evidence on how rhetorical conventions evolve across time, disciplines, and institutional contexts. This, in turn, allows educators and syllabus designers to move beyond prescriptive models and develop writing instruction that is responsive to actual disciplinary norms and developmental patterns. A diachronic perspective, especially, focuses on how genres like the Ph.D. thesis negotiate tradition and innovation, while cross-disciplinary

comparisons highlight the varied stance demands across fields. Together, these approaches provide an essential foundation for evidence-based academic writing pedagogy that aligns more closely with the real-world practices of academic disciplinary communities.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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