

Humanities' Humanity: Construing the social in
HSC Modern and Ancient History, Society and
Culture, and Community and Family Studies

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Date: 16th June, 2014

Dedication and Acknowledgement

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Table of contents

Chapter 1 : Introduction	1
1.1 Senior School Literacy – Bridging the gap.....	1
1.2 Locating the current study	5
1.2.1 The Senior High School context	5
1.2.2 Challenging the notion of the ‘essay’ in literacy practices in senior secondary humanities.	9
1.3 Introducing the research design	13
1.3.1 The emergence of the research focus	13
1.3.2 Rationale for selection of data.....	14
1.3.3 Research questions	15
1.3.4 A linguistic focus	16
1.3.5 The nature and role of linguistic theory in the research design.....	17
1.3.6 The approach to analyses of the data.....	18
1.4 Significance of the thesis	19
1.5 Organisation of the thesis.....	20
Chapter 2 : Positioning the thesis.....	22
2.1 Introduction	22
2.2 The humanities	23
2.3 Disciplinarity.....	26
2.3.1 The discipline of History.....	30
2.4 Evaluation	33
2.4.1 Evaluation and identity	33
2.4.2 Evaluation in pragmatics.....	34
2.4.3 Evaluation as APPRAISAL.....	34
2.4.4 Historical keys	36
2.5 School literacy.....	38
2.5.1 Literacy pedagogy in secondary schools.....	41
2.6 Theory of language as a social semiotic.....	44
2.6.1 The hierarchy of instantiation.....	45
2.6.2 Genre theory.....	46
2.6.3 APPRAISAL Theory	47

2.7 Legitimation Code Theory	48
2.8 Conclusion	50
Chapter 3 : Research Design	53
3.1 Qualitative research design	54
3.2 Approach to analysis of text	55
3.2.1 System and Text	55
3.2.2 Analysis of ATTITUDE.....	56
3.3 The texts	62
3.3.1 Texts representative of the subjects	64
3.4 Focus on interpersonal meaning	70
3.5 Ethical considerations.....	74
3.6 Conclusion	75
Chapter 4 : Structuring kinds of knowledge.....	77
4.1 Genre across subjects.....	78
4.1.1 Society and Culture: consequential explanations	79
4.1.2 Community and Family Studies: factorial explanations	82
4.1.3 Modern History: expositions and discussions	84
4.1.4 Ancient History: varied genres	87
4.1.5 Profiles of genres across the Humanities	90
4.2 Analysis within subjects.....	92
4.2.1 A historical account in Ancient History.....	93
4.2.2 A historical account in Modern History	97
4.2.3 Consequential explanations in Society and Culture	103
4.2.4 Genre complexes in Community and Family Studies	106
4.3 LCT and knowledge building in the humanities.....	113
4.3.1 LCT: Semantics.....	113
4.3.2 Community and Family Studies and the semantic wave.....	115
4.3.3 Reworking the text: making waves.....	118
4.4 Conclusion	125
Chapter 5 : ATTITUDE and GRADUATION.....	128
5.1 Inscribed ATTITUDES	129
5.1.1 Patterns and preferences for inscribed ATTITUDE in Ancient History	129
5.1.2 Patterns and preferences for ATTITUDE in Modern History.....	141
5.1.3 Patterns and preferences for ATTITUDE in Society and Culture.....	147

5.1.4	Patterns and preferences for ATTITUDE in Community and Family Studies.....	150
5.1.5	– Disciplinary variation in ATTITUDE.....	153
5.2	Analysing GRADUATION.....	156
5.2.1	Sparse GRADUATION of explicit ATTITUDE.....	156
5.2.2	Upscaling of ATTITUDES	157
5.2.3	Variation of GRADUATION in Society and Culture	159
5.2.4	Implications in patterns of GRADUATION.....	160
5.3	Invoked ATTITUDES in the humanities	161
5.3.1	Invoked ATTITUDE in Ancient History.....	162
5.3.2	Invoked ATTITUDE in Modern History	167
5.3.3	Invoked ATTITUDE in Society and Culture.....	171
5.3.4	Invoked ATTITUDE in Community and Family Studies	175
5.3.5	Comparing Invoked ATTITUDE across subjects.....	177
5.4	ATTITUDE profiles in the humanities.....	179
5.5	Cosmologies	182
5.6	Conclusion.....	188
Chapter 6	: ENGAGEMENT	190
6.1	Engaging with other voices in Ancient History	192
6.1.1	Degree of engagement with other voices in Ancient History.....	192
6.1.2	Dialogic expansion in Ancient History.....	196
6.1.3	Engaging with ancient and modern voices in Ancient History.....	197
6.1.4	Engaging imperfectly.....	200
6.2	Engaging with other voices in Modern History.....	201
6.2.1	Degree of engagement with other voices in Modern History	202
6.2.2	Engaging with other voices through contraction.....	204
6.2.3	Engaging with ‘facts’	207
6.2.4	Engaging with Evidence.	213
6.2.5	Objectivity in Modern History.....	215
6.3	Engaging with other voices in Society and Culture.....	216
6.3.1	Engaging through dialogic contraction	217
6.3.2	Diversity in engaging with other voices in SAC.....	223
6.4	Engaging with other voices in CAFS	223
6.4.1	Entertaining other voices.....	224
6.5	Engaging with other voices across subjects.....	229

6.5.1 Engaging with other voices through scare quotes	229
6.5.2 Ways of engaging which are avoided	232
6.5.3 Confusion in engaging with other voices	233
6.6 Knowers in the humanities	235
6.6.1 The cultivation of gazes	236
6.7 Conclusion	240
Chapter 7 : Conclusion.....	243
7.1 Research Findings	244
7.1.1 Genres in the humanities	245
7.1.2 ATTITUDE in the humanities	246
7.1.3 ENGAGEMENT in the humanities	248
7.1.4 APPRAISAL profiles	249
7.1.5 The humanities' humanity.....	250
7.2 Pedagogical significance of research findings	252
7.2.1 Disciplinary specific literacy pedagogy	252
7.2.2 Explicit pedagogy	254
7.2.3 Programming and planning for literacy.....	256
7.2.4 Transition to tertiary literacy.....	258
7.3 Theoretical significance	260
7.4 Future directions	263
References	265
Appendix 1 Survey of past HSC examination questions from 2008-10.....	276
Appendix 2 – Genre	304
Appendix 3 Inscribed attitude analyses.....	339
Appendix 4 - Inscribed attitude analysis with graduation.....	364
Appendix 5 - Inscribed attitude analysis with graduation + invocations	389
Appendix 6 Engagement Analyses.....	423

List of figures

Figure 4-1: statistics in MH	102
Figure 4-2: Evaluation of Consequences stage in SAC	105
Figure 4-3: listing in CAFS.....	108
Figure 4-4: Explanation stage in proto-consequential explanation.....	109
Figure 4-5: Semantic wave.....	115
Figure 4-6: CAFS text reworking.....	124
Figure 6-1: Cline of factivity	209
Figure 6-3: Social relations in the humanities.....	239

List of tables

Table 3-1: The texts.....	64
Table 4-1: Consequential explanation in CAFS.....	80
Table 4-2: Factorial explanation in CAFS	82
Table 4-3: Exposition in MH.....	84
Table 4-4: Discussion in MH	86
Table 4-5: Historical account in AH	88
Table 4-6: Genres in the humanities	91
Table 5-1: Inscribed ATTITUDES and subtypes.....	154
Table 5-2: Inscribed and invoked ATTITUDES and subtypes.....	181
Table 5-3: partial constellational analysis of modern and ancient sources	183
Table 5-4: constellation: unplanned pregnancy.....	185
Table 7-1: Attitude Profiles.....	249

Abstract

This thesis builds knowledge of the disciplinary differences in the literacy demands of senior secondary school subjects; knowledge that contributes to the development of visible pedagogies supporting more democratic educational outcomes. The focus of the study is specifically on subjects within the general domain of the humanities, here including modern and ancient history, society and culture, and community and family studies. It attends in particular to differences across these subjects in the kinds of interpersonal meanings and the nature of their expression that are rewarded in students' high stakes writing. In other words the thesis aims to map the nature and scope of humanities' humanity, as intellectual fields of the humanities are recontextualised and reproduced in senior schooling.

The question of how students are expected to engage with subject knowledge through writing is explored from two theoretical perspectives. Linguistic analyses are carried out using tools from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a social semiotic theory of language as meaning. The findings from a detailed linguistic analysis are then re-interpreted into the theoretical framework of Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) as sociological theory of knowledge practices.

From a linguistic perspective, an analysis of genre as the most abstract realisation of disciplinarity provides a basis for the subsequent investigation of discourse semantic choices and patterns of interpersonal meaning. Analysis reveals different preferences in the genres instantiated in each subject and a corresponding variation in the potential for students to engage with more uncommon-sense meanings. Genres in ancient history were found to be variable, texts in modern history favoured argument, consequential explanations were instantiated in society and culture and community and family studies privileged both factorial and consequential explanations.

Appraisal was used to analyse the interpersonal orientations of text. Patterns of attitude were found to vary across subjects, with Ancient History favouring appreciation of artefacts and evidence, Modern History orienting to judgement as

ethical evaluations, Society and Culture to judgements of capacity, and Community and Family Studies favouring expressions of affect, especially related to in/security. While most of the system of attitude is implicated across the humanities, the distribution of kinds of attitude varies across subject, and indicates more or less personal or institutionalised approaches to feelings.

Patterns and preferences in managing multiple voices in texts were also investigated using the engagement system. While all subjects were discovered to be highly heteroglossic in nature, differences in the prosodies of engagement were established. Ancient history and community and family studies were both found to be dialogically expansive, creating space for alternate viewpoints, however they differed in how this was achieved. Preferences for resources of acknowledge in ancient history reference knowledge claims to voices external to the writer, while resources of entertain are used in community and family studies to open space around knowledge claims. Similarly, both society and culture and modern history were found to be dialogically contractive but different in how contraction was construed. Writers in society and culture produced strongly contractive texts through resources of deny, while in modern history contraction was achieved through counter expectancy.

What is revealed across the subjects is an interpersonal landscape.

The results of linguistic analyses were then reinterpreted from a sociological perspective, drawing on two dimensions of LCT. The first is Specialization, which investigates relations to both knowledge and knowers as the different bases of legitimation in intellectual fields. From the perspective of Specialization, the highly rated students' literacy practices in different subject areas reveal a variation in the visibility of the basis of legitimation of knowledge claims and differing strengths in their orientations to knowers. While the humanities are generally categorised as a knower code, the subjects occupy relative spaces within this categorical space, some more strongly knower oriented than others.

A second dimension of LCT is Semantics, which can be used to analyse the ability of intellectual fields to build cumulative knowledge. The patterns of meanings enacted in highly rated texts across subjects were interpreted into Semantics to reveal differences

between subjects in the potentials for cumulative knowledge building. In particular, community and family studies was identified as a subject which constrains student knowledge building through reduced requirements to manage the mode demands of extended writing.

The contributions of this study are of particular importance as they are situated in the context of a transitional stage between junior secondary and academic study. This thesis makes visible elements of interpersonal meaning-making which were heretofore under explored in the context of senior secondary learning and which are important for the management of academic writing which must be both 'objective' and evaluative'.

