Writing (and Writing Instruction) Benefits from Attention to Language-Level Features

Language-level features generally receive little attention in current discussions of students’ writerly development, and they are not listed among threshold concepts. This is not altogether surprising given the complicated relationship between writing studies and linguistics. Yet it is worth pausing to consider why a language-level approach to writing is not seen as foundational. After all, as Charles Cooper claimed about strategies such as sentence-combining and the generative rhetoric of the sentence, “No other single teaching approach has ever consistently been shown to have a beneficial effect on syntactic maturity and writing quality” (72). George Hillocks, after an extensive review of research on language-level pedagogies, affirmed and amplified Cooper’s claim. Study after study showed that students’ writing improved when they received language-level instruction. During the period between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, teaching approaches that drew on linguistics enjoyed wide approval. Articles on language-level approaches appeared regularly in journals, and several conferences on sentence-combining were held at Miami University.

A quick look at the history of writing studies provides one explanation of why such successful instructional practices would have been banished from the field. In the mid-1960s, as the field of writing studies or composition and rhetoric took shape, the generative rhetoric of the sentence as articulated by Francis Christensen received a great deal of attention for its capacity to help students create periodic sentences. This was followed by sentence-combining, which Kellogg Hunt and John Mellon showed to be highly effective in enabling students to produce more complex syntax. The work of linguist Noam Chomsky provided a theoretical basis for sentence combining, lending it further stature, and many in the field received training in or claimed affinity with linguistics. Tagmemics, introduced by Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike, added a rhetorical dimension to a language-level approach, but it proved difficult to teach. As language-level writing instruction was
taking shape, the field of writing studies began moving in another direction. Proponents of a process-based approach to writing, such as Janet Emig, Donald Murray, and James Moffett, criticized language-level approaches for removing context from writing. Their desire to push language-level approaches aside was made easier by the turn of linguistics toward ideal rather than actual users of language. To the extent that linguistics or language study received attention from scholars in writing studies after the early 1980s, it took the form of a sociolinguistic focus on issues surrounding African American vernacular as articulated by Geneva Smitherman, or discussions of writing instruction for students who use English as an additional language by scholars such as Ilona Leki, Alister Cumming, and Tony Silva.

Robert Connors offers another explanation for the decline of language-level writing instruction. He argues that critics framed language-level approaches as formalist, behaviorist, and empirical, setting them in opposition to more holistic, student-centered, and process-focused strategies. Connors goes on to claim that the reason colleagues in writing studies became so actively antiformalist, antibehaviorist, and antiempirical was because they found their “departmental home in the same place its primary course identity—first-year composition—resided[; . . .] the graduate students after 1975 who would make up the core of composition studies were, for better or worse, English graduate students, and they would go on to become English professors” (121). The current number of writing departments now separate from English departments raises questions about Connors’ claim, but English departments still house many scholars of writing studies. Given that current language-level approaches to writing instruction call on computer-aided approaches, and given English departments’ increased interest in the digital humanities, there may be reason to think that attitudes and perspectives in today’s English departments have shifted.

In any event, it is time to bring language-level approaches back into the field of writing studies, and the two chapters in this section demonstrate what our field can learn from doing so. During the time that we in writing studies have been looking elsewhere, linguistics has developed theories and practices that can inform our approaches to writing. Among other things, helping students develop an understanding of how certain features of language can shape the larger effect of a given piece of writing gives them a metacognitive perspective that may be easily transferred to other rhetorical contexts. Language-level attention to writing can help address common writing problems such as overgeneralization, use of ineffective words, and the struggle to assume an authoritative stance. Moreover, language-level approaches can be effectively combined with the more familiar rhetorical genre studies (Miller; Russell; Devitt).
Linguistics has also developed new methods of analysis using computer technologies that reveal patterns of language use that are impossible for an individual reader to discern. Like Franco Moretti’s distant reading, computer-aided analysis or corpus linguistics makes different, large-scale, aspects of writing visible. Corpus linguistics begins by creating a collection or corpus of texts in a principled way, such as copies of student essays from the same course or institution, and then, often, comparing this corpus with another, perhaps student essays written by a different group of students or an established reference corps such as the Contemporary Corpus of American English or the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers. In a comparative study, a tool or concordance such as AntConc (Anthony) or WordSmith Tools (Scott) identifies keywords or words that are distinctively salient in each corpus, and statistical analysis determines if the differences between the two sets of keywords occurred by chance or were significant in the statistical sense. In some cases, a corpus is divided into subcorpora to examine differences such as gender or major in a large body of writing. A concordance can also generate lists of collocations or groups of words that occur together in a given corpus. Reflecting important patterns and distinctions across texts, both keywords and collocations can show textual choices that have a considerable effect on entire pieces of writing.

In recent years, corpus analysis has been used to study first-year student writing (Aull; Aull and Lancaster) and writing constructs valued in US composition instruction (Dryer). Corpus studies show that teachers and students often respond to patterns that are tacit and invisible, and they can reveal unconfirmed intuitions about writing. For example, Zak Lancaster’s recent corpus study tests the intuition-driven writing templates in the widely used textbook *They Say, I Say*. He finds that the templates do not reflect discourse practices of published academic writing; for instance, the templates encourage students to directly entertain objections, using phrases such as *many will probably disagree*, while academic articles and essays instead favor indirect phrases such as *as it could be argued that* (251).

Both of the authors in this section analyzed corpora or collections of texts written or spoken by students in our study using a concordancer. Each of the authors addressed a different research question, but they both used similar methods in that they created corpora, used a concordance to identify words or phrases that were distinctive in two or more corpora, and compared the results with another corpora. Applying this method of analysis to various collections of student writing, sorted by categories such as gender, minor or nonminor, major, or student level in college can show how language-level choices contribute to much larger effects.

Laura Aull’s chapter takes on the problem of overgeneralization, as it frequently appears in the writing of relatively inexperienced students, signaled by words such
as *every, always, and people*, among others. These uses are analyzed alongside assertions of certainty. By considering the appearance of such language in writing sorted by genre, discipline, and student level, she provides insights into the writing development of seven students in our study based on analysis of the entire collection of their writing across their undergraduate years. She begins with the Directed Self-Placement (DSP) essays written by each student as part of their matriculation into the university, and she concludes with papers written in the senior year. As she looks at each category of student writing, she compares it with a similar corpus. For example, in analyzing the DSP essays, she compared her sample with a larger corpus of DSP essays collected between 2009 and 2013. In analyzing more advanced student writing she uses the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers for comparison. For the most advanced student writing the Contemporary Corpus of American English, which includes published academic writing, served as the reference corpus. While not exactly parallel to the student writing under consideration, these three corpora provide a means of comparing students’ use of language that marks generality and certainty across three levels of writing.

In addition to words that mark generality, Aull’s study focuses on qualified generalizations such as *almost all, virtually every, and some people*, along with lists of hedges, words such as *perhaps, approximately, and plausible* that qualify claims, and boosters, words such as *conclusively, extremely, and doubtless* that amplify claims to show how students’ use of such language shifts across their undergraduate writing careers. Not surprisingly, generality markers along with boosters appeared most frequently in the writing of first-year students, and advanced student writing showed more hedges and qualified generalizations. These variations suggest that the epistemic stance created by the languages of generality and certainty serves as an indication of broad patterns of writerly development.

To show further nuances in the ways students use markers of generality and certainty and to deepen her analysis, Aull considers subcorpora of particular genres; discipline-specific texts; three divisional groups of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences; and student and professional writers. This analysis, in addition to that focused on the full corpus, makes visible the differences between the writing students do when they arrive at the university and when they leave. Aull’s analysis implies, among other things, that genre and discipline can have a shaping effect on language-level choices made by student writers, and these choices, in turn, contribute to rhetorical constructs such as audience and purpose.

Zak Lancaster also employed automated text analysis, but instead of focusing on student writing he examined what students say in interviews about the metalinguistic constructs of *style* and *voice*. Specifically, he analyzed responses to ques-
tions raised in 131 interviews about students’ views of “good” writing as well as their writerly identities and goals. Using the concordancing software AntConc, he identified 454 instances of students using *style* and *voice* in responding to interview questions. After differentiating what he calls the individualist (expression of the writer’s unique inner self) and social (culturally embedded language performance, sometimes called *stance*) views of voice, he reviews scholarship on the various ways these constructs have been described, asserting that most scholars who take one view or the other would probably agree that “voice is best understood in dialogic terms, through specific discoursal interactions” (p. 167). Lancaster does not review all the scholarship on style, but he notes a similar division between viewing style as prose unique to an individual author and style as more socially constructed. Most importantly, he observes that writers draw on linguistic resources to construct community-valued voices (p. 167), thereby making clear the need to learn more about what resources student writers draw on and how they deploy them.

Combining two groups—minors and nonminors—Lancaster reports that *style* appears more commonly than *voice* in the responses of the entire group, and he suggests that its frequent appearance may result from the multiple meanings students attach to it. These meanings include style as individual language use, as register, as genre, and as usage conventions. Significantly, minors and nonminors apply specific meanings at different frequencies, with nonminors increasingly referring to individual style, perhaps using it as a substitute for voice, and minors describing style as register. Lancaster observes that the minors’ description of style as register is “more congruent with current theoretical conceptualizations” (p. 171). This observation suggests that the curriculum experienced by minors may have enhanced their ability to think about style in more complex terms, especially since minors referred to voice more than twice as much as nonminors during their entry interviews. Without the minor curriculum, this group might have continued to focus on *voice* in relatively simplistic terms.

With regard to *voice* Lancaster found that individualist terms tended to surface in discussions of specific forms such as assignments, while students used social terms in more general discussions of writing goals. Both minors and nonminors described voice less frequently in individualist terms as they moved toward graduation and increasingly framed it in social terms. Still, though, minors referred frequently to *voice* in their entrance and exit interviews, and it was usually represented in individualist terms, while their references to style usually emphasized social terms. From a developmental perspective, one of the most interesting findings with regard to students’ use of both *voice* and *style* is the extent to which students
move between individualist and social meanings for both, sometimes in the same sentence. This fluidity suggests that even graduating seniors are still developing concepts of writing and of themselves as writers.

Lancaster’s analysis of two individual selections of writing offers an intriguing discussion of the resources and strategies these students call on to create a writerly self-image. Through careful reading and identification of both linguistic and rhetorical features, Lancaster shows how these student writers establish roles for themselves and their readers at the same time that they enact some of the meanings of style and voice that they articulated and/or contradicted in their entrance and exit interviews. Through this analysis, Lancaster further demonstrates the enormous complexity that surrounds students’ negotiations with taking a stance in writing.

Together these two chapters demonstrate how much we can learn about writerly development by looking through a language-level lens at both the writing students produced and what they say about writing and themselves as writers. By looking at the large patterns made visible with automated text analysis, we can begin to understand how developing writers actually progress from one type of writing to another because language-level changes contribute so much to the overall effect of a piece of writing. Features such as boosters and hedges may seem relatively incidental, but as Aull shows, they help shape the stance of the writer regarding the extent to which the writing does or does not conform to the discourses of the academy and/or confer authority on the writer. If a goal of college writing is to guide student writers to take up academic discourses, the tools of corpus linguistics can indicate the developmental levels achieved by a group of students, particularly with regard to a threshold concept such as writing is a social and rhetorical activity. Students’ use of hedges and boosters can, among other things, provide an indication of students’ rhetorical sensibilities as well as the extent to which they seek to engage the reader in dialogic terms.

Similarly, linguistic analysis of the language students use to talk about their own writing, especially if done in concert with analysis of samples of their writing, can provide insights into their understandings of writing. As Lancaster showed, the terms students use and the meanings they apply often vary from those used by professionals in writing studies, but nonetheless they offer a window into the thinking that contributes to writing choices. Of course, this does not mean that there is always symmetry between what students say about writing and what they actually write, as Lancaster’s analysis of Joe shows. Even though Joe talks about voice in individualistic terms, he uses patterns of language and rhetorical moves that invite interaction with the reader.

Contradictions such as these point to another aspect of language-level analy-
sis. Even though large-scale patterns and smaller-scale examination of linguistic features can provide some insights into students’ writerly development, it is never steady or uniform development. As the variations between minors and non-minors, different genders, and lower and upper division students, to say nothing of the variations within groups, show language-level development is irregular and dynamic; we cannot point to stages or levels of linguistic development in student writers. But we can point to the value of giving students opportunities to develop metalinguistic awareness. Such awareness can lead to productive discussions about writing that capitalize on students’ uneven and shifting writerly development.

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