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Content

VOLUNTEER TOURISM OUTLOOK: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON DIVE TOURISM OPERATORS AT KOTA KINABALU, SABAH <i>Boyd Sun Fatt, Amysteffie Jeofrey, Christy Bidder, Muhammad Irfan Harith & Suzzie Suzanthi Sulan</i>	1 – 11
MATERIA MEDICA OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: FROM EAST TO WEST AND BEYOND <i>Julenah Ag Nuddin</i>	12 – 22
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA, ADVERTISEMENT AND BODY IMAGE PERCEPTION AMONG YOUNG WOMEN IN SABAH <i>Norshatilla Ezanie & Dewi Tajuddin</i>	23 – 26
MOLLUSCIDAL ACTIVITY OF THE PLANT <i>Acacia mangium</i> (Willd.) AGAINST THE SNAIL <i>Pomacea Canaliculata</i> (Lam.) <i>Hendry Joseph, Muhammad Mu'izzuddin Zulkapli, Hasnidar Iskandar & Sharmiza Sanin</i>	27 – 33
HANDLING COUNTER-ARGUMENTS IN WRITTEN ARGUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES <i>May Siaw-Mei Liu & Jason Miin-Hwa Lim</i>	34 – 46
FUZZY SIMPLE HIERARCHY ANALYSIS-BASED LINGUISTIC HEDGES TO MIDSIZE LUXURY SPORTY UTILITY VEHICLE SELECTION <i>Zamali Tarmudi & Ung L. Ling</i>	47 – 54
TREND KUTIPAN ZAKAT PERNIAGAAN DI NEGERI SABAH <i>Nor Alhana Abd Malik, Razizi Tarmuji, Saiful Nizam Bin Amran, Yunus Ab. Samed, & Suwaid Tapa</i>	55 – 64
TALENT STRATEGY FOR RETAINING BANKING TALENT IN MALAYSIA <i>Dewi Tajuddin</i>	65 – 70
PEMILIHAN PELAJAR MDAB BERASASKAN PENILAIAN KABUR <i>Zamali Tarmudi, Hamidah Achmad, Jasman Jaafar & Abdul Kadir Rosline</i>	71 – 78

HANDLING COUNTER-ARGUMENTS IN WRITTEN ARGUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

While the ability to present a written argument convincingly is important for tertiary level students, research has shown that the written argument is one of the most difficult written genres for students to master. In this regard, many studies have been conducted on this genre and it was found that one of the moves which students encountered the most difficulty with was the move which handled counter-arguments. Novice writers have been known to avoid this particular move even though skilled arguers are expected to demonstrate an ability to raise counter-arguments and quash them strategically in order to strengthen a chosen claim. This study applied the robust two-layer move-step approach popularised by Swales (1990, 2004) to explore this particular move in argumentative essays. The qualitative analysis of this study included an examination of the linguistic features used by writers to communicate their intentions in this move and its subsequent steps. It was found that a move which handled counter-arguments might contain a combination of three steps and these were steps which raised a counter-argument, acknowledged the value of a counter-argument, and rejected a counter-argument. The findings of this study have pedagogical value because it can assist classroom practitioners in preparing teaching materials, particularly for a second language classroom at tertiary level.

Keywords: Genre analysis; discourse analysis; English for Academic Purposes; argumentative essays; counter-arguments

ABSTRAK

Keupayaan untuk menulis karangan argumentatif merupakan satu kemahiran bahasa yang sangat berguna terutamanya bagi pelajar di institusi pengajian tinggi. Dapatan kajian lepas pula menunjukkan bahawa penulisan argumentatif merupakan satu genre penulisan yang paling sukar dikuasai pelajar. Ini telah menarik minat ramai penyelidik untuk membuat kajian ke atas genre penulisan tersebut, dan juga didapati bahawa langkah yang paling sukar untuk ditulis ialah langkah berkenaan hujah balas. Disebabkan kekangan ini, hasil penyelidikan lepas telah menunjukkan bahawa ramai pelajar novis telah cuba mengelakkan diri daripada menulis hujah balas dalam esei mereka sedangkan langkah ini adalah penting untuk mengukuhkan lagi pendirian penulis dalam esei. Kajian ini mengaplikasikan pendekatan genre berbentuk 'gerak-langkah' yang dicadangkan oleh Swales (1990, 2004) untuk menganalisis unsur maklumat utama berkenaan dalam esei argumentatif. Kajian kualitatif ini juga melihat ciri-ciri linguistik yang lazim digunakan oleh penulis berpengalaman untuk merealisasikan niat komunikasi mereka. Dari kajian, didapati bahawa langkah berkenaan hujah balas terdiri daripada kombinasi tiga gerak iaitu membangkitkan hujah balas, mengakui nilai hujah balas dan menolak hujah balas. Justeru dapatan kajian ini amat bernilai dari segi pedagogi kerana ia dapat membantu pengajar dalam usaha menyediakan bahan pengajaran khususnya dalam pengajaran bahasa di institusi pengajian tinggi.

Kata kunci: Analisis genre; analisis wacana; Bahasa Inggeris untuk Tujuan Khusus; esei argumentatif; hujah balas

1. Introduction

One of the important academic genres which often forms part of an English syllabus at tertiary level is the argumentative essay. In particular, the ability to write convincing and persuasive arguments has long been acknowledged as an essential skill which tertiary level students need to acquire (Imtias & Mahmood, 2014; Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015; Qin & Karabacak, 2010). Although essential, the argumentative essay has also been acknowledged as one of the most difficult genres to produce (Ka-kan-dee & Kaur, 2015). In this regard, much research has been dedicated to analyses of argumentative essays (Joiner & Jones, 2003; Liu & Lim, 2007; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Stapleton & Wu, 2015; Townsend, Hicks, Thompson, Wilton, Tuck, & Moore, 1993; Victori, 1999).

The aforementioned studies have indicated that one of the models of argumentation which is still widely used today is the Toulmin's (1958) model (Liu & Lim, 2007; Liu & Stapleton, 2014; Qin & Karabacak, 2010). The six interrelated components of argumentation in the Toulmin's model are (i) claim, (ii) data, (iii) warrant, (iv) backing, (v) rebuttal, and (vi) qualifier. While all the components of the Toulmin's model are important, this paper is interested in the rebuttal element of arguments. Also called "counterargumentation" (Liu & Stapleton, 2014, p. 118), "counter-argument" (Chandrasegaran, 2008, p. 241), and "refutation" (McWhorter, 2007, p. 160), rebuttals are crucial because they consider alternative views in an argument. Since written arguments are typically monologic, a skilled arguer is known to use refutations to handle any objections that readers are likely to have in order to persuade the readers to accept or agree with the writer's point of view (Crusius & Channel, 2003). Even though refutations are known to strengthen a writer's argument considerably, it has also been acknowledged as the most difficult part to write in an argumentative essay (White & Billings, 2002). Probably due to this, novice writers have been known to avoid addressing this critical aspect of argumentation. For instance, Liu and Stapleton (2014) found that this component is often absent in the argumentative writing of first and second language learners of English. Similarly, Nussbaum and Kardash (2005, p. 157) also found that students tended to avoid counter-arguments even though this gives rise to "my-side bias" in their argumentative texts. Thus, it is important for this step to be explained clearly to novice writers (Nussbaum & Kardash, 2005), particularly in relation to its communicative function in an argument and to link that to the linguistic resources that are commonly used by members of the discourse community.

With this in mind, this study aims to apply the genre-based approach to analyse the refutation move to complement the existing Toulmin's model. Using the two-layer move-step analysis popularised by Swales (1990, 2004), this study seeks to identify the presence of the move which handles counter-arguments in the written arguments of experienced writers and the possible constituent steps used to achieve the communicative intentions of the writers. Salient linguistic mechanisms are linked to the associated rhetorical steps in order to highlight the language resources which are useful in performing the communicative functions concerned. The two research questions that guide this study are given as follows:

- (1) What are the constituent steps that experienced writers use to handle counter-arguments in argumentative essays?
- (2) What linguistic resources are used by experienced writers in handling counter-arguments in argumentative essays?

In this study, "experienced writers" refers to expert writers of published model essays, and such a definition is based on Thompson's (2005) categorisation which distinguishes "texts produced for student writers" (published in books or references) from texts produced by student writers in a language classroom (Thompson, 2005, p. 208).

2. Literature Review

Before explaining how a move-step analysis is related to the present endeavour to study counter-arguments in argumentative essays, it is necessary to provide a brief review of the genre-based approach and its related concepts which underpin the design of this study. The genre-based approach is an influential and practical approach that has gained much popularity in the field of academia since it provides a deeper description of language as well as the underlying interaction between the writer and reader. Genre models consider aspects of socio-cultural, institutional and organisational explanation which are of great value to language teachers and applied linguists, rather than to grammatical theorists only (Bhatia, 1993). In an academic setting, various researchers have applied genre analysis to many areas of interest. In the field of teaching, there has also been much interest and enthusiasm over the use of genre as a teaching tool (Hyon, 2001). Studies have also shown the benefits of using genre analysis in the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), and more specifically in the application of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It has been reported, based on past studies in the field of ESP, that genre-based teaching for non-native English speakers has produced positive effects (Hyon, 2001). Genre analysis has also been found to be beneficial in the field of teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP). In fact, Hyon (1996) has urged practitioners to conduct more studies into the effects of a genre-based approach in the classroom on non-native speakers' (NNS) language performance.

Within the sphere of genre analysis, one popular model is Swales' (1990) two-layer move-step approach which was originally used to analyse research article introductions. The application of this robust analytical model has been extended to other text types in two decades, including legal texts (Bhatia, 1993), advertisements (Labrador, Ramon, Alaiz-Moreton, & Sanjurjo-Gonzalez, 2014), letters of application (Ding, 2007; Henry & Roseberry, 2001), and classroom discourse (Mirador, 2000). The move analysis has been acknowledged as a useful tool in genre studies because of its association with writers' communicative intentions (Ding, 2007) and due to this, researchers have provided their own definitions of moves. Nwogu (1997, p. 122) considered a move as a text segment consisting of a bundle of linguistic features (lexical meanings, propositional meanings, illocutionary forces) which give the segment a "uniform orientation and signal the content of discourse in it". Cross and Oppenheim (2006) extended the definition of moves further to include the relationship between a reader and the writer of a text. Swales (2004, p. 228) revisited the move concept in his seminal work and defined a move in genre analysis as "a discursual or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse". An important element in carrying out a genre-based study using the move approach has to do with the identification of moves. Nwogu (1997) identified moves according to the relationship between the function of the text segment and the linguistic clues used to realise it. In essence, the two main ways proposed by Nwogu (1997) to identify a move are through making inferences from context and also by utilising the linguistic signals of the text.

Moves are occasionally further broken into constituent steps, termed the "two-layer" move-step analysis by Yang and Allison (2003, p. 370). One move can consist of one step or a combination of steps. In explaining moves and steps, Yang and Allison (2003, p. 370) posited that a move "captures the function and purpose of a segment of text at a more general level" while a step "spells out more specifically the rhetorical means of realising the function of Move". They suggested that the steps within a move should represent the rhetorical choices commonly available to writers and that they be ordered in a preferred common sequence. Identifying moves in research usually entails a corpus to be selected. Results of move analyses have been proven useful for classroom application. Many researchers (e.g. Anthony, 1999; Brett, 1994; Cheng, 2006; Hyland, 2003; Peacock, 2002) have made the connection between genre analysis and its application in a language classroom.

In essence, genre-based instruction gives learners a contextual writing framework which emphasises meaning in specific situations (Hyland, 2003). At its core, the teacher's task is to create genre awareness in learners and to expose them to typical lexico-grammatical patterns of specific text types or the linguistic choices available to realise the communicative functions of particular text segments. Hyland (2003, p. 26) posited that "providing writers with a knowledge of grammar shifts writing instruction from the implicit and exploratory to a conscious manipulation of language and choice". A genre-based approach to teaching also purposefully connects communicative functions to their linguistic exponents using tasks and materials which reflect targeted texts that learners have to comprehend and produce (Brett, 1994).

Given the review on the genre-based approach and its possible applications, we will now turn our attention to arguments which form the focus of this investigation. Arguments constitute a form of "mature reasoning" (Crusius & Channel, 2003, p. 3) and "a form of discourse in which the writer or speaker tries to persuade an audience to accept, reject, or think a certain way about a problem that cannot be solved by scientific or mathematical reasoning alone" (White & Billings, 2002, p. 4). Hatch (1992, p. 185) further defined argumentation as "the process of supporting or weakening another statement whose validity is questionable or contentious". Definitions along these lines have helped to earn arguments a somewhat combative reputation, with most people conjuring up images of two opposing sides; each trying to make their point or convince the other that their views are right. For the scope of this study, the term 'argument' is taken to include a wider sphere than the typical two-sided debate.

Since arguments are based on mature reasoning, Crusius and Channel (2003) have posited that there are four aims of arguments, which are to (i) inquire, (ii) convince, (iii) persuade, and (iv) negotiate. An *inquiry* seeks out the best position regarding an issue and helps us not only to form an opinion but also to continually question existing opinions. A *conviction* is an "earned opinion" which is the result of an earlier inquiry (Crusius & Channel, 2003, p. 16). Those who have a conviction are the ones who would normally wish for others to share the same view. Thus, people who are convinced about something may argue their case by presenting reasons and evidence in order to make others agree with their point of view. *Persuasion* goes one step further after a conviction. Persuasions aim not just to change a person's thinking but also to change some form of behaviour or spur someone into action. Given that persuasions aim to elicit some form of action from the other party, it sometimes cannot rely on logical reasoning alone but may appeal to people's emotions as well. Another aim of arguments is *negotiation*, which usually happens when both sides have equal reasons and evidence to support their respective views. Both parties may negotiate a middle ground in the argument especially if some form of action is required in order to move on.

The Toulmin's (1958) argumentation model provides a guide on how to argue effectively and is still widely used today (Stapleton & Wu, 2015). The six core elements of this model are (i) a 'claim' which is the arguer's stand, which he/she wants others to accept, (ii) 'data' which comprises facts and evidence to substantiate the claim, (iii) a 'warrant' which ensures the validity of the data chosen to support the claim, (iv) a 'backing' which supports the warrant, (v) a 'qualifier' which makes exceptions to the claim under different circumstances, and (vi) a 'rebuttal' which is a recognition of restrictions that may render the claim inapplicable. Since the 'rebuttal' element is of interest to the researchers in this study, it will be explored further here. Rebuttals or counter-arguments are essentially the opposing views in or objections to an argument which a writer anticipates. At the surface level, some may even say that raising an opposing view in an argument may weaken a writer's claim. However, skilled writers should be able to show that counter-arguments do not undermine their basic claim (Crusius & Channel, 2003). In fact, research has demonstrated that since arguments are supposed to advance mature reasoning, counter-arguments which are handled expertly actually contribute to the persuasive power of an argument instead of detracting from it (Hirschberg, 1996; Liu & Stapleton, 2014).

3. Methodology

According to Bhatia (1993), the genre that one is working with must be defined and distinguished well enough from other genres in order to select the appropriate kind and size of corpus. This definition may be based on the communicative purposes, the situational context(s) in which it is normally used and some distinctive characteristics of the text or some combination of these. Bhatia (1993) goes on to suggest the use of existing literature such as practitioner advice, guide books and manuals which are relevant to the speech community, as part of the investigation of the genre in question.

Table 1: Summary of the data analysis stages

Stage	Purpose	Procedure
1	Classifying the moves and steps according to the writers' communicative purpose	Repeated readings and qualitative extraction of information
2	Segregating the moves and steps	Giving each text segment a discourse function
3	Proposing the generic structure	Arranging the moves and steps into a logical sequence
4	Extracting the linguistic features	Referring to explicit text division devices (surface level) and delineating the salient linguistic features by examining lexical choices, syntactic structures and sentences and considering the communicative function of the segment (deeper level)

The criteria employed in the selection of the corpus were based on (i) the reputation of the books, (ii) accessibility of the materials to tertiary students in the locality where this research was carried out, and (iii) representativity of the essays selected. Using the purposive sampling technique, 30 argumentative essays were chosen from six books from the accessible works on argumentative essays. One of these books is a reader while the other five are textbooks. The five textbooks are (i) *The Well-Crafted Argument, A Guide and Reader* (White & Billings, 2002), (ii) *The Aims of Argument, A Text and Reader* (Crusius & Channell, 2003), (iii) *Strategies of Argument* (Hirschberg, 1996), (iv) *The Craft of Argument* (Williams & Colomb, 2003), and (v) *Perspectives on Argument* (Wood, 1998) while the reader is *75 Readings Plus* (Buscemi & Smith, 2002). The reputation of the books was controlled by qualitatively judging their contents and referring to available reviews on these books. In addition, all the materials used in this study are accessible to tertiary students in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, where this research was carried out. The researchers also ensured that only one essay from each author was selected, and if there was another essay written by the same author, it was by-passed in favour of another author's essay. The 30 essays were selected from five main fields of writing, comprising Crime and Public Safety, Electronic Media and the Internet, Family, Feminism and Health in order to reflect representativity across various fields. Six essays were chosen from each field, and this means that essays from each field constituted 20% of the corpus. The essays were then labelled AE1 through AE30 to facilitate identification.

With regard to the writers' background, three categories of writers were identified as contributors to the essays in the corpus, and these were (i) experts who had been trained in their respective fields (33.33%), (ii) experienced writers who had not been trained in the specific fields but possess sufficient knowledge about the contents of the essays (43.33%), and (iii) established writers of books, newspapers or magazine columns (23.33%). The third category of writers – writers of books, newspapers or magazine columns – were included as well because Crusius and Channel (2003, p. 8) posited that “if we want to grasp the basics of mature reasoning, it's good to begin with the concise and readable arguments of professional columnists.”

Table 1 shows the summary of the data analysis stages of this study. The generic structure of argumentative essays was first identified by classifying the moves and steps in the essays according to the writers' communicative purpose for each text segment. This was done through repeated readings and qualitative extraction of information. Each text segment identified was given a discourse function and segregated into various moves and steps to make up the generic structure. Once the generic structure had been established, further analysis was done on the move which handles counter-arguments in order to extract the linguistic features of the move and its possible steps. A step might consist of a main clause or several sentences and it fulfills the communicative purpose reflected by the functional label given to the move (Lim, 2011; Lim, Loi, Hashim, & Liu, 2015). Each step was then analysed to identify the salient linguistic features that indicate the writers' communicative intentions. This was done on the surface level first by referring to explicit text division devices (Connor & Mauranen, 1999), and subsequently the salient linguistic mechanisms used were delineated based on the descriptions provided by Greenbaum and Quirk (1990), Thomas and Hawes (1994), and Lim (2012, 2014). This included examining lexical choices, syntactic structures and sentences and considering the communicative function of the segment which handles counter-arguments.

Table 2: Classification of step frequency

Frequency label	Percentage of occurrence
Obligatory step	100%
Quasi-obligatory	51-99%
Optional	0-50%

The frequency of the essays containing each rhetorical step was counted. Past researchers have proposed different classifications with regard to frequency. For the purpose of this study, if a step appeared in 100% of the corpus, it was labelled as an obligatory step, but if it appeared in 51% to 99% of the corpus, it was labelled as a quasi-obligatory step. If it appeared in half or less than half of the corpus, it was labelled as an optional step (Lim, 2010; Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares, & Gil-Salom, 2011; Yang & Allison, 2003).

4. Results and Discussion

Our analysis showed that not all the essays in the corpus contained the move which handled counter-arguments. Twenty-six (86.66%) of the AEs contained this move while four AEs (13.33%) did not. The four AEs which were completely void of this move were AE4, AE16, AE22, and AE30. Given that 86.66% of the argumentative essays incorporated counter-arguments, we have categorised the presentation of counter-arguments as a quasi-obligatory move.

Table 3: Distribution of the steps in the move 'handling counter-arguments'

Move Step	Handling counter-arguments		
	Step 1: Raising a counter-argument	Step 2: Acknowledging the value of a counter-argument	Step 3: Rejecting a counter- argument
AE 1	+	-	+
AE 2	+	+	+
AE 3	+	+	+
AE 4	-	-	-
AE 5	+	-	-
AE 6	+	+	+
AE 7	+	-	+
AE 8	+	+	+
AE 9	+	-	+
AE 10	+	+	+
AE 11	+	+	+
AE 12	+	-	+
AE 13	+	+	+
AE 14	+	+	+
AE 15	+	+	+
AE 16	-	-	-
AE 17	-	-	-
AE 18	-	-	-
AE 19	+	-	+
AE 20	+	+	+
AE 21	+	+	+
AE 22	-	-	-
AE 23	+	-	+
AE 24	+	+	+
AE 25	+	-	+
AE 26	+	+	+
AE 27	+	-	+
AE 28	+	-	+
AE 29	+	+	+
AE 30	-	-	-
Total	24	14	23
Percentage of essays (%)	80.0	46.7	76.7

Note: '+' denotes presence of the step, while '-' denotes absence

An analysis of the corpus revealed that in the move that handled counter-arguments, writers were likely to employ three possible constituent steps to realise the communicative functions of the move. If and when counter-arguments were presented, the initial step commonly deployed by writers was to first raise the counter-argument. It is interesting to note that one of the findings in this study was that in certain instances, writers might even acknowledge the value of these counter-arguments. In the present study, counter-arguments were predominantly raised to strengthen the writer's claim, and as such, these counter-arguments were largely rejected after they were raised. The three rhetorical steps identified in the corpus were labelled accordingly as Step 1 (i.e., 'raising a counter-argument'), Step 2 (i.e., 'acknowledging the value of a counter-argument'), and Step 3 (i.e., 'rejecting a counter-argument').

Table 3 shows the frequency of the individual steps under this move. Step 1 (i.e., 'raising a counter-argument') was found in 80.0% of the corpus, Step 2 (i.e., 'acknowledging the value of a counter-argument') in 46.7%, and Step 3 (i.e., 'rejecting a counter-argument') in 76.7% of the corpus. Of these, Step 1 and Step 3 appeared to be quasi-obligatory while Step 2 was optional in argumentative essays.

4.1. Step 1: Raising a counter-argument

Writers raised counter-arguments and highlight the strength of the counter-arguments at the same time. This was done through the use of active verbs or verb clauses to demonstrate the level of perceived aggressiveness possibly from the opposition camp. For instance, ‘claim’ and ‘point out’ were milder devices compared to ‘charge’. In doing so, writers set the scene for the rejection of the counter-arguments later. The strength of the writer’s rejection of an argument hinged largely on the extent to which he/she perceived the counter-argument to be unfounded or groundless. Instances of ‘raising an argument’ are given as follows:

- (1) Critics of mandatory minimum sentences **point out**, often with considerable indignation, that mandatory sentencing denies judges discretion in imposing sentences. (AE10)
- (2) Critics of TV violence **claim** it teaches children sadism and cruelty. (AE28)
- (3) Shifting their ground, animal activists now **charge** that livestock threatens the environment. (AE29)

Counter-arguments were raised by the writers themselves, but most writers (76.7% in the corpus) ultimately had the aim of rejecting the counter-arguments in order to make their own claims stronger and more valid. Rejection of counter-arguments came in Step 3, but there appeared to be shades of rejection even in the early stages of Step 1. This was reflected in two ways. The first way was a subtle approach by the writer in injecting a slightly patronising tone into the step. The use of adjectives denoting definiteness and certainty, such as ‘obvious’ and ‘of course’, actually signalled that the counter-argument was one which should be comprehensible to any reasonable person. In doing so, the writer subtly downplayed the counter-argument even at the initial stage of raising it.

- (1) **Of course**, the possibility of mistakenly executing an innocent person is a serious concern. (AE7)
- (2) **Of course**, some argue that marriage is by definition between a man and a woman. (AE15)
- (3) **Of course**, we can agree to a few common sense limitations. Guns should not be sold to children, to the certifiably insane, or to convicted criminals. (AE26)
- (4) There are, **of course**, many **obvious** objections to this idea. I anticipate, for example, complaints that the government will execute more murderers in order to obtain more body parts. (AE27)

The second way of subtly rejecting a counter-argument (by downplaying its importance) was associated with the identification of a possible opponent, and the use of implicitly derogatory terms to place them in a less favourable light. Opponents were commonly referred to as ‘critics’, but some writers used noun phrases which connote unreliability of possible opponents, such as ‘misguided do-gooders’ and ‘proselytizing vegetarians’ as shown below;

- (1) **Critics** of mandatory minimum sentences point out, often with considerable indignation, that mandatory sentencing denies judges discretion in imposing sentences. (AE10)
- (2) **Misguided do-gooders** frequently quote the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” to prove that capital punishment is wrong. (AE21)
- (3) **Critics** of TV violence claim it teaches children sadism and cruelty. (AE28)
- (4) Appealing to self-interest, a common opening line for **proselytizing vegetarians** is to claim that “eating meat is bad for us.” (AE29)

The findings indicate that by placing opponents in a more unfavourable light, writers hoped to persuade readers not to join the opponent's camp, but to side with the writers instead. Having raised counter-arguments, writers rarely left the counter-arguments without rejecting them. In only one of the AEs (i.e., AE5) did the author raise a counter-argument without rejecting it. In the rest of the AEs where a counter-argument was raised (in 24 out of 30 AEs), the counter-argument was subsequently rejected. Prior to rejecting the counter-arguments, however, some writers acknowledged the value of the counter-argument first and only presented their rejection of it later.

4.2. Step 2: Acknowledging the value of a counter-argument

Writers did occasionally acknowledge the value of a counter-argument. On the surface level, adjectives and adverbs indicating conditional acceptance or recognition were used to draw attention to this. Frequently used were the adjective 'true' and the adverb 'yes'. However, while the writers did acknowledge the value of a counter-argument, they would normally reject the counter-argument at a later stage.

- (1) It is **true** that adult women tend to be paid less than men and to be grouped disproportionately on the lower rungs of the economic ladder. (AE6)
- (2) **Yes**, women are descended from a long line of thwarted women. (AE6)
- (3) **True**, the divorce rate rose after the introduction of no-fault divorce in the late 60's and 70's. (AE13)
- (4) **Yes**, at first blush, it seems like a radical proposal, but when you think about it some more, it's actually the opposite. (AE15)

Acknowledgement of a counter-argument was also accomplished by giving it a legitimate place in the discussion. As noted earlier, the ultimate aim was to reject the counter-argument. To this end, where the counter-arguments were acknowledged for their value, a rejection would normally follow immediately after that, so as to place the counter-argument in a weaker position. In essence, the writers were signalling that they were aware of the value of the counter-argument, but that their claim was stronger and should therefore take centre stage.

- (1) This combination of conspicuousness and constituency has allowed AIDS activists to get more research funding, more treatment money and looser drug-testing restrictions than any comparable disease. **Nothing wrong with that.** (*Acknowledging the value of a counter argument*). The system for allocating research and treatment money in American medicine is archaic, chaotic and almost random **anyway** (*the word 'anyway' attempts to discredit the counter-argument in a subtle manner*). (AE2), italics mine.
- (2) Once again, **the critics are right**: There is a distinction between major and minor drug offences. **A minor** drug offence takes place when a pusher sells drugs to somebody else's child; **a major** drug offence takes place when he pushes drugs on yours (*sarcasm used to discredit the counter-argument*). (AE10), italics mine.

From the subtle rejection of counter-arguments in Step 1 (i.e. 'raising a counter-argument') and Step 2 (i.e. 'acknowledging the value of a counter-argument'), the orientation progressed to a more direct rejection, and this was done in Step 3 (i.e. 'rejecting a counter-argument').

4.3. Step 3: Rejecting a counter-argument

Step 3 employed different strategies in executing its communicative purpose. This step was often linked with the two earlier steps (i.e., ‘raising a counter-argument’ and ‘acknowledging the value of a counter-argument’) in that it often followed the two steps closely and occasionally even appeared in the same sentence. In rejecting counter-arguments, the various strategies found in the analysis of the texts included the use of subtle strategies such as hedging devices, conditional clauses and inquiries. On the stronger end, the use of adversative conjunctions and an outright rejection of the counter-arguments were found to appear in argumentative essays as well.

Hedging devices might be used to weaken a counter-argument. Even though the counter-argument was raised, it was given a limited scope and this reduced the counter-argument to an opinion from a minority or lesser camp. These hedging devices used adverbs of frequency (e.g., ‘sometimes’), determiners denoting limitation (e.g., ‘some’), modals denoting possibility (e.g., ‘may’) and adjectives that questioned the truth value of the counter-argument (e.g., ‘alleged’).

- (1) It is **sometimes** said that even though an execution may not deter others, it at least prevents the freeing of the murderer in a few years to kill again. (AE1)
- (2) However, while everyone wants a safe society, **some** people would say that capital punishment is too strong a means of ensuring it. (AE7)
- (3) People **may** make unwise choices. Though that could cause them grief, it will be remediable. (AE8)
- (4) Fortunately for the future of the republic, the **alleged** psyche-scarring effects of divorce have been grossly exaggerated. (AE13)
- (5) There **may** also be some concern about an individual living with a serial murderer’s heart or other body part. (AE27)

Other than hedging devices, some writers used conditional clauses to raise a counter-argument followed by an inquiry to question the validity of the counter-argument. This put the counter-argument in a less favourable light, thus quashing it in the end.

- (1) **If** the rare, almost non-existent, chance that an innocent person might be executed is such a terrible evil as to require abolition of capital punishment, **then why don’t** we also demand the abolition of automobiles as well? Because we balance the value of those lives lost in traffic accidents against the importance of automobiles in society. (AE7)
- (2) **If** we were not designed to eat meat, **why** do we produce large quantities of the enzymes required to break down such foods? **Why** is vitamin B12 (found only in animal products) essential to human life? (AE29)

Other texts did not frame the rejection of the counter-argument in conditional clauses, but used interrogative structures to raise the inquiry directly for the same purpose. This was, again, to question the validity of the counter-argument.

- (1) **Are we really** such fragile creatures that we need such an extreme definition of safety? (AE9)
- (2) **Why should** gay couples be treated differently? (AE15)
- (3) **Did it make sense** for Susan to stay in a marriage that was not working for her, for John, or for her children? (AE23)

For more direct rejections of counter-arguments, adversative conjunctions were commonly used. Specifically, the *adversative conjunct* ‘but’ seemed to be widely-used among writers of argumentative essays.

- (1) The suffering caused by AIDS is enormous. Sufferers deserve compassion, and their disease deserves scientific inquiry. **But** AIDS has got far more. (AE2)
- (2) The most frequently cited study, by California therapist Judith Wallerstein, found that 41% of the children of divorced couples are “doing poorly, worried, underachieving, deprecating and often angry” years after their parents’ divorce. **But** this study has been faulted for including only 60 couples, two-thirds of whom were deemed to lack “adequate psychological functioning” even before they split, and all of whom were self-selected seekers of family therapy. (AE13)
- (3) The advocates of same-sex marriage say that they seek to strengthen and celebrate marriage. That may be what some intend. **But** I am certain that it will not be the reality. (AE14)

However, there were also other writers who rejected a counter-argument directly and explicitly. This constituted a more direct strategy aimed at stifling possible doubts arising from the brief mention of the counter argument. Instances of such outright rejection are given as follows:

- (1) **It fails** a test of social justice in that it has been disproportionately applied to minorities. (AE1)
- (2) **It wasn’t true.** AIDS is not everyone’s problem. (AE2)

From the above analysis, it can be said that the three steps under ‘handling counter-arguments’ constitute part of the writers’ strategic manoeuvres in argumentative essays given that the core of arguments is that there exists a disagreement between different parties.

5. Conclusion

In brief, this study showed that handling counter-arguments constituted an important quasi-obligatory move in argumentative essays. Although three different steps were used to realise this move in the present study, only the first step and the third step (i.e., raising a counter-argument’ and ‘rejecting a counter-argument’) were used in the majority of the argumentative essays. It is interesting to note that less than half of the writers acknowledged the value of the counter-argument (in Step 2). Overall, when counter-arguments were raised, they were normally rejected in the same essay as well. This conclusion is supported by the fact that a rejection of the counter-argument step had been found in all but one of the essays which had raised the counter-argument. This means that as far as pedagogical implications are concerned, instructors may not always insist that student writers acknowledge the value of a counter-argument, but it is generally important to guide novice writers to use some appropriate language mechanisms to raise a counter-argument and subsequently reject it to strengthen their own claims.

Our analysis revealed an interesting repertoire of linguistic mechanisms deployed by experienced writers in all the three steps associated with handling counter-arguments. These linguistic resources, among others, included adjectives denoting certainty, noun phrases connoting unreliability, adverbs affirming the value of opinions, hedging devices that question the truth value of a counter-argument, and interrogative structures. These useful linguistic mechanisms can be highlighted to student writers who are learning to handle counter-arguments as part of their writing strategies to strengthen their own claims in argumentative essays. In brief, counter-arguments are not merely raised for the purpose of providing information as they can be employed with an intention to demonstrate the writers’ (i) awareness of possible challenging and opposing views, and (ii) their readiness in subsequently rejecting the counter-arguments concerned with valid grounds. The findings of this study are therefore pedagogically significant in that both the explicit and implicit strategies for handling counter-arguments can be introduced

to novice writers who need to broaden their genre knowledge in the process of learning to write effective argumentative essays.

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