

# 1. Introduction

The notion of *value* is central to the development of Western thought. For the OED (2009) ‘value’ is “The relative status of a thing, or the estimate in which it is held, according to its real or supposed worth, usefulness, or importance [...] the personal or societal judgment of what is valuable and important in life” – a definition that reflects the relativity of value and its dependence upon social interaction. Human transactions rely heavily on this notion and a whole strand of economic research is devoted to the investigation of value theory. The concept is equally prominent in the social sciences, psychology and theology. In philosophy it is the domain of axiology, which targets the investigation of what is both ethically and aesthetically appropriate in human experience.

As discourse reflects and reinforces the values prized by a given community, its investigation is likely to provide textual evidence of which qualities or aspects of reality are regarded as desirable or undesirable by its members. Whatever the field of enquiry, knowledge claims are being constantly challenged and (re)negotiated through language. This area of linguistic research has particularly attracted scholars concerned with the wording of scientific writing, which “illustrates one way in which the values of academic communities are articulated in discourse meanings” (Hyland 1997: 20). Some of the most often-quoted values that guide the academic community are collegiality, competitiveness and empiricism.

The aim of the present study is to extend our understanding of what values are most prominent in English disciplinary discourse and what linguistic resources are most likely to be used to signal such values. The analysis is evidence-based, as it investigates a corpus of authentic texts drawn from leading scholarly journals in ten different disciplinary areas. Its methodology includes the use of corpus-analysis tools (wordlist builders, concordancers, collocate calculators, etc.) as well as manual investigation of the object of value judgements in

academic writing. Apart from Thetela's (1997) small-scale study of 'parameters of value' in academic discourse, this is to my knowledge the first systematic attempt to explore the value system that underlies scholarship published in English-medium journals. A sample of texts was analysed lexically, semantically and contextually in order to identify the main values encoded by relevant occurrences in each of the disciplines represented in the corpus.

It is hoped that this volume will provide further evidence not only of the evaluative dimension of domain-specific communication, which has extensively been dealt with in the literature on evaluation and stance, but also of the epistemological priorities upheld by academics in their search for knowledge and recognition. In addition, it may shed light on any overt reference to the institutional constraints placed on scientific enquiry (cf. Ali *et al.* 1996; van Damme 2002), whose educational and political implications have so far been more researched than their linguistic dimension.

## 1.1. Mapping discipline-specific values

The main purpose of this volume is therefore to describe the specific values signalled by research article authors belonging to different disciplinary communities through realisations that employ explicit lexical types. The classification of such variables will be made inductively rather than deductively: in other words, I will attempt to interpret the emerging corpus data (as in Channell 2000) rather than apply it to an existing framework. To date there have been few attempts to seek out this kind of evidence, though several authors have speculated as to what aspects of science are normally regarded as desirable or undesirable. The values encoded by scholars are expected to share a common concern for the quality, reliability and impact of research in their field. While for some of these a negative counterpart is likely to occur in the corpus (e.g. *useful/useless*, *interesting/dull*), for others it may not be lexically signalled or available.

One aspect that deserves special attention is how values are distributed across the different domains represented in the corpus, in terms of number and choice of lexis, and whether there are common patterns within the corpus sections. Such variables can either be encoded by highly vague markers (e.g. *well, nice, interesting*) or single out specific facets of value (*systematic, clear, expert, innovative*) that deserve to be carefully investigated and classified. At the same time, the proportion of directly positive vs. negative lexis and the polarisation of lexicalisations may vary according to the degree of agonism present in each discipline (cf. Salager-Meyer 2001a; Tannen 2002, 2002).

A further dimension worth investigating in order to account for variation across domains is represented by the entities being evaluated through such judgements. Each claim identified in the corpus establishes a link between a given quality and an entity endowed (or not endowed) with such a quality. Within this dyad it is therefore essential to explore what is being evaluated if we are to understand how academic values operate in context. The corpus was scanned manually to map the referent linked to each value claim and a list of the options prevalent in each domain was drawn up for insights into how different disciplinary cultures attribute certain qualities to specific aspects of research or even to entities that lie outside the immediate realm of their enquiry. This type of analysis is useful for pedagogic as well as descriptive purposes, since undergraduates and novice writers do not necessarily appreciate what aspects of research deserve to be prized or stigmatised through appropriate evaluative acts (cf. Mei 2006a, 2006b).

The lines of enquiry described above seek to address three research questions whose combined insights can shed further light on an important part of the complex web of evaluative meanings embedded in published English-medium scholarship:

- What academic values are signalled in the discourse of research articles belonging to different disciplines?
- What lexical resources are employed to signal academic values and to what degree are such lexicalisations transparent?
- With what evaluated entities do academic values tend to correlate, both within and across disciplines?

## 1.2. Outline of contents

The theoretical background to this volume is presented in Chapter 2, which reviews the main approaches to the study of academic discourse relevant to the notion of value in context. After an overview of the historical development of academia from its medieval origins to contemporary debates on the role of tertiary education, the chapter looks at the evolving status of academic disciplines, whose recognition is reflected in the taxonomy and nomenclature used by the central libraries that disseminate/archive their published output. Disciplines are at the same time organisms formed by experts with similar interests and institutions with a life of their own: these two dimensions define the norms that regulate communication among peers and mark the ‘territorial boundaries’ within which they are allowed to operate. Central to academic discourse is the notion of genre, especially in its most standardised published form (i.e. the research article). When dealing with values, the main references are to be found in the extensive literature on evaluative speech acts, and particularly on the linguistic resources involved in the expression of academic criticisms. Far less is known of the *parameters* on which such claims are based, though much work in the social sciences recognises the fundamental importance of axiological variables in human interaction.

Chapter 3 describes the various sources of textual material selected for analysis. The decision to opt for ten disciplinary fields is explained and accounted for as representative of a suitably broad spectrum of academic domains. The method employed in the selection of appropriate journals from which to extract a suitable number of recent texts is explained in detail, in line with standard practices for the construction of specialised corpora. This is followed by a description of the procedure adopted to convert the 100 texts in the corpus into a format compatible with concordancing software.

Chapter 4 presents the methodology used to analyse the texts in hand. After a quantitative outline of the corpus, it explains how potential value-marking items were identified and investigated

through a combination of automated processing tools and manual inspection. The relevant lexical items are listed with reference to the semantics of the four values chosen for further investigation. In order to answer the three research questions listed in this Introduction, the corpus will be examined for evidence of how such values are distributed across disciplines but also of the linguistic resources that mark them out and of the entities they evaluate. The analysis will include collocational aspects of the target items, as well as recurring lexico-grammatical patterns within and across disciplines. Finally the procedure used to interpret the findings is accounted for, where possible, in the light of other corpus-based studies of evaluative phenomena in academic discourse.

The results are illustrated and discussed in Chapters 5-8, devoted respectively to the values of goodness, size, novelty and relevance. The textual evidence extracted from the corpus as outlined in Chapter 4, is described both quantitatively and through a number of salient examples. Difficult cases and analytical problems emerging from the data will also be considered, suggesting if possible an alternative approach. When results show significant divergences between domains, the discussion of each variable is contextualised within the epistemology and concerns of its parent disciplinary culture, bearing in mind Becher/Trowler's (2001) mapping of academia into 'tribes' and 'territories'.

Chapter 9 offers a comparative assessment of the main results of this study, with a general discussion of their bearing on the initial research questions and on the literature. Finally Chapter 10 critically highlights the strengths and inevitable weaknesses of the approach adopted and identifies avenues for further research. Despite its imperfections, this volume provides a detailed account of the theoretical and empirical challenges faced by the analyst when reconstructing semantic variables rooted in the values and beliefs of a community of practice. It is hoped that its findings may be of interest not only to the applied linguistics community but also to EAP practitioners and novice researchers engaged in English-medium scholarship across the world.