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Re-thinking Engagement: Dialogic strategies of alignment in letters to two South African newspapers

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Abstract

This article uses an APPRAISAL analysis of 40 letters to the *Daily Sun* and *The Times* newspapers in South Africa to illustrate a reconceptualisation of the Engagement system. It discusses dialogism (Bakhtin 1981), which inspired the creation of the Engagement framework by White (2003), who classified attempts to either align or disalign readers with a writer's stance. Contrary to the options for dialogic Engagement proposed by Martin and White (2005) and White and Don (2012), the data suggests that not all Engagement strategies carry equal power of alignment, as the framework's systemic layout implies. This prompts a re-thinking of the Engagement categories as occurring along a continuum of their strength.

Key words: alignment, APPRAISAL, dialogism, Engagement, rhetorical questions

Introduction

During research investigating communities created by APPRAISAL strategies in letters to the *Daily Sun* and *The Times* newspapers, the coding and analysis processes triggered a realisation that Engagement choices within a subsystem have different rhetorical strengths. This article is therefore a by-product of observations from research for a larger project: for more on the main results, see Smith (2013). Representing Engagement choices as a system is convenient and allows analysts to see the options available, but this also implies that they have equal power in terms of negotiating dialogic space,[1] as they are equally spaced, well-defined points in a system diagram. It was through extensive interaction with the full appraisal framework that these insights came to light.

The framework's options are neatly spaced in their system diagrams, and coding data according to these representations raised some questions about some of the assumptions made by the diagrams. The article presents the insights gained from the data, and how they contribute to this new understanding of Engagement strategies. After providing an overview of the data, we focus on Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, and how it relates to White's (2003) monoglossia and heteroglossia, the latter of which forms the foundation of the Engagement framework. We present a detailed description of the Engagement system as it is understood from Martin and White (2005), and White and Don (2012), with examples from the data for illustration. The names of the APPRAISAL subsystems have initial capitals (Acknowledgement, for example), so they are not confused with the non-technical use of the terms. Finally, our data-specific insights are explained in order to introduce the dialogic continuum on which we have placed the Engagement subsystems.

The data

The research project from which these thoughts on Engagement are drawn used a data set that comprised 40 letters to the editors of the *Daily Sun* and *The Times* newspapers. These letters were collected over a month for the period 9 January to 3 February 2012, making sure that there were 20 letters from each newspaper for analysis. Where an utterance from the data is quoted, it is followed by the initials of the newspaper of origin's name (DS for the *Daily Sun*, TT for *The Times*), and the number it was assigned (eg, the second letter from the *Daily Sun*, collected on 10 January 2012, would be called DS2).

Dialogism

According to Martin and White (2005) and White (2003), the Engagement system consists of linguistic resources with which authors present a stance while positioning themselves regarding alternative evaluations and other voices in a text, and attempt to position readers as aligning (or disaligning) with their stance. This theory draws on the work of Bakhtin (1981), who sees all written and spoken communication as dialogic, in that it is always a response or reference to something that has either been written or said before. Holquist (1990, 60) explains Bakhtin's perspective as follows:

> … an utterance is never *in itself* originary: an utterance is always an answer. It is always an answer to another utterance that precedes it, and is therefore always conditioned by, and in turn qualifies, the prior utterance to a greater or lesser degree.

Not only is an utterance a response to a previously stated utterance, it is also anticipatory, meaning that it takes into account what could be argued as a result, and attempts

to account for this: 'every word is directed towards an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word it anticipates' (Bakhtin 1981, 280).

Following this approach, it is evident that utterances are multifunctional. Their first function is to describe the text producer's (in this case, the writer's) stance on a matter, which, as Bakhtin implies, needs to be communicated to a recipient as a response to what the producer has either seen or heard. The writers can choose whether or not to recognise explicitly the voices that are external to the text, to which they are replying, and, if they are recognised, the extent of the external voices' involvement. If the external voices are referenced, writers then present themselves as aligning, as neutral, as undecided, or as disaligning with the values of the external voice (Martin and White 2005). Finally, in keeping with the anticipatory aspect of Bakhtinian theory, writers' utterances also indicate how the writer positions the audience as regards the views being offered by the writer – does the envisaged audience align or disalign with the writer; should the writer's comments be seen by the audience as commonsensical (taken for granted); or does the writer expect the views to be questioned?

White (2003) argues that utterances can be divided into two types, drawing on Bakhtin's notions of dialogised utterances. Monoglossia refers to 'undialogised' utterances; those that are bare assertions, and are presented as 'factual'. These utterances, state White (2003) and White and Don (2012), are those that neither acknowledge, nor respond to, external voices with alternate stances. The following example from the data illustrates this:

(1)   Madonsela has outshone her predecessors and set a high standard for successors (DS1).

The writer of this letter leaves no room for argument against this positive evaluation of Thuli Madonsela, the South African Public Protector, who investigates allegations of corruption in the government, abuse of state resources, and fraud. We could say that the 'dialogic space' is completely closed, according to White's (2003) definition of monoglossia. Martin and White (2005) suggest that monoglossic bare assertions are indicative of two audience types, which the analyst can identify by examining the co-text, the text surrounding the utterance in question. Monoglossia can construe an audience that is completely aligned with the writer; there is no reason for the writer to argue for a position if it is already commonsensical in the readers' minds. The readers will thus not question the bare assertions made if they share the writer's value positions. However, monoglossia can also indicate that writers' views are merely their side of a highly contested debate, and the writers think highly enough of themselves to be able to put their views to an audience without acknowledging other sides of the discussion. White (2003) notes that, because of the commonly held association of monoglossia with complete alignment with a community of shared values, the monoglossia used for argumentation will threaten the solidarity between the writer and the disaligned reader.

'Dialogised' utterances (as opposed to undialogised, monoglossic, bare assertions) are called heteroglossic (Martin and White 2005; White 2003; White and Don 2012). Heteroglossic utterances construe dialogic space – space for alternate stances that are suppressed by monoglossia. According to White (2003, 265), dialogised (heteroglossic) utterances are those 'in which some engagement with alternative positions and/or voice is signalled'. This engagement that is carried out with alternative viewpoints in dialogic space can be Expanded to allow more room for alternate stances, or Contracted, to allow less room for argument. Before discussing the ways in which heteroglossia negotiates dialogic space, however, we would like to clarify our stance on monoglossia. We are operating on the premise that all utterances are inherently dialogic in that they are responsive to previous utterances and anticipative of possible arguments against them (as well as set against 'a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements', from Bakhtin 1981, 281). Yet, there is a distinction in terms of which bare assertions are seen as undialogised because they allow no room for argument. We agree that they do not allow room for argument, so we could keep the term 'monoglossia', but we do not think that these utterances are completely undialogised (where undialogised is taken to mean that they are not dialogic – neither anticipating nor responding to previous utterances). If, following Bakhtin (1981), we assume that *all* utterances are dialogic, then there must be *some* dialogic space construed, albeit a small space. White's (2003) argument that bare assertions present a stance to an aligned community shows that there is some communication happening between the writer and the audience. The idea of argumentative monoglossia is more difficult to deal with, but it is still not undialogised – in suppressing alternate viewpoints it is still *communicating* something to disaligned readers (although threatening the solidarity between the two parties) and this communication leads us to believe that dialogism, however slender a shard, does exist there. Putting forward views monoglossically is still responding to an argument, in Bakhtin's view of dialogism that everything operates against a backdrop of what has been said before. While the distinction between monoglossia and heteroglossia is a useful one to make, we are less certain of the interchangeability of the terms 'monoglossic' and 'undialogised'. We see the difference between monoglossia and heteroglossia as the amount of dialogic space that is construed by the resources. Heteroglossic resources are also explicitly flagged with certain words that 'signal' their dialogic nature. Monoglossic bare assertions do not signal dialogism, because, although they are (a little) dialogic, they certainly do not invite alternate viewpoints.

Bednarek (2007) also suggests that utterances traditionally seen as monoglossic, such as *She likes linguistics*, have the potential to be seen as heteroglossia. This is because they recognise an evaluation external to the text producer (non-authorial Affect) – the evaluation is being made by someone other than the speaker. This type of utterance should be included under the heteroglossic strategy of Attribution: Acknowledgement, argues Bednarek (2007). We see this utterance as still being an observation of the author, so we are not convinced that there is an external voice being reported on, as the example

is not explicitly attributed to an external voice, using a formulation such as *She said* or *They said*. What is important is the way Bednarek also sees that even 'monoglossic' utterances (bare assertions) contain dialogism, so perhaps the 'fuzziness' of the relationship between dialogised utterances, monoglossia, and undialogised utterances is something that needs to be further problematised and investigated.

Expansion

The Engagement subsystem in the APPRAISAL framework includes the heteroglossic resources that can either expand or contract dialogic space (see Figure 1 for full representation). The first category under the subsystem of Expansion is Entertainment. Writers use Entertainment to show that their viewpoint is entirely subjective, merely one of many possible views, and thus opens dialogic space in order to accommodate these. Entertainment strategies therefore construe an audience that could be disaligned; a heterogeneous audience. Two kinds of Entertainment are evident in this example from the data:

(2)   Active teachers in South African schools are mostly between the ages of 40 and 55, *suggesting* that much of the content taught … *could* be obsolete … (TT11).

The word *suggesting* indicates that the writer anticipates disalignment, as this is merely a suggestion; the writer is not saying that this is definitely the case; it is one person's opinion amongst many. The other instantiation, *could*, is a modal. White (2003) argues that earlier literature has treated modals as an indication that writers lack commitment to the truth of their stance, but must also be seen as opening up dialogic space to allow for alternate positions. In the above example, the modal does exactly that. The writer recognises that there will be other opinions about whether the age of teachers determines whether the content they teach is obsolete. Assumedly the writer would know that the group of teachers aged between 40 and 55 would be unhappy with this view, so the writer also allows for anyone to argue that teachers of that age *do* keep up-to-date with new content. Expanding the dialogic space for alternate viewpoints helps to ensure that the writer is not accused of making a sweeping generalisation.
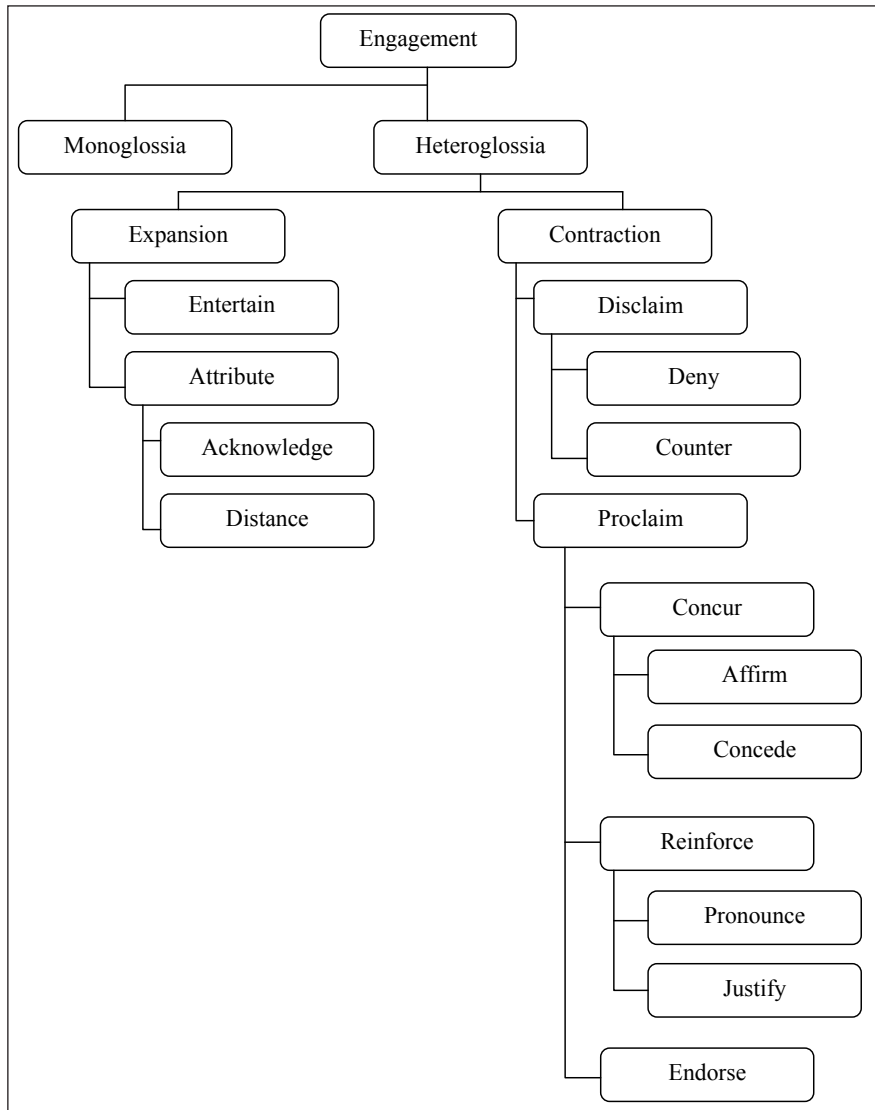
Figure 1:   The APPRAISAL framework: Engagement (adapted from Martin and White 2005; White and Don 2012)[2]

Another resource for expanding the dialogic space is Attribution, which itself consists of two strategies, namely Acknowledgement and Distancing. Attribution occurs when writers bring in external voices so that they can dissociate themselves from the stance that is being advanced. Martin and White (2005) note that this is often done through reported speech. Acknowledgement is typically seen as being more 'neutral', that is, the writer does not explicitly align or disalign with the external voice's proposition. Achugar (2004) found that newspapers in her research incorporated the voices of au-

thorities into their analyses of the 11 September 2001 plane crashes in the United States (US), to authorise their interpretation of the events. Lemke (1988, in Hood 2006, 44) supports this, arguing that 'explicitly naming an intertextually valued sayer increases the value attributed to the projected proposition'. A writer to the *Daily Sun* uses Acknowledgement strategies in this way, by quoting Nelson Mandela, an international icon, to reinforce the argument that education is important:

> (3)   FORMER President Nelson Mandela once *said*: 'Education is the greatest engine of personal development …' (DS11).

In the above example, the writer construes dialogic space by bringing in an external voice (that of Nelson Mandela), and engages with this voice. Dialogic space is opened as the writer is not stating an explicit position of alignment or disalignment with Mandela's statement by attributing the words to him. This can be contrasted with the Attributive strategy of Distancing, where writers dissociate themselves from the external voice's evaluation. Distancing opens up dialogic space because the writer is already indicating the presence of two different opinions in the text (the external voice's opinion, and the writer's, as the writer chooses to remain separate from the external voice, and wants the reader to know this by marking it with Distancing resources). This can be achieved in a few ways – one of them is using reporting verbs such as *claim*, which indicates disbelief on the writer's part, as in the example below:

> (4)   … he *claims* the administration is in a good space … (TT8).

Scare quotes can also be used effectively to distance the writer from the external voice's viewpoint. In the following example from TT10, the writer is responding to a police officer's comment on why women kidnap babies from hospitals. The writer does not agree with the use of the term *love relationships*, which is further indicated by *as he calls them*:

> (5)   These women are not merely protecting *'love relationships'*, as he calls them (TT10).

Contraction

Contraction consists of two subsystems, namely Disclamation and Proclamation. Disclamation has a focus on the closing down of dialogic space by discrediting other viewpoints, whereas Proclamation refers rather to the foregrounding of the writer's stances. Two strategies of Disclamation are Denial and Countering. The first of these, Denial, uses negating lexis to explicitly reject a stance, closing down the dialogic space where disaligned readers would be allowed to argue for it. An example of this appears in DS2, but other examples include *no* and *never*:

(6)   … that does *not* mean one is always right … (DS2).

The authorial voice has intruded in the above example to ensure that the reader has no intention of arguing that boundaries should be set, thereby closing down the space for argument for the external position.

Counters go against, or replace, a proposition that would have been expected (Martin and White 2005). They close down dialogic space for the expected, alternate, stance and replace it with the more correct or justifiable one (from the writer's point of view). In the following example, the writer Denies the expected approach (*not*), and Counters it with the 'correct' one (*but*):

(7)   … the essence of our approach is *not* to mourn this behaviour, *but* to find solutions to a complex reality … (TT2).

The second subsystem of dialogic Contraction, Proclamation, has three options: Concurrence, Reinforcement (White and Don 2012), and Endorsement. Concurrence construes an audience with the same knowledge and stance as the author, and is therefore already aligned (Martin and White 2005). Concurrence further comprises Affirmation and Concession. Affirmation involves writers' assumptions that their viewpoint is already taken for granted by the audience, and is realised in the data as rhetorical questions and instantiations such as the following:

(8)   Especially in a developing country such as ours, with its unique challenges, corporate South Africa and the ANC *naturally* have to share with each other their views on the economy (TT20).

Rhetorical questions are dialogic in that they force the reader to think about an answer to the question, and this is a powerful strategy, as the reader is probably more likely to see the answer as commonsensical, as they have come up with it themselves. This naturalises the writer's view in the reader's mind, aligning the two parties automatically. Having made the same 'connection' as the writer in their minds, readers may find the writer's next arguments more believable. These questions appear in both newspapers' data – example 9 is from DS14, where the writer's argument preceding the question had been against the use of political contacts to win contracts. The question prompts the reader to answer 'no', and this meaning is not open to challenge as it has not been directly asserted:

(9)   *Do we really need provincial governments* … (DS14)?

According to Martin and White (2005, 124), Concessions are strategies 'by which argumentative ground is given up initially … only for that ground to be retaken in the subsequent counter move'. The writer assumes the reader holds an alternative stance,

so the writer attempts to 'correct' the reader's views. This is demonstrated in example 10 from TT13, where the writer admits that Zimbabwe has problems as a country (this is the view that the reader must hold), but states that education is nonetheless of good quality:

(10)   *Concession*   *Counter*

     Children educated in Zimbabwe, [*troubled though the country is*], [*still*] have an outstanding education and can work anywhere in the world (TT13).

Reinforcement, the second subsystem of Proclamation (White and Don 2012), contains two options for writers to make an intensified argument for their opinion: Pronounce-ment, in which the writer explicitly intervenes to assert the validity of the stance (Mar-tin and White 2005); and Justification, in which writers provide extra information to explain their evaluations (White 2003). Since writers need to add information to their evaluation to substantiate it, Justification construes the audience as disbelieving, as writers must believe that they cannot merely state their views without providing further argumentation against the anticipated reader response. In example 11 of Justification, the writer gives a reason for the argument that a stampede (and its resulting death of a parent at the University of Johannesburg) would not have happened at the University of South Africa (Unisa):

(11)   … a situation like this wouldn't have happened there *because* they have the proper controls in place (TT6).

Pronouncement, as mentioned above, refers to the foregrounding of the authors' inter-vention in a text, either as explicit mentioning of themselves (with pronouns such as *I* or *we*) or emphasis on something, where writers choose to obscure their subjectivity, such as in example 12 from TT4. Martin and White (2005) state that Pronouncement, like Justification, construes the audience as holding a divergent viewpoint to the writer's, as the writer has to insist that the position that is advanced is true. The writer quoted below surely only feels the need to assert his stance as he thinks that there might be alternate stances held by some readers:

(12)   … *it is clear* that inequality is worsening (TT4).

Finally, in Endorsement the authorial voice is again foregrounded, but it is used to con-strue that the propositions of *external sources* are valid and worth supporting (Martin and White 2005; White 2003). Endorsements are doubly dialogic in that they engage with the external source's stance by referencing it and aligning with it (Bakhtin's notion of 'responding' to what has either been said or written before), but also by promot-ing it to readers, the writer is 'taking over responsibility for the proposition' (Martin and White 2005, 127), thus transferring the responsibility for 'anticipating' readers' responses about the external source's claims to the writer. These resources contract the dialogic space because, by promoting the external source's stance, the writer leaves

little space for divergent stances. The audience construed, however, is one that may contain disaligned readers, as the writer has believed it necessary to evaluate the source as being a trustworthy one, in case the audience did not believe this already. For example, in the extract from the data in example 13, the writer implies that the studies in question are maximally credible by using the word *confirmed*. This shows that the writer anticipates alternate stances, but uses Endorsement to close down the dialogic space for argument as far as possible:

(13)   Studies have *confirmed* that South Africa imports more than it can export (TT18).

Towards a deeper understanding of the Engagement system

As was mentioned above, the Engagement subsystems' boundaries are blurred when it comes to contraction and expansion. For example, strategies of Acknowledgement, traditionally expansive, can be used to contract dialogic space, and actually support a writer's argument, where external voices of high-status people are used to make a statement more difficult to argue against, as in the following examples:

(14)   *FORMER President Nelson Mandela* once said: 'Education is the greatest engine of personal development …' (DS11, our italics).

(15)   It is a giant movement and an 'international inspiration', as *Nicolas Sarkozy* described it (TT1).

Another Engagement strategy that does not function equally with its other system members is Affirmation, a contractive strategy used to reinforce a point in a reader's mind – and it usually targets the aligned reader. Words such as 'naturally' seek to make the argument at hand more commonsensical, which naturalises it in the reader's mind. But rhetorical questions are also classified as Affirmation, and are a powerful device for alignment, as they put ideas in readers' minds while distracting them with a question. Example 16 illustrates this.

(16)   WHY do our leaders take our lives for granted? (DS15)

The question is asking *why* this happens, but what is taken as common sense is that the leaders *do* take readers' lives for granted. This contracts dialogic space to a greater extent than a Denial, for example, because the Denial explicitly rejects a viewpoint. A rhetorical question such as the one above does not even give the reader a chance to argue, and plants the thought in the reader's mind that 'the leaders are taking our lives for granted'. When readers make their 'own' assumptions and connections (ie, the ones that have been planted in their minds by strategies like this one), the alignment is stronger. The alignment strategy itself is very powerful when writers can get a reader to think that their opinions are the reader's own, and therefore not bother to question them.

These insights have led us to wonder whether it is not better to conceptualise Engagement strategies as existing along a cline of dialogic space. Visualising the strategies from a systemic approach assumes that the strategies are equally powerful, and we have argued that this is not the case. On the ends of the scale would be 'total contraction', where there is no dialogic space at all, and 'total expansion', where dialogic space is opened to its widest, to accommodate all possible stances on a matter. Total expansion and contraction are ideals, much like cardinal vowels in phonetics, as we would argue that it is impossible to achieve them. How can a text allow for all possible stances – how would writers establish their own stance without threatening those of disaligned readers? A writer has no way of knowing what knowledge every single reader will bring to the text, as all readers have had different life experiences, so there are too many different opinions to allow for. But what about total contraction – is this not just monoglossia? All language is dialogic, as it addresses someone, so there is bound to be some kind of dialogic space, however small. Even monoglossic utterances are dialogic in that they either respond to something which has been said before, or anticipate a certain stance. This view of Engagement strategies existing on a continuum, with examples from the data, is illustrated by Figure 2. Where strategies have been 'removed' from the systems of expansion and contraction to be placed along the continuum, the remaining strategies from each system still belong in their original places shown in Figure 1 (eg, Entertainment still falls under 'heteroglossia: expansion', as it has not been placed on the scale).
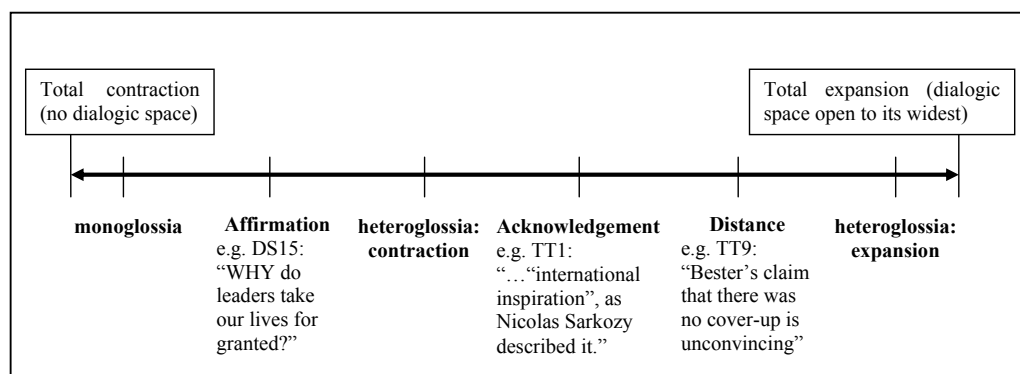

Figure 2:   Figure 2: Schematic representation of the dialogic continuum

Conclusion

From the data presented above, it appears that the distinctions between Engagement categories are not as clear-cut as their systemic layout suggests. This is not to say that there should be any permanent adjustment to the systemic APPRAISAL framework, but it is important to acknowledge that the Engagement strategies within each subsystem do not have equal 'power' to align the reader, so the choices that the writer makes are

important. Thus, it is not merely a case of expanding or contracting dialogic space, but how far the space is expanded or contracted, and which stances are allowed. The dialogic continuum clearly illustrates how the boundaries between expansion and contraction blur, as Acknowledgement, for example, is a strategy of expansion, but it is more contractive than, say, Distancing, which is more contractive than Entertainment; Affirmation is more contractive than Denial. While the continuum is an attempt to challenge the assumptions made by APPRAISAL system diagrams, it also raises further questions about how co-text is read by an analyst, the role of analyst intuition, and the reading position of the analyst (how helpful it is to declare it, how interpretation of APPRAISAL choices according to this position can be checked, and how valid these checks are).

A larger corpus of data, or data from different genres, would be beneficial in observing whether the instantiations that we identify occur elsewhere, and whether they have the same rhetorical effect. In terms of Acknowledgement especially, further research could investigate how often it is used expansively and how often it is used contractively, to strengthen (or weaken) the case for it to be rethought as both a contractive and expansive strategy. Texts that are meant to be highly persuasive, such as advertisements, or political pamphlets, could be coded to determine which Engagement strategies they use for maximum alignment.

Notes

1. The relationship between the degree of dialogic space offered by an Engagement choice, on the one hand, and the extent of the power of an alignment (or its rhetorical strength), on the other, is a matter that requires further exploration.
2. Figure 1 is a representation of the current thinking of Engagement according to the authors cited: it summarises monoglossic and heteroglossic options, and the hierarchy of these. It must be noted, however, that the system diagram is a convenience that maps Engagement strategies for readers. The central premise of this article is that analysts have come to naturalise this structure, where the options are equally spaced, with definite boundaries, and have ceased to see it as merely a convenience. With this naturalisation comes the assumption that the subsystems have equal ability to contract or expand dialogic space, and this is what we attempt to foreground, and challenge.

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