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The Linguist in the Writing Center: A Primer on Textual Analysis in Writing Center Studies

Why have so few scholars engaged in empirical analysis of writing center talk? When Michael Pemberton raised this question in these pages in 2010, in an introduction to a 1988 textual analysis of writing center sessions, he could name just a few scholars who had set out to study the linguistic features of writing center talk. Pemberton reasoned, "If talk, conversation, and teaching are at the center of a writing center's praxis and pedagogy, then it only makes sense that we should continue using every technique in our methodological tool kit to study and understand them" (Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace, 1988, p. 24). But today, ten years after the publication of Pemberton's introduction, no one in our field would bemoan a dearth of textual-analysis studies. With the publication of work by scholars Melody Denny, Innhwa Park, Terese Thonus, Jo Mackiewicz, Isabelle Thompson, and others, textual analysis of writing center discourse has emerged as one of the most fertile strands of writing center research. In fact, some writing center professionals might even complain that, as textual-analysis studies proliferate, it has become difficult to keep up with our field's expanded "tool kit."

Some of the more visible methodologies of textual analysis were introduced to our field and have been practiced primarily by trained linguists. Because of this, these methodologies can seem to be both a part of writing center

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studies and apart from them, borrowed methodologies that might never become fully integrated. As a writing center director who came to administration after a decade as a professional tutor, I was drawn to textual-analysis methods because of the promise they hold of illuminating actual practice and, equally important, providing an empirical foundation for new theories of our work. My experience working with these methods in my own center showed me that, while standard methods of rhetorical analysis have their value, textual-analysis methodologies are more attuned to features and patterns in language and are, therefore, I believe, well suited to providing a long-overdue revision of our understanding of writing center talk, especially if nonlinguist directors take the time to get acquainted with these methodologies. Through a discussion of four primary methods of textual analysis—**discourse analysis**, **corpus analysis**, **mixed-methods corpus analysis**, and **diachronic corpus analysis**—my essay offers a primer to introduce readers to the history of textual analysis in writing center studies from the 1980s to more recent methodological innovations. By tracing the deep roots of textual analysis within our field, I aim to demonstrate that these methods are not so foreign to writing center studies as they may initially seem and to illuminate their unique potential and drawbacks.

Discourse Analysis

The central activity of discourse analysis is the close reading of texts. In fact, Hansun Zhang Waring (2018) defines discourse analysis as "the close reading of *actual use of language along with other multimodal resources* for the purpose of dissecting its structures and devising its meanings" (italics mine) (as cited in Thonus, 2019, p. 174), "Writing Center Studies Theory in DA" section). In writing center studies, discourse analysis is a qualitative method that has generally taken the form of the close reading of written transcripts of talk from writing center sessions, though "*multimodal resources,*" including nonspeech features, such as pauses and laughter, have also been considered (Gilewicz & Thonus, 2003; Thonus 2001, 2008). Perhaps because so many writing center professionals have come from English and other humanities backgrounds that value the practice of close reading, scholars have almost from our field's inception conducted discourse analysis studies, though not with this label, to understand patterns and meaning in writing center talk. For example, the establishment of many writing centers in the late 1970s (Boquet, 1999) roughly coincided with the introduction of portable audio-recording devices. Excerpts from transcripts of sessions appeared in early editions of the *Writing Lab Newsletter* (Taylor, 1988). Writing center directors have been making audio recordings of sessions, transcribing the recordings, and analyzing the language of students and, more often, tutors for almost 50 years.

Two threads, one motivational, the other methodological, run through the scholarship of discourse analysis of writing center sessions. Researchers were often motivated to interrogate what might be described as an original tenet of writing center practice—that tutors should be nondirective. While Susan Wolff Murphy (2006) described this tenet as "one point of consensus for our field" (p. 64), support has been growing recently for an alternative view, particularly when working with multilingual students (Severino, 2016). To test nondirective approaches, researchers usually developed original, theoretically grounded coding schemes for writing center discourse, as two early teams of researchers, Kevin Davis, Nancy Hayward, Kathleen Hunter, & David Wallace (1988) and Susan Blau, John Hall, & Tracy Strauss (1998) did. Citing literature on classroom teaching, Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace (1988) compared writing center discourse with discourse in classrooms and in non-teaching settings, identifying four kinds of "conversation moves": to structure, to solicit, to respond to solicitations, and to react (p. 47). Blau, Hall, & Strauss (1998) proposed a scheme of "recurring rhetorical strategies" of tutors, which included "questions" (open and closed), "echoing" (of students' speech), and "qualifiers" (p. 22). Supporting the then less recognized notion that the minimalism-versus-directiveness framework presents a false binary, both studies found tutors shifting between more and less directive speech patterns, stances, and roles. Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace (1988) found tutors "do a certain amount of teacher-patterned talk," in which they structure the conversation and solicit response, while also engaging in extended "sections of peer discussion, during which writers and tutors exchange reactions" (p. 49). These findings led the researchers to conclude that their tutors "were not functioning exclusively as peers or as teachers, but as a combination of the two" (p. 49). Blau, Hall, & Strauss's (1998) discourse analysis elicited an interesting finding about how one tutor used questions in a session; the tutor shifted from what might be described as an excruciatingly nondirective approach, signaled by open-ended questions, to a directive approach the researchers ascribed to the increasing frustration of both parties (pp. 25–26).

Although the studies of Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace and Blau, Hall & Strauss illustrated the potential of discourse analysis to illuminate actual practice—or, in Terese Thonus's (2004) formulation, to describe "'what is' rather than provide prescriptions of 'what should be'" (p. 228)—the literature of textual analysis in writing center studies in the 1980s and 1990s is thin. Few if any scholars responded to Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace's call for scholars to pursue studies that take into account time dominance or the influence on conversation of role differences, such as tutor-student familiarity, age, and gender.

Pemberton (2010) pointed to three reasons "well-designed analytical studies of conversational narratives" were so "few and (too) far between": a

research paradigm that "valorizes other tools for data collection and analysis"; a "mistrust" among researchers of quantitative methods; and, finally, a lack of proper training in discourse analysis (pp. 25, 24). As someone who has attempted small-scale discourse analysis in my center, I would add that the time-intensive labor required to record and transcribe even a few sessions, to say nothing of obtaining Institutional Review Board approval and the requisite permissions from both tutors and students, make a rigorous textual-analysis study impractical for many directors. My initial experiments have yielded mixed results. In the spring of 2017, I developed a successful presemester staff-orientation activity with passages from a transcript I created from a writing center session between a professional tutor and a graduate student that led to a discussion about the consultant's use of questioning in the opening stage of the session. Somewhat less successfully, I asked my staff to record one of their sessions and choose two minutes to transcribe using a linguistically rigorous method. Tutors struggled with the technical demands of the transcription method, and I struggled to guide them in the process. I have not employed textual analysis in further professional-development projects largely because I found the process of producing even a few linguistically rigorous transcripts to be so challenging.

As more scholars have begun to pursue textual analysis, however, a study involving just a few transcripts would now be regarded as anecdotal. Most scholars attempt to compile a corpus, which, by Jo Mackiewicz's (2017) definition, cannot be small; she defines a corpus as a "large collection of texts" ("Aboutness" section). Mackiewicz (2017) uses the term "subcorpus" to denote a part of a larger corpus; a corpus of writing center talk always includes both a tutor subcorpus (comprised entirely of tutors' talk) and a student subcorpus (comprised of students' talk).

Writing ten years after Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace (1988), Blau, Hall, & Strauss (1998) made a similar call for other researchers to join them in this promising strand of research, pointing, tellingly, to some of the same directions Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace had identified ten years earlier (p. 39). Unlike the 1988 call, the 1998 call did receive an answer, in the work of Thonus. Beginning with a 2001 study of the influences on writing center sessions of professors, the "silent participant" in all tutorial meetings, Thonus, who holds a Ph.D. in linguistics, brought a new sophistication to writing center discourse analysis, compiling a body of work grounded in the literature and methods of sociolinguistics. In fact, Thonus seemed aghast that any scholar would have attempted discourse analysis without such methodological grounding. Referring to Blau, Hall, & Strauss's interest in how writers (and tutors) "echo" each other's "non-content" speech, such as "o.k.," "right," and "you know," which she referred to as "fillers," Magdalena Gilewicz & Thonus

(2003) chided, "These 'fillers' constitute a whole category of response with very different meanings" (p. 28).

Thonus was among the first writing center scholars to use discourse analysis in a comparative study of native English speakers and multilingual writers. In a study of a corpus of writing center transcripts evenly divided between native English speakers (NES) and nonnative English speakers (NNES), Thonus (2004) found sessions with NNES tutees had fewer backchannel responses (comments such as "uh-huh," "yeah," "ok," and "(all) right," which are made without the intention of taking the floor (Gilewicz & Thonus, 2003, pp. 29–30), as well as fewer simultaneous speech overlaps, less laughter, and "turns" by tutors that were both more directive and longer. While another researcher might have left her analysis there, Thonus's facility with the literature of sociolinguistics allowed her to place these discourse features, in a larger context of institutional discourse and conclude that NNES sessions "have the transactional character of a service encounter" (2004, p. 237). These differences in the features of NES and NNES sessions did not signal a troubling disparity to Thonus; rather than prescribe ways to train tutors to change the approach to working with NNES tutees, she suggested administrators and tutors "relinquish the orthodoxy of the collaborative frame" and use their own transcripts of sessions with NNES tutees as the basis for reflection and "a more flexible approach" (p. 240).

Though Thonus was interested in challenging the lore of minimalism, her grounding in the literature of linguistics helped her move beyond this project. In another article, Thonus (2016) examined the closings of writing center sessions in the context of sociolinguistic research on "institutional closings," as in doctors' visits and at drive-through windows, finding that writing center sessions have characteristics of institutional interactions while also including "movements" that "cross the boundaries of institutional roles and expectations" (p. 43). Thonus (2001) was also among the first researchers in writing center studies to mark what linguists call "paralinguistic" features, nonspeech utterances including coughing, finger snapping, and laughter, and she did not hesitate to make these less recognized features of communication the central focus of her inquiry. A study on "coordinated laughter" in writing center sessions found both tutors and students used laughter in the "purposeful development of familiarity" (Thonus, 2008, p. 341). While "single-party laughter," that is, laughter that is not shared, was used by students to "display nervousness" or "acknowledge error," laughter by tutors was used to "mitigate directives" (p. 342). The discourse analysis studies I discuss here, especially Thonus's, illustrate how the careful reading of session transcripts can lead to rich findings about how tutors and students create meaning through their talk. With its easy fluency in the terminology and literature of sociolinguistics, Thonus's work can feel daunting to would-be discourse analysts, who might

ask themselves whether it is even possible to work in this strand of research as a nonlinguist. But a chapter by Thonus (2019) in a recent guide to methods in writing center studies provides an accessible introduction to discourse analysis both within and beyond writing center studies for nonprofessionals while also introducing principles of critical discourse analysis, a method that, because it "views talk and text within their social and political contexts," aligns with a social justice approach to writing center research (p. 177).

Close Vertical Transcription (CVT)

Gilewicz & Thonus (2003) argued that only the rigorous, technically demanding method of transcribing sessions they called "close vertical transcription (CVT)", would allow scholars access to the full richness of writing center discourse. Gilewicz & Thonus found problematic the basic transcription method often employed in tutoring manuals and dubbed it "playscript" because of the way it simplified tutor-student discourse as "neatly taken" conversational "turns" (p. 31). In contrast, the transcripts Gilewicz & Thonus advocated making are "vertical" because they not only allow for representing nonspeech utterances but also represent the moments in conversation when two speakers "share" a "channel," either through overlapped speech or through backchannel responses. CVT resembles methods used in fields including linguistics and anthropology (Gilewicz & Thonus, p. 28).

To illustrate how CVT captures conversational features playscript omits, Gilewicz & Thonus (2003, p. 37) introduced both playscript and CVT excerpts of the same group tutoring session, three lines of which I have shown below in Table 1. (Asterisks denote "indecipherable or doubtful" hearing [Gilewicz & Thonus, 2003, p. 30]).

Table 1

Comparison of Playscript and CVT Analysis

Playscript	CVT
M: See, I don't know if my conclusion really, I kind of like messed up.	M: See, I don't know if my conclusion really ***. I kind of like [messed up.
F: I kind of like the essay.	F: [I kind of like the essay.
A: I like the whole thing.	A: I like, I like the whole thing.

Comparing the two excerpts reveals that F's interruption of M and a repetition in A's turn— which were omitted from the playscript transcript—are faithfully recorded in the CVT transcript.

Although Gilewicz & Thonus (2003) acknowledged one purpose of their work as making the case for writing center conversation as "an oral discourse genre in the academy" (p. 47), the researchers, who asked tutors to reflect on portions of the sessions the researchers had transcribed using CVT, believed using CVT in professional-development activities could have unique benefits because the method illuminated otherwise hidden aspects of practice. The use of pauses, which are erased in playscript transcription, were the focus of the two tutors' reflections excerpted by the authors. One tutor, who had transcribed a section of a group tutoring session he facilitated, reflected on "how much of the time was spent in silence" (p. 42), pointing to several long pauses that followed his (repeated) prompting of group members to "phrase" a thesis statement. In response to this reflection and in an annotation of the transcript, the writing center director commented on the tutor's method of soliciting orally composed thesis statements rather than suggesting a (probably longer) pause to allow students to compose potential thesis statements on paper. In response to another excerpt from a transcript, which captured a tutor "pil[ing] query upon query" (p. 42), the writing center director suggested a similar change in approach: from the tutor prompting oral composition to inviting the student to respond to the questions, one at a time, on paper.

Susan Wolff Murphy's CVT analysis (2006) is an excellent example of how close reading of a writing center transcript can help puncture writing center lore. Using the method reveals the fallacy that consultants are making conscious, moment-by-moment choices about enacting a directive or nondirective pedagogy when, in fact, consultants may be more immediately concerned with the success or failure of the social transaction of the session. Murphy showed how a consultant's nondirective self-presentation broke down, sliding incrementally towards an authoritative stance, over the course of a session that was not progressing according to a collaborative ideal of give and take. In a darkly entertaining analysis, Murphy highlighted a dramatic shift in tutor self-presentation from "uninformed consultant," one who confesses he has not read *The Handmaid's Tale*, to an authoritative (and exasperated) teacher. After 145 conversational turns that did not produce a thesis but did display his knowledge of literary studies jargon, the tutor advised, "For right now what I would do is you know whatever you want to write your paper about, just chuck it" (p. 76). While Murphy's purpose was not to make any special claims for the virtues of CVT, it can be said that CVT makes a case for itself in the session excerpts included in this article, especially for its faithful representation of interruptions at points of tension in two of the sessions she analyzed. Orthographic transcription, a linguistically rigorous method that shares features

with CVT and has been used by Mackiewicz & Isabelle Thomspon (2018), offers similar advantages.

Recent Developments in Published Work on Writing Center Talk

Over the past ten years, textual-analysis studies have been published more frequently. They have included studies by Innhwa Park (2014) of how student-writers push back against tutors' suggestions and what language is used by student-writers when they make requests of tutors; and a study by Sue Dinitz & Susanmarie Harrington (2014) of the relationship between the quality of conferences and the disciplinary expertise of tutors. Recognizing a need to support scholars working in this growing strand of research with a common analytical framework for textual analysis, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) recently introduced a new, holistic coding scheme for textual analysis. In the same study, they applied their scheme to an analysis of ten writing center sessions and considered the implications of their findings for staff education, even as they acknowledged the local limitations for their study, in which none of the tutors or students were nonnative speakers of English and all of the tutors were white (pp. 8, 55).

The book *Talk About Writing*, by Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018), introduced a scheme I will refer to as the *TAW scheme*. In developing this scheme, they drew from the literature of writing center studies but also (and principally) from other fields, including early childhood education, math and science instructional software, politeness theory, classroom teaching, and writing and motivation. Mackiewicz & Thompson also acknowledged a significant debt to a scheme developed for a study of decoding in adult-literacy tutoring, which they adapted for the writing center context. The TAW scheme is comprised of two components—the macrolevel, which focuses on the organization of sessions, and the microlevel, which focuses on strategies tutors use in sessions.

A Macrolevel Focused on Organization of Sessions

In their description of the macrolevel component of their scheme, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) affirm the usefulness of a widely accepted framework for the organization of sessions into three stages. In the opening stage (also known as the agenda-setting stage), tutors and students collaboratively set goals for the session. In the teaching stage, by far the longest stage, tutors and students collaborate to meet the goals set. Finally, in the closing stage, tutors and students assess whether together they have met the goals identified at the beginning of the conference (pp. 15–17).

One way Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) look at the macrolevel of sessions is through the concept of topic episodes, which is less familiar to most writing center professionals than the organizing principle of stages. The researchers define the topic episode as "strings of conversation that coherently address one subject" (p. 17). Most writing center conferences are comprised of several topic episodes. A conference might include, for example, a discussion of past perfect tense (which would constitute one topic episode) and a discussion of making a thesis statement more specific (which would constitute another). A researcher who has identified the topic episodes comprised in a conference can list them out to create what Mackiewicz & Thompson call a "chain of topic episodes," as in the following partial chain of topic episodes from the teaching stage of a conference that focused on brainstorming a paper about smoking:

1. Tutor initiated the idea of curbing rather than banning smoking.

2. Tutor asked where smoking is currently banned.

3. Tutor asked if there are places where smoking is not banned but should be.

4. Tutor asked where the information for the essay should come from.

5. Tutor suggested that topic needs narrowing.

6. Tutor suggested Hollywood as a means for narrowing. (p. 75)

This topic-episode chain suggests how the unit of the topic episode can illuminate the bones of a session, providing a thumbnail sketch of its content. The practice of mapping out the topic episodes in a session might have a useful application for tutors who wish to better understand their practice, as well as for directors and scholars seeking to identify patterns in session transcripts.

A Microlevel Focused on Tutoring Strategies

In the microlevel of their scheme, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) introduce three categories of tutoring strategies. The scheme's first category, instruction, encompasses the strategies of telling, suggesting, and explaining (p. 6). Cognitive scaffolding, which Mackiewicz & Thompson define as "a range of strategies that prod students to think and then help them to push their thinking further," includes, among others, pumping (questions "that get student writers to think out loud"), reading aloud, and responding as a reader or listener (p. 7). Motivational scaffolding strategies, which "provide encouragement through praise, assurances of caring, and statements reinforcing student writers' ownership of their writing," include showing concern, praising, and reinforcing student writers' ownership and control (p. 7). In an acknowledgement of

the value of early discourse analysis in writing center studies, Mackiewicz & Thompson note correspondences between their scheme and Blau, Hall, & Strauss's (1998), noting that Blau, Hall, & Strauss's category of open and closed questions corresponds to the TAW scheme's category of cognitive scaffolding; Blau, Hall, & Strauss's category of "echoing" corresponds to motivational scaffolding and their "qualifiers" correspond to the instructional strategy of suggesting (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2018, p. 32.)

With its 16 codes for tutoring strategies, the TAW scheme provides a vast frontier for quantitative analysis. Among other findings, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) report quantitative findings for each of the 16 strategies in their scheme, including the average number of occurrences of each strategy per ten minutes of tutoring, such as that tutors used the strategy of referring to a previous topic an average of .54 occurrences per 10 minutes. Yet acknowledging that "quantitative analysis of tutoring strategies gets us only so far," Mackiewicz & Thompson dedicate far more space to their (qualitative) discourse analysis (p. 93).

To illustrate how the TAW scheme operates in a discourse analysis—and how a more specialized terminology can enhance a close reading of a session transcript—Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) analyzed the following brief passage of tutor talk from a writing center session:

> T[utor]2: And I think that talking about those transitions [changes in Student 2's life] is making your paper seem a little unfocused. And so I think what I would think about is which of these you would like to focus on. Do you want to focus on what you learned from this change, or do you want to focus on what you learned from that change? (p. 8)

Without their coding scheme, an observer of the conference might say the tutor "delivered a criticism about [the student's] preference for revising" (p. 7). With the coding scheme, an observer could label the advice as *suggesting*, a strategy that mitigates advice, making it feel less obligatory. They could also identify the question as one that forces the student "to choose between two alternatives": a "forced choice" in their scheme (p. 8).

Further evidence of the benefits of the precision of their scheme abounds in their fuller analysis of 10 writing center sessions, in which the distinctions between the various codes are clearly delineated. When they applied their scheme to the ten sessions they analyzed, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) found tutors used the strategy of suggesting (as opposed to telling, a more directive strategy) when discussing grammar, as in the suggestion "So a good thing to do would be to put a comma there," and that tutors used verbs such as "might" and "could" to signal the "optionality" of their suggestions (p. 95). The researchers also found tutors utilized the strategy of responding as a reader or a listener, often summarizing or paraphrasing what students had said or written (p. 118). In addition, Mackiewicz & Thompson note tutors used formulaic

praise, as in "that's perfect," more often than nonformulaic praise, as in "I think that your paper does a nice job of . . . trying to explain . . . that independence lets you go out and do these other things" (p. 138), and that just 16% of tutors offered students explanations for their advice.

Among Mackiewicz & Thompson's (2018) recommendations for staff education is that writing center directors help tutors learn to reduce ambiguity in their advice to writers by prefacing important suggestions with phrases such as "I suggest" and other illocutionary-force indicating devices, or "words that explicitly mark what a speaker is doing with his or her words," as when one tutor said, "So, what I would suggest is going back and reworking the first, um, especially the second two sent—like the first sentence or two" (p. 96). Given how few tutors offered students explanations for their advice, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2018) recommend talking with tutors about explaining strategies (p. 105). The researchers also suggest encouraging tutors to show engagement and understanding by paraphrasing what students say and to ask students to paraphrase their assignment prompts (p. 124). In addition, they recommend helping tutors understand the differences between formulaic and nonformulaic language so they can offer nonformulaic praise, which has been shown to be more effective (p. 146).

While they acknowledge that the small sample size of their study limits the applicability of their suggestions across a range of student (and tutor) populations, Mackiewicz & Thompson's (2018) project points to a model for using local empirical research as a tool to inform staff education. When they created their own bare-bones coding schemes to ground their studies, Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace (1988) and other early discourse analysts were reaching towards something like the TAW scheme—a coding framework at once simple enough for a nonlinguist to replicate and complex enough to encompass the variety of strategies on display in any given writing center session. It seems inevitable that the TAW scheme will be used (and adapted) not only by researchers who seek to build on this strand of scholarship but also by writing center professionals seeking to better understand their own and their colleagues' practice. At the same time, any project of discourse analysis, whether grounded in the TAW scheme or not, that depends solely on the human eye will necessarily be limited in its scope. Discourse analysis does not allow researchers to analyze large quantities of text or to make broad, empirically grounded claims about writing center talk that larger scale analysis might make possible.

An Emerging Terminology

The proliferation of textual analysis conducted by trained linguists has led to the more widespread use of linguistic terms that will likely become

integrated into writing center studies as researchers build on this strand of scholarship. In addition to terms I have already defined, including *backchannels* and *illocutionary-force indicating devices*, and the terminology of Mackiewicz & Thompson's (2018) TAW scheme, Mackiewicz, Thompson, Thonus and other scholars have used the following terms in their analysis of writing center talk:

- **Discourse markers** or **discourse organizers** are words that often signal the beginning of a speech turn, or topic episode, including "OK," "now," and "let's."
- **Hesitation markers** are words, such as "um," "uh," or "like," used to fill time in conversation while thinking out loud. Hesitation markers are particularly salient in the analysis of students' speech.
- **Minimal responses**, as defined by Mackiewicz (2017), are "single-word acknowledgement[s] of the other discourse participant that may or may not comprise the speaker's entire turn at talk" ("Word Count" section). Minimal responses, which include "yeah," "uhhuh," and "ok," are often used by students to "signal their attention to what the tutor says" (Mackiewicz, 2018, p. 4). All these minimal responses qualify as **backchannels**, a type of minimal response uttered without the intention of taking the floor (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Student Writers'" section).
- **Downgraders** are words or sequences of words, such as "a little" or "kind of" that "mitigate the force of a proposition" (Mackiewicz, 2018, p. 97). Downgraders include "understaters," such as "just" (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Student Writers'" section) and "downtoners" such as "maybe," "possibly," and "perhaps" (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Adverbs" section).
- **Tag questions** include words and collocations such as "you know?" and "ok?" that, when appended to a statement, turn the statement into a question.

In addition to these established linguistic terms, new terms have emerged through the analysis of writing center talk. Mackiewicz (with Thompson) coined the term "**spoken written language**," or "**SWL**," and subsequently updated the definition as "the oral language that tutors and student writers generate for potential use in the student writer's written texts" (Mackiewicz, 2018, p. 65), as in when a tutor said, "You're going to say like, 'however, in *Notes from the Underground*, the author does show that there's hope for a better life'" (p. 98); or as in, "You might say, 'The Vatican has two main aims in this strategy.'" It is perhaps a testament to how little scholars in our field have studied session transcripts up to this point that both Mackiewicz (with Thompson) and Melody Denny (2018) have, in studies published within a year of each other, given a name to this ubiquitous feature of writing speech. Denny calls this feature "**OR**," for "**oral writing-revision space**" (36).

Corpus Analysis

Until recently, the scope of textual-analysis studies had always been limited by practical constraints. No two scholars—even scholars as industrious as Mackiewicz & Thompson—could reasonably hope to analyze 100 transcripts on their own, and even 40 would seem to be a stretch. Mackiewicz (2017) introduced a potential solution to this problem of scale in the form of corpus analysis, a method that allows for the digital analysis of a corpus.

There are two general categories of corpora (the plural form of corpus). A **specialized corpus** is a collection of texts compiled from the discourse of a particular setting or field, such as conversations between air-traffic controllers and pilots, or conversations in the gift shop of a botanical garden. By contrast, **reference corpora** are compiled of texts drawn from more general sources. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) contains 520 million words of spoken English. The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) is drawn from academic office hours representing a range of fields.

Corpus analysis encompasses two primary approaches. **Corpus-based analysis** works on the same principle as the "find" function in Microsoft Word: researchers direct a computer program to search a corpus for occurrences of particular words or groups of words. (Mackiewicz used the popular corpus-analysis software AntConc.) Zak Lancaster (2016) employed this method in a study of the popular composition text *They Say/I Say* (Graff & Birkenstein, 2014), using corpus-analysis software to search a corpus of published academic work for occurrences of some of the word sequences that comprise that book's many templates for academic prose, showing that these rhetorical forms were actually used infrequently by both professional scholars and college writers. Comparing a corpus he compiled of research-based argument papers written by first-year students at CUNY's City College to a national corpus of first-year writing, Thomas Peele (2018) searched for words and word sequences indicating a writer was entertaining objections to their argument, offering concessions, and posing a counterargument. He found City College writers made concessions only rarely, and with "a much smaller range of linguistic resources" than their first-year writing peers (p. 86).

Corpus-driven analysis, by contrast, is an inductive method. Rather than searching for particular words or groups of words, researchers direct software to identify the most commonly occurring words and word sequences in a given corpus, sometimes with surprising results. Corpus-driven analysis is often used to illuminate the unique linguistic features of a specialized corpus. In addition to the examples presented earlier, a corpus of writing center talk would also constitute a specialized corpus. Once they have identified the most frequently occurring words and word sequences in a specialized corpus, researchers conducting corpus-driven analysis compare these findings against

a reference corpus, such as COCA or MICASE (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Corpus Analysis Described" section).

Five Measures of a Corpus

Five frequently utilized measures of a corpus include word count, type-token ratios, most frequent words, key words, and frequently occurring lexical bundles.

Word Count
Word count, the measure of the number or words in a corpus, determines the volubility of parties in a corpus of spoken discourse, such as the volubility of tutors versus that of students (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Basic Characteristics" section).

Type-Token ratio
By measuring the "proportion of unique words in a corpus (the types) to the total number of times those unique words occur in the corpus (the tokens)," the type-token ratio provides an indication of the difficulty of the talk in the corpus. In a corpus containing many unique words and relatively few repetitions, the type-token ratio would be high, indicating difficulty, while a corpus with a low type-token ratio, in which relatively few words were used (and were often repeated), would indicate less difficult speech (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Basic Characteristics" section).

Most Frequent Words
Another common measure of a corpus is its most frequent words, or the words used most often. As with word count, it is possible to determine the frequently occurring words of two parties in a corpus of spoken discourse; Mackiewicz (2017) presented tutors' and students' frequently occurring words in separate lists (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Basic Characteristics" section).

Key Words
In corpus-driven analysis, comparing the frequently occurring words of a specialized corpus against a reference corpus, such as COCA or MICASE, allows researchers to identify the key words of the specialized corpus. Key words are words that appear more frequently in a specialized corpus than they do in a reference corpus. As such, key words suggest the unique characteristics, or aboutness, of the specialized corpus (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Two Types of Corpus Analysis" section). For example, in a corpus of doctor-patient interactions in a podiatrist's office, the word *bunion* would likely be a key word; key

words are one of the most salient measures for describing the aboutness of a specialized corpus (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2016, p. 199).

Frequently Occurring Lexical Bundles

A lexical bundle has been defined as a "frequently occurring word sequence" (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Basic characteristics" section) and as a "relatively common multiword sequence" (Tremblay, Derwing, Libben, & Westbury, 2011, as cited in Mackiewicz, 2017, "Lexical Bundles" section). Examples of lexical bundles include "on the contrary," "in the middle of the," and "I don't know." Thus, the rhetorical forms in *They Say/I Say* would be classified as lexical bundles. As with individual words, researchers can direct corpus-analysis software to search for frequently occurring lexical bundles.

As Mackiewicz (2017) details in an excellent literature review, corpus analysis, both corpus based and corpus driven, has been employed in a variety of studies of educational discourse, from a study that compared the directiveness of international graduate student teaching assistants and faculty members in office hours with students to another study that measured changes in the discourse of veterinary students as they progressed in their education. Some of these studies were purely quantitative while others used a mixed-methods approach of quantitative and qualitative analysis ("Corpus Analysis Outside Writing Studies" section). Likewise, in his *The Writing Center as Cultural and Interdisciplinary Contact Zone*, Randall Monty (2016) used corpus analysis in a chapter on how writing centers position themselves on their websites.

Mixed-Methods Corpus Analysis

In **mixed-methods corpus analysis**, corpus analysis is utilized in conjunction with discourse analysis. In a mixed-methods corpus analysis of 47 writing center sessions (which was the first corpus analysis of writing center sessions of any kind), Mackiewicz & Thompson (2016) reported both quantitative and qualitative findings. As in Mackiewicz's (2017; 2018) subsequent work, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2016) dedicated far more space to presenting discourse analysis founded in the literature of sociolinguistics. Their quantitative findings showed tutors were far more voluble than students, with an average word count per conference of 2,336, in contrast to 962 for students, and that "you" was tutors' most frequently occurring word, with a total of 5,691 uses. In a book-length expansion of that study, Mackiewicz (2019) again contextualized her most pertinent findings with discourse analysis, using corpus analysis as a kind of searchlight to guide her to the most promising sites for close reading, providing discourse analysis of the corpus's most frequently occurring words, the most frequently occurring four-word bundles, and tutors' and students' key words, a category Mackiewicz divided into key function

words, or words that "link words, phrases and clauses," and key content words, or words that "supply information and meaning" (Mackiewicz, 2017, "Analyzing the Aboutness" section). She reported the top twenty function words for both tutors and students, the top five of which were "you," "ok," "um," "your," and "sentence" for tutors and "like," "uhhuh," "I," "ok," and "yeah" for students.

What are we to make of this list, which would not seem particularly surprising to anyone who has spent a few hours in the midst of writing center conversation? Mackiewicz & Thompson (2016) expressed a goal of using corpus analysis to "make the invisible visible" by studying words and phrases "so commonly used in writing center dialogue that researchers may not single them out for analysis" (p. 217). And this is what Mackiewicz has continued to do. Examining the many instances in her corpus in which students used the word "like," Mackiewicz (2017) found students using that word in the same way they used another key word, "um," a use she sees as consistent with our understanding of a writing center session as a space that allows for deliberative, provisional talk ("Key Function Words" section, "Tutors' and Student Writers' Most Frequent Words" section). However, she found students using "like" in other ways, too. She excerpted the following exchange, in which a student is recounting a narrative he wrote about:

Like, it's just the story of her captivity and, like, how they kept her captive. They didn't hurt her. It was, **like**, a pretty good captivity…

Here, the student, who does not feel comfortable making an assertion that the narrator actually *enjoyed* a period of captivity, is using "like" as a "distancer," a word speakers use to "distance themselves slightly from the words and phrases they use" ("Key Function Words" section). Mackiewicz also highlighted how students used "not" both in their descriptions of instructors' proscriptions and to report on what they had not yet accomplished in their work on a paper, and how tutors used "you" when "providing encouragement and advice" and "so" to signal evaluations of a student's work ("Key Function Words" section).

A Transinstitutional Corpus

Mackiewicz (2017) clearly viewed her corpus-analysis study—including the discourse analysis I have summarized above—as a beginning, a kind of introduction to a new and promising methodology. The great promise of corpus analysis is that it might allow scholars to make large-scale comparisons across disciplines, student and tutor populations, campuses, and even points in time, as Mackiewicz has recently attempted in a study I discuss below. Like Davis, Hayward, Hunter, & Wallace (1988), Blau, Hall, & Strauss (1998), and Gilewicz & Thonus (2003), Mackiewicz called for other scholars to follow her lead in conducting empirical analysis of writing center talk, but her call was both more concrete and more ambitious: Mackiewicz (2017) expressed the

hope that the International Writing Centers Association or another body would oversee the creation of a transinstitutional corpus of writing center transcripts that would allow "access to a wide range of conference participants—tutors and student writers representing non-traditional college students and those from different linguistic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds" and facilitate research on a scale that would allow for generalizability. Citing a precedent for a shared repository in the developmental sciences called the Databrary, Mackiewicz suggested following the model of a controlled data collection, which would allow for different levels of access to data ("Creating a Controlled Data Collection" section).

Will this happen anytime soon? Mackiewicz concedes there are many barriers, not the least of which is the approval of Institutional Review Boards. Interestingly, Mackiewicz (2017) has argued against imposing any requirements on the transcription style of transcripts to be included in the transinstitutional corpus of writing center discourse, describing any such requirements as "a largely pointless prescription" ("Creating a Controlled Data Collection" section).

Diachronic Corpus Analysis

While a corpus analysis of the kind I have described can help us understand the nature of writing center talk, a **diachronic corpus analysis**, comparing writing center talk at two points in time, can help us understand how (or if) that talk has changed over time. Mackiewicz (2018) juxtaposed two corpora from the same writing center gathered almost twenty years apart, in 2000 and 2017, with the aim of determining whether two major shifts that occurred in the writing center during this period, a major increase in the number of nonnative English speaking students and an overhaul in the center's approach to staff education, would be reflected in the language of conferences. (In addition to conducting corpus analysis and discourse analysis, Mackiewicz also conducted interviews of conference participants and writing center administrators past and present.) Mackiewicz complemented her quantitative findings on most frequently occurring words, key words, and lexical bundles from both the 2000 and 2017 subcorpora with incisive discourse analysis of session talk in which she found evidence of larger changes in the writing center in some of the smallest words both tutors and students used: "ok," "yeah," and "so."

Her finding that "ok" fell from being the most key word of the 2000 tutors to the eighth most key word of the 2017 tutors led her to passages from transcripts in which the 2000 tutors used "ok" as a "microtransition" to shift from reading a student's paper aloud to making a suggestion for sentence-level changes, or from making such a suggestion back to reading aloud (Mackiewicz, 2018, pp. 74–80). What accounted for this change? Mackiewicz attributed the

drop in the keyness of "ok" to a new program of staff education that asked tutors to take a more holistic, rhetorically based approach to working with students. This approach, she suggested, had helped move the 2017 tutors away from a sentence-by-sentence method of reading and suggesting, a strategy that she knew, from interviews she conducted with tutors from 2000, tutors had often used (pp. 79–80).

Whereas the sentence-by-sentence method employed by the 2000 tutors could lead to tutor dominance and student passivity, the 2017 tutors' more holistic approach promoted more equal, conversational exchanges, Mackiewicz (2018) concluded. She found this shift reflected in a slight increase in student volubility (p. 62) but also, more pertinently, in a dramatic shift in the keyness of "yeah," which went from being tutors' 50th most key word in 2000 to their 5th most key word in 2017 (p. 73). In her discourse analysis, Mackiewicz (2018) found tutors used "yeah" in exchanges that reflected increased student control and engagement, to affirm students' formulations of their ideas, and to respond to their questions (pp. 75–77). Similarly, Mackiewicz explained the increased keyness of "so," a word tutors used to link ideas and draw conclusions, as an indication that 2017 students "were doing more of the work of connecting ideas and extrapolating from one idea to another than student writers in 2000" (p. 120).

With the promise of tracking the adoption of best practices by tutors and measuring student engagement by juxtaposing writing center talk at two points in time, diachronic corpus analysis presents a new, quantitatively driven assessment tool for writing centers. Of course, the widespread use of this method as an assessment tool would depend on the capacity of writing center professionals to collect data from their centers and analyze it using corpus-analysis software.

Over the past five years, Mackiewicz has introduced us to three methods of corpus analysis through expansive studies that have both advanced our field and illustrated the potential for further advancing it. Mackiewicz's work makes clear that corpus analysis is most valuable when practiced as a component of a mixed-methods approach that includes the interpretive component of discourse analysis. If it can be employed on a large scale (and across institutions), mixed-methods corpus analysis will allow us to make empirically founded generalizations about writing center practice and simultaneously will illuminate key differences in writing center talk across a variety of tutor and student populations. The most recent method Mackiewicz (2018) has introduced, the mixed-methods diachronic corpus analysis, seems to have enormous potential as an assessment tool. If this method can be employed on a large transinstitutional scale, it might, through the analysis of our talk, even allow for long-term empirical measures of the evolution of our field.

I hope this survey of the history and present landscape of textual analysis in writing center studies clarifies the deep roots of these empirical methods in our field, as well as their potential to address some of our field's most pressing needs and questions. Before this can happen, though, there is a lot of work to be done. As clearly as Mackiewicz has described this method and mixed-methods corpus analysis, other researchers, as they attempt to replicate these methods in writing center studies, may encounter significant technical and practical barriers, a few of which I discuss below.

Future Directions for Textual Analysis

Even if Pemberton would no longer lament a lack of research in textual analysis, he might still point to a lack of training. The methods I have described in this primer have the capacity to help us understand the full breadth of writing center discourse, but we can only achieve this if more would-be scholars learn how to use the new methods of textual analysis, especially corpus analysis.

I will suggest one possible step towards equipping more of us to conduct our own textual-analysis studies: a handbook for nonlinguist writing center professionals who aspire to do empirical linguistic analysis of talk in their centers, whether to publish scholarship, develop in-house programs for staff training, or transcribe sessions for the transinstitutional repository of writing center talk Mackiewicz envisages. Thonus's (2019) aforementioned chapter on discourse analysis, situated in a guide to methods in writing center studies, points towards resources for would-be practitioners and presents examples of potential studies, but it does not address corpus methods or offer practical step-by-step guidance tailored to writing center professionals. Monty's (2019) chapter on corpus approaches to writing center studies in the same volume is excellent but necessarily limited in scope. I am proposing that Mackiewicz write a single-method-version introduction akin to Jackie Grutsch McKinney's *Strategies for Writing Center Research* (2015) that might discuss, for example, how to develop a timeline for a study, how to adapt the TAW scheme to answer particular questions, and how to use AntConc. Mackiewicz might also address the question of what actions writing center professionals can take to establish the transinstitutional repository of writing center talk.

As the director of a writing center that serves a population of nontraditional students, a majority of whom are working-class graduate students of color, I was initially drawn to textual analysis as a method of producing DIY staff-education materials that would reflect the talk I heard in our center. Like other writing center professionals who lead writing centers serving populations of working-class students, students of color, nontraditional students, and/or graduate students, I have found my own students underrepresented in the literature of writing center studies. In spite of my experience, I still believe

textual analysis promises to be one way writing center professionals who work in centers like mine, which do not fit the mold of a four-year Research 1 university, can help illuminate the diversity of "actual practice" of writing center discourse, and, in Mackiewicz & Thompson's (2018) vision, "broade[n] the implications of the research beyond the local" (p. 8). What Mackiewicz and Thompson do not say, but I will, is that in order to achieve this lofty and worthy goal, we'll have to get everyone on board.

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