

## DESCRIBING INTERPRETATION IN CRITICAL SUMMARIZATION

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This paper is about identifying, classifying and describing interpretation in critical summarization. It is suggested that critical summarization could be used as a way of introducing student writers into the critical practices of their academic discourse communities. The method for identifying and classifying interpretation was developed on the basis of critical summaries written by university students synthesizing three topically-related source texts. Academic book reviews were chosen as control data since they are considered both generically close to critical summaries and also useful target performance for undergraduates. The data showed that interpretation was manifested in the speech acts of reporting, evaluation and discussion. Six subtypes under these major speech acts were identified for categorizing interpretation in the critical summaries and book reviews. In this paper the six speech act subtypes identified in the data will be described and illustrated. The method is likely to yield pedagogical applications for teaching reviewing and critical writing in general.

**Keywords:** interpretation, critical summarization

This paper presents a synopsis of my doctoral dissertation (see Stotesbury 1999), which attempts to identify interpretation in critical summaries and develop a model for its description. The study makes two assumptions about critical summarization: (1) that the writing of critical summaries could be a useful first step in practising proper academic writing, which usually draws on a variety of sources, and (2) that all summarizing includes interpretation.

### 1 DEFINITION OF CRITICAL SUMMARY

The critical summary is defined as a piece of discourse which gives the most important points of the source text(s), as judged by the summarizer

with reference to the purpose and audience of the summary, examines the source text(s) critically, interprets the contents and/or evaluates the authors and/or the ideas expressed by them, and includes the summarizer's own view of the text(s) or of the ideas expressed in them.

## **2 INSTRUCTION FOR THE CRITICAL SUMMARY ASSIGNMENT**

The instruction for the critical summary assignment stated: Please read the following three texts and, on the basis of all three texts, write a **critical** summary for a fellow-student who has not read the texts but would like to have some idea of them and your opinion of them. Suggested length: 1-1½ pages.

## **3 MATERIALS**

The principal data comprised 77 critical summaries written in English by Finnish university students (taking an English for Academic Purposes language course) on the basis of three source texts (from the *Guardian*, 19 January 1986). The control data consisted of 25 academic book reviews (from *History Today*, *The TESOL Quarterly*, and *ELT Journal*).

## **4 SOURCE TEXTS**

Jonathan Yardley: "The vacuum at the end of the tube"

Hélène Hout: "Why the image is no substitute for command of language"

Philippe Bernard: "TV medium is putting the classroom message across"

## **5 METHOD**

The analytical method applied in the study was developed by examining the data. It appeared that interpretation was manifested in speech acts which express the summarizers' and reviewers' intentions through the communicative (illocutionary) force of utterances. The speech acts which



Finnish undergraduates, while the reviews were written by native English speakers and presumably more professional academic writers.

## 7 SPEECH ACTS AND THEIR SUBTYPES

The following brief outline characterizes and illustrates each subtype of the major speech acts of reporting, evaluation and discussion. The (unedited) examples are from the critical summaries.

The following codes are used to indicate the speech act subtype:

plain reporting:	<u>underlining</u>
interpretative reporting:	<u>double underlining</u>
evaluative reporting:	<u>underlining + <b>boldface</b></u>
evaluation proper:	<b>boldface</b>
evaluative discussion:	<b>boldface + <i>italics</i></b>
discussion proper:	<i>italics</i>

**1. PLAIN REPORTING** includes such references to the source text language events which do not express any explicit mental, textual or contextual interpretation. (Nevertheless, this does not overrule more covert interpretation since the very act of selection from the source text involves subjective decision-making and, accordingly, interpretation.) The acts of plain reporting are commonly realized by the prototypical reporting verb *say* of plain reports.

Example 1:

Huot says that it is good to use pictures as a technique in the teaching, but images cannot be more than that.

**2. INTERPRETATIVE REPORTING** includes such references to the source text language events in which the summarizer or reviewer displays an interpretative stance in the form of a distinct mental, textual or contextual inference or deduction. These speech acts comprise various contextual and interpersonal functions whose purpose is to provide the reader with guidance in the form of introductory summary statements and metadiscursive statements.

Example 2:

**Bernard justifies his opinion with experiences which French teachers have of the use of audiovisual systems in schools.**

**3. EVALUATIVE REPORTING** includes such references to the source text language events in which the summarizers or reviewers, in addition to their plain or interpretative stances, also display an evaluative stance. The acts of evaluative reporting often have the rhetorical function of introduction.

Example 3:

**The third and last article is more tolerant in this.**

**4. EVALUATION PROPER** includes such references to the source text language events in which the summarizers or reviewers display an evaluative stance. The subtypes of speech acts designated as instances of evaluation proper may include the summarizers' or reviewers' assessments of the facts and views presented by the source text author(s) or, in the case of book reviews, their appraisals of the authors' scholarly performance. These evaluative acts are usually presented with regard to quality (i.e., on the axis of 'good' or 'bad') or moral judgments of actions (i.e., on the axis of 'right' or 'wrong').

Example 4:

**I do agree with him about the entertainment "show"-TV, but I think there are also a lot of useful and important programs from where can get much true information.**

**5. EVALUATIVE DISCUSSION** includes such references to the source text language events in which the summarizers or reviewers, while expressing an evaluative stance, distance their speech act from evaluation proper, i.e., direct evaluation of the source text author(s), to the realm of the speech act of discussion. The subtype of evaluative discussion concerns the quality of the source texts or the authors' presentation of their ideas. In this subtype the focus is on the text and its reception by the summarizer, not on the author, as in the evaluation proper. In contrast to the acts of evaluative reporting, those of evaluative discussion have an anaphoric function and they are usually placed at the end of the summary or the treatment of a source text (in the case of multiple sources).

Example 5:

*It seems to me that at least the textbooks of some foreign languages are too full of images; they have become annoying.*

**6. DISCUSSION PROPER** includes those references to the source text language events in which the summarizers or reviewers develop the topic of the source texts further. These discussive speech acts usually occur at the end of the summary or book review, but they may also occur at the beginning of discourse as an introductory discussion on the topic or throughout the summary or review in the form of metadiscursive commentary.

Example 6:

*I think images can be used for motivating pupils but they should not make the main teaching material. They can also be used as a source for discussions.*

## 8 FINDINGS

All the speech act subtypes were identifiable in both sets of data. Thus the model generated for the study seems applicable in tapping interpretation. As hypothesized, there were both qualitative and quantitative differences which were mainly realized by linguistic means (although there were also some generic differences derived from the somewhat different purposes of book reviews and critical summaries). The main difference in linguistic realization between the two sets of data was that book reviews used more lexically varied and more complex reporting acts, which means ample multilayering and packing of information (see Ventola 1996: 176) facilitated by the frequent use of grammatical metaphor (see Halliday 1985: 321–345; 1989: 94). As regards the distribution of speech acts in the two sets of data (see Table 1), the analysis indicated that the book reviews engaged in evaluative speech acts more often than the critical summaries did. The critical summaries, in turn, contained more speech acts denoting discussion. Both sets of writing contained similar acts of reporting, but the number of different types of reporting structures was greater and the means of their realizations more sophisticated in the case of the book reviews, whereas the critical summaries had more tokens of reporting structures.

TABLE 1. Distribution of Speech Act Subtypes in Critical Summaries and Book Reviews.

CRITICAL SUMMARIES			BOOK REVIEWS		
	Number	Percentage		Number	Percentage
Plain reporting	460	29.4	Plain reporting	310	28.7
Interpretative reporting	509	32.5	Interpretative reporting	265	24.6
Evaluative reporting	67	4.3	Evaluative reporting	166	15.4
Evaluation proper	98	6.3	Evaluation proper	136	12.6
Evaluative discussion	98	6.3	Evaluative discussion	98	9.1
Discussion proper	335	21.4	Discussion proper	104	9.7
Total of speech act subtypes	1567	100	Total of speech act subtypes	1079	100

## 9 PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The model developed in this study for analyzing interpretation in critical summarization and reviewing is likely to be pedagogically useful in that it makes explicit some of the tacit assumptions about summarizing. Moreover, teaching academic reporting with its compactness of information-packing and overt and/or covert interpretative acts is a useful area for any disciplinary domain in tertiary education, not least because it paves the way for academic writing proper dependent on writing on the basis of a multitude of sources. Hence, the writing of critical summaries, which synthesize ideas from several source texts, seems a natural step towards academic writing proper.

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## Source texts of the critical summaries

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