

Evaluation of the candidate in MPhil thesis examiners' reports at University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examiners' report is a crucial review genre in postgraduate pedagogy. It puts the thesis writer under close scrutiny as s/he seeks membership into the discourse community. The present study examines the thesis examiners' report, focusing on the thesis writer, the Candidate, as an evaluated "persona". The data set comprises 100 thesis examiners' report for Master of Philosophy students from four disciplines. The TRANSITIVITY system is used as the analytical framework. The findings show that the thesis writer is mostly lexicalised in various participant roles as "Candidate" or "Applicant", thereby highlighting the position of the thesis writer as a novice being evaluated for acceptance into the discourse community. Regarding process types, material processes are dominantly used to evaluate the research. Relational processes are used for valuation of the candidate. The study contributes to the few studies on feedback in postgraduate education and the findings are relevant to postgraduate pedagogy. Thus, the evaluation of the candidate touched on the intellectual capabilities and other general qualities of the candidate who had undertaken tasks related to the studies such as Literature Review and Discussion. Future studies could consider the use of evaluative language in particular sections of the MPhil theses in the thesis examiners' reports.

Keywords: Candidate, Examiners' Reports, Evaluation, Linguistic Variant, MPhil Theses, Transitivity

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback is usually thought of as information provided by an agent (e.g. teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding. A similar explanation is given by Hughes et al. (2014) who assert that feedback is information from instructors or peers that is provided to students about written assignments. Feedback includes both information about the product (the paper or the assignment) and the process of writing. Nicol (2009) mentions that in higher education, it is usual to think about the instructor as the initiator and provider of feedback. Nicol (2009) argues further that while teachers engage with ideas and arguments, they must analyse signals, have genuine interest, respect identities, and have strengths and potential in written papers in order for them (teachers) to give appropriate feedback. As an expert, the teacher gives feedback to students with the intention of supporting their learning, helping students reach higher levels of learning and achievement. Stracke and Kumar (2010) observe that through feedback, supervisors engage with supervisees. They explain that his or her engagement could be in the form of interactions that range from referential utterances which provide information, directive utterances which try to get the hearer (writer) to do something or, finally, expressive utterances which express the speaker's (supervisor's) feelings.

Again, teacher written feedback raises students' awareness of the reader's expectations (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994). Mahfoodh and Pandian (2011) also think that written feedback is crucial to students' growth as writers because it is considered to be the best way for communication with each student on a one-to-one basis. Feedback is formative if it effectively helps students to master their difficulties (William, 1999). Besides, students can use feedback from their supervisors/examiners to learn how to self-assess and set goals, and increase ownership of their own success. The supervisee and supervisor use information on the TERs to shape the thesis for a "better" product later. Thus, through the feedback, supervisors/examiners engage supervisees/ candidates (Kumar & Stracke, 2007). By this socialization, a student is exposed to the norms and practices of this community, and it is assumed that by the end of a certain period, the student may be familiar with these practices, and exhibit skills and knowledge. It must be noted that the exhibition of these acquired skills and the knowledge does not come with perfection. As Duff (2010) asserts, the AD is a site of internal and interpersonal struggle for many people (both learners and faculty; native and non-native) and, especially, for newcomers or novices.

In the event of providing information about students' learning or skills (feedback), a value is placed on these learning procedures, which relate to evaluation. In this sense, Evaluation can narrowly be seen as the process of judging or putting a value on a procedure, the degree to which knowledge has been gained, or skill. The TERs serve

both the purpose of gathering information on what has been learnt or produced, and placing a value or judging what has been produced (the thesis). Broadly speaking, studies on thesis examiner's report can be grouped into two: Linguistics and non-linguistics. Non-linguistic have focused on the completion rate and Assessment criteria. For instance, Nightingale (1984) established that practices of thesis examination were dis-empowering in that they did not clarify the criteria by which a thesis would be evaluated. She recommended that explicit assessment criteria be made available to both students and examiners. However, Holbrook et al. (2004b) had different findings from what Nightingale (1984) observed in her study, and the disparity may be that with time comes improvement. Holbrook et al. (2004b) examined the disparities between examiner recommendation and institutional decision and attempted to identify what has triggered the discrepancy. It was revealed in the analysis of the data that specific instructional emphasis and qualities in the examiner comments appeared to influence the recommendations offered. In the assessment criteria, examiners focused on research topic, theory, empirical investigation, conclusions and recommendations, and language and editing of the dissertation, showing that examiners commend and expect quality in dissertations and frown on poor quality dissertations (Mafora & Lessing, 2014).

Also, the quality of the thesis produced by candidates has received attention. For instance, Mulinge and Arasa (2013) found that the bulk (63.0 %) of the dissertations examined were of low quality; only 37.0 % was rated "excellent" or "good". These tended to be plagued by a variety of weaknesses, including the inability to adequately contribute original and valuable knowledge, poor packaging and presentation that left many of them reading like raw drafts that required the attention of a supervisor more than the services of an examiner, and contents that left a lot to be desired in terms of depth, clarity, sequencing and coherence, among others. Furthermore, the choice of a suitable topic and overall quality of presentation were found to be addressed relatively well while data analysis, interpretation, and literature review appeared to be the most difficult. Lack of critical thinking was identified as a common weakness, and writing quality played a significant role in deciding the outcome. There was generally a good level of consistency in assessment practices across different reports (Bao & Leikin, 2013).

On rhetorical sections of the thesis, Nimulola's (2018) findings revealed that "originality" attracted few neutral comments as well as "literature coverage" (Literature review). "Substantive" and "advancement of knowledge" (Contribution) "accuracy" and "application" categories (Literature Review), and "research design" (Approach/Methodology) were ascertained as appropriately done. However, "sampling", "validity" and "reliability", "qualitative data analysis", and "interpretation" in Approach/Methodology, and "quantitative data presentation" in Analysis/Findings were found inappropriate. Concerns were also raised on Presentation, "communicative competence" and "expression". Also, examiners dedicated one-tenth of TERs to the LR, and provided details about types of errors, coverage, and use of the literature. Also, examiners identified critical appraisal of the body of literature, working understanding, connection between literature and findings, and disciplinary perception as important indicators of performance in a candidate's use of the literature (Holbrook et al., 2008).

The examiners' reports have been studied in terms of the philosophies that underpin the production of these reports. Lessing (2009) found that experienced examiners followed a definite structure in the examination of postgraduate studies. The examination process does not always run smoothly and remuneration was mentioned as a problem. Schulze and Lemmer (2019) observed challenges in the appointment of examiners; vague criteria for auxiliary requirements to the thesis; and discrepancies in the quality of examiner reports and examiner recommendations, which delayed graduation. There was variation in length, scope and rigour of examiners' reports. Increasingly, with the Australian scholars, attention has now begun to be paid to the linguistic form. A few of these are, first, Starfield et al. (2015) who specifically used the Attitude and Engagement sub-systems of Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal in studying the TERs, and extended the framework by suggesting more delicate options within the Appreciation and Judgment strands, and introduced two new concepts, "covert judgement" and "embedded judgement". It was also revealed in the analysis that the theses were appreciated in the reports, the candidates were judged, and the examiners were affected. Starfield et al. (2017) identified 10 roles that examiners assumed for themselves in the reports, and their implications for candidates, supervisors and the departments/institutions.

However, this research trajectory seems to come mostly from Australia, Asia pacific and, to a lesser extent, the West and some parts of Africa, notably the South. It is only recently that the Ghanaian context has been considered in the study of the examiners' reports (e.g. Adika, 2015; Afful, 2020). Adika, for instance, examined thirty-five (35) assessors' reports of graduate theses submitted to the University of Ghana, comprising nine from the Sciences and twenty-six from the Humanities. The study revealed that students used Research Acts reporting verbs (e.g. classify and develop), but the Discourse Acts (e.g. mention and intimate) were missing in the data. Afful (2020) found that, first, there was a great deal of variability in terms of individual text format, structure of title of the report, text length, and visual features. Second, with the content of the thesis reports, discrete emphases in the assessors' reports were identified. The overwhelming emphasis was on "literature review", followed by "analysis and reporting", "statement of the problem", and presentation issues. Third, theses assessors largely adhered to institutional guidelines in terms of the evaluative criteria.

In sum, several studies have investigated TERs; however, generally, there are not extensive studies on TERs produced in the Ghanaian context. Our knowledge of the practices and expectations of examiners are not well established. Again, while Starfield et al. (2015) has taken the linguistic aspect a step further in employing SFL in the study of the examiners' reports, the same thing cannot be said with studies that were done in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. The reason for which this study is conducted is to add to what has been done by employing a linguistic framework that is SFL, particularly, Transitivity, to explore the evaluated persona, the candidate, in terms of the linguistic variants and grammatical processes.

1.1 Research Objective

The study seeks to:

- i. Identify the linguistic variants by which examiners refer to the Candidate as an evaluated entity in the thesis examiner's reports of MPhil theses.
- ii. Unearth the grammatical processes associated with the evaluation of the Candidate in the thesis examiners' reports of MPhil theses.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study adopted the Transitivity model which is rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Transitivity is a lexicogrammatical system that realizes the experiential component of the ideational metafunction within the architecture of language according to SFL. It construes human experience, both the physical world and the internal consciousness of humankind, reducing countless going-ons into a "manageable set of process types". Transitivity is concerned with the three major components of a clause: Process, Participants in the process; and Circumstances associated with the process. Participants are things and people; they are mostly realized by nominal group. Process is the nucleus of the experiential mode of the clause; they are actions, events, relations, and states. Process is represented by the verbal group. Circumstance occupies the adjunct element in the clause structure. They include extent, manner, and location, and are typically realized by prepositional phrases and adverbial groups. Notably, a choice of process selects the participant automatically. If the process is material, (e.g. make, identify), then, the participant will be actor(doer); other participants are Goal (sufferer), Scope (extent of the process), Recipient, and Client.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) divide the system of transitivity or process types into six processes: material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal, and existential. They consider material, mental, and relational as major as these are more frequent in corpora representative of different registers. Behavioural, verbal and existential processes are minor. Material processes are processes of 'doing'; that is, they express physical experience. In the material processes, there are two participant roles: Actor and Goal. Another participant is Scope which does not suffer from the actions in the clause but presents to us the summary of the Process or extent of that. Second, mental processes are processes of sensing. They include: perception (seeing, hearing, etc.), affection (liking, fearing, etc.), and cognition (thinking, knowing, understanding, etc.). In the mental processes, there are two participants: Senser (the conscious being that is feeling, thinking, or seeing) and Phenomenon (which is sensed – felt, thought or seen). Third, relational process construes a relationship between an expression and its content. The process is realized by a Be and linking verbs. There are two modes: Attributive and Identifying.

Next, verbal processes are processes of saying. The participants of the processes are: Sayer, Receiver, Verbiage, and Target. Moreover, existential processes represent that something exists or happens. These clauses typically have the dummy subject, 'There', the verb *be*, or some other verbs expressing *existence*, such as *exist*, *arise*, and followed by a nominal group functioning as Existent (a thing which exists in the process). Last, behavioural processes stand between material and mental processes. Simpson (2004) expounds and makes it clear by indicating that this process encompasses physical actions such as breath or cough or portray state of consciousness such as sigh, cry or laugh. A behavioural process verb is intransitive (it has only one *participant*, Behavior) and indicates an activity in which both the physical and mental aspects are inseparable and indispensable to it.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study is situated in Ghana, specifically, University of Cape Coast (UCC). In UCC, before a thesis is completed and sent for assessment, a supervisor assists in the preparation of the thesis for examination. Specifically, in terms of responsibility, the supervisor guides the student on the technical aspects of research and provides periodic feedback. In addition, after its completion, the thesis is examined internally and externally. After both examiners have submitted their reports, and passed the thesis, the candidate is required to defend the thesis at a viva voce, the oral

examination. Thus, as in many universities that run postgraduate programmes, UCC has a very structured and hierarchical system that takes care of the pre-preparation (proposal) through the drafting of the thesis to the examination and defence of the completed thesis.

The data for the study were obtained from examination reports on MPhil theses that had been submitted to four Disciplines: English, History, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Population and Health, from 2010 to 2020. The data were solicited from these disciplines because the departments were willing and available to release the data for the study (considering the confidential nature of the data). Consideration was given to 25 thesis examiner reports (TERs) from each of the selected disciplines, making the total hundred (100). It must be mentioned that even though data were collected from different disciplines, the study did not set out to tease any disciplinary variations but to determine what the practices were, in general, with regard to the use of evaluative language in the assessment of the candidate. For the method of analysis, the study adopted the Transitivity approach as analytical framework. Again, the present study adopted a content analysis. The data were coded manually, and in doing so, data were numbered (1-25) for each discipline. For example, the first History data were labelled “HIS 1”; next “HIS 2” till the final one, “HIS 25”; “HOT” to represent Hospitality and Tourism Management; “ENG” signified English; “POH” meant Population and Health.

Coding the data allowed for easy identification of the various distinctive forms of evaluative resources in the data and the analysis of them. The analysis was organized according to the themes that emerged. All these identified themes were further broken down into smaller emerging patterns. For example, a coding system representing the various sub-themes under Material process was used. The features were grouped according to the emerging similar themes in the analysis of the data. Again, in order to ensure that the identified themes were accurate, the coded items were left unattended to for some days and were revisited to check for consistency in the coding of the items in the data. Thereafter, the coded items were given to a senior member (lecturer) of Department of English who is experienced in linguistic analysis to seek confirmation or otherwise of the identified items. Where there were discrepancies in the coded items, further deliberations with this member aided in the clarification of issues.

In addition, to conceal the identities of candidates, concepts /topics/ issues in the data that may point to identities of such candidates were replaced with either X, Y or both, where necessary in the extracts. For example, X for ‘citation practices’ in the English data because it was likely for readers to trace that to the candidate assessed in that report. Moreover, the data were made to stand as they were without any corrections of errors. Thus, extracts taken from the data with such errors were made to remain as they were without corrections.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Findings

This section examines the different appearances (linguistic realizations), and the grammatical roles of this persona. The first main point in the analysis is that thesis examiners used various tags in evaluating the candidates. Whereas some examiners used “Candidate”, others deployed “Researcher” or “Student”, etc. The distribution of these linguistic variants in the data is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1

Distribution of Linguistic Variants for Candidate

Linguistic Variants for Candidate	(N)	(%)
Candidate	975	70.6
Researcher	155	11.2
Student	127	9.2
Writer	89	6.5
Author	31	2.2
Applicant	04	0.3
Total	1381	100

Table 1 shows the distribution of linguistic variants for the Candidate as an evaluated persona in the thesis examiners’ reports (TERs). The highest variant was “Candidate”, with 975(70.6%), which is far more than half of the total occurrence of all the other linguistic variants in the data. This finding is not surprising since a Candidate is somebody who is being examined or somebody seeking to earn a degree. Again, “Candidate” is what is mostly used in the literature (Holbrook, et al., 2004a; 2004b; Kumar & Stracke, 2011; Starfield et al., 2015; 2017; Stracke & Kumar, 2010). The least frequent variant was “Applicant”, 4(0.3%), followed by Author, 31(2.2%). Again, these linguistic choices are made to reflect individual differences of examiners who try to distinguish between what candidate is and

who a researcher is confirms previous Afful's (2020) study that differences exist in the structural patterns in the examiner's report which show individual differences.

By choosing a certain referent for the candidate, examiners unconsciously or consciously create a certain identity for the candidate; that is, examiners maintained a certain uniqueness for the candidate for others to consider him/her in that direction. A summary of the use of these linguistic variants are presented below:

Extract 1

The candidate has poorly stated the problem that he investigated. (HIS 23)

Extract 2

The applicant writes excellently. (ENG 9)

Extract 3

The researcher has demonstrated adequate evidence of understanding of the area of research (HIS 13)

Extract 4

The writer sets out clearly the problem for research and delimits the area of investigation. (POH 18)

Extract 5

The author also needs to clarify culture-induced etiquette and codes of conduct from ethical standards. (HOT 15)

Extract 6

The student did not adequately discuss the study results. (POH 3)

By referring to the evaluated persona as "Candidate" in Extract 1, the examiner may either have in mind, first, somebody who is being examined or second, somebody applying for a position (degree). The first option is more applicable, considering the idea that the examiner has to assess the Candidate through the thesis to consider him/her fit for the degree being sought for. The examiner disapproves of what the candidate does with the statement of the problem (Extract 1)

Closely related to the concept of "Candidate" is the use of "Applicant". Here, the candidate is thought of as applying for either a position or a degree. What this means is that certain criteria must be used, and the applicant must meet certain requirements. Thus, the examiner is there to ensure that both ends are met. It is not surprising for an examiner to assess the applicant and conclude that "the applicant writes well" (Extract 2). That is, considering the expectations of the disciplines, institution or School of Graduate Studies (SGS), the examiner thinks that the "writing" of the applicant is superb. The examiner expresses his/her feelings about what the applicant has presented, and it is an example of what Kumar and Stracke (2007) refer to as expressive utterances as a form of feedback.

Another referent for this evaluated persona in the data is "Researcher". Some examiners consider this persona as someone who investigates conscientiously and meticulously in order to come out with findings or truths of a sort, constituting in this case, the thesis. In Extract 3, the examiner views the researcher as having achieved something (thesis) by demonstrating adequate understanding of the research area. If research requires thoroughness and diligence, then, an understanding of the research area is key to achieving good results, seen in a product, the thesis, (Hyland, 2000); the examiner demonstrates that the researcher has done well. This is a positive comment which is in consonance with Haines (2004), who suggests that students are not given all the bad points, as this can be demotivating.

Again, there was the use of "Writer". To the examiner, the Candidate has tried to produce an output which is the thesis (Extract 4). Since writing is essentially a social act (Katerm et al., 2004) in which the writer needs to construct meaning in a manner conventional in a particular community, it means that some consideration of what to include and exclude is necessary in ensuring the finest piece. Planning is also needed. Again, each stage of the "production" is very important, with emphasis on certain procedures such as pre-writing, drafting, evaluating, and revising (Hyland, 2003; Kpolugbo, 2006; Nordin & Mohammad, 2006). By setting out clearly the problem of the research (Extract 7), a strong foundation is laid for the completion of this piece, and even in addition to delimiting the area for investigation. By being provided with feedback, the writer is helped to achieve negotiated goals (Stracke & Kumar, 2010). Also, this reference to the writer means that the candidate be knowledgeable about writing: coherence, cohesion, etcetera. Also, the writer must show disciplinarity and knowledge about research writing (Adika, 2015; Paré et al., 2009; Prior, 1998).

Closely related to the linguistic variant "Writer" is "Author". The "Author" who "composes" a masterpiece, such as the thesis considers factors such as disciplinary variation, rhetorical sections, and requirements of genre, language, and visuals. Thus, in Extract 5, the "author" is reminded to illuminate the "culture-induced etiquette" used in the "composition", study, as well as codes of conduct.

The word "Student" represents someone who is under training or being enculturated to fit into a community—in this case, the academic community (AC). In Extract 6, the student can be seen not to have mastered the presentation of the results in that its adequacy was missing in the thesis. Hence, the examiner, providing feedback for the student, affirms Bruno and Santos' (2010) observation that one way to support students' learning is by using feedback. Kumar

and Stracke (2011) see the supervisee on a journey and that training is needed for such learners to become independent scholars (Afful, 2009). In a sense, this self-regulated learner finds value in expressed feedback. The developmental and formative component where examiners provide feedback to assist the candidate to revise the thesis for final submission (Kumar & Stracke, 2011) is key to a learner— a student. The point though is that after going through the socialization process, one's inability to discuss the results of a study is quite serious since that is the core of the whole study that has been undertaken. Here, the examiner does exactly what Haines (2004) suggests by telling the student exactly what is wrong; the student, in a way, can feel secure and see the opportunity for improvement.

In sum, examiners used different linguistic forms to refer to the candidate as an evaluated persona. Either the choice of any of these names in the evaluation of the candidate was done deliberately because examiners were aware of what their meanings were, or the choices were made unconsciously, maybe, for the sake of variety to avoid monotony or for individual preferences. Again, it must be mentioned that not every use of “Student”, “Candidate”, “Writer”, “Author”, or “Researcher” in the study came with a negative comment; some came with positive comments, as seen in the evaluated comments above.

Grammatical Roles of the Candidate as an Evaluated Persona

This second section considers the various grammatical process types that are identifiable with the Candidate as an evaluated persona, helping present the outer and inner experiences of the candidate as made evident in the examiners' comments. These include material, relational, mental, verbal and existential. The process types are discussed below:

Table 2

Distribution of Process Types for Candidate

Process Type for Candidate	(N)	(%)
Material	556	42.1
Relational	455	34.4
Verbal	177	13.4
Mental	78	5.9
Existential	56	4.2
Total	1322	100

Table 2 shows that the material process occurred most frequently (556, 42.1%), followed by the relational process, (455, 34.4 %). The least was existential, (56, 4.2%). The material process is more since the candidate engages in an activity and the product of that activity is the thesis. With the relational process, the quality of the candidate is identified with other attributes as being good or bad; hence, it occupies the second highest frequency position in the data.

Studies on Transitivity have shown the frequent occurrence of material process in the different data employed for analysis. Iwamoto's (2008) analysis of a male character in a literary text showed that that character was mainly involved in material process. Rodrigues (2008) also found the most frequent use of material process. While relational process was least in Rodrigues (2008), it was the second highest in the present study. Perhaps, the data used for the present study, academic writing, allow for the values and attributes to be evaluated but the literary text used in Rodrigues (2008) allows for conversation/dialogue; hence, the use of more verbal and mental processes but least of the relational process, confirming Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) that relational and mental processes are characteristic of conversation. Here, with verbal process, the examiner is seen to be engaging in a dialogue with the reader, but Mental Process is less in the present study because the recipient of that “conversation” is not physically present in the discourse to reveal his/her subconscious feelings and thinking. The subsequent paragraphs discuss the process types identified in the data with examples from the data.

Material Process

In this section, I examine material process used in the data. The process helps establish the activities that the candidate engaged in the writing of the thesis, and what activities examiners have assigned to the candidate in the reports. The various participant roles such as Actor, Verbiage, Goal and Scope are examined as well as their placement as Theme or Rheme position in the structure.

Illustrations are found below:

Extract 7

The candidate consulted diversified sources to secure information that helped to reduce subjectivity. (HIS 3)

Extract 8

The researcher developed specific and appropriate problem statement to guide the study. (POH 1)

Extract 9

He has laid out the reasons for the choice of the discourse representational theory. (ENG 25)

Extract 10

She has displayed a good knowledge of the theoretical issues in sexual and reproductive health needs of male adolescents which is highly commendable. (POH 6)

The extracts displayed above (7-10) consist of Actor, Process and Goal. First, the Actors in these extracts are nominal groups and pronouns, which name entities and entities can undertake activities; hence, their availability in the Actor position in the clause. The nominal group is chiefly made up of a determiner and a noun without any post modification. We find above the minimal groups “the candidate” (Extracts 7,) and “the researcher” (Extract 8). Pronouns are also placed in a subjective position to control what is said in the sentence, and it comprises, both, masculine and feminine forms. While Extract 9 gives the masculine use of the pronouns, Extract 10 has an instance of feminine pronoun placed in the subjective case as a persona being talked about in the clauses. The pronouns allow for variation and avoidance of repetition, helping to create cohesion in the text by making anaphoric reference to the nouns (such as “candidate” and “researcher”) used in the text.

Next, the process consists mainly of material, construed by verbal group. The verbs used in the material process were several in the data, and came in variant forms, concrete and abstract. The few shown in the extracts above include simple verbal forms like “consulted”, and “developed” (Extracts 7 and 8 respectively). As the verbs are in the simple past form, they depict actions that the Actors of the clauses undertook when writing the theses plus what the examiners also assigned to them when they were assessing the theses. Apart from the simple past tense forms, there were other verb forms found in the data, as seen in Extracts 9 and 10 (“has laid out”, and “has displayed”), showing the events that had happened in the past but has relationship with the present. It describes a completed whole rather than from within the event as it unfolds (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973)

Furthermore, the Goals in the clauses were mostly nominal groups which came in different forms. In Extract 7, the Goal consists of an adjective, “diversified”; the head word, “source”, and a prepositional phrase, “to secure information...” We see that what the candidate has done here is worthwhile. However, in Extracts 9 and 10, we find that the head words are immediately followed by prepositional phrases: whereas “the reasons” has “for the choice...” (Extract 9), “a good knowledge” has “of the theoretical...” (Extract 10). These post modifiers seek to explain further what the receivers or sufferers of the process are, the Goals. Some examiners, however, placed the Goal in Theme position in the clause, obfuscating the candidate and emphasizing what has been achieved, the product, rather than who undertook that action, the Actor. Some instances in the data are as follows:

Extract 11

The thesis has been well presented in the right format. (HIS 22)

Extract 12

The problem guiding the study is well formulated. (POH 8)

In Extract 11, the examiner fronts “the thesis”, giving attention to “the thesis” which has been presented in the “right” Manner. However, it is the candidate that presented the thesis in that right manner. Perhaps, the examiner thinks that that is given information; hence, the attention is rather placed on the thesis, which was also a finding of Kosonen (2014) that examiners cared more about procedures, data, and results than the actors who were doing the interpretation. Consequently, the Actor is relegated to the background. The material process analysed in the data was not only with Goals but with Scope as well. The Scope is not impacted by the Process, but it shows the range of the Process. Unlike the Goal discussed above, the Scope were used in the data probably because the examiners were interested in elaborating the range to which actions have taken place or been done. Instances of the use of Scope in the data are presented below:

Extract 13

The candidate has exhibited *enough justification for the methodology he has used in data collection.* (ENG 16)

Extract 14

He does not throw much light on *how he inspected the data and embarked on the analysis* (HOT 25)

Most of the examples on Scope are nominal group with either pre-modifiers of adjective or post modifiers of prepositional phrases. Characteristically, Extract 13 has the Scope which is a nominal group that consists of an Attributive adjective, “enough”; headword, “justification” and post modifier, a prepositional phrase, “for the methodology....” These combined pre-modifier and post-modifier indicate the extent of the Process. In fact, it will be insufficient for the examiner to end the construction at the Process, but an addition of the range which is the Scope is

very much appreciated. Conversely, the Scope in Extract 14 has quite a dissimilar structure in that it consists of compound sentence, “how he inspected the data” on one hand, and “embarked on the analysis” on the other hand. The use of simple sentences which are combined helps the examiner to elaborate what ought to have been done and was not done by the candidate. Furthermore, with some occurrences of passive constructions in the data, the Scope occupied subject position in the clause, and thus, became the Theme of the clause:

Extract 15

Adequate recommendations were offered by the researcher. (ENG 2)

Extract 16

The presentation and discussion of the results were very well handled. (POH 21)

In Extract 16, the extent of the Process, “handled” is “the presentation and discussion”. The candidate who is anticipated to have initiated these activities expressed in the Processes is relegated to the background, through the use of the passive constructions used in casting these clauses found in Extracts 15 and 16. Thus, prominence is given to the Scope by placing them in Theme position. The analysis also revealed that the Material Process was projected, sometimes. Here are some examples:

Extract 17

Candidate clearly indicates *that her study is a library research*. (HIS 19)

Extract 18

The candidate has clearly indicated *that her study covers a missing area of researching in X*. (POH 3)

In the instances (17 and 18) shown above, “that her study is a library research” (Extract 17) is the projected clause, and it is a second-order use of language (Thompson, 2014) in that this Projection has been alluded to earlier on in another clause of the same structure. In other words, what the “Candidate clearly indicates” is realised in the second clause, which is the projected one, “that her study is a library research”. In addition, the realization of the material process was found with Circumstances which are realized by circumstantial Adjuncts. The commonest one was Manner. Manner expresses quality which mostly occurs as “-ly” adverbs. It could also be realised as a means, comparison or degree. Instances of its occurrence in the data are displayed below:

Extract 19

Candidate is unable to explicitly and closely show how register theory informs her study. (ENG 15)

Extract 20

The researcher writes *well*. (HIS 8)

The use of “explicitly and “closely” in Extract 19 indicates a quality which should have been exhibited by the candidate but it is missing at the moment. This demonstrates the background for the Process, that is, the “show” which is that the Process was not done in the best of state. The examiner’s use of double expression of Manner deepens the context for the construction of the Process. Lastly, some examiners presented the Candidate as a modifier to the item being evaluated. Simply, the Candidate, in this instance, functioned as a possessive, describing other elements in the clause. These are some examples from the data:

Extract 21

The researcher’s attempts strengthen existing knowledge of the general area. (ENG 18)

Extract 22

The candidate’s language is clearly understood for the most part of the thesis. (POH 7)

Here, the evaluation, in general terms, is about the candidate but its specificity relates to what the candidate has done. In Extract 21, for instance, the structure can be recast to be “The researcher has strengthened existing knowledge of the general area”. The “attempts” added in the clause shows, in specific terms, what has brought that achievement. By attaching the Candidate to the item which is being evaluated, ownership is created, here.

Mental Process

Mental Process deals with Processes of sensing, wanting, perceiving, and feeling. With this process, the examiner brings to the fore the thought processes of the candidate, which are perceived to be correct or incorrect.

First, we consider those Processes that are related to the candidate:

Extract 23

The candidate confuses the purpose of the study with problem of the research. (ENG 5)

Extract 24

She understands what she has read. (HIS 10)

The Senser is “the Candidate”, which is represented with either a nominal group made of a noun or a pronoun, and it is the persona whose mind the Mental Process occurs. So, in Extracts 23, “the confusion” is created in the mind of the candidate. In Extract 24, the Senser is represented by a pronoun, “she” that goes through the Process of “understanding...” The mental processes are marked by the use of the present tense (confuses; understands), indicating a state of the mind at the moment.

The other Participant Role, which is the Phenomenon, comprises facts which can be sensed, felt or perceived but cannot do anything or have anything done to (cf. Thompson, 2014). This was also in the form of a nominal group. So, with Extract 23, the nominal group comprises a noun, “the purpose” with post modifier which is a prepositional phrase “of the study” and another one, “with problem of the research”. Here, this nominal group is what is sensed, showing the state of mind of the candidate. The analysis further revealed that there were other mental processes recorded in the data but these were associated with the examiners themselves. In other words, it was the examiners themselves who were the Sensers in these clauses. Some cases in point are illustrated below:

Extract 25

I believe that the researcher did not understand what he read or did not read the entire thesis. (POH 15)

Extract 26

I do not think that the chief was afraid of women. (HIS 7)

We find in the extracts (25 and 26) that the Senser which is represented by “I” alludes to the examiner, the writer of the reports. It can be said that what the examiners do, here, is to express their personal opinion or feelings of the phenomenon. This can be seen as a hedging strategy (Boncea, 2014; Hyland, 1998; Lakoff, 1972). Although the examiner actually wants to say that the candidate has done or has not done something, he/she says that indirectly through what the examiner personally thinks or perceives. For example, in Extract 25, the statement could have just been presented categorically as “the researcher did not understand what he read or did not read the entire thesis”. By avoiding this direct expression of what he/she has in mind, the examiner saves his/her face and that of the candidate. By using this hedging strategy, an option is presented to the candidate as to whether to accept or reject what might be thought of as an expression of somebody, which may be the entire truth or otherwise of the situation (Brown & Levinson, 1978). This approach underscores the idea that the lexico-grammatical choices used for constructing discourse and, in particular, for constructing stance or position, have unquestionable effects on the act of communication (Pascual & Unger, 2010). These are metaphorical expression of modality or what is termed as modality through grammatical metaphor. Thus, in most of the excerpts, here, it can be seen that right after the Senser and the Process, the next item in the clause mentions the candidate either directly or indirectly.

Also, these excerpts (25 and 26) invariably project other clauses. Thus, in a clause, an aspect is the Senser and the Process, and another is the projected clause which is placed after these two Participant Roles, Senser and Process. For instance, we have Senser, “I”; Process, “do not think”, and the projected clause, “that the chief was afraid of women” (Extract 26). In actual sense, what the examiner thinks is that the chief was not afraid of women. That is, the second clause is a Projection of what has been indicated in the first clause. Through language, the examiner expresses what is in his/her mind. As explained by Petch-Tyson (1998) examiners make themselves visible in the reports by employing verbs which denote Mental Process.

Considering the few occurrences of the Mental Process in the data, we observe that enough space is not given to the candidate to go through this Mental Process of sensing and feeling etc. of him/herself. What is seen here is that the examiner ascribes these Mental Processes to the candidate, and since the examiner cannot move into the mental world of the candidate, few of this Process are realised in the data.

Relational Process

The Relational Process sets up a relationship between two concepts namely Carrier and Attribute. The examiner, through this process, assigns qualities and values to the candidate. The analysis revealed that the frequent occurring type was the Attributive Type, probably, because with this type of Relational Process, an object is ascribed an Attribute, a value. Thus, by judging the thesis and candidate, directly or indirectly, positive or negative, values are assigned to entities. Some examples are presented below:

Extract 27

The researcher is silent on the meaning of the findings. (HOT 5)

Extract 28

He exhibited great passion about the subject studied. (ENG 12)

These are attributive relational processes which assign entities. The Carrier of the Attribute is the Candidate, a human persona, as expressed in Extract 27. The Carrier is a Nominal group which is represented by a determiner, “the” and a noun, “researcher”. However, with Extract 28, we see the use of pronoun, “He” as Nominal group used as Carrier of the Attribute, expressed in the Process.

Also, the Process (verb) displayed in the extracts 27 and 28 is Relational, signaling the existence of the relationship between the Carrier and the Attribute. With Extract 27, a relationship is seen between the Carrier, “the researcher”, and the Attribute, “silent on the meaning of the findings”, and this is achieved through the process, the verb “is”. In the analysis, it was seen that the “be-family verbs” abound in the data as compared to other forms of verb that express relational, such as the linking verbs and/ or the copular verbs like “seem”, “have”, etc.; perhaps, the be-family verb, a process, is handy in helping signal the existence of relationship between an object and a quality.

The next participant role in the Relational Process is the Attribute. The Attribute which is the value assigned to the Carrier occurs after the Process in the extracts. For example, Extract 28 gives us “great passion about the work studied”. This is made up of a nominal group which is made up of an adjective, “great”; the head word, “passion”, and a post-modifier which is a prepositional phrase, “about the subject studied”.

Instances were, also, recorded in the data where the Attribute was adjective which is a reduced form of the nominal group. Illustrations are given below:

Extract 29

The candidate was rather *exhaustive* to a fault almost bordering on repetitiveness. (HIS 15)

Extract 30

The candidate has been extremely *impressive* in the discussion of the related literature. (ENG 25)

Extract 29 contains “exhaustive...” which is the value that is assigned to the Carrier, “the Candidate”. This predicative adjective describes, in value terms, the nature of the Carrier. It is this Attribute, the predicative adjective, that apportions significance to the Carrier in the Theme position, which is the focus of the discussion.

Furthermore, the analysis showed that, in some circumstances, the evaluated persona, the candidate, served as a possessive element, describing the nature of some aspects of the work. Perhaps, this was done by some examiners to indicate who is being evaluated:

Extract 31

The candidate’s knowledge on pertinent literature on the area is satisfactory. (POH 20)

Extract 32

The candidate’s problem solving and logical reasoning were problematic. (HOT 3)

In Extract 32, there is an identified problem with the nature of solving problem and logicity in reasoning, but this is actually a fault of the candidate; hence, the attachment of this identity to the structure.

Verbal Process

Verbal Process involves clauses of saying which include “say”, “noted”, etc. The examiner brings to the fore the sayings of the candidate, from the inner experience to the outer experience. The participant roles associated with this Process are Sayer, Receiver, and Verbiage.

Some cases of the use of Verbal Process in the data are displayed below:

Extract 33

The candidate discusses Ghana’s Economic experience development well. (HOT 14)

Extract 34

He did not explain the precise significance of the book for his work. (HIS 19)

First, the Sayer, in Extract 33, is “the candidate” which is represented by a determiner, “the” and candidate. Extract 33 indicates that “the candidate”, has a good discussion, which is a positive remark. In Extract 34, the statement is negative in that the Sayer, “he” did not explain the relevance of the material used in the study.

Again, verbal process gives information. In the data, both tenses (present and past) were used by the examiners. Thus, in Extract 33, there is the use of the present tense, “discusses”, which indicates the current state of discourse. The simple past which is marked on the helping verb, “did” is used in Extract 34, to indicate that the candidate could not articulate issues clearly.

Next, this process consisted of the use of Verbiage. This participant role was very common in the data compared to the other participant roles of the verbal process like Target:

Extract 35

The candidate has not explained *the theory* properly. (ENG 1)

Extract 36

The candidate has stated *the problem that he investigated* fairly well. (HOT 19)

In Extract 35, the message of the verbal process is presented in simpler form. It consists only of a determiner, “the”, indicative of the fact that it is given and that there is knowledge of the “theory” being discussed now (See Adika & Denkabe, 1997; Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973), and the noun, “theory”. Compared to Extract 36, the Verbiage, “the problem that he investigated fairly well” is a bit complex. Here, the Verbiage comprises the determiner, “the”, noun, “problem” and a that relative clause, “that he investigated fairly well” serving as the post modifier. In totality, what has been stated well is the problem investigated by the candidate and that is the Verbiage, the message itself.

Also, there were other cases found in the data where “the candidate” was placed in Theme position but this did not serve as Sayer but as Targets in the clause. Some examples are these:

Extract 37

The candidate is also to be recommended for the presentation of inferential statistics in her attempt to provide answers to her research questions. (POH 17)

Extract 38

The candidate is to be recommended highly for her use of sociolinguistic interview. (ENG 20)

Here, a positive remark is made about the Target, in that, per the examiner’s estimation, “the presentation of inferential statistics” (Extract 37) was appropriate, attempting to answer the research questions posed in that study. Consequently, the candidate is to be congratulated. Similarly, in Extract 38, the examiner commends the candidate for the successful use of “sociolinguistic interview” in the study. Perhaps, the difficulty involved in getting informants in qualitative data collection compelled the examiner to congratulate the candidate on that achievement.

Again, the Verbal Process came with the use of Circumstances, Manner. Manner labels as the summary of the message in that it gives additional information about the message:

Extract 39

She does not *in a strong way* state the real essence of the year in the statement of the problem and the abstract. (HIS 2)

Extract 40

The candidate has *fairly well* stated the problem that she investigated. (POH 15)

Whereas 39 is expressed in the negative sense, Extract 40 is cast in the positive sense. The Circumstance is cast chiefly in adverbs, as found in “well”, and “fairly”. Reference is made to what can be found in Extract 39. Here, the examiner uses a prepositional phrase in expressing the whole value of what has been said; that is, the relevance of the message is not expressed “in a strong sense”.

Another major point to be presented under the Verbal Process is the use of Projection. Instances of the use of this element in the data are the following:

Extract 41

This, she observes, is so because in the (POH 25)

Extract 42

He acknowledges *that much of the literature is written in French....* (HIS 16)

In Extract 41, though we find the use of a “that zero clause”, what “she observes” is “this...is so because...” However, the projected clause, “represents a second-order phenomenon, something that is itself a representation, ‘a metaphenomenon’” (Halliday, 1994, p. 252). In other words, projection brings to bear meaning (“idea”) or a world of wording (“locution”) and takes away the involvement of human consciousness. Similarly, Thompson (2014) also observes that the relationship between projecting clause, like “he acknowledges” (Extract 44) and the projected, “that much of the literature” is not that of one element being part of a bigger component. Explaining this further, he exemplifies this with the relationship between a picture (projected clause) and its frame (the projecting clause). Together, they make up a single complex unit, but neither is actually part of the other.

Furthermore, some clauses were cast in the Passive voice, placing the Verbiage in Theme position, and the Sayer (stated explicitly or implicitly) in Rheme position. With this structure, examiners emphasize the message, rather than the author of that message. Illustrations are given below:

Extract 43

The problem statement was satisfactorily stated by the researcher. (HOT 5)

Extract 44

The research problem was clearly and succinctly stated. (ENG 10)

In Extract 43 above, the Verbiage which is “the problem statement” has been fronted, capturing the focus of the clause. However, the Sayer, “the researcher” is included in the clause through a by-phrase. Contrary to the introduction of the Sayer through a by-phrase, sometimes, the passive constructions were introduced in the data without the Sayer (Agentless passive), as displayed in Extract 44. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) postulate that the importance of the passive form lies in reversing the normal order of *agentive* and *affected* elements, and adjusting clause structure to end-focus and end-weight. They explain that end-focus has the tendency to place new information

towards the end of the clause and end-weight as the tendency to reserve the final position for the more complex parts of a clause or sentence, as evident in the extracts above (43, 44).

Lastly, it was also observed in the data that there were Verbal Processes that had the Sayer, not as the candidate but the examiners themselves. With this, the candidate becomes the Target of the clause rather. Illustrations are these:

Extract 45

I must admit *the candidate* has done a very good job. (ENG 1)

Extract 46

I must congratulate *the candidate* for a good work done. (ENG 1)

It can be seen in Extracts 45 and 46 that the Sayer is the examiner himself/herself, “I”. The examiner is impressed and feels obliged to say that the candidate has done well. The analysis of the data did not record any negative statement from the examiner, in this direction. This particular structure with the examiner as the Sayer came from one particular examiner in one out of all the four disciplines included in the study. Perhaps, the candidate did a very extraordinary work which greatly impressed the examiner because in that particular report, the examiner indicated that the thesis was “one of the few good works examined recently”.

Existential Process

The presence of Existential process type in the data help establish that something exists or does not exist. The main participant roles are the Existent Participant and the existential “There”.

Some examples of the use of existential process are provided below:

Extract 47

There is evidence of reasoning and an apparent reflective dialogue between the candidate and her data. (HOT 9)

Extract 48

There are some weaknesses in aspects of the line of reasoning of the researcher. (ENG 22)

The clauses shown above have the Existential “There”, which is an adverb that helps in construing existence. The Process itself is mainly of the “Be family” verb and it is used both in the singular and plural forms. While Extract 47 instantiates the use of the singular verb, “is”, Extract 48 has the plural form of the verb, “are”. This is made possible because the selection of the verb is based on the nature of the complement that succeeds the verb; that is, the verb takes after the nature of the verb. Thus, in Extract 47, the Existent (complement) “evidence of reasoning ...” is singular; therefore, the verb “is” is singular. This ensures concord between the verb and the complement. Again, the Existential Process is cast in the present tense.

In relation to the nature of the Existent, it was mostly realized in Nominal group; typically, with nouns that have been pre- and post- modified, in some instances. Generally, the pre-modifiers in the Existent consisted of determiners and adjectives. We find “some” in Extract 48, as an example of a determiner or quantifier. The post-modifiers were mostly prepositional phrases which serve to show relations between the selected items in the Existent. For example, in Extract 47, “...of reasoning”. These modifications help make more explicit the nature of the Existent that is being construed.

Furthermore, the Existent was embedded in projected clauses, as shown below:

Extract 49

There is evidence that the candidate has good grasp of the subject matter. (ENG 17)

Extract 50

There is indeed abundant evidence to show that the candidate is familiar with the relevant reference texts in the area. (HOT 19)

A look at these extracts indicates the use of “evidence” in all the clauses, construing the existence of something that the candidate has achieved. This “evidence” is explained in the projected clause. We find in Extract 49, for example, that the “evidence” is that “the candidate has good grasp of the subject matter”, a projected clause.

Furthermore, some of the Existential Processes were cast, relegating the candidate to the background and giving prominence to the Existent. The structures were presented in the passive voice, as illustrated below:

Extract 51

In total, though, *there is* an appreciable level of *knowledge displayed*. (ENG 4)

Extract 52

There are no explicit *research questions* provided. (HIS 11)

It can be seen that the candidate as doer or Actor in the clause has been omitted entirely (Agentless Passive), leaving only the Existent which is for some aspects of the thesis, which include “knowledge displayed” and “research questions”. This finding on the evaluation of or comments on aspects of the thesis, especially Research Questions, contrasts the finding of Hansford and Maxwell (1993) who found in their study that research questions were rarely commented on in their data.

In summary, the analysis established that the candidate goes through the process of Material, Mental, Relational, Verbal and Existential but most of these processes were the Material and the Relational. Again, evaluative adjectives, verbs, adverbs, nouns and prepositional phrases were largely used in the process, alongside some projected clauses. This confirms the finding of Nur (2015) who identified that evaluation was with word classes, adjective, verbs, adverbs, and nouns. Another finding of the present study that relates to Ye (2010) is that the evaluation of the candidate touched on the intellectual capabilities and other general qualities of the candidate who had undertaken tasks related to the studies such as Literature Review and Discussion.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The present study investigated the construal of the Candidate as an evaluated persona in 100 thesis examiners' reports of MPhil theses purposively selected from four disciplines (English, History, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Population and Health) in University of Cape Coast. Specifically, the study examined the various referents of the word "Candidate" and the various grammatical processes identified with it. The present study adopted transitivity approach as a framework. Adopting a qualitative content analysis to the data set, the study revealed two key findings: first, the highest linguistic variant, in terms of occurrence, employed by examiners was "Candidate". The least frequently occurring variant was "Applicant", followed by Author. Second, for the grammatical roles, the least frequently occurring process was Existential. Material was first and Relational Process placed second for the frequency of occurrence. The findings showcased that examiners focused more on activities (material process) and recognised value or qualities (Relational Process) in the data. The study has unearthed the information examiners choose to focus on by placing such information in Theme position like "Actor" and "Goal" in Theme position, emphasizing, who undertook that action, the Actor or what has been achieved, the product.

Theoretically, the present study adds to the usefulness of the theory that underpinned the present study—SFL which emphasises ideational, interpersonal and textual. Several studies have employed SFL and have successfully managed, analysed and interpreted their data in many genres/levels like TERs students' writing media and literary texts. The adoption of this theory, in the present study, adds to the usefulness of the theory in interpreting the findings, with particular reference to the use of evaluative language, highlighting the entity that is evaluated and the processes associated with this entity. Again, the theory has unearthed the information examiners choose to focus on by placing such information in Theme position like 'Candidate' or 'thesis', and some parts of the thesis like 'Abstract', 'Literature' and 'Methodology'. Thus, the study confirms the proposition in SFL that language users make systematic choices from the systematic organization of language to realise meaning.

In addition, the present study has implications for post graduate pedagogy. Precisely, the findings of the present study give insights into the kinds of value that are placed on the candidate (through the lens of the product, thesis) in written thesis examiners' reports (TERs). These findings give insights to supervisors and students on how best to situate their coaching and writings skills respectively to meet institutional and genre specificity within their communities. In terms of writing skills, examiners expect candidates to particularly and clearly present what constitutes each part of the thesis. Not only are these (parts of the thesis) but the quality of presentation is of relevance here. Thus, issues such as grammar and typing are evaluated by the examiner. Consequently, there is the need for candidates to master these writing skills well.

5.2 Recommendation

It is recommended that further studies be conducted by paying attention to other areas related to the findings of the present study. Though the present study employed four different disciplines (English, History, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Population and Health), I aimed to only establish threads in the use of evaluative language, and not establish any disciplinary variations in the evaluative language in thesis examiners' reports (TERs). It is, therefore, recommended that further studies be conducted, employing different disciplines (such as Economics, Chemistry and Finance), aimed at establishing disciplinary variations in TERs. This will help establish how different disciplines engage in the process of evaluation and the value they place on entities in the reports.

Declaration of Interest

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