Learning to evaluate through *that*-clauses: Evidence from a longitudinal learner corpus

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**Abstract**

The language of evaluation in academic writing has been increasingly studied. However, little is known about how students learn to make evaluative meanings. This article reports on a study of evaluative *that*-clauses based on a longitudinal corpus of 632 argumentative essays by 158 Chinese undergraduate students. The findings of the study show a non-linear trajectory of change in the use of evaluative *that*-clauses over time. It was found that the proportion of verb *that*-clauses decreased whereas the proportions of noun *that*-clauses and adjective *that*-clauses increased. Further, while the range of the lexical words co-occurring with evaluative *that*-clauses expanded, the authorial visibility in stance expression decreased. These changes indicate signs of agency and suggest that the development of evaluative language resources is an organic, dynamic process. Overall the study points to the value of developing and exploring longitudinal learner corpora for studying language learning in general and development in evaluative language in particular. Taking an approach to treating learner language in its own right, the study further contributes to a small but growing body of research based on an empowering ideology and to the empirical literature on evaluation and language learning. Implications for writing instruction are considered.

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1. Introduction

The language of evaluation has been studied in academic discourse under various labels such as *evaluation* (Hunston, 1989, 2011; Hunston & Su, 2017; Hunston & Thompson, 2000), *stance* (Biber & Finegan, 1989; Conrad & Biber, 2000), *metadiscourse* (Hyland, 2005) and *appraisal* (Martin & White, 2005). The importance of evaluative language has aroused research interest in its use in student writing (e.g., Hong & Cao, 2014; Jiang, 2015; P.; Thompson, 2012) and motivated scholarly attempts to investigate differences between second language (L2) and first language (L1) learner writing. There are, however, few studies which examine how students of English develop their linguistic resources over time to express evaluation.

This study, based on a longitudinal corpus, seeks to uncover how university students go about developing language resources based on *that*-clauses to convey evaluative meaning. The use of *that*-clauses has been found to be prevalent in academic writing: this linguistic feature serves an important means for expressing stance, defined here as the personal feelings, attitudes and value judgments conveyed by the speaker or writer (Biber, 2006; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999; Groom, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2005a, 2005b; Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Parkinson, 2013). Empirically, this study shows that the developmental trajectories for evaluative *that*-clauses are not straightforward and that development in the use of evaluative language is more than just an increase in the employment of linguistic features over time. Learners also constantly...