

Revealing Obscurity: A Linguistic-conceptual Analysis of English Academic Writing by Chinese Learners

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Abstract: Logical linguistics is core to the mastery of academic writing. Unfortunately, it often flies under the radar of what most English teachers are on the lookout for. In Hong Kong, English classes in the tertiary sector are concerned with grammar, professional writing, and presentation skills. Yet, thinking methods, which include linguistic-conceptual analysis, logic, scientific methodology, and fallacies analysis are seldom compulsorily incorporated into the formal curriculum of undergraduate English writing courses and postgraduate research method courses. With the objective of raising English teachers' awareness towards the learning and teaching of thinking methods in writing classes, this small scale study collected twenty-five 500-word students' English essays from a university writing class delivered for local undergraduate students studying arts and social sciences at a university in Hong Kong in 2019 - 2020. With a special focus on clarity and precision in reasoning, a linguistic-conceptual analysis has been conducted for the writing samples. Alongside grammatical mistakes and weak coherence, various degrees of obscurity in meaning and argumentation recur persistently in all the students' essays. The results of the observational study suggest that there is an urgent need to introduce logical linguistics in writing modules and subject courses for students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

Keywords: Linguistic-conceptual analysis, obscurity, academic writing, learning English as a foreign language (EFL)

1. Introduction

Crucial to critical thinking, logical reasoning is mainly about checking the consistency of statements and detecting the validity of arguments (Nosich, 2009). That said, since logical reasoning is presented in language, Cooper and Patton (2010) and Barnet and Bedau (2005) assert that logical thinking is made possible through essay writing. In the same way, “[p]ractice in dealing with reasoned argument will also help students in their essay writing, since in most subjects a requirement of good essay writing is that ideas should be presented in a clear, coherent and well-argued way” (Thomson, 2009, p.3). Indeed, only statements that are grammatical, complete in meaning, and free of obscurity are worthy of logical discussions. For example, “All humans are mortal.” and “All humans are immortal” are valid propositions that are capable of holding a truth value. Readers can make a judgment of whether such claims are true or false. Likewise, “This man is both dead and alive” (Dodigovic, p. 59), though contradictory, is a statement which can at least be tested for validity. On the other hand, expressions such as “Swans is is bird.” (ungrammatical), “All swans are... [blank]” (incomplete), and “They

[unknown subject] are birds.” (ambiguous) are not qualified as statements in logic. Due to their ungrammaticality, incompleteness and/or obscurity in meaning, meaningless and obscure sentences carry no logical entities, not to mention any truth values (Lee, 1992, p. 78). To help EFL students formulate sound and solid arguments in their academic writing, English teachers should not only teach grammar, but also impart to students the knowledge of logical linguistics, which is core to all disciplines. Likewise, subject teachers are also responsible for teaching reasoning in thinking and clarity in writing. At any rate, room for cross-disciplinary application of logic in writing, be it initiated by teachers or students, should be explored. Despite its significance, logical linguistics is seldom formally taught in university courses. Alidmat and Ayassrah (2017) pointed out that in Middle East, mechanical writing skills rather than critical thinking are featured in the ESL programme’s writing tasks. Tso and Chung (2016) also stated that in Southeast Asia, oftentimes university students “were only trained to write summaries, to paraphrase, to write essay plans and essays on general topics” (p. 55). Most students were found to be deficient in critical thinking skills (Flores et al, 2012). This lack of training in critical thinking and logical linguistics causes the recurrent problem of obscurity in tertiary students’ writing, especially those written by EFL students.

2. Background of The Study

With the aim of identifying the most typical kinds of obscurity in EFL university writing, this observational study collected twenty-five argumentative essays from a freshmen English writing class offered for year one EFL students studying arts and social sciences at a university in Hong Kong in the autumn term of 2019 - 2020. Just like any other university freshman, the twenty-five students who took part in the study had passed the standardized public English exam for entering university. They had also passed the public exam on liberal studies, a core compulsory subject in Hong Kong’s New Senior Secondary School Curriculum which is supposed to foster students’ social awareness and nurture their “critical thinking through issue-inquiry learning approach” (Ip, 2010, p.1). However, they had not taken any formal courses on logic and critical thinking, not to mention logical linguistics. The textual analysis of the students’ English essays reveals that a majority of the EFL students in Hong Kong have difficulties in articulating their thoughts and arguments clearly without ambiguity, vagueness and incompleteness in meaning. With examples found in the twenty-five students’ essays, the most common obscurity issues in EFL academic writing, namely (1) lexical ambiguity, (2) syntactic ambiguity, (3) referential ambiguity, (4) vagueness, and (5) incompleteness in meaning, will be discussed in the following.

3. Ambiguity in EFL Students’ Essays

According to Crystal (1988), ambiguity is a linguistic matter. It occurs when a word, a phrase or a sentence expresses more than one meaning (p. 15). While it is not always possible for a writer to avoid linguistic ambiguity in one sentence, the issue of unclear meaning is often easily solved when a given context is provided. However, should the intended meaning remains unclear even after the context is provided, the ambiguity will become a major obstacle that interrupts the logical flow of an argument. In the EFL writing samples of this study, all three types of ambiguity, namely lexical ambiguity, referential ambiguity, and syntactic ambiguity can be identified. This indicates that Hong Kong students are not alert about the importance of avoiding ambiguity in academic writing.

3.1 Lexical Ambiguity

“Words with multiple meanings” (Hawel, 2008, p. 71), also known as lexical ambiguity, often cause confusion to readers. In academic writing, it is the important to make sure that whenever there are two or more possible meanings for a single word or phrase, the writer’s intent should be spelled out. From the students’ essay samples collected, it is observed that lexical ambiguities in the adjectival form often occur in students’ writing. Below are two typical examples showing lexical ambiguities in adjectives:

- (a) Some people go vegan because of religious reasons. Meat is not allowed because they think that it is **dirty**.

(b) Vegetables contain high fiber content. It may be hard to digest. It is not **good** for our intestinal function.

In sentence (a), the student has not explained clearly why “meat” is thought to be “dirty”. Can “dirty” be referring to the aesthetic qualities of surfaces of meat, such as being “messy”, “unclean”, “sloppy”, “filthy”, “disordered”, “cluttered”, “blemished” and “unattractive” (Leddy, 1995, p. 259)? Or has it got something to do with the standards of food hygiene? Or can “dirty” be related to ‘sins’ in religion, such as inflicting intolerable pain when slaughtering animals? All the unknowns are left unanswered throughout the essay. Likewise, in sentence (b), it is unclear what the adjective “good” means. How is “good” food defined? Is “good” food defined by its digestibility? If that is the case, then fiber-rich vegetables such as artichokes and beetroots are defined as “bad” food. The student’s claim will then be contrary to dietitians’ advice, for it has been proven that a high fiber diet can stimulate peristalsis and prevent constipation, which is “good” and essential for the human intestine. Moreover, the intake of fiber-rich vegetables can lower cholesterol and reduce the risk of heart disease, which is “good” and healthy for humans. Confused by the lexical ambiguity, readers can only make guesses about the author’s claim.

3.2 Referential Ambiguity

Besides lexical ambiguity, unintentional referential ambiguity also occurs quite often in English essays written by Hong Kong students. A responsible writer is expected to employ a consistent point of view when writing an academic essay. Failure to use appropriate referential pronouns in writing can create misunderstanding and confusion. Unfortunately, the academic essay samples collected from the participants reveal that university students in Hong Kong are relatively weak in using personal pronouns. Together with an inconsistent point of view, awkward referential ambiguity is frequently created in their writing. Below are two excerpts showing typical referential ambiguity in Hong Kong students’ academic essays:

<Excerpt 1>

A person must be constantly vigilant day after day, month after month, and year after year to ensure **he or she** is getting enough of these nutrients. **They** need to take fortified foods or supplements, critics say, should be seen as a red flag. Otherwise, it will stifle **your** health if **you** do not receive enough key nutrients.

As shown in excerpt 1 above, at the beginning, the essay author mentions “a person” to refer to any human being regardless of age, race, gender and class. Third person pronouns like “he or she” are used to refer to the unnamed person. In the second sentence, however, the subject turns plural all of a sudden. Inconsistent to sentence 1, the plural pronoun “they” is used, and it is unclear whether “they” is used to refer to the vegans, or the people who want to get “enough...nutrients”. Worse still, in the third sentence, the point of view changes again. Now the subject becomes “you”, which refers to the reader. Such referential ambiguity makes it hard for the reader to follow the passage, let alone the logical sequence that the author means to articulate.

Likewise, in excerpt 2, it is unclear why the essay author uses such inconsistent pronouns as “our body”, “they” and “them” to refer to the “vegans”:

<Excerpt 2>

Vegans only eat legume products as the main way to get proteins. However, many legume products are processed food. In the long run, it may get harm to **our body**. Processed food such as tofu, soy milk, soybeans is the main source for vegans to get proteins. However, legume products can harm **our body** because they contain high anti-nutrients. Also, it is hard for **them** to eat meats to get proteins. Therefore **they** can only rely on legume products. In the long run, it may affect **our body health**.

In the first sentence, the author infers that legume products are harmful to human health. Then, starting from sentence 4, the author uses “they” and “them” to refer to the vegans, claiming that vegan diet is harmful to the vegans’ own health. Strangely, in the concluding statement, the author suddenly assumes that all readers are vegans. Readers are warned that in the long run, their vegan diet can harm their own health. The confusing use of pronouns has created layers of referential ambiguity which no one, including the author, can explain.

3.3 Syntactic Ambiguity

Similar to lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity refers to the presence of two or more possible meanings within one sentence or a sequence of words. In numerous essay samples collected from this study, it is noticed that many EFL students have difficulty using coordinating conjunctions. As shown in examples (a) to (c) in the following, syntactic ambiguity is often created when students misuse coordinating conjunctions such as and, or, but, yet, etc.:

- (a) Not eating **meat or seafood products** is known as a vegan diet.
- (b) In the book of **diet and nutrition therapy**...
- (c) **Going vegan** not only brings better health to humans, but also animals.

In example (a), the syntactic ambiguity makes it unclear what a vegan diet truly means: does it mean “not eating meat and not eating seafood products”? Or does it mean “not eating either meat or seafood products”? Similarly, in example (b), it is hard to decide whether there is a book written about “diet and nutrition therapy”, or that there is “a book about diet” plus “a therapy for nutrition intake”. As for example (c), readers are uncertain who are going vegans, thus the sentence can be understood in at least two ways: one interpretation is that humans go vegan, and that brings benefits to the health of both humans and animals; the alternative interpretation is that both humans and animals go vegan, and both enjoy better health.

Amongst lexical ambiguity, referential ambiguity and syntactic ambiguity, referential ambiguity appears to be the most common in the twenty-five writing samples collected, while all three types of ambiguity disrupt the logical flow of essays, making the comprehension process annoying and irritating to readers.

4. Vagueness in EFL Students’ Essays

Apart from ambiguity, vagueness is yet another writing problem of which EFL students in Hong Kong do not seem to be aware. By definition, vagueness refers to the lack of precision. As *Bowell and Kemp (2010)* point out, the actual meanings of many “rhetorically powerful or emotionally provocative words in public (and private) discourse” (p. 141) are vague. This is particularly obvious when it comes to such abstract concepts as “love”, “rights”, “politics” and “ideology”. When such vague terms are used and details are not given in the description, it can be hard for readers to follow the argument that the author means to convey. In the collected essay samples, over half of the EFL students have shown various degrees of vagueness in their writing. Below are a few examples of vagueness excerpted from the students’ essays:

- (a) The vegan diet brings a lot of benefits to **people’s** health.
- (b) People turn vegan to defend **the value of life**.
- (c) For people who want a better body shape, rather than going vegan, it is more efficient to keep fit in a **normal** way.

Example (a) is the most typical kind of vagueness to be found in students’ term papers. Scientific studies have proved that not everyone, especially children and pregnant women, can benefit from the vegan diet. It is therefore necessary to state explicitly exactly which kind of “people” (e.g. those of high cholesterol or heart disease) can benefit from the vegan diet. The vagueness in examples (b) and (c), on the other hand, involves abstract concepts that cannot be explained easily. For example, philosophical topics like “the value of life” in example (b) are hard to explain and understand. The “value of life” may also change across different people, cultures and time periods. Sometimes, “even the speaker himself

may not know precisely what he intends to convey” (Cooper, 1978, p. 225). The meaning of “to defend the value of life” is therefore deemed vague and close to meaningless. By the same token, the so-called “normal way” in example (c) is vague in meaning. Why is going vegan considered abnormal? What are the criteria of “keeping fit in a normal way”? If EFL teachers can provide students with logical linguistics training in the writing classes, further elaborations in detail can be made to clear the vagueness.

5. Incomplete Meaning in EFL Students’ Writing

In addition, meaning incompleteness is also highly commonly in EFL essays. Different from vagueness, the obscurity does not come from abstract terms. Instead, obscurity is created because the author fails to provide readers with the full and accurate information in understanding the complete picture. In other words, meaning incompleteness causes obscurity, just as the following:

Refusing to eat meat can also cause health problems. Vegans cannot absorb enough nutrients such as iron, zinc, iodine, calcium and vitamins to maintain healthy life. Some professionals are worried that without those nutrients, vegans may suffer from health problems such as fatigue, poor concentration, a decrease in brain volume and irreversible nerve damage.

While it is true that people who fail to absorb sufficient nutrients may suffer from health problems, the author has not revealed the complete picture to readers – health problems will only occur if people go on a pure vegan diet for a long period of time. Also, nutrient deficiency is unlikely to occur if vegans have supplement intake to refill the missing nutrients from their vegan diets. The incompleteness in meaning not only confuses readers, it may also lead to wrong interpretations. To check for completeness in meaning, it is suggested that one should always look for what is missing in the given data (Diyanni, 2016, p. 33).

6. Conclusion

While it is known to all that organizing “facts in logical order” (Kalb, 2012, p. 3) is important for academic writing, the first and foremost concern is that there should be “[c]larity, preciseness and no ambiguity” (Tso, 2016, p. 3). In other words, academic writing must be understandable and free of obscurity. Obscure sentences are not qualified as statements with any truth value, and they are unworthy of logical discussions. As BonJour (2002) remarks, “if a statement has no real content and hence could not be false, one does not need any further reason in order to be justified in accepting it as true” (p. 44). In this observational study, numerous obscure words, phrases and expressions of various kinds are frequently found in the twenty-five academic essays written by the local university students in Hong Kong. While the scale of study is small (n=25), the findings do raise concerns about the learning needs and difficulties of some EFL students, if not all. In fact, numerous recent studies have also discovered that besides language problems such as grammatical mistakes, EFL students do find it challenging to produce “a piece of writing where the vocabulary is carefully chosen, the sentences are logically related, the ideas are clearly expressed, and the paragraphs are coherent.”(Badi, 2015, p. 69). The logic in coherence and cohesion is what students find they lack most. EFL teachers have expressed concerns about students’ difficulty in mastering logical thinking and clarity in writing (i.e., logical linguistics) as well, “everybody knows introduction, body part, and then refutation, and then the conclusion. They [the students] have those rigid structure in mind, and they do it in a way, but the organization in this content is more about the logic-the internal logic flow within.” (Li and Ngai, 2018, p. 110). In alignment with the existing studies, this paper suggests that EFL teachers, together with subject teachers, should consider helping their students’ enhance their understanding of logico-linguistics and mastery of critical thinking. Good academic writing means way much more than just taking care of mechanics such as grammar, vocabulary, and punctuations.

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Appendix: Essay topics for students

Read the following three source materials and take notes in your own words. Write an essay of five paragraphs for one of the following topics:

- (1) *Why do people go vegan?*
- (2) *What are the health risks of being vegan?*

Source material 1:

Book title: *Vegan Diets*
Author: Don Nardo
Year of publication: 2014
Place of publication: Farmington Hills, Mississippi, U.S.

Publisher: Cengage Learning

Pages: 45 (The paragraphs in the above box is from page 45.)

NUTRITIONAL SHORTFALLS

A vegetarian diet is defined as one that does not include meat (including fowl) or seafood, or products containing those foods. In regard to key nutrients for vegetarians including protein, n-3 fatty acids, iron, zinc, iodine, calcium, and vitamins D and B12, a vegetarian diet can meet current recommendations for all of these nutrients. While it is possible for a person to adopt a vegan diet and get enough of the substances that make up the classic vegan nutritional shortfalls, some medical professionals emphasize that, although this is possible, it is not necessarily easy. A person must be constantly vigilant day after day, month after month, and year after year to ensure he or she is getting enough of these nutrients. The need to take fortified foods or supplements, critics say, should be seen as a red flag. One such critic is Dew Ramsey, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University. Worried that a vegan diet can adversely affect the human brain, he warns that clinical research finds that people on vegan diets commonly suffer from a variety of nutritional deficiencies. One study, for instance, showed that more than half of the vegans tested were deficient in vitamin B12, putting them at risk of mental health problems such as fatigue, poor concentration, decreased brain volume with aging, and irreversible nerve damage. Ramsay suggests that it would be better to modify the vegan diet with a minimal amount of animal nutrients from responsibly raised, high-quality sources, perhaps local seafood or grass-fed lamb. Those with ethical objections to killing animals can meet all their animal-nutrient needs with dairy products from grass-fed cows [that are allowed to die of natural causes], organic eggs from cage-free chickens, and occasional servings of mussels or oysters.

Source material 2:

Book title: *Nutrition and Diet Therapy: Self-instructional Approaches*

Author: Peggy Stanfield and Y. H. Hui

Publisher (Place): Jones and Bartlett Publishers (Sudbury, Massachusetts, U.S.)

Year of publication: 2010

Page: 40

VEGETARIANISM: DIET EVALUATION

There are many reasons why individuals eliminate animal foods from their diets. The most common reasons are economic concerns, religious guidelines, health considerations, and concern for animal life. Generally, the more restrictive the vegetarian's diet is, the more likely it is to be deficient in one or more major nutrients.

Problems with protein quality and quantity often occur among vegans. If vegetables and cereals are the only sources of protein, not only will they be of low quality but the digestibility factor is often low. Because of high fiber content, many nonmeat sources are not well digested. Beans are especially difficult for children. Although soybean protein is fairly similar to animal protein, its low digestibility and a lack of favor prohibit its consumption as such. Soybeans are usually consumed in a highly processed and value-added form, for example, tofu or soy milk.

Soy products are derived from soybeans; they are not soybeans. Also, soybeans contain a trypsin inhibitor that interferes with the function of trypsin, a major enzyme for digesting protein. Some vegetarian children tend to be smaller and show symptoms of undernutrition. Children should not be put on a vegan diet unless medical and nutritional expertise is available to monitor their health. When foods are chosen wisely, a vegetarian child can meet his or her nutritional needs.

Vegetarianism, when properly managed, can be a healthy way to eat. Children are especially at high risk of failure to thrive if they are not supplemented with fortified foods containing essential nutrients missing from their diets. Vegetarians may be at lower risk for gastrointestinal disorders (such as constipation, diverticulitis) and colon cancer because of the high fiber content of the diet. On the other hand, osteoporosis, which affects three out of five women over the age 60, is a high risk factor among many vegetarians.

Source material 3:

Book title: *The Advantages of Being a Vegetarian*

Author: Randy Richards

Year of publication: 2018

Place of publication: Scotts Valley, California, U.S.

Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing

Pages: 55

ELIMINATE ALL MEAT AND ANIMAL PRODUCTS FROM YOUR DIET

It is actually quite easy to eliminate red meat and poultry from our diets. When you give any thought whatsoever, the reasons are so compelling to stop eating them. Your reasons may be physical, because you need to lower your cholesterol or blood pressure. You may want to reduce your risk of cancers that may run in your family, and eliminating red meat from your diet is an important way to do this. You may also find that the way we mass-produce meat and poultry for consumption is repugnant to you. If we really thought about the way meat and poultry is raised, we would never eat the stud again. We are consuming flesh that has been produced from enormous pain and suffering. Even the smallest life has value on this earth; mass producing these animals to slaughter and eat them degrades their lives and degrades our own in the process of eating them.

It might feel like it is carrying things too far to eliminate something as elemental as a shrimp or a scallop, but think about what we dump into the ocean where this food comes from. All our waste and trash gets hauled into the ocean, if it does not go into a landfill. Think of the millions of gallons of oil that have been dumped from oil tanker accidents. Think of the impact that the erosion of the ozone layer in the atmosphere has had on every living thing on the planet. There are toxic levels of mercury in fish and seafood, so much so that if you are a woman contemplating getting pregnant, you most definitely should not eat fish. Your risk of producing a baby with birth defects is extremely high if you do.

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