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Guarding the gate politically and politely: How accreditation teams do facework while gatekeeping

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Abstract: Accreditation is a quality assurance mechanism which evaluates either the capability of an institution to offer an academic program or the quality of an academic program before its launch. Accredited institutions and programs are allowed to enroll students, both fee-paying and non-fee-paying. The outcome of an accreditation exercise will therefore have significant implications for an institution's reputation and finance. Institutions are normally informed of the outcome through an accreditation report, a genre whose discourse is intrinsically interesting and important, and thus deserves fuller research attention, for two reasons: (1) the genre contains evaluations and comments which can be negative and face-threatening, and (2) the accreditation team, as we can safely assume, will do facework subsequent to the performance of face threats through the negative evaluations and comments. The present study seeks to gain a better understanding of the lexicogrammar of this genre in general, and the lexicogrammar used to textualize facework in particular by analyzing the discourse of 30 accreditation reports in an Australian context. This paper argues that the evaluative language used in this genre can serve to perform facework for both the institution being accredited and the accreditation team itself, and have important implications for both the workplace and classroom.

Keywords: accreditation, evaluation, face, facework, politeness

1 Introduction

The culture and practice of accreditation of academic institutions (i.e. institutional accreditation) and the academic programs offered by such institutions (i.e. program accreditation) should not be new in view of the emphasis placed

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by national governments, professions, and the public in recent decades on the quality of academic programs and the need for the institutions to observe more closely their accountability to their various stakeholders (Augusti 2007; Christiansen 1985; Houston 2008; Kohler 2003; Matarazzo 1977). Accreditation is therefore an important activity to the stakeholders of the education sector on the one hand, and a high-stake one to the institutions on the other. Its importance to the stakeholders lies in the fact that they will have more confidence in the institution in terms of its capability to administer the courses provided and of the quality of such courses. It is a high-stake activity to the institutions as they will be allowed to offer the accredited programs for a certain period of time, having important financial implications. It has been established that accreditation actually works to license institutions for their offering of certain academic programs (Kohler 2003). Given such importance, a considerable body of research has been undertaken discussing the various aspects of accreditation, including its purposes, the models used in accreditation exercises, and the effectiveness and challenges of accreditation (e.g. Augusti 2007; Cusick and Adamson 2004; Damme 2002). What is left unaccounted for, among others, is the discourse of the reports: the genre through which the decision of the accreditation team (please see Section 2 for details concerning the formation and role of the team) is made known to the institutions and in some jurisdictions, the stakeholders as well, through the publication of such reports. The reports also list the evaluations, both positive and negative, made of the various aspects of the institutions and/or programs, as well as the justifications for such evaluations. The discourse of the reports should be an interesting object of research for two reasons. First, it carries significant importance as discussed above. Second, it includes discursively-induced face threat (e.g. the negative evaluations and the associated justifications) that the institutions need to deal with. Since it has been pointed out that the academic community highly values solidarity (Hyland 2004; Itakura and Tsui 2011; Johnson 1992), it will be safe to assume that the team carrying out the accreditation and writing up the genre will invest considerable effort in doing facework after making the face threats (a discussion of face and facework will follow in the next section). Identifying the linguistic and discursive devices and strategies the team uses in doing facework and maintaining solidarity while performing face-threatening acts makes the third reason. The present paper attempts to achieve two aims: (1) to address the issue of insufficient research attention; and (2) to gain a fuller understanding of the lexicogrammar of the genre in general, and the lexicogrammar used to textualize facework in particular. The paper will also attempt to address the issue of inadequate training in the writing of appraisals offered by the current English for specific purposes courses. A total of 30 accreditation reports on

programs from three closely related fields were analyzed: pharmacy, dentistry, and medicine (please see Methodology section for more details of the reports) offered by various universities and colleges in Australia.

2 Face, facework and accreditation

2.1 Face

Probably the most influential concept of face is the one proposed by Goffman (1967: 5) who defines it as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line *others* assume he has taken *during a particular contact*” [emphasis mine]. While this definition indicates, or at least strongly implies, that interaction and relation are key to the interpretation of the concept of face (as in “*others*” and “*during a particular contact*”), it was adopted only partially by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) seminal work. In this work, Brown and Levinson (1987) put forward their politeness theory discussing face and other concepts originating from it: positive face, negative face, face-threatening acts, positive politeness (strategies) and negative politeness (strategies). Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory, as critiqued by other scholars, emphasizes the individuality of face and overlooks its interactional and relational components (e.g. Arundale 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini 2003; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 2006; Matsumoto 1988), thus deviating substantially from Goffman’s (1967) conceptualization.

The interpretation of Goffman’s (1967) notion of face continues subsequent to the attempt by Brown and Levinson (1987), and emphasis on the relational and interactional can be witnessed in such interpretations. For example, Lim (1994: 210) emphasizes the role of “the other” and points out that “(t)he claim for face is the claim that the other should acknowledge, whether explicitly or implicitly, that one possesses the claimed virtues”. Arundale (2006: 201) captures the essence of interaction and states explicitly the interactional and relational, contending that “face is an emergent property of relationships, and therefore a relational phenomenon ... framing face as relational rests directly on framing it as interactional ... face is a meaning or action, or more generally an *interpreting*, ...” [emphasis mine]. Spencer-Oatey (2007: 643), apart from emphasizing the interactional and relational nature of face by referring to “the appraisal of others”, also specifies the “claims about one’s *attributes*” as in “face entails making claims about one’s *attributes* that in turn entail the appraisal of others, so in this sense the notion of face cannot be divorced from

social interaction” [emphasis mine]. This paper attempts to propose and use the following alternative interpretation of face by combining these definitions/interpretations:

Face is to be interpreted as relational and interactional, developed and resulting from a relationship formed during the course of interaction, and as an interpreting of an interactant’s attributes.

It is hoped that this alternative interpretation, with its emphasis on the interactional and relational, will make possible a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of the discourse of the present study. This discourse comprises namely: the accreditation reports of academic programs and the discursive product resulting from an accreditation exercise (involving extensive interaction between the accreditation body and the institution running the programs) on the one hand, and the main channel through which the interaction and relation between the two parties is realized and visualized on the other (please see Section 2.3 below for more details).

2.2 Facework

Two other important concepts introduced by Brown and Levinson (1987) are face-threatening act (FTA) and facework. While it is argued that every act can potentially threaten the positive or negative face of the hearer and speaker, and thus be termed FTA, individuals will resort to doing facework which functions to mitigate such an FTA by attending to the positive face or negative face of either interlocutors. So while Goffman (1967: 12) regards facework as “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face”, Brown and Levinson (1987) just take facework as, in essence, the use of positive or negative politeness strategies.

Spencer-Oatey (2008) discusses the inadequacies of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) face construct with reference to the politeness theory proposed by Gu (1990), Mao (1994), and Matsumoto (1998) and, also basing her conceptualization on Goffman’s (1967) notion of face, proposes rapport and rapport management. According to Spencer-Oatey (2008), rapport refers to the (dis)harmony between interactants and has three bases, namely “face sensitivities”, “sociality rights and obligations”, and “interactional goals” (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 14), while rapport management refers to “the use of language to promote, maintain or threaten harmonious social relations” (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 3) and entails “the management of face, the management of sociality rights and obligations, and the management of interactional goals” (Spencer-Oatey 2008: 13). This al-

ternative interpretation and conceptualization has the advantage of being more relational and interactional, it concerns social harmony and the discursive work done to achieve such. Rapport management, therefore, has a broader scope than Brown and Levinson's (1987) facework. Locher and Watts (2005) criticize Brown and Levinson's (1987) conceptualizing of facework as politeness strategies that essentially aim to redress face threats as being restrictive, since forms of cooperative communication entail more than acts that mitigate FTAs. Locher and Watts (2005:11) propose "relational work", which encompasses the work interlocutors do to either convey their (im)polite intention or behave in a politic manner whose appropriacy is dictated by the contextual factors of the interaction. Taking these alternative conceptualizations and theorizations into consideration, and based primarily on Goffman's (1967) notion of facework, I propose the following modified interpretation of facework:

Facework, being the action taken by an individual to make whatever he is doing consistent with face, can serve both the speaker and hearer, and spans from face enhancement/polite through politic to face threat/impolite.

This alternative interpretation, taking Goffman's (1967) notion as the point of departure, differs from previous ones in two respects. First, it echoes and emphasizes the interactional and relational nature of face as it 'can serve both the speaker and hearer'. That is, when a speaker does facework, s/he can take action to make whatever s/he is doing consistent with the face of him-/herself and that of the hearer. I will demonstrate how facework can be done to make one's action consistent with the institution's (i.e. the hearer's) face in Section 4.2 and with the accreditation team's (i.e. the speaker) in Section 4.3. Second, it accounts for the discursive work that not only demonstrates (im)politeness, but also achieves "unmarkedness".

I find it necessary to point out here that in the present study the application of both face and facework is intended to reach beyond the domain of traditional face-to-face individual spoken interaction into that of asynchronous written communication produced and received by groups or institutions. It follows that the "interactant", "individual", "speaker", and "hearer" used in the above modified interpretations of face and facework do not only refer to individuals participating in a face-to-face spoken interaction, but also groups or institutions involved in written communication through which they interact with each other asynchronously. Such extension has two implications: First, face is not only an individual-based phenomenon, but a group-based one as well (Spencer-Oatey 2005, Spencer-Oatey 2008). It follows that the groups/institutions involved in the present study, the accreditation team and institution undergoing

an accreditation exercise, do have face concern. Second, consequentially, the re-conceptualized notion – facework – will be applied in the discussion of the observed linguistic choices made by the accreditation team in constructing the discourse of the accreditation report.

While the concepts and constructs discussed in the preceding paragraphs were developed to account for phenomena in the domain of spoken discourse, their application in the domain of written discourse is, however, not uncommon. For example, Ho (2010) studied request emails exchanged among professional English language teachers in Hong Kong and showed how they both conveyed politeness and constructed an identity of a polite and considerate leader linguistically by drawing upon the construct of rapport and its management (Spencer-Oatey 2008). Drawing upon the same construct, Ho (2011) compared the way core and peripheral members of a community of practice (Wenger 1998) managed rapport through request emails. Lee (2004), also studying email discourse, explored the choice of request strategies of Chinese learners of English using Scollon and Scollon's (2001) conceptualization of face. Graham (2007), on a slightly different note, studied the use of impoliteness and construction of identity by members of an email discussion list by drawing upon Locher and Watts' (2005) construct of relational work.

2.3 Accreditation

In a broad sense, accreditation can be seen as “a licensing scheme” which works to formally approve a study program or an institution (Kohler 2003: 326), or as “an authoritative and impartial evaluation of the quality of learning programs or the ability of an institution/organization in delivering such learning programs” (Hong Kong Council for the Accreditation of Academic and Vocational Qualifications [HKCAAVQ thereafter] 2014). In a narrow sense, accreditation can be regarded as “the recognition that an educational program is a suitable entry route to a profession” (Augusti 2007: 280), or a signification of a program that has been found to meet the standards of the accreditation agency. Accreditation is also regarded as confirming that a program has adequately equipped the students with the necessary professional skills: “that the program provides graduating students with the knowledge, skills and professional attributes necessary to practice the profession in Australia” (Australian Dental Council 2013). An accreditation exercise is usually conducted by a team formed by the accreditation agency whose membership includes experts (mainly peers), stakeholders such as representatives of students and future employers (Kohler 2003), or specialists with the expertise to conduct relevant accreditation

exercises (HKCAAVQ 2014). The accreditation team of the Australian Medical Council exemplifies such membership clearly: it includes a mix of clinicians, specialist trainees, scientists, allied health professionals, health administrators and wider community perspectives (Australian Medical Council 2014). The accreditation team, by adhering to the set standards and criteria for conducting accreditation, works to achieve a number of purposes. For example:

- a) to support and advise independent institutions of further or higher education in the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of their provision (British Accreditation Council 2014);
- b) to regulate entry into a profession thereby furthering the status of the profession (Matarazzo 1977, McGaghie 1993);
- c) to assess the ability of a program or an institution to match and sustain quality standards (Kohler 2003); and
- d) to protect the interest and safety of the public (Christiansen 1985, Gray 1984)

These purposes can be achieved since accreditation involves scrutinizing the institution in order to determine whether it can meet certain quality requirements or standards. The scrutiny realizes the evaluating of the various aspects of the institution. The outcomes of the evaluation may either be positive or negative. Positive outcomes refer to comments concerning the strengths of the institution, which may lead to and be presented as commendations or affirmations, whereas negative ones refer to comments concerning the weaknesses or areas needing further improvements which may be presented as recommendations. The commendations, affirmations, and recommendations are listed in the accreditation report prepared by the accreditation team upon completion of the accreditation exercise, as practiced by some accreditation agencies in Australia (e.g. Australian Dental Council, Australian Pharmacy Council), Britain (e.g. British Accreditation Council, British Council), and Hong Kong (HKCAAVQ). The accreditation report can therefore be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it lists the strengths of the institution and thus could serve, though that not being the main purpose of the report, to affirm and even enhance the reputation of the institution. On the other hand, through disclosing the weaknesses or specifying the areas needing improvement of the institution, the same report can devalue its reputation; and through specifying what the institution needs to do to address the weaknesses, it can threaten its autonomy. Seen from this perspective, the discourse of the accreditation report may simultaneously enhance and threaten the face of the institution; it enhances the institution's face in that it recognizes its positive attributes (i.e. there is an interpreting of the institution's attributes and such attributes are regarded as positive, desirable); and it threatens the institution's face in that it identifies and discloses the

institution's negative attributes (i.e. there is an interpreting of the institution's attributes and such attributes are regarded as negative, undesirable). As solidarity is valued highly in the academic community (Hyland 2004; Johnson 1992), the act of enhancing the face and image of the institution by attending to and pointing out boldly their positive attributes is readily understandable (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1967; Spencer-Oatey 2007). What is probably more interesting is the way the accreditation team addresses solidarity or face issues while constructing the discourse of face-threatening negative evaluations and recommendations.

I find it useful to include here a brief discussion of face-threatening acts (FTAs). FTAs were first defined by Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) as "those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker". In the context of academic accreditation, FTAs will then include instances where the accreditation team makes a negative evaluation, a negative comment, or a recommendation. The making of a negative evaluation/comment/recommendation constitutes an FTA in that it results from an interpreting of the institution's attributes as negative. Face-attack, a more recent concept somewhat similar to face threat, refers to "communicative acts that are (or are seen as) intentionally rude, disrespectful, and insulting" (Tracy 2008: 173). However, as solidarity is valued highly in the academic community, it is unlikely that the accreditation team would be intentionally rude, disrespectful, and insulting to the institution. Another definition of FTA is given by O'Driscoll (2007: 256) as "any move which predicates a face inconsistent with the one presented up to that point in the ongoing situation". With the alternative interpretation of face as the backdrop, the face that an institution usually presents to its stakeholders and to the accreditation team particularly during the process of accreditation should be one that is associated with its positive attributes: academically and administratively competent. An act performed by the accreditation team that could be interpreted as an FTA by the institution would then be one that predicates a face that is not as academically and administratively competent as the institution wishes. Speech acts like evaluating or commenting negatively, and making recommendations as to what the institution can do to improve the quality of its program or administrative efficiency should qualify as an FTA. In this paper, I will adopt O'Driscoll's (2007) definition of FTA.

Having defined FTA, let us move on to a discussion of some literature concerning the performance of facework in the academic community. Within the academic community, initiating face threat is not uncommon. One academic activity in which such initiation is hardly avoidable is the write-up of book reviews (e.g. Hyland 2004; Itakura and Tsui 2011; Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza 2004) or research article reviews (e.g. Bruce 2014; Myers 1989). A review-

er's negative comment will probably predicate a face for the author which is inconsistent with the one the author has presented, thereby constituting an FTA for the author. It has been observed that writers of reviews expend discursive effort in maintaining an interpersonal relationship with the audience. That is, facework is done subsequent to the possible face threat caused by the comments and evaluations made in the reviews. Such work can be grouped into four categories: (1) hedging the proposition in the negative comment, pairing criticism with praise, and attributing the proposition to an outside source (Hyland 2004); (2) making it explicit to the readers that the negative comment is just the reviewer's personal opinion (Myers 1989); (3) expressing the reviewer's emotion or attitude in order to align with the readers (Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza 2004), or to identify a methodological or conceptual weakness (Bruce 2014); and (4) apologizing, self-denigrating, asking rhetorical questions, and recasting problems as future research potential (Itakura and Tsui 2011). Most of the strategies included in the first three categories can actually be subsumed under Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory concerning the language of evaluation: hedging is covered by Entertain; attributing to an outside source by Attribute; expressing emotion by Affect¹. Outside of the academic community, it has also been demonstrated that evaluative language can be a resource for professionals to do face work while performing the face-threatening speech act request. In his study of the discourse of request emails in an intra-cultural context (Ho 2014a) and an inter-cultural context (Ho 2014b), it has been shown that while Chinese and non-Chinese professionals justify their requests, they also use evaluative language in an attempt to mitigate the face-threat caused by their act of requesting. Following Ho (2014a), I will draw upon Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory as the analytical framework.

The aim of the present study is therefore three-fold. First, it aims to investigate how the accreditation team performs facework in the little researched but important and high-stake genre: accreditation reports of academic programs offered by universities or colleges; second, it aims to extend the scope of application of evaluative language in discourse analysis; and third, it seeks to gain a better understanding of the lexicogrammar of this genre in general, and the lexicogrammar used to textualize facework in particular. The next section describes the data and the appraisal theory, the analytical framework used in the present study.

¹ The first letter of the domains and regions of evaluative language is capitalized to distinguish them from other English words.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data

The present study is a part of an ongoing research project into the discourse of academic quality audit and accreditation in cities and countries where the culture of academic quality audit and accreditation is well-established. These cities and countries include the USA, the UK, Australia, and Hong Kong. The present paper focuses specifically on the discourse of accreditation in Australia. Three closely related fields of the healthcare sector were chosen: dentistry, pharmacy, and medicine. Three accreditation agencies were responsible for carrying out the accreditation exercise of the respective education programs leading to the award of qualifications of these fields. These three accreditation agencies were: the Australian Dental Council, the Australian Pharmacy Council, and the Australian Medical Council. The accreditation reports, in summary form, prepared by the panels (termed site evaluation teams (SET) by the Australian Dental Council and the Australian Pharmacy Council or AMC teams by the Australian Medical Council) upon completion of the accreditation exercises were published via the websites of the agencies and were accessed at:

<http://www.adc.org.au/index.php?id=16>

The Australian Dental Council

<http://pharmacycouncil.org.au/content/index.php?id=19>

The Australian Pharmacy Council

<http://www.amc.org.au/index.php/ar/bme/reports>

The Australian Medical Council

Only the latest report was included in the data in cases where more than one report on the same program had been published. This was done for two reasons, first, the present study is not a diachronic one, and second I believe that the latest accreditation reports will inform us of the current prevalent pattern of use of evaluative language in the mitigation of face threats in the genre. A total of 30 accreditation reports in summary form – 12 from dentistry, 8 from pharmacy, and 10 from medicine – constituted the data and were analyzed using appraisal theory (Martin and White 2005).

3.2 Appraisal theory: A quick glance

As a comprehensive account of the theory is not possible given the space constraint, a brief overview of it will be presented here². It is common to see individuals evaluate by expressing emotions, judging people's behavior, and commenting on the value and nature of phenomena and objects. Apart from body gestures and some physiological reactions like crying, laughing and screaming, they do so with language. The type of language that can achieve such purpose is the language of evaluation, or appraisal (Martin and White 2005). According to Martin and White, the language of evaluation consists of three interacting domains that individuals can draw upon in the process of evaluation: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation.

3.2.1 Attitude

Attitude or attitudinal evaluation refers to situations in which individuals express emotional reactions, judge people's behavior, or evaluate phenomena or objects. It consists of three regions: Affect, Judgment, and Appreciation. Affect concerns emotional reactions, which can be classified as happiness/unhappiness, security/insecurity, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction. The region Judgment concerns one's attitudes to others and the way they behave. Judgment concerns people's normality: how special one or one's behavior is; capability: how capable one is; tenacity: how dependable one is; veracity: how honest one is; and propriety: how far beyond reproach one is (Martin and White 2005: 52–53). The last region in the Attitude domain is Appreciation, which concerns evaluations of phenomena, performances, and objects. It allows an individual to evaluate in terms of their reaction to the phenomena/objects, their valuation of the phenomena/objects, or the composition of the phenomena/objects.

3.2.2 Graduation

It concerns meanings construing people's modification of their attitudinal evaluations, where the direction of modification can be either way, that is, strengthening or weakening, sharpening or softening. It has two regions: Force and Focus. Force concerns the strengthening or weakening of evaluations. To

² Readers may refer to Martin and White (2005) for a detailed and comprehensive account of appraisal theory.

strengthen or weaken an attitudinal evaluation, one can modify either its intensity or quantity. Focus concerns sharpening or softening. To sharpen or soften an attitudinal evaluation, one can either up-scale the specification so as to indicate prototypicality or down-scale the specification so as to indicate a “marginal membership in the category” (Martin and White 2005: 138).

3.2.3 Engagement

It concerns the evaluative language resources with which the writer/speaker (writer hereafter) “adopts a stance towards the value positions being referenced by the text and with respect to those they address” (Martin and White 2005: 92). The possible range of stances adopted includes various degrees of commitment to, distancing from, or denial of the value positions put forward in the proposition. To commit themselves strongly to a value position, the writer can use resources belonging to the category of Proclaim which functions to concur with the readers, to pronounce the position, and to endorse a position. To commit themselves less strongly, the writer can resort to Entertain as it can function to indicate that the position put forward is just one of the possible alternatives. To distance themselves from a value position, the writer can rely on Attribute which functions to just acknowledge or even to attribute to some external source the value position put forward. To deny a value position, the writer can use the resources of the Disclaim category. It functions to deny a position with an explicit ‘no’ or ‘not’, or to counter a position by “represent(ing) the current proposition as replacing or supplanting, and thereby ‘countering’, a proposition which would have been expected in its place” usually with such conjunctions and connectives as *although*, *but*, *however*, and *yet* (Martin and White 2005: 120).

3.3 The analysis

The present paper aims to explore the ways the accreditation teams did face-work subsequent to the making of negative comments and/or recommendations in the accreditation reports. These comments and recommendations were extracted from the 30 accreditation reports for analysis. However, it was noted during the process of extraction that negative comments/recommendations were often accompanied by either one or both of these elements: positive evaluation of the aspect being negatively commented on, and justification for recommendations. In other words, a face threat in the accreditation reports will in-

clude moves (Bhatia 2004; Swales 1990) that are obligatory: either the making of a negative comment or the making of a recommendation, or both; and optional: the making of a positive evaluation of the aspect being criticized or the justifying of a recommendation, or both. The term “face-threatening discourse” will be used to refer to these moves collectively. The face-threatening discourse was then read closely by me and another linguist separately in an attempt to first identify all the instances of evaluative language use with reference to Martin and White’s (2005) appraisal theory. While evaluation was generally found to be instantiated through lexical items or phrases, a number of instances of evaluation were realized by combining two or more single lexical evaluations in a longer stretch of discourse. Extracts (1) and (2) below illustrate these two cases. Evaluative language is emboldened and the respective category is shown in the adjacent square bracket (the instances of evaluative language presented in these and other extracts in the rest of the paper are just some of the many possible realizations of the evaluative language which is a system of “discourse semantic” which can be realized “across a range of grammatical structures” (Martin and White 2005: 45).³

(1) evaluation realized as lexical items

Feedback from graduates and interns has been **carefully considered** **[Judgment-Propriety]** by the Faculty and has been **influential** **[Appreciation-Valuation]** in improving curriculum content and delivery.
(pharmacy: accreditation report PC)

(2) evaluation realized as combined lexical evaluations

Staff showed **a high level of** **[Intensity (strengthening)]** **commitment to the program** **[Judgment-Propriety]** ...
(dentistry: accreditation report DG)

The two instances of evaluation in Extract (1) had different targets: the way the relevant personnel considered the feedback in the first instance, and the effect of such feedback on the curriculum content and delivery in the second. They were then regarded as two independent evaluations. The two instances of evaluation in Extract (2), however, worked together to evaluate one single target positively: the staff. The staff were first evaluated positively for being committed to the program and such evaluation was strengthened with *a high level of*, an instantiation of Graduation-Intensity (strengthening).

³ For a more comprehensive (but by no means exhaustive) list of lexicogrammatical resources for evaluation purposes, please see Martin & White (2005: 48–152).

The identification of all the instances of evaluative language use was then followed by a close reading of all such instances in order to further identify those which functioned to perform facework. An inter-rater reliability rate of 78% was obtained. Only those instances of evaluation agreed upon by both raters were analyzed further.

4 Doing facework with evaluative language

This section reports and discusses the use of evaluative language in doing facework subsequent to the possible face threat resulting from the making of negative comments and recommendations in the accreditation reports. It consists of two sub-sections, section 4.1 shows how face threats were textualized and performed in the two obligatory moves (the making of negative comments and the making of recommendations). Section 4.2 discusses the role of evaluative language in both the obligatory moves and optional moves (the making of positive evaluations on the aspect being criticized and the justification of recommendations).

4.1 Face threat in the obligatory moves

Extracts (3) and (4) illustrate how the face threat was constituted respectively in the recommendation and negative comment (for simplicity reasons, the evaluative language used in the moves is not specified or discussed at this stage):

(3) recommendation emboldened

Teaching staff are dedicated and the program is producing graduates with the skills needed to practise, **however, the clinical exposure of students could be improved.**

(dentistry: accreditation report DE)

This recommendation was based on the accreditation team's findings that the amount of students' clinical exposure was not adequate, therefore it was recommended to the institution that such exposure *could be improved*. This recommendation constituted an FTA to the institution since it predicated a face that was inconsistent with the one the institution should intend to present, it should wish to have its attributes interpreted positively: a competent institution whose dentistry program provided its students with adequate clinical exposure. The recommendation exposed, despite its somewhat indirect manner, the weak-

nesses of the program (that it did not provide an adequate amount of clinical exposure to students), reflecting that the accreditation team interpreted the institution's attributes negatively.

(4) negative comment emboldened

The teaching program is being maintained, with significant increases in staff and infrastructure having been put in place. **Communication failures with the large and scattered student body have occurred.**

(medical: accreditation report MJ)

The negative comment boldly points out the weakness or negative attribute of the institution and thus predicates a face which is inconsistent with the one the institution intends to present: that it is competent enough to have a mechanism in place for effective communication with its large and scattered student body. The negative comment thus constituted a threat to the face of the institution.

4.2 Doing facework for the hearer: the institution

I now turn below to a discussion of the instances of evaluative language use that functioned to do facework addressing the possible face threat made in the obligatory moves and optional moves. Extracts (5) to (7) (these three extracts together contain the four moves constituting the face-threatening discourse) will be used to illustrate and explain the function of the evaluative language used.

It has been observed that the face threats performed in the making of recommendations and the making of negative comments were attended to both internally (within the obligatory moves) and externally (within the optional moves) with evaluative language. Let us examine Extract (5) below to find out how hearer-oriented facework could be done (evaluative language and their categorization highlighted). The extract shows a common pattern of evaluation used in the accreditation report: positive evaluation followed by recommendation.

(5) The program is **producing graduates with the skills and experience needed for practice [Judgment-Capability]. However [Counter],** the program's admission policies and procedures **could [Entertain]** be improved, formalised and applied more consistently.

(dentistry: accreditation report DH)

The extract starts with a positive evaluation of the capability of the program to produce quality graduates. Though *The program* is not a person and thus *producing graduates with the skills and experience needed for practice* is not a behavior of any person, I still regard this instance of evaluation as a Judgment-Capacity. *The program* in the sentence should be interpreted as a collective entity consisting of the personnel involved (e.g. the teachers, supporting staff, managers), the course syllabus, the course delivery and administration etc.. In other words, *The program* should be interpreted as an organic, living entity instead of a lifeless one, and thus the category Judgment is applicable. This act of positive Judgment-Capability evaluation acknowledged a positive attribute of the program, thereby enhancing the face of the institution. This face enhancement should be interpreted as politic as the accreditation team is supposed to report the strengths of the institution. The same act of positive evaluation, however, was followed immediately by a recommendation, which apart from stating what the institution should do, pointed out the weaknesses of the institution: the admission policies and procedures were not satisfactory, not formal, and not applied consistently. The weaknesses and the recommendation constituted an FTA to the institution since they predicated a face that was inconsistent with the one the institution should intend to present; it should wish to have its attributes interpreted positively: a competent institution that had in place satisfactory, formal and consistently applied admission policies. The proposition contained in the recommendation was hedged with the Engagement-Entertain token *could* whose use can be interpreted as an indication of the team's reserved commitment to the proposition (that is, the recommendation), and/or the team's willingness to accept or at least entertain or discuss others' alternative viewpoints (Martin and White 2005). Either of these interpretations could convey to the institution one or both of these meanings: that the weaknesses were not serious, and/or that the institution was not being forced to implement the recommended action. Similar observations, that negative review comments are hedged in the academic community, have been reported (Hyland 2004). The facework done through the use of the Engagement-Entertain token *could* should therefore be a politic move.

These two moves, positive evaluation followed immediately with recommendation, being vastly different in terms of tone, nature and desirability, were strategically linked with an Engagement-Counter token *However*. A Counter, according to Martin and White (2005), can serve to prepare the readers for some information whose nature is different from, or more precisely opposite to, what has been presented before it. In this particular discursive context, this Counter serves to introduce some less desirable message compared to the preceding one: it was a recommendation related directly to *The program* which has just

been evaluated positively before the Counter. So, in a way, the Counter, being a signal in itself as a change of tone in the forthcoming discourse, could serve to foretell the institution what message (or at least the nature of the message) the team was going to convey to them, thereby preparing the institution for the message. Its use is therefore argued here to be strategic since the team could have introduced and presented the negative comment either without the Counter, in which case the institution would not have been prepared for the face threat, or with some affective expressions that might have aggravated the effect of the criticisms like *unfortunately*, *sadly*, or even *disappointingly*. As negative comments used in academic reviews are usually hedged to soften its impact as we witnessed in the preceding paragraph (Hyland 2004), the facework performed through the use of the Counter token *However* in Extract 5 is not politic but can be open to a polite interpretation (Locher and Watts 2005).

The accreditation team has therefore probably performed facework that is (1) politic in nature: Entertain (*could*) which functioned to weaken the strength of the negative comment on the problematic issue and weaken the force of imposition on the institution; and (2) open to a polite interpretation with the use of Counter (*However*) which functioned to prepare the institution for some unpleasant message.

From Extract 5, we know that facework can be performed with evaluative language used in the obligatory move (making of recommendation) and optional move (making of positive evaluations) of the face-threatening discourse. Extract 6 below shows how facework in the other obligatory move – making of negative evaluations – can be achieved with evaluative language.

- (6) It is noted that the program is **fully [Intensity (strengthening)] integrated with much of the indicative curricular occurring in non-regular teaching settings [Appreciation (composition)]**, for instance some medicinal chemistry components are covered in placements. The program **appears to [Entertain] articulate these processes well from basic science to application [Judgment-Capability]**. **However [Counter]**, it was not possible to extract some of these materials from the course as a whole in order to gauge breadth and depth of coverage. This also relates to the current incomplete nature of the program.
(pharmacy: accreditation report PG)

A gradual change in the nature of the evaluation is observed in Extract 6. The team first presented a strengthened positive Appreciation regarding the curricular of the program: *fully integrated with much of the indicative curricular occurring in non-regular teaching settings*, followed by another positive evalu-

ation that was weakened by the use of the Entertain token *appears to* as in *appears to articulate these processes well from basic science to application*. The weakening effect was achieved by the use of Entertain, suggesting that the team was committed to the proposition with some degree of reservation. Finally, two negative evaluations introduced with the Counter *However* were made: (1) the breadth and depth of the coverage of the course could not be determined since some course materials could not be extracted; and (2) the program was incomplete at the time of the accreditation exercise. Both negative comments pointed out boldly the weaknesses or negative attributes of the institution and thus predicated a face which was inconsistent with the one the institution should intend to present; that it was competent enough to have ready all the course materials for examination by the accreditation team, and to have a program that was complete at the time of the accreditation. They thus constituted a threat to the face of the institution. Here, we can see that two strategies were used by the team in doing facework. The first one is the gradual change of the nature of the evaluation, from a positive one with emphasis, through a positive one with reservation, to finally a negative one. The readers of the report would then be led through a transition and thus prepared psychologically, or at least discursively, for the negative comment. Second, the use of the Counter *However*, as discussed in Extract 5 of section 4.2 above, also served to prepare the institution for the negative comment that came after it. The team could have presented the negative comment differently, for example, they could have presented the negative comment before the two instances of positive evaluation; or they could have omitted the Counter token *however*, both would have increased the impact of the face threat caused by the negative comment. I argue, therefore, the facework done can be open to a polite interpretation.

Extract (7) below sees the use of three moves: making of positive evaluation, making of recommendation, and justifying of recommendation.

- (7) The current Professional Experience Placement program is **commended [Appreciation (reaction)] but [Counter] attention needs to [Entertain]** be given to succession planning for the community liaison pharmacist, as much of its success is linked to the current appointee.
(pharmacy: accreditation report PC)

The team made a positive evaluation of the Professional Experience Placement program by boldly stating that such program *is commended*, expressing its reaction towards it, thus qualifying such evaluation as an instance of Appreciation. The same program, however, then received a recommendation introduced by a Counter *but* as in *but attention needs to be given to succession planning for the*

community liaison pharmacist, which was immediately followed by the justification for such recommendation: *as much of its success is linked to the current appointee*. Facework was done subsequent to the face threat caused by the implying of the negative attributes through the recommendation, that the institution personnel had not paid attention to the succession planning for the community liaison pharmacist, with four different means. The first one is the first move of this face-threatening discourse, the making of a positive evaluation of the program. It attends to a positive attribute of the program thereby enhancing the face of the institution. Similar to the facework attempt realized as a positive evaluation in Extract 5 above, this instance of facework should also be interpreted as politic: reporting its observation and evaluation is the job of the accreditation team. The second one is the use of the Counter *but*. The institution was then prepared for the forthcoming less desirable move, the making of a recommendation, with the Counter *but* which functioned to attend to the face of the institution, as discussed earlier in section 4.2. So, it is a facework attempt which can be open to a polite interpretation. The third one is the use of the Entertain token *needs to* as in *attention needs to be given to succession planning for the community liaison pharmacist*. Despite its high modality level (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004), it still showed the team's intention to allow alternative viewpoints from the institution on the one hand, and reserved commitment to the proposition on the other, i.e. it serves to hedge the proposition, and therefore the use of the Entertain token *needs to* is a politic move (Hyland 2004). And finally with the move justifying the recommendation, solidarity can be maintained or even enhanced (Faerch and Kasper 1989; Hassall 2001; House and Kasper 1987; Kong 2006), that is, the team was behaving in a politic way, a way commonly practiced by members of the academic community (Hyland 2004; Itakura and Tsui 2011; Johnson 1992).

We can see from the above discussion that the accreditation team performed facework with various evaluative language resources subsequent to the face threat realized through the making of recommendations and/or negative evaluations. The nature of the facework was either politic, i.e. the team was just doing what it was supposed to do, or polite, i.e. the team was doing something extra. Both the politic and polite facework served to lessen the impact on the institution whose attributes had not been interpreted as positive as it wished.

I will now turn to a discussion of the way the accreditation team made what it did consistent with its own face.

4.3 Doing facework for the speaker: the accreditation team

Recalling that facework means the action an individual takes to make whatever s/he is doing consistent with his/her face, and that it can serve both the hearer and speaker, the way the accreditation team attends to its own face also deserves our attention. The accreditation reports, though published without explicitly stating the authors, are understood to be written by the accreditation team whose members are known to the institution, the team visited the institution during the accreditation exercise. It is for this reason that the accreditation team would also find it necessary to attend to its own face while constructing the evaluative discourse of the accreditation report. So, the team would also do facework for itself. In other words, what the accreditation team did, making a language choice in this case, should be consistent with its own face, interpreted as a professional, objective and considerate group of individuals.

Though we may not be consciously aware, we make choices when we are producing discourse (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The accreditation team was also making choices while producing the discourse of the accreditation report. As discussed in Section 4.2 above, the choices made included the use of Engagement-Entertain and Counter to lessen the impact of the face threat caused by the making of recommendations and negative evaluations. We have seen such choices could be taken as facework done for the institution, the hearer. The same choices, I argue, should also be taken as facework done for the accreditation team itself. Before illustrating how the team did facework for itself, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by the face of the team. As the suggested modified interpretation states, face is an interpreting of interactants' attributes. The accreditation team, being one of the interactants in the ongoing interaction, the accreditation process, should wish to have its positive attributes attended to and interpreted as such. Its positive attributes include professional, objective, and considerate. Let me now illustrate below how the accreditation team did facework for itself with two examples: the use of *could* and *However* in Extract 5. I mentioned in Section 4.2 that the Entertain token *could*, may convey the meaning that the accreditation team was reserved about the recommendation and was not strongly imposing on the institution. Such action – the choice of language – should then be consistent with the team's face, it was professional and objective as it on the one hand made a recommendation based on evidence, and welcomed alternative or even opposing views from the institution on the other (Martin and White 2005). Had the accreditation team replaced *could* with a stronger, more authoritative expression like *are to be* in Extract 5, it would not have been able to satisfy its own face wants. The use of a non-sanctioned move (hedging is the preferred one [Hyland 2004]) would be

interpreted by the institution and other readers of the report as being neither professional (the team should be well aware of the norm) nor objective (the team only stated its judgment and did not allow alternative viewpoints or any space for negotiation). Similarly, the use of the Counter token *However* should also be seen as the team's attempt to do facework for itself. The token, as discussed in Section 4.2, served to prepare the institution for the forthcoming negative comment and was open for a polite interpretation. Both the intention to better prepare the institution for the message and to be polite highlighted the accreditation team's attribute: considerate. So, had the accreditation team not used the Counter token *However*, it would not have been able to satisfy its face want as it would not have been seen as being considerate by preparing the institution for the negative evaluation.

5 Implications

The findings of the present study will have implications mainly for three groups of individuals: (1) evaluators, (2) teachers and learners of English for specific purposes, and (3) researchers working on politeness and identity. Here evaluators include in a narrow sense experts on the accreditation teams, and in a broad sense supervisors who need to evaluate subordinates' performance regularly, reviewers who need to evaluate the quality of a book, article or proposal, and internal/external auditors who need to evaluate and report on the performance of an organization which is held accountable to its shareholders or stakeholders, just to name a few.

Evaluation has been viewed as a profession (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Stufflebeam 2001) and universities have been providing courses or even programs equipping students with the professional skills and knowledge to practice in the profession (Dewey et al. 2008; Engle et al. 2006; LaVelle and Donaldson 2010). It has been reported that, unfortunately, the quality of some professional evaluations is not satisfactory and this has been attributed to the insufficient training students have received (Worthen 1999). This is not surprising when we look at Davies and MacKay's (2014) study of the content of the evaluation courses offered by universities in the USA. It is found that none of these courses have an explicit focus on the language used for delivering the evaluation results. They focus, instead, on areas like evaluation approaches, evaluation ethics, planning evaluations, professional standards, and budgeting and contracts (in descending order of importance as rated by the teachers). Since the evaluation results, which can be face-threatening as the present study has just

shown, are presented to the organization or individual being evaluated in the form of a report, the discourse of such reports should play an important role in the whole process determining the effect and effectiveness of the evaluation exercise. The person or organization being evaluated may feel offended by the content and the language used to textualize the content. This may lead to two undesirable consequences. One is the people concerned may become less receptive to the recommendations made in the report, thereby defeating the purpose of the evaluation to some extent. The other one is the damage caused to the relationship between the evaluator and the one being evaluated. This would be particularly problematic if the evaluation in question is an internal performance appraisal, as the interpersonal rapport and working relationship between supervisors and subordinates will be at risk. It is therefore advisable for the evaluation courses specifically offered to those who wish to pursue a career in the evaluation profession to include modules that will equip students with the linguistic knowledge required to construct the discourse of evaluation reports in general, and with the means to do the necessary facework in particular.

It is also common that course books for business communication that university students rely on while learning to do evaluation mainly focus on the ways to conduct various kinds of evaluation and to write various kinds of evaluation report (e.g. Allen 1998; Bowden 2008; Ewald and Burnett 1997; Torres et al. 2005). These kinds of evaluations and evaluation reports concern staff appraisal, organizational evaluation and project evaluation, they are the kinds of activities or tasks that professionals will be involved in throughout their careers, and thus it is important for the learners of business/professional communication courses and other English for specific purposes (ESP) courses to acquire and possess the necessary knowledge to produce the discourse. The learning and teaching materials for evaluation introduced by such course books, however, only touch upon the discourse of evaluation briefly. For instance, on some occasions, students are advised to check their completed evaluation report with reference to a list of questions like the following (Allen 1998: 453–457):

1. Have you determined how to present bad news, if necessary, in the most appropriate – and ethical – manner? Make sure you do not bury it or use so many hedges that the reader cannot understand your message
2. Have you carefully described the strengths and weaknesses of the project's design and implementation?
3. Should you revise the wording, tone, or evaluation to lessen or heighten the reader's response?

These questions actually suggest the need to use evaluative language to do facework subsequent to face threats. While “do not bury it” in question (1)

suggests the need to be clear, “do not use so many hedges that ...” suggests the need to be indirect; the adverb “carefully” in question (2) and the clause “revise the wording, tone, or evaluation to lessen or heighten the reader’s response” in question (3) suggest the need to attend to the face wants of readers. However, no discussion of these important and useful expressions, to my best knowledge, is included in the course books. The findings of the present study may warrant the inclusion of evaluative language and its pragmatic function in the curriculum of ESP courses offered in universities.

While the enactment of group identity has been observed in communication among group members through small talk among academics and health-care professionals (Tracy and Naughton 2000), the present paper also shows that group face can be attended to and group identity be enacted with facework. Such facework was mainly performed by the accreditation agency discursively with evaluative language in an attempt to make what it was doing consistent with both its own and the course provider’s face. So, it is important for researchers working on politeness and identity to be aware that discursive facework can have an effect on both individuals and groups despite such discursive work possibly not differing considerably. Such an effect should also warrant the attention of evaluators and ESP practitioners as the act of evaluation and the face threats that the act will cause, concerns not only the target of evaluation and the evaluator him/herself, but also the groups to which the target of evaluation and the evaluator belong. The face wants of both groups thus need to be taken into consideration during an interaction.

6 Conclusion

This paper is one of the first studies investigating the use and function of evaluative language in the discourse of academic accreditation reports, a genre which has important reputational and financial implications for institutions offering academic programs. It has been found that the genre causes face threat effected by “face-threatening discourse” which comprises up to a total of four moves: making a negative comment, making a recommendation, making a positive evaluation, and justifying a recommendation. The first two moves are obligatory, either one or both of them causes the threat, and the other two are optional, if present, one or both of them will accompany the obligatory moves. While evaluative language is used in both the obligatory and optional moves, and other parts of the accreditation report, the study has only focused on and analyzed the instances of use of language that functions to do face work subse-

quent to the face-threatening discourse. It has been shown that different categories of evaluative language can do facework, which, as the paper has pointed out, is important in this genre in view of the value the academic community attaches to solidarity (Hyland 2004; Itakura and Tsui 2011; Johnson 1992).

Despite the limited scope of the study in both geographical and professional terms (the study only focused on the practice of accreditation in three closely related professions in Australia [pharmacy, dentistry, and medicine]), this qualitative study should be significant in three aspects. One lies in its novelty, to the best of my knowledge, this study should be the first to investigate the discourse of accreditation reports by drawing upon Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal theory. The other one lies in the possible contributions to the workplace and academia.

The implications of the findings for the workplace concern mainly the evaluators: professionals who evaluate others in, for example, staff performance appraisal, project evaluation, and organization evaluation. They should have the linguistic strategies not only to textualize their evaluations and comments, especially negative and thus face-threatening ones, in an objective and concise manner, but also to do so tactfully. That is, they should know the way to do facework subsequent to the face threat caused by such comments and evaluations through discourse. There are also implications for academia, the teaching and learning of business/professional communication and ESP. Given the importance of evaluation and its discourse, it will be highly desirable for teachers of these courses to consider including topics related to the discourse of various kinds of evaluation reports commonly encountered in today's workplace. And lastly, the study demonstrates that group face can also be attended to with facework and thus warrant our consideration during an interaction.

The importance of this high-stake genre should warrant further research which can investigate, among others, its move structure. I have investigated the generic move structure partially: the two obligatory and optional moves that constitute the face-threatening discourse. A more thorough and comprehensive study will reveal the generic components of the whole report on the one hand, and allow us to further develop, understand and consolidate the discursive practice involved in the genre on the other.

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Bionote

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