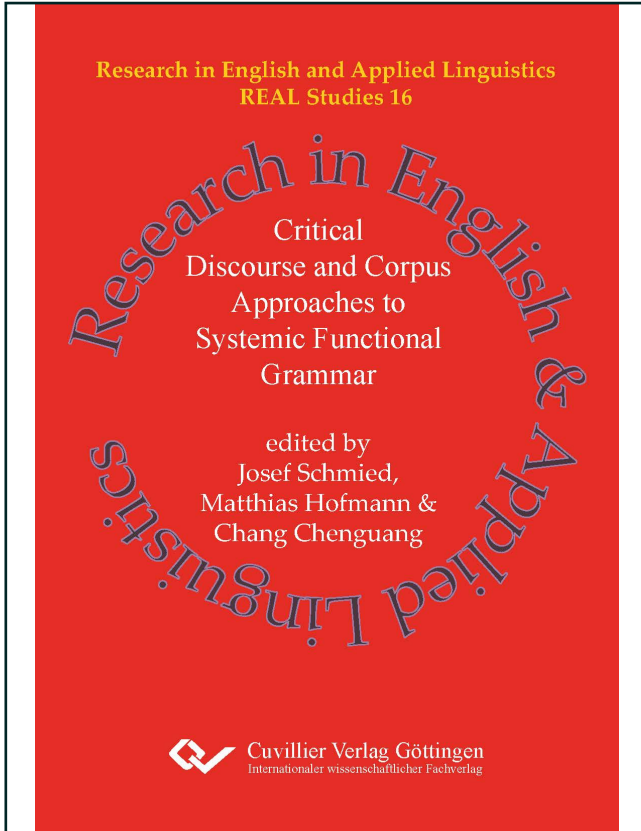Chenguang Chang (Herausgeber)
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Critical Discourse and Corpus Approaches to Systemic Functional Grammar

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Applying Appraisal Theory to Conference Reviews: Systemic Functional Perspectives in Corpus-Based Genre-Specific Discourse Analyses[1]

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Abstract

This contribution combines five linguistic approaches: systemic functional linguistics as a general grammar theory, appraisal theory as an application in evaluative contexts, genre theory from a textlinguistic perspective, discourse analysis for professional discourse, and corpus-linguistics as an empirical methodology. The genre of reviews has been chosen because it has diversified in the last few decades from a journalistic to an academic context. At the same time, conventions have become professionalised in the sense of awareness of good communicative behaviour of discourse. Based on a small corpus of open reviews of conference proposals, the features of concessive constructions and politeness are analysed because they show the necessary cooperative interaction between reviewers and authors.

Keywords: review, evaluation, concessive, politeness, solidarity, judgement

1. Introduction

1.1. Symbiotic Approaches in Systemic-Functional Linguistics

If we define genre (with Bhatia 2004: 26) as "situated linguistic behaviour in institutionalised academic or professional settings", we find many examples in academic discourse communities. The genre of reviews and more specifically of academic (research article and conference) reviews that come across as professional allows us to combine many different approaches to language. We can choose approaches that are not mutually exclusive, but have their focus on theory (e.g., systemic functional linguistics - SFL, mainly as in Halliday & Matthiessen 2014), on register or discourse types (e.g., genre), on methodology (e.g., corpus linguistics), etc. Such symbiotic approaches have been applied fruitfully for many years: Lentz & Pander Maat (1997), for example, demonstrated that functional approaches to the study of language may be used not only to characterise discourse structures,

but also to assess their communicative quality, since discourse analysis and evaluation are conceptually related activities. The combination of corpus-linguistic methodology and academic writing has been explored in Camiciotti & Tognini-Bonelli (eds. 2004), the combination of evaluation and corpus-linguistics by Hunston & Thompson (2000). Hunston (2011: 10f) discusses the key terms appraisal, evaluation, and stance on a systemic functional basis. The current theoretical summary on synergy of SFL and Corpus Linguistics is provided by Chang (2020) and several other contributions in this volume.

1.2. Reviews in Systemic-Functional Linguistics

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 42) mention reviews in their section on context:

> Reviews range from opinions that might be shared in casual conversation to analytical evaluations of the kind we would expect from expert reviewers contributing to quality newspapers. Since both 'sharing' and 'exploring' contexts are important sites for the instantiation, and (in the phylogenetic time-frame) for the evolution, of interpersonal meaning, there are likely to be interesting changes in patterns of interpersonal meaning-making – more profound than the addition of 'emoticons' to written conversation to make up for some of the loss of intonation and voice quality in spoken language. Of course, technological advances do not affect only 'sharing' and 'exploring' contexts, but also the other types of situation characterized in terms of sociosemiotic activities in Figure 1-1. However, the development of social media does indicate the extent to which companies are trying to leverage people's need for 'sharing' and orientation towards the interpersonal.

Of course, this is a modern concept of reviews, as it includes social media, but it is also very broad. This 'sharing' and 'exploring' includes any opinion, whereas "reviews" require a certain level of expertise (at least through user experience) as a basis for 'exploring', i.e., a critical analysis and analytical evaluation. Although author and reader of reviews must be on a similar level to be able to 'share' in a discourse community, the reviewer must usually indicate some experience to come across as credibly useful. In contrast to personal opinions expressed in conversation, today's reviews are digital and distanced, so that this lack of personal acquaintance must be balanced by language clues indicating 'expertise' or 'experience'. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 51) emphasise the "fundamental" role of a corpus and its stratification for language analysis, but they do not include the genre model and genre-specific language in their discussions of text and register and rather refer to other works by Martin and Matthiessen (e.g., Martin & Rose 2008). The language of analytical evaluation received a new functional impact in the seminal contribution by Martin & White (2005). They locate appraisal mainly in the interpersonal function with a focus on tenor, which may signal power and solidarity (Figure 1.17, p. 34) and recontextualise Halliday's register in their stratified model of social context "to include a more abstract level of patterning called genre" (ibid: 32). They provide the greater frame for the semantics of reviews. Appraisal is comprised of attitude (including affect, judgement, appreciation), engagement, and graduation (Martin & White 2005: 35) and "the development of engagement as a resource for managing the play of voices in discourse" (Martin & White 2005: xi). In reviews, this "play of voices" is the negotiation of evaluation through a

writer – (construed) reader dialogue with argumentation, assertion, concession, counter-expectation, etc.:

> Broadly speaking **engagement** is concerned with the ways in which resources such as projection, modality, polarity, concession and various comment adverbials position the speaker/writer with respect to the value position being advanced and with respect to potential responses to that value position.
>
> **Judgement** is concerned with resources for assessing behaviour according to various normative principles, for example criticism …
>
> **Appreciation** looks at resources for construing the value of things (Martin & White 2005: 35-6)

For our purposes of analysing reviews from this power (status) perspective, we can combine engagement and appreciation as solidarity and judgement as distancing evaluation aspects or face (cf. 2.2 below).

Although this view seems central to academic reviews, Martin & White mention the genre of reviews only in two contexts, namely film and news reviews:

> We find unexceptional all manner of publicly-presented positive evaluations – for example, favourable arts reviews, positively-disposed journalistic commentaries, obituaries, and 'this-is-your-life' style television programmes. (Martin & White 2005: 5)

The related Appraisal Website, developed by P. R. R. White, also focusses on media and not on academic discourse. Even in his more recent publications (like White 2015), White does not mention academic texts and academic reviews. The methodological and genre limitation of appraisal and evaluation studies is further discussed by Thompson (2008: 185), who rightly argues in favour of a broadening of perspectives towards discourse and corpus analysis:

> I would argue strongly in favor of a recognition that it is important, as far as is practical, to sharpen the definition of the categories, and to tether analyses of evaluation firmly to the wording selected by the writer or speaker. Only by doing that can we avoid the charge that we are merely providing an idiosyncratic and impressionistic commentary on discourse rather than a replicable linguistic analysis.

Recent research has expanded SFL to the evaluation of academic reviews. In terms of Xu & Nesi (2017: 1), reviews are a clear case of "the research world, where the choice of evaluation must be affected by the writer's argumentative intention".

2. Concepts

2.1. The Genre of Reviews

The current (02/06/20) entry s.v. *review* in the Oxford English Dictionary online makes it clear that although the lexeme *review* is very old in English (from Middle French), the entry as a text type or genre only comes considerably later:

7.

a. An account or critical appraisal of a book or (now also) a play, film, concert, etc. [1649-]

b. A periodical publication consisting mainly of critical articles on current and cultural events, new books, the arts, etc. Frequently in the titles of such publications. [1705-]

c. A critical appraisal of a product, service, etc., intended for the guidance of consumers. [1914-]
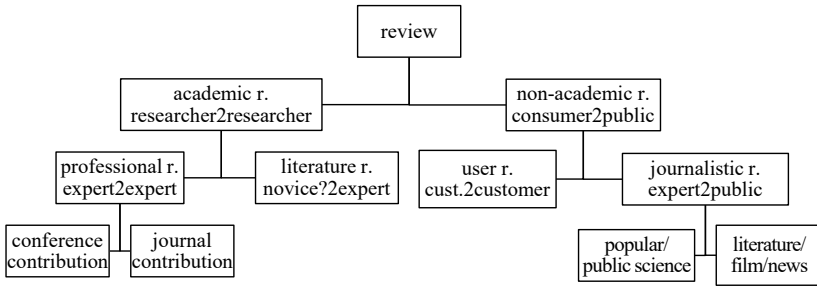
Figure 1   Types of review by author-reader relationship

The military meanings in the OED seem more prominent than the text meanings – and not a word of digital or on-line review, although this seems most prominent in the 21st century, at least in academic circles.

If we see genres as community-specific "professional practices" (Bhatia 2004), we can perceive reviews today always in digital form and developing in two directions: user, consumer or customer reviews should be written "peer-to-peer" (or p2p) in non-professional style (although cheating or even 'professional' fake reviews in on-line commerce seems big business), and peer reviews of (proposals of) journal articles or conference abstracts should be written in professional style. Since both review genres are gaining in importance and popularity, they need "guidelines" to integrate novices into the business in a satisfactory way. Whether a review is accepted or helpful (cf. Filieri 2015, Skalicky 2013, Mudambi & Schuff 2010) depends on the pragmatic impact on the readers of reviews in a reviewer – author dialogue that balances solidarity and constructive criticism, i.e., the positive face of positive appreciation and the negative face of negative judgement. To measure the "strength" of a review, graded opinions can be found on both sides of the dialogue: reviewers may indicate explicitly how confident they feel about their expertise, and consumers may indicate how useful they found a review.

Figure 1 may clarify the complex system of reviews, although even this is a simplified version. We discuss in detail conference (contribution/presentation) reviews as special cases of (professional) academic reviews, i.e., reviews as an independent text type written in an academic context by specialists for their colleagues, which is why they can also be called peer reviews, together with reviews of journal articles. Related texts are expert-to-expert reviews of other publications like book, film or news(paper) reviews, again either public reviews in journals or on www pages or internal (pre-publication) reviews of book proposals or journal article proposals for publishers. Literature reviews written by young academics as part of their theses, often as a chapter on concepts and methodology after the introduction, are only partial texts and less peer-to-peer. Of course, a brief literature review is included in all conference and journal contributions and state-of-the-art articles

may be even a complete text in between a journal article and book review, for instance. Completely different conventions apply to non-academic reviews, as they are consumer-to-public communication, written either by people involved in political discourse or customers in commercial discourse. The difference between consumer and customer review is that the latter focusses not only on the product, but also the shop or service. Neither concept is yet included in the standard dictionaries such as the OED or Miriam-Webster online because all the non-professional2public options have expanded enormously since the internet revolution. On this new platform, the entire ideal of the public understanding of science is a relatively new and important concept that covers several genres and readerships. In all these types of reviews, the functional context is quite different: expert-to-expert reviews are written for peers to advance research (through oral papers at conferences and written papers in journals). Literature reviews in this sense are written in a hierarchical setting to (demonstrate that the author can) digest research (or find a research gap); customer reviews are written to share an experience with peers; and the public discourse on news includes news reviews, usually by professional journalists to the general public, but possibly even letters-to-the-editor and the (infamous?) social media tweets or posts, where the hierarchy is reversed and where sections of 'the public' reject the cooperative discourse we have taken for granted (Schmied fc). New digital affordances, as usual, bring both opportunities and threats …

Of course, there are also many exceptions to the types presented in Figure 1: literature reviews may be discussed by students peer-to-peer so that they learn from one another before learning from the teacher; book or film reviews may be "sponsored", news reviews may be biased "propaganda", and hotel reviews may not be written by real customers, but bought from a "service". All these different purposes require different linguistic usages that can be analysed.

As modern on-line reviews lack a direct personal relationship, this can be achieved by appropriate interactive metadiscourse strategies. For consumer reviews (e.g., TripAdvisor, Amazon, Netflix, Epicurious, and Yelp), this has been analysed by Vásquez (2015), who found mainly oral discourse markers (e.g., *well*, *you know*), but also (simulated) questions and answers – all features that help to focus on interesting interpersonal dialogue functions (cf. Text 2 and Table 2 below). Similarly, Tian (2013) focusses on engagement features in hotel reviews.

Even if we focus on academic texts, a wide audience or readership of reviews with different functional needs is possible. Relatively few books on academic literature reviews take a perspective as wide as Efron & Ravid (2019: 30), who list professors or dissertation committees, faculty, private or public grant committees, publishers, practitioners in the field, policymakers, workplace colleagues, scholarly community, and general public – but they include neither SFL nor face, concessions or politeness, the key concepts of this contribution.

2.2. Academic Peer Reviews

Traditionally, academic peer reviews are double-blind (sometimes also called double-anonymous, e.g., by publishers such as Taylor & Francis). Figure 2 illustrates the system. It applies to all subgenres, i.e proposed contributions to journals or edited books as well as to conferences today: an author submits a text that must be anonymised and follow the formal guidelines of the text genre of academic article or conference abstract (length, content sections/moves, references, keywords etc.), usually through a submission system to an editor or conference organiser, who chooses two reviewers and they return a text (sometimes also a standardised form) in the genre (academic) review to the editor or organiser, who decides on this basis whether to accept the proposal (or not!) and which reviewer comments to pass on to the author. The comments basically serve as guidelines for improvement, but they usually include a "clear verdict", such as "reject" (i.e., not appropriate for this journal/conference or too much work to make it fit), "accept", which can be qualified "as is" or "publishable/presentable with minor corrections" or "publishable or presentable after extensive revision" (for phraseological examples of all these categories see Paltridge 2017). Both sides are "blind" in the sense that the reviewers do not know the author(s), although they may guess from self-citations (if they have not been removed) or specialisation, and that the authors do not know the reviewer, although they may guess from a list of professional specialists published as journal advisors or academic conference committee. Of course, "blind" does not mean that the two sides do not know each other in principle, because specialists are part of the same academic discourse community, i.e., they publish in the same journals and attend the same conferences, so that the reviewer usually gets to know the author later. However, the direct connection between author and reviewer is blocked in this text evaluation process (indicated by two strokes in Figure 1). Even then, the review process, like all academic gate-keeping, includes face-threatening acts, risks for cooperative professional communication, which the editor/organiser has to handle professionally, especially in the case of rejections or critical comments by the editor/organiser. As gate-keepers, they are responsible for ensuring that journal readers, and conference participants feel well-served professionally.

In open peer reviews, reviewers may choose themselves to comment on reviews professionally, and they can not only indicate their professional judgement in their rating, but also their confidence openly. As in traditional peer reviews, open peer reviews can be single-blind, where the reviewer does know the author, or double-blind, where the reviewer does not know the author (or fully open, where both reviewer and author are known). Still, the professional dialogue between author and reviewer in Figure 2 below is not blocked by an editor, so authors can rebut reviews and improve their contributions, although finally the conference organiser (or editor) remains the ultimate gate-keeper and decides. This opportunity of open dialogue makes an objective, unbiased, constructive professional academic discourse even more necessary, hence our emphasis on balancing the solidarity and judgement functions of open reviews.
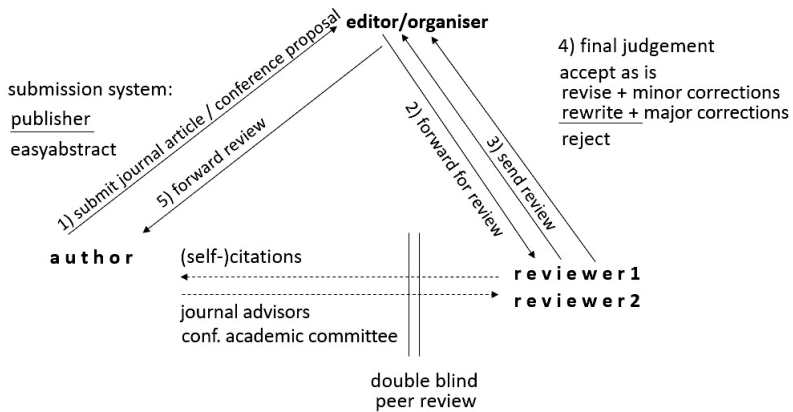
Figure 2   Processes in double-blind peer review

Conference reviews are good examples of research-oriented evaluation in the sense of Thetela (1997), where the worthiness of a proposal is discussed and hopefully increased through a complex evaluation process including more or less fixed and transparent variables like significance of topic, methodological rigour, innovative character in the field, clarity and appropriateness of presentation, etc.

Interestingly, the contributions on "Academic Evaluation and Review Genres" in Hyland & Diani (eds. 2009) hardly mention conference reviews and focus on literature and book reviews – and this is normal in a rich and expanding field. A very vivid presentation of the challenges of reviewer – author interaction can be found in Tardy (2019).

The most detailed analysis of peer reviews is Paltridge (2017). He uses a phraseological SFL perspective (with many concrete examples), also focuses on reviews as face-threatening interaction and has a whole chapter on politeness, in which he even identifies features of accepted and rejected reviews (esp. Paltridge 2017: 100-111), but he analyses a small corpus of academic journal reviews (71,661 words). Although he emphasises that reviewers may want to minimise the imposition on authors in relation to the changes they require and may "bracket" their negative comment in an otherwise overall positive review (ibid: 101), he does not mention concessive constructions. It is important to bear in mind that in journal reviews reviewers may direct their comments to the author directly or leave it to the editor to decide and communicate criticism to the author.

2.3. Professional Discourse

Professional discourse is a relatively new term in genre discussions (in contrast to language learning). It has been defined by Gunnarson (2009: 5) and Schnurr (2013: 14) simply as text and talk "in professional contexts for professional purposes" and they have emphasised that expectations and norms of what is considered appropriate change over time with technological affordances and occupational or institutional contexts. When we analyse these current linguistic technological-institutional usages in academic (conference proposal) reviews, we see on the one hand the dialogic character, which is essential for the advancement of science, and on the other hand the business-like relationship and communication (in contrast to personal or private communication). Professional communication among peers must be characterised by the common aim of guaranteeing conference contributions that are appreciated by conference participants, as well as maintaining a good working relationship between peers, e.g., for future conferences. Thus, although the evaluative character of reviews makes the negative elements face-threatening, they must be brought across in un-emotional, polite style and the constructive character must be felt through a good balance between praise and criticism (solidarity and critical judgement), which is guaranteed by polite elements in the interpersonal metafunctions and contrastive and concessive elements in the textual metafunctions. Halliday & Matthiesen (2014: 38) summarise: "Tenor considerations thus include the range of 'voices' taking part in the different socio-semiotic activities, including degrees of expertise and of professionalism".

2.4. Functional Elements for Professional Reviews

For professional reviews, we expect a dialogic process of reviewing to lead to a better conference or journal contribution. This is why the final message "accept" (or "reject") must be clearly based on a polite and transparent argumentation in logical metafunctions. From functional linguistics perspectives, several concepts can be applied to reviews: here we focus on theme-rheme patterns, concessive/contrastive argumentation structures from the intertextual metafunction and (grammatical) politeness features from the interpersonal metafunction.

The semantic relationship between the system of information and the system of theme is explained by Halliday & Matthiesen (2014: 120):

> But although they are related, Given + New and Theme + Rheme are not the same thing. The Theme is what I, the speaker, choose to take as my point of departure. The Given is what you, the listener, already know about or have accessible to you. Theme + Rheme is speaker-oriented, while Given + New is listener-oriented.

Normally, the theme–rheme refers to the order of clause elements, but in the clause complex it can refer to clause sequence (Halliday & Matthiesen 2014: 51-53), where enhancing hypotactic, dependent clauses (e.g., *although*) may serve as theme. Of course, from the clausal level we can move up to the textual level where such sequences may be an important element to lead the reader to the final evaluation rheme, "accept" or "reject". All these sequences and chains contribute to an

overall cohesion in the genre of academic reviews, especially for conferences and journals.

A major functional feature of professional reviews are concessives (cf. König 1988 and 2006), since they serve as quick contrastive moves in the information progression, balancing positive evaluations of solidarity with negative evaluations of judgement. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014: 478) subsume concessives under enhancement and distinguish at least three types of indicators: paratactic (prototypical *but* and *yet, still, nevertheless*), which is often also called contrastive and has only regressive function, hypotactic (prototypical *although* and *though, even though/if*, and parts of *while*), which can be used finite or non-finite with gerunds and (non-finite) prepositions (prototypical *despite* and *in spite of, without*) – in the following comparison we concentrate on the prototypical lexemes *but*, *(al)though*, and *despite/in spite of*, which are also the most frequent.

The role of concession and counter-assertion in reviews has been demonstrated by Hunston (2011: 46f). Martin & White (2005: 134) include concessions in their diagram "The engagement system" (Figure 3.3): contract → disclaim → counter (including the diverse lexical examples *yet, although, amazingly, but*).

However, established textbooks on literature reviews (e.g., Galvan & Galvan 2015) do not focus on concessive constructions. But they do include politeness features (usually based on Brown & Levinson 1987) because reviews can be perceived as face threatening (Galvan & Galvan 2015: 28-35) and they distinguish, just like us: "Face work that is aimed at positive face is called "solidarity politeness" … Face work that deals with negative face is known as "respect politeness" (ibid: 29).

Finally, although Halliday & Matthiessen do not focus on reviews, reviews are full of positive and negative proposals (2014: 697). For them (2014:705), "[t]he tenor variables are usually discussed in terms of status, formality, face, tact and politeness". From the politeness features investigated in this paper, they include *I would, you/he could/should*, convenient indicators in many genres, not only reviews (cf. 3.5 below). They are also prominent in the empirical examples from journal reviews in Paltridge (2017: 100-111).

3. Conference Reviews: A Case Study in Academic Evaluation

3.1. Open Reviews as a Data-Base

3.1.1. *Developments in Digital/On-Line Reviews*

Traditionally the principle of double-blind peer review meant that only journal editors or conference organisers had access to a wide range of comparative texts, which usually remain anonymous and unpublished. The development of open peer reviews offers an initial opportunity to collect systematically such texts and relevant criteria, at least in some academic fields. This procedure should create transparency and increase professional discourse as described above. Corpus linguistic research can thus compare linguistic features indicating professionality in this specific genre for the first time.

Professionality here can be defined as a combination of transparent criteria and constructive style. In many reviews, fit (to conference audience or journal readership), novelty, size (of study), scope, and relevance (in the field or wider application context) are valuable criteria, which do not have to have the same weight in the final rating and can always be adapted. In a complex appraisal approach, this judgement must be balanced out by solidarity features (e.g., compliments in Johnson 1992).

The final criterion for every reviewer should always be "Would you like to receive this review yourself and find it useful not only in a short-term perspective (this conference or this journal number), but in a long-term perspective for scientific and personal development". Thus, polite language is the necessary basis for a constructive critical style in conference proposal reviews, which are a major stepping stone towards a successful conference paper and conference. The argumentation in the review must fit the evaluative judgement between "accept" and "reject". Professional reviewers must encourage authors to continue improving their work by construing partnership as well as accepted expertise in their professional discourse community, based on solidarity and judgement.

Many professional discourse specialists have emphasised the desire of young scholars to gain acceptance (Belcher 2007) and the gate-keeping role of reviews (e.g., Habibie & Hyland Eds. 2019) in the advancement of professional knowledge:

> Whatever its origins, a knowledge claim's 'career progression' towards the status of an accepted theory depends on academic publication and the preceding gate-keeping activity of editors and peer-reviewers, with further validation of the knowledge claim, or new theory, occurring when other researchers take it up in their own work as if it were true. (Smart, Currie & Falconer 2014: 86)

3.1.2. *A Corpus of Open Peer Reviews in Conferences on* Learning Representations

Since conference contributions are usually chosen on the basis of conference abstracts, i.e., short presentation proposals that have to be handed in months before the conference is opened, they usually do not have to prove that the underlying research project is finished, but only that it is "promising" according to transparent criteria (such as originality or centrality in the field) and academically sound (such as methodologically rigorous or conceptually sophisticated in the field; cf, above). Here group-specific language use plays a major role in the choice of technical terms and presentation style, but many features of professional metalanguage can be analysed on a broader academic basis. At least this perspective is open for general academic researchers and open for comparison on the basis of a good (machine-readable) corpus.