

PART IV

EVALUATING WRITING

14.

A SOCIOLINGUIST TEACHES EVALUATING LANGUAGE

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What You Will Learn in this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn how to develop evaluative criteria for a piece of language (e.g. what makes a piece of writing “clear,” “engaging,” “convincing,” etc.). You’ll also learn how to use those criteria to support your evaluation of a piece of language. We’ll talk about evaluating language from the perspective of *sociolinguistics*, or the study of how society and language interact. By the end of this chapter, you’ll be ready to look at some language (a piece of writing), develop some criteria to evaluate it (is it good or bad, do I like it or not?), and write an evaluation which explains to your audience why you feel this way about this piece of language.

Key Terms

Here are some terms from sociolinguistics that will help us to think about how and why we evaluate language:

- Language attitudes
- Stigmatized languages/dialects

In addition to these terms, you’ll see some in-text citations in this chapter. These indicate a reference to another piece of written work. Some common reasons these references are used in academic writing are to reference research that supports a claim (as in the first three citations below), or to give credit to the author of an excerpt included in the text (as with the excerpt from Young later in the chapter). These typically look like the last name of the author(s) and the year of publication, both inside parentheses (an information-prominent citation), or the year of publication in parentheses after the author’s name in the text (an author-prominent citation).

Evaluating language

Analyzing vs evaluating language

Research tells us that children as young as four years old can make a guess about where a speaker is from based on the way they talk (McCullough, Clopper, & Wagner, 2017). This is an example of **analyzing** language (see the previous section); we hear people

speaking a certain way and learn or are told that those people are from a certain region. When we have enough examples of this, we hear someone speak, analyze the way they sound, and make a guess about where they might be from based on other people who sound like them.

But we don't just learn to analyze language from a very young age; **evaluating** language, especially spoken language, is a social practice that we learn from as early as four years old as well. Day (1980, 1982) and others have demonstrated that children as young as four develop and express positive or negative **language attitudes** about their own language, and the language of others. This means that they're not just saying "this speaker sounds like they come from that region," they're saying "this speaker sounds like they come from that region, AND that means that they sound good/bad, intelligent/unintelligent, lazy/hardworking, etc." This is an incredible cognitive ability to learn at such a young age!

However, it's crucial to know that there's nothing at all about any language or dialect that is naturally good/bad, intelligent/unintelligent, lazy/hardworking, or any other evaluation. From a linguistic perspective, all languages are equally useful for human communication, and any evaluations we make about languages or dialects are social judgments of the people who use those languages or dialects. But when a dominant group holds and expresses an evaluation of a group and the language they use, their language or dialect may become **stigmatized**, meaning that it's viewed as worse/less intelligent/lazier, etc. than other varieties.

Let's take a look at an example of a really useful feature of several American dialects that is also stigmatized. In "Standard American English," (in quotes because this is very hard to define as a variety, but typically refers to the language used predominantly by white Americans), the singular and plural version of the second-person pronoun are both *you*. So if I say to a classroom full of students "You forgot to turn in your homework," it's not clear whether I'm talking to one particular student, or to the whole class.

To clear up this ambiguity, many speakers of American English, especially users of African-American English and speakers from the Southern US, use the second-person plural pronoun *y'all*. To compare with the example above, "Y'all forgot to turn in your homework" makes it much clearer that I'm referring to more than one person. As you likely know, this is a pretty salient (well-known) marker of the speech of someone who's from the South. This means that if someone hears a speaker say *y'all*, they're likely to extrapolate that this person is from the Southern United States. This is a pretty reasonable **analysis**, especially if they notice other features of Southern English.

However, many listeners (especially if they're not from this region) may hear this feature, recognize it as Southern English, and make an **evaluation** about that speaker. Recall that evaluations of a speaker's language are always an evaluation of the speaker. In the United States, evaluations of Southern English tend to be negative and associated with slower speech and thought, ignorance, and less education, although interestingly, these features (and thus their speakers) are also commonly associated with being humble and polite (Hayes, 2013).

This example has hopefully helped you to see the difference between the **analysis** that a speaker who uses *y'all* may be from the South, and a positive/negative **evaluation** about the word *y'all* and, by extension, the speaker (or writer) and their group/region of origin. With this distinction in mind, we'll move on to how we can first develop concrete criteria for evaluating language (especially writing), and then how we can apply these criteria to a piece of writing and share our evaluation with an audience.

Developing criteria for evaluation

Let's return to our *y'all* example for a minute. Despite being associated with lazy thinking and speaking, *y'all* actually fills a "hole" in the grammatical system of "Standard English" pronouns, and can help reduce ambiguity. Thus, we can see that a negative evaluation of *y'all* and other Southern American English features probably isn't based on the criterion of linguistic "usefulness". If anything, *y'all* can make one's speaking and writing clearer! Before we start developing criteria for evaluating a piece of writing, let's think about evaluations that we might already make about language, and what the criteria are for those evaluations.

We'll stick with *y'all*: if you read the following sentence in an academic essay, would you say it was an example of "good" writing or "bad" writing? Would you say it's "clear"? Would you say it's "appropriate" in this context? Why or why not? Take a look at the

sentence, then take a minute to brainstorm some adjectives you might use to describe this sentence and, importantly, think about **why** you'd choose those adjectives to describe the sentence.

Although Standard American English is implicitly expected by many in academia, y'all do have a right to use your own variety of English in writing assignments for this course and beyond.

You may have had an immediate reaction to this sentence, especially to the word *y'all* in an academic essay, and this is completely expected; remember that we learn at a very young age to both analyze and evaluate language. Just like you have an immediate reaction to this sentence, you have similar reactions to other things that you hear and read. We like some things that we read, and we don't like others. We describe some writing as good, and some as bad. The goal of this chapter is to first acknowledge that evaluations we make about language are subjective, meaning that not everyone will evaluate language in the same way, or based on the same criteria, and then to articulate the criteria that we use to evaluate pieces of writing.

In this chapter, we'll focus on evaluating "academic writing," which I put in quotes because this is a very broad category which could include such diverse genres as lab reports, annotated bibliographies, argumentative essays, and research writing. However, for this chapter, we'll consider these categories together, as pieces of writing which share similar communicative goals, namely, to communicate a process, concept, or argument in a clear, detailed way, to a specific audience.

Evaluating academic writing

Before we can evaluate a piece of academic writing, we'll need to consider what a piece of academic writing **should** do, and the strategies that can be used to accomplish this goal. To put it another way, you'll use what you've learned in the excellent chapters about **analyzing** writing to clearly describe what strategies are used in a piece of writing and whether those strategies accomplish the goals of the author. In order to make this exercise easier, I'll give you three terms you can use to evaluate a piece of academic writing, although you could certainly evaluate academic writing through many other perspectives as well. Is this piece of academic writing:

1. Clear?
2. Engaging?
3. Convincing?

It's important to note that you can define these terms however you'd like. That's the subjective element of evaluating a piece of writing. It's also crucial to remember that different audiences may evaluate academic writing differently. For example, a piece of writing that's clear, engaging, and convincing to someone working in Molecular Biology may not be any of those things to a person working in Art History. This is why it's essential to keep in mind the audience of the piece of writing.

What might make a piece of academic writing clear? What makes it engaging? What makes it convincing? Let's try applying these terms to the example sentence above containing *y'all*. Is the sentence clear? Why or why not? Does the use of features of a stigmatized dialect of English affect the clarity (positively or negatively)? Is the sentence engaging? Does it make you interested in the argument and want to keep reading the piece? Does the sentence help to convince you of the author's argument?

Again, these are all questions which have no right answer: you may feel that the sentence is unclear, uninteresting, and unconvincing, but it's crucial that you be able to explain to your audience **why** you feel this way, using the criteria that you develop for what makes a piece of academic writing clear, engaging, and convincing.

Before moving on to the next section, go ahead and develop, then write down a few criteria for what makes a piece of academic writing clear, engaging, and convincing. In your opinion, what kind of strategies do academic authors use who write clear, engaging, and convincing work? If you have some academic writing you've recently read that you feel meets those criteria, you may want to take a look at that for inspiration as you develop your list of criteria.

Applying criteria for evaluation

Now that you've had some practice developing criteria to evaluate a piece of academic writing, let's try applying it to something longer than a sentence. Below is an excerpt from an academic essay by professor and scholar Dr. Vershawn Ashanti Young (2010) entitled "Should Writers Use Their Own English?" In this essay, Young is responding to an article by cultural critic Dr. Stanley Fish (2009), who had written an article entitled "What Should Colleges Teach." The opening quote from Young's article comes from Fish's article (note the in-text citation).

"If students infected with the facile egalitarianism of soft multiculturalism declare, 'I have a right to my own language,' reply, 'Yes, you do, and I am not here to take that language from you; I'm here to teach you another one.' (Who could object to learning a second language?) And then get on with it." (Fish "Part 3")

Besides encouraging teachers to be snide and patronizing, Fish flat out confuses (I would say he lies, but Momma say be nice). You can't start off saying, "disabuse yo'self of the notion that students have a right to their dialect" and then say to tell students: "Y'all do have a right." That's hypocritical. It's further disingenuous of Fish to ask: "Who could object to learning a second language?" What he really means by this rhetorical question is that the "multiculturals" should be thrilled to leave their own dialect and learn another one, the one he promotes. If he meant everybody should be thrilled to learn another dialect, then wouldn't everybody be learning everybody's dialect? Wouldn't we all become multidialectal and plurilingual? And that's my exact argument, that we all should know everybody's dialect, at least as many as we can, and be open to the mix of them in oral and written communication.

See, don't nobody all the time, nor do they in the same way subscribe to or follow standard modes of expression. Everybody mixes the dialect they learn at home with whatever other dialect or language they learn afterwards. That's how we understand accents; that's how we can hear that some people are from a Polish, Spanish, or French language background when they speak English. It's how we can tell somebody is from the South, from Appalachia, from Chicago or any other regional background. We hear that background in their speech, and it's often expressed in their writing too. It's natural. (Young, 2010)

It's likely that this piece of academic writing looks quite different from others that you've read, and it's also likely that you had some immediate reaction about whether this writing is clear, engaging, or convincing. However, remember that if we want our own evaluation to be clear, engaging, and convincing, it's important to not just react, but to articulate our evaluation based on clearly-defined criteria. Let's apply the criteria you developed for the three terms on which we're evaluating this piece.

Clear

Is Young's writing clear? Are you able to understand what he's saying? Why or why not? How do the features of a variety of English (with which you may or may not be familiar) affect your ability to follow his argument? How about the structure of his argument? Does it progress in a way that's understandable to you?

Engaging

Is Young's writing engaging? If so, what about it is engaging? Does the use of his own variety of English in academic writing make it more engaging, or make you less interested in reading the piece? How about the way he responds to Fish?

Convincing

What is Young's main argument here? Are you convinced by Young's argument? What strategies does he use to try and convince the audience? What lower-level strategies does he use (e.g. specific words, punctuation, grammar)? What broader argumentative strategies does he use?

Although this is a useful practice for evaluating writing, you can develop other criteria for evaluating any piece of writing you'd like! For example, you might evaluate whether a piece of fiction is well-written, entertaining, and interesting. The important thing to remember is that what constitutes each of those terms is subjective (up to you), and that you can and should develop specific criteria for what makes a piece of writing each of those things.

Writing up your evaluation

Now you've had the chance to develop criteria for evaluating writing, and to apply those criteria to a piece of writing. In this final section, I'll discuss a few strategies for writing up your evaluation of a piece of writing. First, it's important to keep in mind that your criteria are subjective. What's clear, engaging, and convincing for one audience may be the opposite for another if they have different criteria. Your goal in writing up your evaluation is to express to your readers why you feel that this piece of writing is (or is not) interesting, effective, etc.

In order to express your evaluation to your readers, it's crucial that you clearly define how you're evaluating the writing and the criteria you're applying. One successful organizational strategy is to use an introductory paragraph where you tell the audience the terms you're using to evaluate a piece of writing. Then, devote each following paragraph to one of those terms and, before diving into the evaluation, explain to your audience the criteria you used.

Another crucial strategy for supporting your evaluation is to use direct examples of the language to explain your evaluation. Let's go back to the example of the word *y'all*. I may make the claim that the use of the second-person plural pronoun *y'all* is clearer than the use of the less-stigmatized *you*. In order to demonstrate this, I've shown a sentence where the less-stigmatized variant leaves some ambiguity that *y'all* may not as in the example “**you** forgot to turn in your homework” vs “**y'all** forgot to turn in your homework.”

Similarly, when you evaluate a piece of writing, you'll want to include examples from the text that support your evaluation. For example, if you argue that Young's (2010) essay above is not clear because his use of African-American English is hard to follow for those unfamiliar with the variety, you may include a sentence which uses features from this variety that were particularly challenging for you to follow.

One final strategy for writing a successful and convincing evaluation is to write confidently about your evaluation. Although your evaluation is subjective, when you have well-defined criteria and use evidence from the piece of writing to support your evaluation, you can write your evaluation boldly. For example, a common tendency for new academic writers is to “hedge” their evaluation by saying things like “I think that Young's article is unclear because.” Because you're the author, we know that this is your opinion, and because you've given us the criteria by which you're evaluating, we know that this is your claim. A more confident way to word this evaluation might be “Young's article is unclear because of his use of...”

Conclusion

Throughout your academic career, whether or not you are assigned an evaluative writing assignment, you will be evaluating language, both spoken and written. Remember that in fact, all of us learn to analyze and evaluate language from as early as the age of four! Evaluating language is a central part of understanding the language and the people that we read and hear. What this chapter has aimed to do is give you the skills to develop specific criteria for evaluating language, and to express your evaluation in a way that helps you and others to better understand and communicate with one another.

Discussion Questions

- Think of a time when you evaluated someone's language use, or when your own language use was evaluated. This could be spoken language, informal communication like a text message, or a piece of classroom writing.

- What was the analysis that led to that evaluation?
- What were the criteria for the evaluation?
- How did the audience and communicative goals affect the evaluation?
- In this chapter, we talked about evaluating academic writing in terms of whether it's "clear, engaging, and convincing."
 - Try coming up with three more ways in which we could evaluate academic writing.
 - Try coming up with three terms you could use to evaluate another type of writing with which you're familiar (e.g. fiction, news writing, emails, etc.).
- Once you've identified the three ways you'd like to evaluate a piece of writing, try using the following questions (substituting your own terms) to come up with criteria:
 - I believe a piece of writing being clear means...
 - I believe an engaging piece of writing has...
 - I believe a convincing piece of writing is...

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