

Public Abstract

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Title:Like Dancers Following Each Other's Steps: An Analysis of Lexical Cues in Student Writing for Differing Audiences

This empirical study examines the role of lexical priming in first-year college student writers' abilities to consider multiple audiences. The writing topic assigned to all 165 students is identical except for the audience for whom the students were directed to write. One-third of the students were directed to write a persuasive letter to an authority figure about the topic; one-third were directed to write a persuasive letter to a close friend about the topic; and one-third were not given an audience assignment, but were instructed to write a persuasive essay about the topic. Their responses were analyzed for evidence of Audience-Sensitivity Traits and further analyzed for evidence of lexical priming, i.e., phonological strings composed of collocation and colligation-related sets that can indicate awareness of audience.

Results suggest that student writers are generally able to consider and write to their audiences in appropriate ways. In the letters to the authority figure, student writers use more requests and citations and quotations than their counterparts use in the letters to their close friends. However, students writing to the authority figure rank lowest in their uses of reasoning and logic and of appeals for inclusiveness and empathy. Students writing letters to close friends on the same topic rank highest of all three groups in the writers' textual interactions with readers, such as directly addressing their readers and referring to specific reader traits. Writers of Close-Friend letters also rank highest in language that expresses positive thought and positive emotional affect. The essays (no audience assigned) rank highest in reasoning and logic and use of public commonplaces and lowest in textual interactions with readers. These results confirm hypotheses regarding audience intimacy behavior such as those proposed by Vincent Puma, who has argued that writers alter the intimacy levels of their writing in rough approximation to speaking or writing stances.

Although some specific variables yielded inconclusive results, overall, it can be concluded that student writers effectively "primed" their readers to read as the writers directed, that they effectively used lexical priming and audience-sensitivity indicators to write within assigned genres, and that most of the writers did not display overt egocentrism. Further, this study furnishes evidence of the usefulness of computerized text-tagging software to aid the rhetorician in textual analysis, even as it exposes some problems with such software.