

A Proposal for Deeper Analysis of Aggressive Language in Classroom Writing

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### Abstract

I am seeking to understand the influences of an instructor's semantics (i.e. word choices) on a student's semantics. A student's semantics in their writing assignments is influenced in a positively correlating way by the semantics in the writing prompts they are given. In other words, the more aggressive the language in the writing prompt, the more aggressive their response will be. The question I am interested in exploring potential answers to is: Does the level of aggression in a writing assignment's semantics (word choices) influence an undergraduate student's semantics, and if so, in what ways?

### **Specific Interests**

My interest is in the levels of aggression in written language, which can be determined through imperative commands, violent word choices, and active (rather than passive) voice. Semantics is just one element of communication; for the purpose of this study, I choose to focus on how word choices, specifically, are influential; other elements that may have influence are tone, syntax (sentence structure), and pragmatics (context).

I believe that aggression in written language is a worthwhile field of study because how intentions, emotions, and evaluations are communicated through word choice, and interpreting aggression in word choice can reveal significant information about how people in general impart said information. Furthermore, aggression and violence in written language are growing in interest in writing studies research; topics such as gender differences, multilingual and bilingual differences, and psychological roots are growing fields (Composition Studies). Researchers are becoming more involved with how hidden feelings are communicated to others, especially negative feelings such as anger, resentment, and even those of violence or threats of violence.

Some background information that may be important for understanding future research is that aggression is a topic that is still growing. Most articles I have read in preparation for this proposal are mainly aimed at studying aggression in young people; for example, many researchers are interested in knowing how aggressive tendencies in written language begin in childhood and progress into adolescence. I believe it is just as important to know how aggression in written language can be influenced in older ages, particularly in college and university ages (i.e. young adulthood). Another area of study is in gender differences, in which researchers study how men and women communicate aggression in written language (Communication Studies). I

am less interested in studying gender differences and more interested in understanding teacher-student relationships.

### **Literature Review**

In all of the articles I read, I could not find many that were specifically about how aggression is communicated in written assignments. I will disseminate the articles that I did find in order of publication; most of these were more focused on aggression in general rather than the written language.

In 2001, Scott Myers and Kelly Rocca published a research article concerning how college students reacted to aggression on the part of their professors. The study found that a professor's argumentativeness, a form of aggression which implies confidence in one's beliefs and passion for one's values, actually motivated students to learn more and be more interested in the class. Furthermore, professor argumentativeness did not cause students to believe the climate of the classroom had changed, nor did they become more apprehensive about going to and/or participating in the class. I did not find significant information in this article about semantics in order to answer my research question (Myers, 2001).

In 2012, Alan Goodboy and Scott Myers published a research article that described how college students' aggressiveness was related to the amount of times they expressed disagreement with their professor. The article found that college students were more likely to disagree with their professor if they exhibited higher levels of aggression. However, the article also concluded that personality characteristics (that is, a student's base level of aggression or argumentativeness) was more influential on their likelihood to disagree in the classroom. I did not find information in this article that positively linked teacher aggression with student aggression (Goodboy, 2012).

In 2013, Darren Linvill and Joseph Mazer published a research article about perceived instructor aggression in a college classroom. This article was based on the indication that most American college students believe that their professors hold political biases and that they allow these biases to influence their teaching methods beyond acceptability. This would be a form of aggression because it is an assertive display of one's beliefs and values, which has the implied suggestion that one's students should also hold these beliefs, or that there may be implied consequences for disagreeing with them. The researchers' results explained that students are more likely to perceive biases in their instructors if they (the students) had a higher base level of aggression (that is, aggression innate to their personalities). However, I did not find that this article discussed word choices thoroughly enough for me to glean much information about how the professor's semantics might influence the students' semantics (Linvill, 2013).

What I can conclude from the articles I have read is that researchers currently understand that aggression in students can influence perceptions of the instructor and the classroom. Researchers also found that argumentativeness (a specific form of aggression) in instructors is linked to positive student motivation. But there are significant gaps in this research. I do not think aggression in classrooms has been studied enough to determine a link between professor aggression and student aggression. Thus, I have enough of a textual basis to support my research proposal.

### **Justification**

Aggression in instructors such as teachers and professors in education systems is a crucial area of study because the ways that aggression is communicated to students are, theoretically, ways that students can absorb and learn into their communicative methods. Instructors can act as mentors who essentially transfer their communicative methods to their students, which may

influence them far beyond their times at school and college (Harkins, 1997). I believe that it is vital to understand how these forms of aggression in written language are conveyed in the classroom so that instructors can be aware of their influence upon their students and so that students can instead learn to communicate in productive, negotiating, and empathetic ways. Controlling aggression is an important developmental step in building higher level social skills (Infante, 1995). Lastly, eliminating aggressive written language in classrooms is just one step toward communication methods that are both peaceful and successful, thus leading toward a more empathetic and understanding world.

### **Potential Methodology**

One potential methodology would be to use a critical discourse analysis methodology. This may be a good choice because it examines instructor assignments and student writing responses for the purpose of determining the existence of larger trends of aggression in institutional academic assignments. The method is a combination of textual analysis, which is systematic examination of patterns in documents, and experimental research, which is a quantitative method that keeps variables constant in order to find shifts in a measured variable (in this case, aggressive written language is the variable to be measured).

The quantitative process begins as follows. Writing assignments are systematically analyzed for levels of aggression in their semantics. This is done by:

1. Coding all words in the assignments in scaled categories such as “calm” to “aggressive,” “peaceful” to “violent,” and “passive” to “active;”
2. ranking the assignments on a “calm” to “aggressive” scale based on their quantitative aggression levels; and

3. coding the assignments into categories based on difficulty (at least a 5-point scale from “least difficult” to “most difficult”).

The experiment is conducted as follows:

1. Over a single semester:

a. 1/3 of students in an undergraduate class receive writing assignments in increasingly aggressive order;

b. 1/3 receive assignments in the opposite direction, in decreasingly aggressive order; and

c. the remaining 1/3 are a control group and receive assignments in a randomized order of aggression.

2. All assignments are given in levels of (appropriately) increasing difficulty over time, and are suitable for the course level.

3. The students’ responses are collected and evaluated in a similar way as the prompts; they are coded for levels of aggression using scaled categories.

4. The responses are measured in levels of aggression over time (the course of the semester) to determine if there is a positive correlation.

Written assignments given over a semester along with each student’s correlated responses to these assignments are collected. Regular college classroom activities, such as class discussions, forum posts, and assignments not requiring written language (e.g. group activities) are not recorded.

The only criterion for selection is that the subjects are all in the same online undergraduate English or Language Arts class. This criterion would be a viable choice because I believe research into written aggressive language can best be discovered at an early stage of institutional education. Undergraduate classes are within the students' early exposure to college-level writing assignments.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Potential societal benefits would include an increase in empathy in institutional academic settings, as any trends of aggression found in writing assignments given by instructors could be used to determine larger societal and institutional aggression trends. Naturally, an increase in empathetic written communication is beneficial to society because young adults will learn to communicate more effectively and with more concern for how others perceive their writing. Additionally, given the lack of research in this particular field, I believe that knowledge of aggression patterns in writing studies would be significantly advanced.

I believe that finding patterns of aggression in academic instructors, which could potentially influence young adults who are seeking education, is an overlooked area of research which desperately needs to be discussed. Even written forms of aggression could possibly have strong effects on how students write and communicate with others. Nowadays especially, written communication is vital in both professional settings and personal relationships. That is why it is necessary to learn how aggression is taught, even unknowingly, to college students.

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