

Analysis of Postgraduate Dissertation Advisors' Written Comments

Análisis de comentarios escritos de
directores de tesis de posgrado

Análise de comentários escritos de
diretores de teses de pós-graduação

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Abstract

This article presents the research results of the analysis of the written comments made by 20 dissertation advisors to students from different master programs in Human Sciences. Specifically, the research focused on the question "What linguistic and pedagogic characteristics are displayed by the comments made by the dissertation advisors?" To that end, we revisited some of the tenets posited by Kumar and Stracke (2007), Hyland (2009), Higgins, Hartely, and Skelton (2001). Based on the data analysis, categories were established in light of the levels of pragmatic language (language function, privileged speech act, intention, role of the sender, role of the receiver, tone), semantics (type of comment, aspect on which the comment focuses, referentiality), syntactics (cohesion, length), and of the written feedback model based on Kumar and Stracke's (2007) language functions. The most significant result shows that the comment reflects that the teacher assumes one of the following roles: evaluator, editor, or co-author. This latter role generates more constructive comments than the former two.

Keywords

comments, master's dissertation; academic writing; levels of language, feedback; co-author; evaluator

Palabras clave

comentarios; tesis de posgrado; escritura académica; niveles lingüísticos retroalimentación; coautor; evaluador

Resumen

En este artículo se presentan los resultados de una investigación en la que se analizaron los comentarios escritos que hicieron 20 directores de tesis a estudiantes de distintas maestrías de Ciencias Humanas. Específicamente, la investigación centró su atención en la pregunta ¿qué características lingüísticas y pedagógicas presentan los comentarios hechos por directores de tesis? Para ello, se retomaron algunos postulados de Kumar y Stracke (2007), Hyland (2009), Higgins, Hartely y Skelton (2001). Del análisis de los datos se establecieron las categorías a la luz de los niveles de lengua pragmático (función del lenguaje, acto de habla privilegiado, finalidad, rol del emisor, rol del receptor, tono) semántico (tipo de comentario, aspecto en el que se centra el comentario, referencialidad) y sintáctico (cohesión, longitud) y del modelo de la retroalimentación escrita basado en las funciones del lenguaje de Kumar y Stracke (2007). El resultado más importante evidencia que el comentario refleja que el docente asume uno de los siguientes roles: evaluador, corrector de estilo o coautor. Este último rol genera comentarios más constructivos que los dos roles anteriores.

Resumo

Neste artigo apresentamos os resultados de uma pesquisa na que analisamos os comentários escritos que fizeram 20 diretores de tese a estudantes de diversos programas de mestrado em Ciências Humanas. A pesquisa centrou-se, principalmente, na pergunta: quais características linguísticas e pedagógicas têm os comentários realizados por diretores de tese? Para isso retomamos algumas afirmações de Kumar e Stracke (2007), Hyland (2009), Higgins, Hartely e Skelton (2001). Da análise dos dados estabelecemos as categorias segundo os níveis linguísticos: pragmático (função da linguagem, ato de fala privilegiado, finalidade, papel do emissor, papel do receptor, tom); semântico (tipo de comentário, aspecto no que o comentário está focado, referencialidade); e sintático (coesão, longitude) e do modelo da retroalimentação escrita baseado nas funções da linguagem de Kumar e Stracke. A descoberta mais importante evidenciou que o comentário reflète que o professor assume um dos seguintes papéis: avaliador, revisor ou coautor. Este último papel gera comentários mais construtivos do que os outros dois.

Palavras-chave

comentários; teses de pós-graduação; escrita acadêmica; níveis linguísticos; retroalimentação; coautor; avaliador

Introduction

Master's students often face difficulties and confusion when writing their dissertation, which are obstacles that can affect their research process and the quality of their dissertation. The dissertation advisor and their comments play an essential role in developing the text since through these, different aspects of writing can be improved in linguistic, discursive, rhetorical, stylistic, or scientific method aspects. This research's object of study were the comments or observations made by dissertation advisors to their students. We sought to identify the linguistic characteristics of said comments and their resulting pedagogical implications.

We assumed it is important to know what type of comments have to be stimulated and which have to be avoided to complete a dissertation, integrate students into an academic community, and get them to continue researching beyond the higher education institution. Indeed, a dissertation's success depends partly on the type of observations and comments made. They are a kind of route for students, based on which they make decisions that help –or do not help– them adjust the text to the requirements of an academic community. Reviewing and contributing comments are practices that promote reflecting on and analyzing formal and content aspects in dissertation writing. They can also reduce difficulties surrounding this process related to feelings of disorientation, loneliness, burnout, discouragement, anxiety, and quitting, documented by some researchers (Bartolini et al. 2013; Carlino, 2003).

We found abundant literature on the role of the dissertation advisor (Difabio de Anglat, 2011; Fresán, 2002; Ochoa & Cueva, 2012; Rosas, Flores, & Valarino, 2006; Valarino, 1997, 2006); as well as on the complexity of the dissertation writer-advisor relationship (Bargar & Mayo-Chamberlain, 1983; Dubs, 2005; Rose, 2005; Tinto, 1993). In this regard, Dubs (2005) asserts:

Students indicate that a barrier that has received little attention is the one of supervision, quality of dissertation advice, and advisor support and accessibility. Students often complain about the lack of timely and effective feedback and encouragement from the advisor. (p. 55)

According to Narvaja de Arnoux (2006), Hattie and Timperley (2007), and Stracke and Kumar (2010), one of a dissertation advisor's most important functions is related to reading, providing feedback and comments on students' written progress. Feedback is an essential tool in a researcher's

training process. According to Yu and Lee (2013), dissertation advisors' comments play an important role in academic writing processes, academic community initiation, and generating motivation and confidence processes; their role must be feedback-oriented rather than assessment-oriented. The model proposed by Odena and Burgess (2015) to develop writing skills in doctoral students, posits three essential elements: 1) Advisors' feedback, as an independent thinking scaffolding; 2) Personal resilience and organization, and; 3) A support network (advisor, students, management, writing center, family, friends), elements that, all together, are fundamental pillars to ensure quality, conceptual clarity, articulating thinking logically, and developing writing skills in postgraduate students.

Authors like Wisker et al. (2003) and East, Bitchener, and Basturkmen (2012) explain that feedback is a learning strategy, whose ultimate goal is to get students to be independent of the teacher. Similarly, Franke and Arvidsson (2011) posit that feedback involves both knowledge and relational processes through which a doctoral student has the chance of developing the necessary knowledge and skills to become an effective researcher. Aitchison and Lee (2006), Cotterall (2011), Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, and Burgin (2012) explain the importance of feedback as a pedagogy to learn to write and the need to develop peer work strategies within dissertation writer circles or small groups linked to the advisors. For their part, Caffarella and Barnett (2000) indicate that giving and receiving criticism allows the dissertation writer to reduce anxiety and gain confidence insofar as it becomes a habit and is perceived as inherent in the research process.

On the other hand, some studies inquire into students' and advisors' perceptions on the comments they receive or make. Bitchener, Basturkmen, and East (2010) surveyed 35 supervisors, interviewed 20 students, and studied some examples of comments made to students whose mother tongue was English (L1) and students whose mother tongue was not English (L2) to inquire into the aspect they focused on when giving feedback. They sought to find out whether advisors provided information on the content, parts of the dissertation, dissertation organization and structure, consistency and cohesion, linguistic accuracy and appropriateness. According to the participants, the teachers provided feedback on each of the aspects studied. They found that more feedback is given on the latter aspect than on the other ones, especially for L2 students. Teachers indicate that the most critical aspect is related to the state of the art, theoretical framework, and work scope.

Ghazal et al. (2014) assessed the quality of feedback given in postgraduate programs at a private higher education in Pakistan. They found that,

according to students, comments focused mostly on content rather than form. The tone of the comments ranged between suggestions, criticisms, and compliments, and there was variation regarding quality, quantity, frequency, and assignment of guidelines and recommendations. They also identified several issues affecting the written information's quality, such as the approach, clarity, depth, and tone of the feedback. Finally, they noted that students prefer content-focused comments and constructive feedback.

For their part, Moreno and Ochoa (2016) interviewed master's program students and alumni on their perception on the comments made by their dissertation advisors. They found that comments were essential for interviewees, not only to complete the dissertation but for the dissertation writer's inclusion into an academic community. However, the type of the comment –unconstructive and disrespectful– may discourage them. According to these researchers, it is necessary to establish some conditions that seek a better scaffolding to support the student's and advisor's task.

Carless (2006) shows there is a divergence regarding students' and teachers' perceptions on comments: teachers believe their feedback is more effective than what the higher education students considered it; for teachers, the amount of information provided is sufficient, whereas for students, it is not sufficient. Teachers consider that students do not pay enough attention to their comments, whereas the latter explain that some of their indications are ambiguous. The author recommends "assessment dialogues" between those involved to clarify opposing perspectives, misconceptions, and to mitigate some of the comments' effects. In this sense, participation in building the assessment criteria or their explicitness contributes to a greater effectiveness of feedback processes.

A more direct precedent related to the research question was found in the work of Tapia-Ladino (2014), who analyzes the discursive characteristics of the writing comments genre and presents a comprehensive state of the art regarding this topic. However, they did not focus their attention on dissertation advisors' comments.

As it is possible to see, the analysis of the comments focuses on a variety of aspects; these aspects became an input for our research, which aimed at presenting a more unified overview of their characteristics.

Theoretical Framework

This section develops, on the one hand, the relationship between feedback and its role in self-regulation processes and, on the other hand, the linguistic characteristics considered in the analysis of the comments.

Feedback and its Contribution to a Postgraduate Dissertation Student's Self-regulation

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is a gradual process of academic autonomy acquired thanks to conscientious and explicit strategies developed in the school environment. In the words of Hernández and Camargo (2017): "The SRL process consists of the deliberate organization of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental activities that lead to successful learning" (p. 147). In addition to the cognitive dimension, this process involves motivational and emotional factors: objectives, expectations, goals, and conviction. Zimmerman (1994) explains that self-regulated students are those metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning. Similarly, SRL is determined by the conditions in which learning takes place; for example, a democratic and participatory environment is conducive to it.

Regarding writing, a self-regulated subject performs a series of decision-making processes according to Rincón, Sanabria, and López (2016):

First, the subject sets clear goals, consistent with the text's requirements, and prepares an action plan congruent with such goals. Second, the subject is constantly monitoring by systematically observing text development as a function of the goal. Third, they self-evaluate themselves to verify how close or how far their text is from the proposed goal; finally, they take concrete actions regarding the process, if required. (p. 63)

Continuous interaction spaces among participating subjects (some more experts than others) and how they interact influence the transition from hetero-regulation to self-regulation. This is why feedback is decisive in said process.

According to Hyland (2009), feedback plays "a central role in the enculturation of students in literacy and disciplinary epistemologies" (p. 132). In that sense, it is a fundamental part of the research process for the postgraduate student to become more independent, to learn by themselves, stay motivated, and keep their academic identity and voice as a writer. Kumar and Stracke (2007) explain that "it is through written feedback that the advisor communicates and provides the student advanced academic training, particularly in writing. [...] [Feedback] is at the heart of a doctoral student's learning experience" (p. 462). Feedback also refers to a form of communication and interaction; in this regard, Higgins et al. (2001) stressed its dialogical role since it leads to discussing, clarifying, and negotiating.

Confrontation through comments is an interaction mechanism between the advisor and their dissertation student, which allows the latter to reflect on their writing. Feedback is also a supporting pedagogical strategy in terms of the loneliness and isolation often faced by the dissertation student. This constant reflection on their research process and writing is essential for the student to become a researcher, especially considering that during postgraduate studies, a dissertation “is a carefully elaborated text, which frequently employs a high degree of rhetorical discourse; it is a written communication that involves a long preparation and maturation process, of both place and time, differed between the writer and their reader” (Bor-singer de Montemayor, 2005, p. 269). It also assumes contributing to the state of knowledge of the disciplinary field in which it is framed.

Said feedback bridges the gap between the student’s current and desired performance (Parr & Timperley, 2010), so the comments allow the student to understand the topic and achieve the learning objectives. It is a process that provides developmental experiences and encourages the dissertation student to self-regulate learning (Stracke & Kumar, 2010).

Comments and Linguistic Characteristics Analyzed in this Article

A comment is a text, in other words, a linguistic unit around which communication is established between a sender (advisor) and a receiver (dissertation student). Since any text is formed by an interrelation of at least three levels or components: the semantics level (contents, ideas), the syntactics level (forms, structures), and the pragmatic level (speech acts and their conditions of use). A general characterization of these levels is proposed below, which are the specific criteria on which the categorization of data collected for this study is based.

At the *pragmatic level*, the analysis of a comment identifies who the sender is and the role they play, how the receiver is perceived (whether they are or not allowed to challenge the observation, whether or not the achievements are highlighted), and what the purpose of the comment is, in other words, the communicative intention: illocutionary speech act. In this regard, to analyze the comments, we revisit Austin’s (1962) and Searle’s (1969) speech act theory, who posit that people perform acts when using language, in other words, language is used to organize, request, warn, advise, etc. An illocutionary act may be literal or nonliteral, direct or indirect. According to Akmajian, Demers, and Harnish (1984):

An act is *literal* if a speaker thinks or means what they say. Conversely, an act is *nonliteral* if a speaker does not think or mean what their words mean literally. [...] An act is *indirect* if a speaker performs that act by performing another speech act [...]. An act is *direct* [...] if it is not performed through any other act. (p. 318, emphasis in original)

When analyzing what comments *do*, Kumar and Stracke (2007) also adopt this theory by associating it with the functions of language: referential, directive, and expressive, which are basic components of any interaction (Holmes, 2001, p. 529). The referential function refers to the comments that provide information; the directive function, to the teacher/student relationship (directive statements that direct the receiver to do something); and the expressive function focuses on the advisor-speaker (expressive statements that manifest the speaker's feelings). Table 1 summarizes these components below.

Table 1
Pragmatic Aspects to be Analyzed in the Comments

Language Function	Action	Example
Referential	Writing	Please use the adequate conjunction.
	Organization	This does not correspond to background information.
	Content	Whose concept is this?
Directive	Recommendation/ Suggestion	Maybe this is not necessary.
	Question	Are you sure about what you are asserting?
	Instruction/Order	Clarify this concept.
Expressive	Praise	Well done, good example!
	Criticism	This table does not contribute to the text.
	Opinion	I recommend elaborating on what motivated this.

Note. Adapted from Kumar and Stracke (2007, p. 464).

At the pragmatic level the tone is also analyzed, which is linked to verbal courtesy: a comment, as a communicative act with an intention,

tries to modify the dissertation student's behavior, in other words, it acts on its receiver. Comments seek to establish agreements on editing, modifying, and transforming the dissertation, for which the tone is fundamental, since depending on the latter, the communicative purpose may –or may not– be achieved. If the tone is positive and constructive, the receiver will likely process it better than if the tone is negative/destructive or disqualifying.

At the *semantics level*, the content (macrostructure), ideas, and information it contributes are studied. At this level, the aspect(s) on which the comment focuses is(are) analyzed, which is closely related to the type of text in which it appears: in our case, a master's dissertation that has certain specific categories such as the theoretical and methodological framework, the state of the art, etc. How referentiality develops in the text is also analyzed: if the comment is elaborate, if it presents arguments that justify the valuation, if it is proactive (with suggestions) or not.

At the *syntactics-textual level*, we analyze how the discourse is presented, how the communicative intention materializes. It comprises two aspects: the text's cohesion and length. Cohesion is the textual property that reflects the logical relationships between words, phrases, and sentences (Calsamiglia & Tusón, 2002); it refers to the text's linear development. Cohesion includes phenomena such as consistency, pronoun management, sentence construction, and the use of conjunctions. A text is cohesive if the sentences are well-formed (complete scheme of subject, verb, and complements); if there is a logical order to the presentation of the information and organization of the text; if the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling of the Spanish language are respected, etc.

Length refers to the comment's extension: whether it is short, medium, or long.

Methodology

The research presented in this article is framed within an exploratory qualitative methodological model. To achieve the general objective –characterize, in linguistic and pedagogical terms, the written comments made by master's dissertation advisors– forty dissertation students from different master's programs from a school of human sciences were asked, by e-mail, for comments from their dissertation advisors; only fifteen students sent the information. Five dissertation advisors were also asked to share copies of dissertation sections or drafts that included their comments. The five advisors accepted and provided us the dissertations. It is important to clarify that

researchers only had access to the drafts of eight complete dissertations, the other documents were excerpts of dissertations. In the latter case, all comments were analyzed, which were no more than two or three. In the former case, to unify the sample (in other words, that there were no more than three per advisor), as a selection criteria, we asked students to choose the three comments that made the most negative or positive impact on them. These three comments corresponded to approximately 10% of the global comments. In total, 56 comments from 20 dissertation advisors were analyzed. To analyze the content of the categories on which the comment focused, all comments were considered, that is, 276 comments.

The data analysis was based on the language levels aforementioned and on the data analysis scheme proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, synthesis, and grouping and verification of results: each researcher independently analyzed the comments, classified them, and then the answers were compared to each other to ensure their reliability.

For this research, a basic model associated with three broad categories –levels– was developed, including the language functions at a pragmatic level proposed by Kumar and Stracke (2007). The following table summarizes the aspects considered in the analysis of the comments (table 2).

Table 2

Analysis Scheme of the Comments made by Advisors to their Dissertation Students

Pragmatic	Semantics	Syntactics
Language Function (Kumar & Stracke, 2007).	Type of comment: general or local.	Cohesion: if the comment is cohesive or not.
Privileged speech act (suggestion/ recommendation, question, assertion, order) and purpose.	Aspect on which the comment focuses (macrostructure): form, contents, or both	Length: short, medium, or long
Sender's role.	Referentiality: development, argumentation.	
Receiver's role: passive/ active. Chance to discuss.		
Tone: positive/negative.		
Constructive/destructive.		

Note. Author's own elaboration.

Results

The linguistic results are presented first, considering the categories listed above and then, the pedagogical implications of this analysis are discussed.

Linguistic Results

Pragmatic Considerations.

Table 3

Distribution of Comments according to Pragmatic Aspects

Criteria	Specific Aspects	Total/56	Percentages (%)
Communicative purpose	Literal speech acts	45	80.0
	Nonliteral speech acts	11	20.0
	Direct speech acts	46	82.0
	Indirect speech acts	10	18.0
Privileged speech act / directive function (Kumar & Stracke, 2007)	Suggestion	18	32.5
	Question	15	27.5
	Assertion	13	22.5
	Order	10	17.5
Sender's and receiver's role	Evaluator	38	67.0
	Co-author	12	22.0
	Editor	6	11.0
	No chance to discuss (passive)	52	92.8
	Has a chance to discuss	4	7.2
Language function: referential and expressive	Writing	26	46.2
	Organization	6	10.0
	Content	25	43.8
	Criticism	18	32.2
	Opinion	32	58.0
	Praise	5	9.8

Criteria	Specific Aspects	Total/56	Percentages (%)
Tone: Negative/positive Constructive/destructive	Positive aspects are not emphasized	51	90.2
	Positive aspects are emphasized	5	9.8
	Constructive	46	82.0
	Disqualifying	10	18.0

Note. Author's own elaboration.

Most of the comments analyzed are literal, but 82% of them are indirect, in other words, they are speech acts in which what is wanted is not requested directly. These results are correlated with the type of privileged speech act: contrary to what is expected, asserting is not the privileged act, but rather suggesting is. Let us look at some examples, in comments (1) (personal communication, 24- 05- 2014) and (2) (personal communication, 17- 06 - 2015):

Comment (1) As this part of the phrase is written, it is unclear whether the finding was yours (by finding the book) or Montejo's (by inventing heteronyms). It should be rewritten to avoid ambiguity.

Comment (2) This part of the title is very broad, very generic, narrow it down.

Comment (1) (personal communication, 24- 05- 2014) alludes to one of the most frequent issues in a dissertation: managing sources. Its purpose is to get the student to learn how to establish a proper relationship between their voice and that of other authors, one of the hardest things to learn. It is both a literal and an indirect speech act: the receiver is not ordered to cite properly (which would be a direct speech act), rather they are politely invited to do so. Note that the student is not accused of plagiarism, instead, the speech act is moderated by the verb *should*, which gives it a positive and constructive tone with which the communicative purpose is achieved. Comment (2) (personal communication, 17- 06- 2015), orders adjusting the title literally and directly.

Communicative purposes are mostly expressed through suggestions (3) (personal communication, 23- 08 - 2015) and questions (4) (personal communication, 18- 04-2016), and to a lesser extent through assertions (5) (personal communication 13-03-2016) and orders (6) (personal communication, 27- 02- 2016):

Comment (3) It would be useful to show the concept of written culture linked to existing traditions of study, what is presented is too general.

Comment (4) What do you mean by didactic indicators? Didactic indicators, according to the didactics perspective we are working with, would be indicators related to teaching processes (...)

Comment (5) I do not understand the meaning of this activity; the planning is unclear (...) In addition, the didactic sequence nearly comes to an end and you still have yet to discuss writing the final product.

Comment (6) Elaborate more on the issue of social coexistence and the lack of interest in reading and writing and then, explain how Professor Galán proposes an alternative in that regard.

Comment (3) (personal communication, 23- 08- 2015) has the purpose of inviting the student to specify a theoretical concept that is needed for the study; however, the suggestion relativizes the communicative purpose to the extent that the receiver might not adhere to it. Comment (4) (personal communication, 18- 04- 2016) is a rhetorical question since the objective is to get the receiver to specify this concept. Comment (5) (personal communication, 13.03, 2016) expresses a reproach through an assertion. The teacher wants the proposed work to be reevaluated. Comment (6) (personal communication, 27- 02- 2016) is a clear and direct order.

Regarding the sender's role, we found three clearly distinguished roles: evaluator, co-author, and editor.

In most comments, the sender acts as an evaluator, in other words, they issue a judgement, usually about an error or weakness in the text seeking to rectify or amend it. The receiver is placed in a subordinate position in which they are not given leeway to discuss the observation. Typical examples are shown in comments (1) (personal communication, 24-05-2014) and (2) (personal communication, 17- 06- 2015) above and in comment (7) (personal communication, 15- 07- 2014) below:

Comment (7) Except for the two final paragraphs of this section [theoretical framework], the writing is characterized by presenting a heterogeneous discursive proposal, structured based on paraphrases, citations, and footnotes, represented in abstract, summary, and review formats, of the theoretical approaches corresponding to some specialists in the field of written culture. In other words, the excessive recurrence to the discourse of the authors cited has caused the discursive dilution of who writes the document. You need to think about the theoretical framework's structure, how the information should be hierarchized, and how to avoid the writer's voice from diluting among so many quotes without a clear fabric.

Comment (7) (personal communication, 15-07-2014) is a harsh criticism that shows the sender's evaluating viewpoint on a serious dissertation issue. There is a broad justification before the final request.

The sender assumes the role of co-author by actively participating in the research and writing of the document and, consequently, contributing to text construction, as seen in comment (8) (personal communication, 24-05-2014), and giving the student the possibility of discussing the observation, as shown in comments (9a-9c) (personal communication, 22-10-2015):

Comment (8) This was said in the paragraph preceding the quote. There is no need to repeat it. A better option would be the following: Since he identifies with the mission of purifying language, his company also has an important feature of messianism. [...]

Comment (9a) The topic, as you are stating it, is clearer. The comparative study between two institutions may be debatable: Is it worth it? Narratives as an object of analysis are a good choice.

Comment (9b) I do not like the word "success" in the research question. We can talk about it in length.

Comment (9c) Next week we can meet to discuss the research question.

Notice the last three comments' tone, which invites the student to reflect and opens up a space for dialogue, as two co-researchers would. Through discussion, students are challenged to rethink, read more, and review their writings. The fact that a dissertation advisor provides comments as a co-author assumes supporting and criticizing the dissertation writer, as well as a mutual commitment and a regulatory structure of the participation that does not only tilt the obligation of completion and improve the text toward the student, but also toward the Advisor. It is not only a matter of indicating issues and errors, but also, through these, a dialogue is established allowing them to advance in developing the text, understand the meaning of feedback, and open up paths of shared editing. In addition, the student is encouraged by generating learning opportunities about their writing process that allow them to confront themselves and self-regulate regarding changes to the text.

Finally, through the Track Changes tool, we found that some teachers review the text and directly correct the issues, be it punctuation, writing, spelling, and even adjust important sections of the dissertation (methodology, conclusions). The teacher becomes an editor who removes what they consider inappropriate and replaces it to adjust the text to what they consider ideal. Note the following comment (10) (personal communication, 07-11-2015):

Comment (10) I made some changes to the conclusions.

This role helps the student muddle through; however, if the teacher does not make the error explicit and explain it to the dissertation writer, they are not contributing to the latter's educational process.

Regarding the referential function, comments about wording and content prevail, as illustrated in the following examples:

Comment (11a) Review this statement: Recover? From what? (personal communication, 20-03-2015)

Comment (11b) You need to review paragraph construction because you have been talking about language teaching and suddenly, you discuss literature, without explicitly connecting between one aspect and the other. (personal communication, 18-04-2015)

Comment (12a) Once again, the reference to traditional practices, but you do not explain what it refers to, what are they, why are they considered traditional, what characterizes them, what other practices do they oppose, what characterizes their discourse, etc. Without the proper description and argumentation, this reference is like a common place that does not provide further information. (personal communication, 20-03-2015)

Comment (12b) I believe that here or further below, it is worthwhile to expand the reflection to the topic of technical training to the detriment of the humanistic field and thus, touch upon some of the political/ideological/economic implications underlying this phenomenon. (personal communication, 04-04-2015)

Examples (11a-11b) (personal communication, between 20-03-2015 and 18-04-2015) highlight writing aspects. These types of comments are very frequent and they refer to different aspects such as coherence, lexical precision, sentence and paragraph construction, punctuation, use of verb tenses, etc. On the other hand, in examples (12a-12b) (personal communication, 20-03-2015 and 04-04-2015 respectively), the comments focus on specific aspects of information that are redundant, repetitive, incomplete or, on the contrary, which should be expanded or modified, conceptualizations or postulates to be developed or specified.

Regarding the expressive function, comments issuing opinions prevail, in other words, an advisor's general valuations that are put for consideration of the dissertation writer with the objective of informing on some aspect of the dissertation that can be improved. This aspect has a close correlation with the evaluator's role. A typical example is shown in comment (7) (personal communication, 15-07-2014).

The other pragmatic aspect considered is tone. Only four observations were found, corresponding to two teachers, which highlight the positive aspects of the student's work, as can be seen:

Comment (13) Yes, your work seems to be going in a relevant direction. However, you should start from the *a priori* idea that there is no fiction in a journalistic chronicle, even if there are literary writing resources that you must show [...]. (Personal communication, 16-10-2015)

Comment (14) Maria Cristina, your work is promising. As a first approach to data analysis, you are on the right track. However, you have to work carefully on the aspects indicated throughout the dissertation, especially those highlighted in yellow. (Personal communication, 17-08-2016)

Comment (15) The writing is fluent and has considerably improved. (Personal communication, 09-04-2015)

Comment (16) This section's thematic development improved. When explaining the concept of pedagogical practice, it is evidenced as an intentional and reflexive action between the teacher and the student; however, you still need to expand on, align with, and distinguish from teaching and learning practices. You need to think about what characterizes teaching practice. On which authors are you basing your research? How are theory and practice aligned? (Personal communication, 17-08-2016)

The start of the comments encourages the writer and shows them that they can improve and do the work, which does not mean adjustments are unable to be requested. It is constructive feedback that focuses on assessing and praising the work done and motivating the student to continue contributing on how the text can be improved. In addition, the inclusion of questions enables student reflection.

We also found some comments were nonconstructive for the receiver, in other words, constantly negative comments or in a threatening tone, as shown in comments (17) (personal communication, 24-05-2015), (18) (personal communication, 12-05-2016), and (19) (personal communication, 17-03-2016):

Comment (17) I remind you that the number of pages for the first submission is about 20, as the total is a maximum of 50. You have exceeded this limit by 13 pages, which you will have to summarize to adhere to the required limits. On the other hand, the space you dedicate to the theoretical framework and methodology is entirely disproportionate; it has to be more balanced.

Comment (18) What were you thinking including this like that? No citation, no introduction, no reflection.

Comment (19) You cannot continue with the “Theoretical Framework” you wrote for your research project, as this is like a patchwork of approaches from authors often unrelated to each other or that touch upon theoretical aspects that are useless for your research.

These three comments are contrary to those presented above. The categorical imperatives (*I remind you*) and the teacher’s valuations (*serious*, “*what were you thinking*,” “*patchwork*”) expressed explicitly or implicitly affect the writer’s image.

Sometimes the teacher does not actually provide a comment, but rather underlines or highlights a section in red without a note whatsoever; question marks appear beside it (?) or loose words such as *incoherent* or *incomplete*, which the student is usually unable to understand and, therefore, they do not know what to do, which usually blocks the writer (Ochoa & Cueva, 2017).

Semantics Considerations.

Table 4.

Distribution of Comments According to Semantics Aspects

Criteria	Specific Aspects	Total/276	Percentages (%)	
General, specific, or both	Specific	228	82.6	
	General	30	10.8	
	Both	13	4.6	
Form, content, or both	Content	169	61.4	
	Form	92	33.3	
	Both	13	4.7	
Category on which the comment focuses	Content aspects	Theoretical framework	52	18.7
		Results	48	17.4
		State of the art	36	13.1
		Methodology	29	10.4
		Introduction	33	12.0
		All	22	8.1
	Form aspects	Writing	56	20.3

Criteria	Specific Aspects	Total/276	Percentages (%)
With or without arguments / elaboration / explanation	With elaboration	141	51.2
	Without elaboration	134	48.7
With or without suggestions for improvement	Without suggestions for improvement	169	61.2
	With suggestions for improvement	107	38.8
Amount of information	Not enough	161	58.3
	Enough	115	41.7

Note. Author's own elaboration.

As shown in Table 4, most of the comments refer to specific aspects. This can be explained because the teacher progressively evaluates parts of the dissertation and, therefore, the attention is focused on concrete aspects¹; for example, it focuses on the theoretical framework, as shown in comment (20) (personal communication 05-09-2014):

Comment (20) Given the importance of the categories “practices” and “experiences,” you need to propose a reflection about them and the theoretical sources that have been used.

As they are specific, the comments are distributed in a balanced manner among the dissertation's different super-structural elements: introduction, question, state of the art, theoretical framework, methodological framework, results, and among aspects of form: citation and writing methods.

However, it is advisable to make one or two general comments summarizing the most important issues and then, move on to the specific categories or vice versa. In these cases, both general and specific aspects are addressed. An example of this is comment (21) (personal communication, 11-02-2016):

Comment (21) Serious citation problems. The references used are very poor. The MEN [National Ministry of Education] is not an academic authority; you may refer to it, but you must strengthen with researchers. There are writing problems.

1 Another explanation has to do with the fact, indicated in the methodology, that there were only eight complete dissertation drafts.

Most of the comments focus on the content, but in general, they are not very elaborate or lack proper argumentation. An example is shown below:

Comment (22) What you wrote for the state of the art is not state of the art, except for the review of the second study. (personal communication, 29-04-2016)

In Comment (22) (personal communication, 29-04-2016), the student is not provided with an explanation on why what they wrote is not state of the art. The sender simply disqualifies the section. It is possible that the receiver may not know what to do or how to do it when reading the observation.

Comparing this example with the following:

Comment (23) Continue justifying by considering:

- The industrial origin of the statement “performance.”
- The issue of assessment in the Educational Institution.
- The tendency of associating academic performance with comprehension or memorization of contents. (personal communication, 18-06-2014)

Comment (24) You must supplement the state of the art (search for more studies similar to yours, in other words, that show how to use discourse markers or more specifically, conjunctions). Then, only leave the section on conjunctions in the theoretical framework and only use Montolío’s references. Subsequently, the whole section on assessment and teaching must be rewritten. Tomorrow, I will send you a study I did so you can see what you have to do in this part. I suggest you do the state of the art and think about the concrete proposal. When you have something, send it to me. Subsequently, we will do the theoretical framework later (you postpone it because it is complex to do). (personal communication, 15-10-2015)

Comment (23) (personal communication, 18-06-2014) is divided into two parts. Initially, a local observation is presented, focused on the justification, and subsequently, focused on the aspects to be considered when developing. This comment proposes specific suggestions to strengthen the justification and qualify the data interpretation. Comment (24) (personal communication, 15-10-2015) also evidences the teacher’s desire to help the student by accurately listing tasks and providing them with a model to follow. Note the broad elaboration of each aspect.

There are, then, observations that provide the student a road map to be followed to improve the text.

The high percentage of formal aspects is noteworthy. This can be explained by the fact that the drafts of the completed dissertations were nearly final versions; in other words, specific observations had surely already been made on each section and in these versions, the aim was to edit the text. The contents of the comments therefore depend on the moment of the research itself: introduction, development, final writing.

As recurrent aspects indicated by teachers, it is possible to observe that poorly written texts receive strong criticism, regarding conclusions that are not duly substantiated and miscitations.

Syntactics Considerations.

Table 5.

Distribution of Comments According to Syntactics Aspect.

Criteria	Specific Aspects	Total/56	Percentages (%)
Length: short, medium, or long	Short	36	63.4
	Long	11	19.5
	Medium	10	17.1
Cohesion	Cohesive	32	58.0
	Incohesive	24	42.0

Note. Author's own elaboration.

Most of the comments are short, which correlates with the finding related to the reference item: comments are not very elaborate or lack proper justification.

As it is possible to see in table 5, there is a slight superiority of cohesive comments, in other words, the writing is clear, comprehensible, and the text respects the rules of the Spanish language. However, nearly proportional, it is possible to find examples with cohesion issues. Let us revisit example (5).

Comment (5) I do not understand the meaning of this activity; the planning is unclear (...) In addition, the didactic sequence nearly comes to an end and you still have yet to discuss writing the final product. (personal communication, 13-03-2016)

Comment (5) (personal communication, 13-03-2016) ends with a very informal, almost verbal, inappropriate record of what is expected from a

master's dissertation comment. A better wording could be (6a) (personal communication, 27-02-2016):

(6a) I do not understand the meaning of this activity; the planning is unclear... Additionally, the didactic sequence nearly comes to an end and you still fail to refer to writing the final product.

Pedagogical Implications

It is important for teachers to be conscientious of the comments they offer their students on aspects such as clarity, depth, tone, quality, frequency, amount of information, and their implications and how they can improve them to enhance both their and students' work. Different studies confirm that effective comments are essential to quality teaching (Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996; Hattie & Jaeger, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). A student learns insofar as they know what they are doing well and what they need to improve. It is advisable that master's programs invite teachers to reflect on this topic. Students also need to request their advisors for accurate comments, with suggestions, with the possibility of discussing and of reaching an agreement. The dissertation writer must be free to ask for clarification and to disagree with the observations. Only under a climate of dialogue and reflection can a text be constructed.

When dealing with literal speech acts there is some certainty of clarity; when otherwise, some comments run the risk of not being understood properly or of being understood as irony, sarcasm, or reproach. Some teachers have a direct style and express their suggestions through orders, which are clear, but may sound a little "aggressive". The use of direct and indirect acts only alluding to the texts' shortcomings often has a potentially negative impact on students' self-perception and confidence (James, 2000).

The fact that comments do not disclose details providing a road map on how to fix issues, that are unclear, or the indiscriminate use of indirect speech acts also contribute to less effective feedback (Carless, 2006; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Weaver, 2006).

On the other hand, the possibility of discussing the observation is a "democratic" perspective in which the student can reply to criticism, manifesting agreement or disagreement. It is a more dialogical and educational process than that which simply involves orders without any justification. Developing a postgraduate dissertation constitutes a practice of academic enculturation (Hyland, 2009; Prior, 1998; Prior & Bilbro, 2012), which should promote a critical attitude and an approach to writing aligned to research. This implies, on the one hand, making connections between

theory and practice, connecting theories, argumentation and reasoning; on the other hand, fostering the development of academic roles (the student assumes their voice as a writer/researcher) and the reconfiguration of the subject participating in a literate activity.

The fact that an observation does not have an adequate development and argumentation can cause issues of comprehension and soundness insofar as the comment lacks a justification that convinces the student and makes them understand its importance.

It is a positive aspect that the comments focus on content, since the purpose is to help students build knowledge around a research question. When the work only focuses on form, the student feels they did not learn how to research and that the dissertation advisor's work could have been done by an editor. The mistaken idea that issues are only of form can also be transmitted. What students request and want is a teacher who is an expert in a subject and in research, who helps students foray into the research field to which they are affiliated (Moreno & Ochoa, 2016); foray that also involves reviewing the form of the texts; writing and style, but it cannot only focus on that.

We emphasize as positive the observations in which the student is offered a path: what they must do, the possibilities they have. An observation that only detects the error is very different from one that in addition, provides a solution. These types of observation tend to be more constructive insofar as they help the student escape the issue, they guide them.

Content-focused comments that make positive valuations without losing objectivity in a gentle and suggestive tone, but with authority, promoting reflective questions, favor dialogue, learning, coping with difficult segments, and the co-construction of knowledge. This must also be supplemented by conversations aimed at clarifying the comments, as posited by Handley and Williams (2011).

It is important that the student receives positive stimuli while developing their dissertation. These types of stimuli help them overcome difficult moments, severe criticisms, throughout a very hard and lengthy process. Positive comments allow the student to feel they are capable of achieving goals and they bolster their self-esteem and confidence, which are essential to a dissertation process. When the advisor only focuses on problem areas to be improved, they miss the opportunity to stimulate the student. The aim is to teach the research trade, in other words, train dissertation writers to be aware of the importance of properly managing data and producing well-argued and documented research reports, but in a constructive environment. It is also important to create spaces for communication between teachers and students in which objectives and expectations on feedback

are discussed. This type of spaces can be supplemented by working in pairs to review the texts.

Issues of coherence, cohesion, and citation present in most of the student texts must be worked on from the beginning of the master's degree, particularly in research seminars. It is relevant to think about how to generate a pedagogical work that supports the student through support groups or networks (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Beyond being a linear, silent, and control process, it is about getting the dissertation advisors, and the different actors involved in assisting the dissertation writer, to pay attention to the nature and dynamics of the work established throughout the drafts and the student's different submissions. According to Aitchison (2010), it has been proven that "the interaction between peers in writing groups is doubly powerful, since students demonstrate their conceptual knowledge, as well as their ability to communicate it through writing" (p.87). Assuming feedback from a dialogic scenario, encourages reflection and can more effectively lead to desired outcomes at the post-graduate level. Thus, it is important to emphasize written comments as a way of understanding the feedback cycle of the dissertation writer.

Discussion and Conclusions

This research sought to inquire into the linguistic characteristics of the comments made by master's dissertation advisors on the drafts submitted by their dissertation students and the implications deriving from them. To approach this object of study, a qualitative study was carried out in which 56 comments were analyzed considering the syntactics, semantics, and pragmatic levels of language.

The data show that in pragmatic terms, most of the comments are literal, indirect, do not give the receiver the option to question them, nor do they indicate the positive aspects, and they evidence the sender's role as an evaluator. At the semantics level, in general, there are specific, content-focused comments with a significant emphasis on the theoretical framework, somewhat developed; however, not always with sufficient information and without suggestions on how to improve the text. In the syntactics aspect, short and moderately cohesive comments prevail.

It is important to clarify that written comments are usually supplemented with face-to-face advice that allow the student to clarify the observations and express their agreement or disagreement with them.

The results of this research coincide partly with those found by Tapia-Ladino (2014) and by East et al. (2012) in relation to the aspects on

which the comments focus. For Tapia-Ladino (2014), the comments refer to aspects related to lexicon, syntax, semantics, discursive genre, and academic habits, whereas for East et al. (2012), the theoretical framework generates a considerable number of comments. This can be explained because it is one of the most complex sections to prepare. Tapia-Ladino's data also show that the comments suggest and impose tasks; this is correlated with the types of speech acts found in this research: most are suggestions and assertions indicating what must be done or corrected.

We share Prior and Bilbro's (2012) assertion that writing is a situated social practice and consequently, its development at the higher education level, implies learning how knowledge is built within a discipline, in which contexts it is produced, and under what conditions. And the role of the dissertation advisor is crucial in this process.

Studies like those carried out by Rosas et al. (2006) or Ochoa and Cueva (2012) highlight the importance that dissertation writers give to contributing ideas and constructive suggestions. Rosas et al. (2006) also emphasizes having an open approach when addressing the matters submitted for discussion as an important characteristic of a dissertation advisor, characteristic that is not visible in the comments analyzed. Yu and Lee (2013) in turn insist that the comment must be educational rather than evaluative.

As Moreno and Ochoa (2016) and Tapia-Ladino (2014) indicate, students generally accept comments to improve texts. Hence, the effect they have on the dissertation's completion process. This effect is mediated by the type of dissertation writer.

In Valarino (1997) there is a decalogue of types of students-dissertation writers; there is the one who postpones, the one who always hesitates, the one who fails concluding anything. Students who tend to postpone or find it difficult to complete a task require specific comments, with very direct guidance to clarify their ideas as much as possible. The hesitant dissertation student needs to be provided with clear and concrete instructions so they can continue the work and find ways to do it. Disqualifying, sanctioning comments that continually undermine a person's self-esteem are very damaging for individuals who allow themselves to be defeated by criticism, this can lead them to abandon the dissertation. The comment's function must not be to discourage the student, but rather maintain their confidence.

Putting yourself in the student's shoes considerably favors interaction and making progress in the dissertation. If the teacher thinks about what is happening to the dissertation student, if they understand their situation, if they see where the student is blocked and why, and if they identify the issue in the text and explains it to them, they can better help them. The comment must bring about a favorable change regarding the research

process and the writing process: explain why what was done is not correct and indicate how it could be improved. In short, it is necessary, as Ghazal et al. (2014) indicate, that feedback be quality feedback.

On the other hand, feedback—in the form of comments—has an important referential function, but also a relational one (cf. Higgins, Hartely & Skelton, 2001; Franke & Arvidsson, 2011), given that, on the one hand, it allows to bridge the gap between the current version of the dissertation and the desired performance (East et al., 2012; Gulfidan, 2009; Hyatt, 2005). On the other hand, the comment can favor or prevent dialogue between the advisor and dissertation student. And this happens because, in terms of the functions indicated by Kumar and Stracke (2007), the comment also reflects the directive function: how the comment situates and addresses the receiver determines how information is received and processed. Considering both these functions makes it possible to reach the ultimate objective of feedback: to gradually achieve the academic independence of the dissertation student (Wisker et al., 2003) and their affiliation to a research community in situated contexts.

Throughout the analysis, it was possible to observe that some teachers limited themselves to indicating errors for the student to correct them. There was another type of teacher who directly corrected the error, especially when it was a minor one, where the teacher feels it is easier and faster for them to do so rather than ask the student to correct it. Finally, there are teachers who assume the dissertation advisory as co-authors or co-researchers, they collaborate on its design, contribute key information, correct, and suggest changes, share the anxieties and concerns of the dissertation, establish a permanent dialogue with the student, express positive comments, share their experience and ideas with the writer, explain what can be done to improve the text or redirect the research, give diverse options, enable dialogue and invite students to reflect through questions. These are three different comment styles we can provisionally label as “evaluator”, “co-author”, and “editor.” This is a finding of this research.

To conclude, it is important to highlight the exploratory nature of this research and to know its limitations. Firstly, the sample is small, which does not allow generalizing its results. Secondly, the comments analyzed were limited to the field of human sciences and, therefore, the findings are not applicable to other areas. In future studies, it is necessary to broaden this sample not only with respect to the number of comments, but also by incorporating other schools. The results likely vary from one school to another. It is also convenient to analyze the comments considering the different stages of research and supervision: the beginning (project), the development, and the end (versions with the whole dissertation in which

reviewing the writing plays an essential role). Finally, a useful study is the correlation between linguistic analysis and the perception of the subjects involved: advisors and dissertation students.

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