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Constructive Criticism or Discouragement? A Linguistic Examination of Supervisory Feedback on Postgraduate Dissertation Drafts

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Abstract

This study presents a linguistic examination of supervisors' feedback comments on Master's students' dissertation drafts. The main objective is to analyse the linguistic features that characterise these comments and determine their impact. Fairclough's (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used as a theoretical framework. A descriptive qualitative design was used. The study analysed 215 comments from five dissertations. Findings show that 37.78% of supervisory comments are interrogatives, commonly used to prompt reflection but potentially confusing if not properly contextualised. Imperatives constitute 27.22%, signalling directives that can feel authoritative and potentially diminish student agency. Personal pronouns appear in 22.78% of comments, highlighting varying degrees of relational positioning between supervisor and supervisee. Modal verbs (10%), judgemental adjectives (7.78%), and overly negative language (7.22%) reflect varied tones and intentions, ranging from guidance to personal attack. Additionally, instances of translanguaging (code-switching and code-mixing), make up 6.67% of the comments, adding cultural relevance but at times affecting clarity. The study argues that clear, respectful feedback supports student growth and urges supervisors to improve feedback literacy to advance metalinguistic awareness.

Keywords: *Linguistic features, supervisory comments, dissertation drafts, Critical Discourse Analysis, teacher feedback*

Introduction

Language is a powerful tool in human communication. It not only facilitates the transmission of ideas but also shapes social relationships, identity, and perception. As Halliday (1978) explains, language functions both as a resource for meaning-making and as a medium through which social processes are enacted. In different contexts, language can construct realities, convey authority, express empathy, or impose judgment. In academic settings, language goes beyond the mere transmission of information. It plays a central role in constructing knowledge, asserting authority, and negotiating roles. Fairclough (1995) argues that institutional discourse, such as that found in education, is inherently ideological. It contributes to the reproduction or disruption of social hierarchies. Thus, academic language reflects not only content but also embedded power relations, pedagogical intentions, and emotional undertones. Tone, word choice, and structural elements significantly shape how messages are received and interpreted—especially in high-stakes communication.

One key area where language demonstrates its functional power is in the provision of supervisory feedback on academic research. Feedback in higher education supervision is widely recognised as crucial to

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students' academic development and success. When effectively communicated, feedback guides students through the complexities of research. It helps them refine arguments, improve methodologies, and develop academic competence (Carless, 2020). However, the nature and delivery of feedback can vary, raising important concerns about its impact. While it may serve as constructive guidance, it can also risk being discouraging and counterproductive (Hyland & Hyland, 2021). Supervisory feedback is often positioned within formative assessment frameworks. Its goal is to offer constructive criticism that facilitates learning and progress. Research shows that feedback that is clear, specific, and supportive can enhance students' confidence and academic performance (Nurie, 2018; Lei & Pramoolsook, 2020; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2021; Monika & Bale, 2023). Despite this, a growing body of literature highlights that not all feedback is perceived positively by students. Feedback that is overly negative or critical can lead to discouragement, increased anxiety, and even academic disengagement (Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2014).

The linguistic features of supervisory feedback are critical to understanding its effect. The tone, choice of words, and phrasing influence how students interpret and respond to feedback. Karunarathne et al. (2023) found that students often feel confused and demotivated when feedback is vague or overly harsh. This emphasises that feedback effectiveness depends not only on its content but also on how it is communicated. The student-supervisor relationship adds another layer of complexity. Supervisors occupy positions of authority, and their feedback can significantly shape students' academic paths, self-perception, and motivation (Turner & Bitchener, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Feedback that is unclear or delivered in a confrontational manner may be perceived as discouraging rather than constructive.

Recent studies have also drawn attention to the cultural dimensions of feedback in higher education (e.g., Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022; Pazio Rossiter & Bale, 2023; Bale & Pazio Rossiter, 2023). Students from diverse cultural backgrounds may interpret feedback differently due to varying communication norms. What is intended as constructive criticism may be perceived as discouragement, especially in cross-cultural contexts (Arasaratnam-Smith & Deardorff, 2022). This is particularly relevant in today's multicultural academic environments. For instance, Bale and Pazio Rossiter (2023) argue that students from cultures with a less hierarchical view of teacher-student relationships may interpret feedback more as collaborative advice than authoritative instruction.

Given the significant impact that supervisory feedback can have on student outcomes, it is crucial to understand the linguistic factors that contribute to its effectiveness or detriment. This research aims to provide a linguistic analysis of supervisory feedback comments in Master's students' dissertation drafts. Its primary purpose is to examine the linguistic features prevalent in the comments and determine whether they function as constructive criticism or discouragement. By analysing the language used in supervisory feedback, this study seeks to offer insights into how supervisors can better communicate their critiques to effectively support student development. This is particularly relevant, as while feedback is a fundamental aspect of academic supervision, its impact is influenced by the way it is linguistically communicated (Nurie, 2018; Gedamu and Gezahegn, 2021). Thus, understanding these aspects is essential for fostering a supportive learning environment in higher education, where feedback can serve its intended purpose of guiding students toward academic excellence (Wisniewski et al., 2020; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Gedamu and Gezahegn, 2021). The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on effective supervisory practices by highlighting the importance of language in the feedback process.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Fairclough's (1989) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to investigate language use in academic discourse. It specifically focuses on how supervisory feedback reflects and reinforces power relations between supervisors and students. Through CDA, the study analyses how comments made by supervisors—shaped by their authoritative positions—positively or negatively impact students' confidence and academic development. Fairclough (1993) emphasises that discourse not only mirrors but also reproduces social inequalities. This perspective is central to the study, as it elucidates how feedback can either support or hinder the development of students' research skills, ultimately shaping their academic experiences. CDA's view of language as a social practice is particularly valuable for analysing feedback as a reflection of academic authority and institutional power.

The study also considers how specific linguistic features contribute to the tone and impact of supervisory comments. For example, CDA highlights the role of *modality* and *imperatives* in shaping how feedback is delivered and received. These features can influence student engagement and perception of the feedback. As Wodak and Meyer (2016b) argue, CDA further reveals how institutional and cultural discourses shape supervisory practices. This provides a broader understanding of feedback, demonstrating how it reflects both individual supervisory styles and wider academic norms. In applying CDA, the analysis is structured around three dimensions: *the* text, *discursive* practices, and *social* practices. This framework facilitated the identification of the linguistic features prevalent in feedback comments, as well as the discourse practices involved in their production. The approach aided in determining whether certain features functioned as constructive criticism or as discouragement, thereby influencing how students respond and progress academically.

Methodology

The study employed a descriptive qualitative research design, using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine supervisory feedback on postgraduate theses from a linguistic perspective. Data were collected from students at Dar es Salaam University College of Education enrolled in the Master of Arts in Education (Linguistics), Master of Education in Management and Administration, and Master of Education in Curriculum Studies programmes. The study used five randomly selected dissertation drafts from these students. Consent was obtained from research supervisors to allow the use of their students' dissertation feedback for this study. Additionally, each supervisee participant was consulted and provided a consent letter for the use of their drafts and associated comments. The dissertation drafts were from five different students, each with distinct academic supervisors. The comments were captured using the screenshot feature in Microsoft Word, resulting in a total of 215 comments for examination. The analysis focused on identifying and coding prevalent linguistic features within the comments, applying qualitative content analysis to uncover patterns and linguistic aspects of supervisory feedback. This approach facilitated the determination of whether the comments were constructive or discouraging and assessed how various linguistic features contributed to the overall tone and effectiveness of the feedback, based on principles of CDA. The data from the written text was arranged and coded into categories of relevant linguistic features obtained. Basic statistical analysis was subsequently performed to determine the frequency and percentage contribution of each linguistic feature relative to the entire dataset, as presented in Table 1.

Linguistic Examination of Comments

This section examines and analyses the comments. The central thesis posits that feedback plays a crucial role in shaping students' research outcomes and academic development. However, the manner in which this feedback is conveyed can either inspire or discourage students, depending on the language choices made by supervisors. Consequently, this section examines, analyses the predominant linguistic features found in the comments. The findings, as shown in Table 1 below, demonstrate that supervisory comments on dissertation drafts are primarily characterised by linguistic features such as *interrogatives*, which occur 68 times across five theses, accounting for 37.78% of the total 215 comments. *Imperatives* appear 49 times (27.22%), while *personal pronouns* are used 41 times (22.78%). *Modality* occurs 18 times (10%), *judgmental adjectives* 14 times (7.78%), *overly negative language* 13 times (7.22%), and *code-switching* appears 12 times (6.67%). These percentages are based on the frequency of each linguistic feature out of the total 215 comments.

Table 1: Linguistic Features in Supervisory Comments on Dissertation Drafts

Linguistic Feature	D_1	D_2	D_3	D_4	D_5	Freq.	%	Examples
1. Interrogatives	18	12	13	17	8	68	37.78	a. Is it really new? b. What do you mean by 'extensively'? c. Has it been explored by a few studies? d. What do you say?

2. Imperatives	11	10	17	4	7	49	27.22	a. Rewrite the section. b. Check! c. Combine these into one or two paragraphs.
3. Criticisms with Judgmental Adjectives	5	1	5	0	3	14	7.78	a. Very poor punctuation and bad style of writing. b. This section is poorly written.
4.Personal Pronouns	10	13	4	5	9	41	22.78	a. **You** claim to use random sampling to give equal chance for the members of the population. b. **I** suggest revising this section.
5. Modality and Modal Verbs	4	4	2	7	1	18	10.00	a. **Can** you also confirm whether it has to be centered? b. You **should** delete everything that was deleted.
6. Overly Negative Language Comments	2	3	6	0	2	13	7.22	a. Too long a sentence! Must you include the two ideas in each and every sentence? b. Liar! After Magufuli, this is no more headquarters of Government of Tanzania. c. Teach yourself how to write a better validity statement d. Where is the title of this badly constructed table? e. This section is a mess. f. Very poor punctuation and bad style of writing. Do we really need to see all these unpunctuated codes? g. Is it "in-depth" or "in depth"? And are you supposed to choose one and use it all over the report or wander about as a mad man?
7.Code Switching	0	0	0	8	4	12	6.67	a. Umeenda mbali sana. Kazi itakosa mtiririko mzuri. You can have a section on DP agreement for theoretical implication before you review studies b. Read this background, delete vyote nilivyodelete kisha uisome. (read this

back ground, delete
everything I have deleted)

$D_{1\text{-}5}$ = Dissertation 1 to 5

Interrogatives

The data show that interrogatives are the most prevalent linguistic feature in supervisor comments, with a frequency of 68 occurrences, making up 37.78% of the analyzed comments. Supervisors used questions to encourage critical thinking, prompt reflection, or clarify ambiguities. Rather than providing direct answers, questions engage students in a dialogic process that fosters active learning. For instance:

1. *What English do you use?*
2. *What was your population?*
3. *How did you select participants in the strata?*
4. *Is sampling used to get information or participants?*
5. *What or who helps?*
6. *What do you mean by 'extensively'? Has it been explored by a few studies? What do you say?*

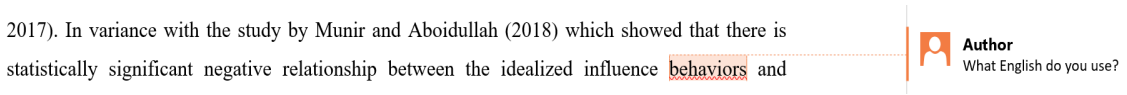

Figure 1: Extract from Dissertation Draft 1

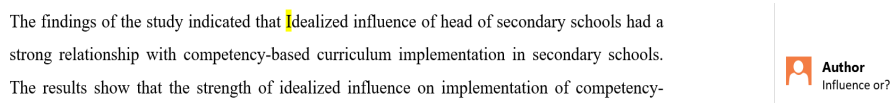

Figure 2: Excerpt from Dissertation 2

These interrogatives, as highlighted above, encourage deeper analysis of choices, aligning with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) and Sadler's (2010) views that feedback should promote reflective practice and self-regulation. Furthermore, questions can highlight ambiguities, as seen in examples, such as:

7. *What/who helps?*

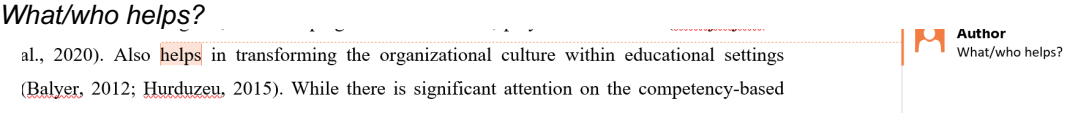

Figure 3: Excerpt from Dissertation 3

S/N	Category of participant	Number of participant
1	Bank Manager	19 (one from each bank branch)
2	Bank Customers	54 (from each bank branch)
	Total	73
3	Bank Forms	98 (from each bank)

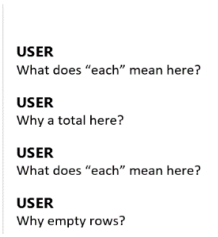

Figure 4: Excerpt from Dissertation 4

These questions soften criticism by offering a less confrontational approach, which Hyland and Hyland (2001) note can mitigate the face-threatening nature of feedback. However, excessive questioning, such as: *What/who helps?* can overwhelm students, undermining their confidence. They can become discouraging if used excessively or in a way that routs students. Because these questions are offered without further guidance might cause students to feel lost or insecure about their abilities. Effective feedback should strike a balance between encouraging students to improve and avoiding overwhelming them with too many open-ended inquiries. Questions are a powerful pedagogical tool that, when used thoughtfully, can enhance critical thinking and self-reflection, as seen in examples such as *Is it really new*? which challenges students to reconsider the originality of their argument, or What do you mean by 'extensively'? which promotes clarity in academic writing. These findings concur with Tofade, et. al,. (2013) who argue that a well-crafted question with supportive explanations enhances student engagement and critical thinking, while poor questions hinder learning.

Imperatives

The analysed data indicates that imperatives rank second comment types among many dissertation supervisors. Statistically, they have a frequency of 49, making up 27.22% of the analysed data. By nature, an imperative is a command or directive that compels the listener or reader to perform a specific action, often without providing options or explanations. According to Crystal (2008), imperatives are a grammatical mood used to issue instructions, requests, or commands in direct and authoritative language. In the analysed dissertation, most supervisors preferred using this direct approach to guide students. The following examples are illustrative:

8. *Change this word.*
9. *Rephrase the sentence.*
10. *Be consistent.*
11. *Rewrite the section.*
12. *Check!*
13. *Combine these into one or two paragraphs.*
14. *Take this to the literature review about studies conducted on Kibhwanji.*
15. *Delete!*
16. *Teach yourself how to write a better validity statement*
17. *Use one, either delimitation or scope and not both.*
18. *Present the limitation of the study.*
19. *Discuss the theory so that we know that TL is made of 4Is.*
20. *Prepare the chapter in a manner that it addresses each and every point I raised.*

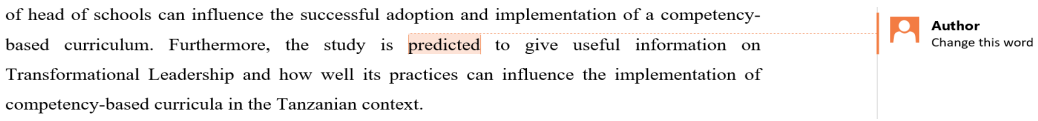

Figure 5: Excerpt from Dissertation 5

These examples illustrate that supervisors provide specific instructions. While such directives effectively communicate expectations, their impact on students' autonomy and critical thinking is contingent upon their delivery. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, imperatives can reveal power dynamics, with supervisors adopting an authoritative role that prescribes actions for students (Fairclough, 2001). Although necessary for guiding academic work, excessive use of imperatives may reinforce hierarchical relationships, positioning students as passive recipients rather than active learners. The effectiveness of imperatives hinges on whether they are constructive or merely prescriptive. Constructive imperatives, such as *Rephrase the sentence*, may assist students in clarifying ideas, particularly when accompanied by explanations like "to avoid ambiguity," which promote critical thinking and more understanding. Conversely, prescriptive commands such as *Be consistent*, *Combine these into one or two paragraphs*, and *Teach*

yourself how to write a better validity statement may yield immediate results but can constrain the development of students' analytical skills by emphasising compliance over understanding. Research indicates that overly directive feedback may impede student learning and motivation (Warrick, 2024). Furthermore, Hyland and Hyland (2001) contend that reliance on imperatives can undermine confidence, as it prioritises correction over growth. Similarly, Bitchener et al. (2011) advocate for a balance between direct instructions and opportunities for reflection, allowing feedback to function as a developmental, two-way process. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) assert that feedback should encourage self-regulated learning, as exemplified by *Prepare the chapter in a manner that addresses each point*, which would be more effective if accompanied by guidance on critically approaching each point, thereby fostering a more engaged and reflective learning process. Additionally, Lei and Pramoolsook (2020) emphasise that indirect feedback promotes instructional scaffolding, student engagement, and independence, which are crucial in dissertation writing.

Judgmental Adjectives

Data reveal that another feature in supervisors' comments is the use of judgmental adjectives. It appears in 14 times making 7.78 % of the data. This involves the use of subjective and evaluative language to express disapproval. This type of feedback often transcends objective assessment, introducing personal judgments that can elicit strong emotional responses from students. Judgmental adjectives such as *poor, bad*, *common* and *wrong* not only convey disapproval but also imply a lack of competence or diligence on the student's part, positioning the supervisor as authoritative and the student as subordinate (Gee, 2014). Consider the following comments:

21. *Bad statement.*
22. *Is this the way serious researchers punctuate?*
23. *Liar!*
24. *Poor punctuation.*
25. *This does not seem to be a complete sentence.*
26. *Very poor punctuation and bad style of writing.*
27. *Wrong word.*

The data presented above indicates the prevalence of cases of criticism employing judgmental adjectives. For instance, the statement, *This is a common definition known by every researcher,* subtly undermines the student's originality, potentially diminishing their confidence and sense of achievement (Hyland and Hyland, 2021). Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) argue that such feedback fails to foster constructive dialogue regarding improvements, often leading to defensiveness and demotivation (Boud and Molloy, 2013). Judgmental language can also inhibit students from exploring creative solutions or taking risks, reinforcing a fixed rather than a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). For example, in the rhetorical question, *Is this the way serious researchers punctuate?*, the use of the adjective *serious* not only questions the student's punctuation but also their identity as a researcher. According to Leki (1990), this type of questioning affects students' self-esteem and academic identity. Such feedback, which may feel more like a personal attack than constructive criticism, can further alienate students from the feedback process, making it challenging for them to engage with comments in a meaningful way. Further examples can be observed in the following Figure 6.

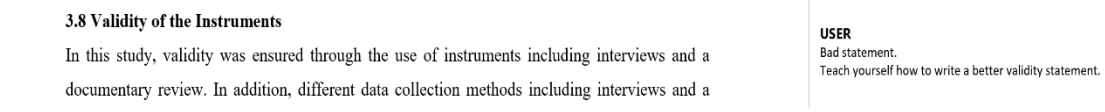

Figure 6: Excerpt from Dissertation 5

Additionally, the use of evaluative adjectives stresses the power relation in feedback, where terms such as *wrong* or *bad* highlight the supervisor's authority while portraying the student's work as *inferior* (Fairclough, 2001). This hierarchical structure can limit the student's capacity to engage constructively with feedback (Canagarajah, 2012). For instance, direct critiques like *wrong word* or extreme judgments such as *Liar!* shift

the focus from academic criticism to personal attack, adversely affecting the student-supervisor relationship and undermining trust (Sommers, 1982). Such comments evoke strong emotional responses, further distancing students from constructive engagement with their feedback.

Moreover, judgmental feedback can cultivate a fear-based learning environment, where students become preoccupied with avoiding criticism rather than enhancing their skills. Hattie and Timperley (2007) emphasise that effective feedback should be clear and actionable, assisting students in understanding how to improve their work. Comments such as *not well articulated* or *Too short to be six paragraphs* critique without providing practical guidance, potentially leading to frustration and diminished learning opportunities (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989). This lack of detailed feedback limits the effectiveness of the comments and reinforces hierarchical power relations, suggesting that a more constructive and supportive approach to feedback would better empower students to learn and grow. This argument aligns with Sparapani et al. (2020) and Gedamu and Gezahegn (2021), who emphasise that expressive language coupled with a direct directive approach is more effective, as it engages students in clarifying and improving their work.

Personal Pronouns

The analysis of supervisors' feedback reveals that second-person pronouns such as *you* are the most frequently used of all pronouns, while first-person pronouns like *I* rank second. Less frequently used pronouns include *we* and *it*. The use of these pronouns plays a crucial role in shaping feedback and influencing how students perceive it. The pronoun *'I'* reflects the supervisor's personal position, often signalling authority and reducing the space for student input. In contrast, the personal pronoun *you* directs responsibility to the student, clarifying the necessary corrections. Meanwhile, *we* implies a collaborative approach, although it is the least used pronoun, suggesting that feedback often lacks inclusivity. Supervisors frequently utilise *I* to assert their personal perspective, as seen in examples such as *I don't think so*. This creates an assertive tone, placing the supervisor at the centre of the discussion. However, this can limit student engagement and reduce opportunities for dialogue. Excessive use of the first-person pronoun *I*, without room for student input, may lead to a one-sided dynamic, diminishing the student's ability to explore alternatives. The supervisor's authority is reinforced through these comments, but at the cost of limiting a more collaborative interaction.

Conversely, the pronoun *you* is used to directly address the student, often in a directive tone. Examples such as *You need to categorically tell us…* and *You cannot start discussing…* clearly indicate what the student needs to correct. While such feedback is beneficial for identifying issues, the repeated use of *you* without positive reinforcement can render the feedback overly critical. It assigns responsibility to the student but risks making the feedback feel burdensome and discouraging if not balanced with encouragement. The pronoun *we* promotes collaboration, as demonstrated in the example *We know that TL is made of 4Is*, which assumes shared knowledge and reduces the hierarchical gap between student and supervisor. Research suggests that using *we* fosters inclusivity and partnership, thereby cultivating a cooperative atmosphere. Despite this advantage, feedback dominated by *I* and *you* can create an authoritative tone, potentially discouraging students. According to Tutunaru (2023) and Isler (2018), constructive feedback encourages open communication between students and teachers, facilitating a more supportive and collaborative learning environment. Research by Hyland (1998) and Straub (1997) highlights the importance of balancing directive feedback with encouragement and collaboration, which supports student engagement and growth.

Modality and Modal Verbs

Modality reflects the writer's or speaker's attitude towards the likelihood, necessity, or permissibility of an action, conveyed through modal verbs such as *'can', 'will', 'must', 'might',* and 'could', as well as adverbs, adjectives, and other modal expressions (Palmer, 2001; Zhang, 2019). The analysis reveals that modal verbs significantly shape the feedback provided by dissertation supervisors, with variations in their usage across different supervisors. Statistical data indicates diverse frequencies of modal verbs in feedback comments. For instance, 'may' appears most frequently among all modal verbs, while 'should' ranks second. Other modals, such as *'can',* 'might', and *'must',* occur less frequently but still significantly influence the tone of the feedback comments. This distribution illustrates that supervisors utilise modals to express

varying degrees of certainty, possibility, and obligation, thereby affecting how feedback is perceived by students. Please examine the following data in Table 2.

Table 2: Use of Modal Verbs

Modal Verb	Comments
May	- May be parents, spouse, children - Maybe you operationalise the word numbers. - Maybe this should be named as conclusion. - Maybe after transition from NP to DP you have Section.
Can	- Can you also confirm whether it has to be centered.
Could	- You could remove 'in Tanzanian secondary schools' and put it in the purpose of the study. - You could not go around the world and call the studies non-Bantu.
Should	- You should change this heading to be different from the chapter name. - Should come before you begin addressing objectives. That is section 2.2. - This section should go before population. - You should begin by showing the mean scores and standard deviations for both heads of schools and teachers. - You should combine these to one or two paragraphs. - You should teach yourself how to write a better validity statement. - You should pose a problem. - You should delete everything that was deleted.
Would	- You would have one table combining all 4Is against CBC.
Must	- Must you include the two ideas (language choice vs. access to information) in each and every sentence?

As already established, modal verbs, as linguistic tools, convey various levels of certainty, possibility, necessity, or obligation, which can significantly affect the tone and perceived intent of feedback. From the table above, it can be observed that, the mostly commonly used modal verbs are may, can, could, should, would, and must. These verbs contribute to either constructive criticism or discouragement. Consider the following examples:

28. *May be parents, spouse, children (First Dissertation)*
29. *Maybe you operationalise the word numbers (First Dissertation)*
30. *Maybe this should be named as conclusion (Second Dissertation)*
31. *Maybe after transition from NP to DP you have Section (Fifth Dissertation)*

The modal verb *may* introduces suggestions with a sense of uncertainty, offering options rather than firm directives, as seen in comments like *May be parents, spouse, children*. This softens critique, allowing students to explore alternatives without feeling pressured, aligning with Halliday's (1994) view that modality reflects the speaker's stance on likelihood or necessity. In educational contexts, *may* fosters a collaborative atmosphere by presenting possibilities non-confrontationally, a point supported by Martin and White (2005), who note that modality modulates interpersonal dynamics. Similarly, *can* is used to request or inquire about possibilities, as in *Can you also confirm whether it has to be centered?,* focusing on what is possible or within the student's capacity. According to Biber et al. (1999), *can* suggests an action within the student's control, often interpreted as a constructive prompt. Additionally, *could* offers alternatives, as seen in ***You*** *could remove 'in Tanzanian secondary schools' and put it in the purpose of the study* and *You could not go around the world and call the studies non-Bantu*, facilitating constructive dialogue without enforcing changes, which Gee (2014) highlights as a way to suggest improvements while maintaining a collaborative tone.

Additionally, data show that other supervisors prefer the use of modal verbs *could, should, must* and *would.* As for the modal verb *could* is used to offer suggestions or alternatives, implying that there is room for choice and that the proposed action is just one option among many. For example, comments like *You could remove 'in Tanzanian secondary schools' and put it in the purpose of the study* and *You could not go around the world and call the studies non-Bantu* suggest possible improvements without enforcing them. Gee (2014) highlights that *could* serves to present alternatives and maintain a collaborative and supportive tone, aligning with the idea that it facilitates constructive dialogue by allowing students to consider different approaches. In contrast, *should* and *must* carry a stronger sense of obligation. The use of *should* in comments such as *Should come before you begin addressing objectives* and *You should begin by showing the mean scores and standard deviations* implies a higher degree of necessity and serves as a strong recommendation for improving the dissertation. According to Hyland (2005b), *should* provide guidance toward meeting academic standards, though it can sometimes come across as directive. Similarly, *must* expresses a firm requirement, as seen in comments like ***Must*** *you include the two ideas (language choice vs. access to information) in each and every sentence?* and ***Must*** *you include the two ideas (language choice vs. access to information) in each and every sentence?*. Martin and White (2005) note that *must* convey strong obligations, which can be perceived as more forceful and potentially discouraging if not coupled with supportive feedback. In contrast, *would,* as in *You would have one table combining all 4Is against CBC*, proposes a hypothetical scenario or preferred outcome without imposing it explicitly. Biber et al. (1999) suggest that *would* can be used to suggest improvements in a less demanding manner, thus presenting an ideal scenario while maintaining a more flexible approach.

Overly Negative Language Comments

The analysis of supervisory feedback in postgraduate theses reveals that some supervisors' comments reflect the use of overly negative language. From the analyzed data it constitutes 7.22% of the feedback comments. Consider the following example:

40. *I don't think so. Implementation is by teachers. Leaders are not implementers directly.*
41. *Liar! After Magufuli, this is no more headquarters of Government of Tanzania.*
42. *Very poor punctuation and bad style of writing.*
43. *And are you supposed to choose one and use it all over the report or wander about as a mad man?*

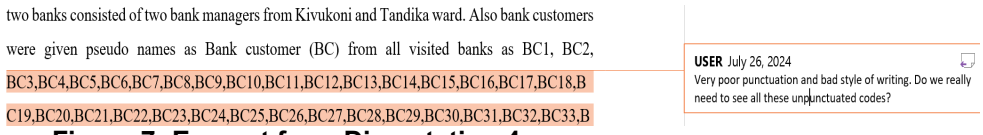

Figure 7: Excerpt from Dissertation 4

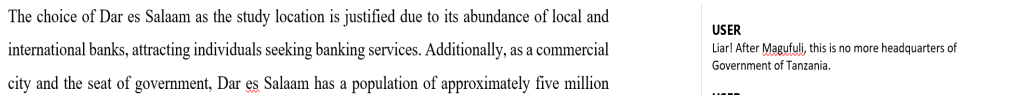

Figure 8: Excerpt from Dissertation 4

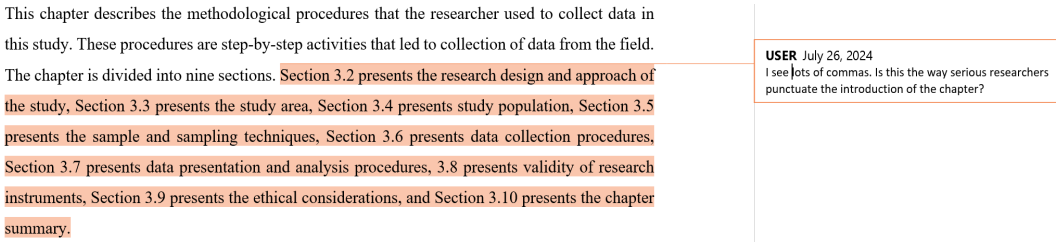

Figure 9: Excerpt from Dissertation 4

From examples above, feedback such as *Liar! ,* exemplifies the sarcastic tone used by supervisors, which dismisses the originality of the student's work rather than fostering intellectual discussion. This reflects the power dynamics described by Fairclough (1989), where discourse is a tool for enacting power, and the

supervisor's comment shuts down the student's autonomy, aligning with Foucault's (1980) view of knowledge and power being intertwined. The authoritative stance here discourages debate and intellectual exploration, further entrenching hierarchical power structures in academia. Moreover, comments like, *Very poor punctuation and bad style of writing.,* reveal how feedback can assert the supervisor's authority without encouraging collaborative discussion. The abrupt rejection exemplifies van Dijk's (1993) observation that institutional discourse often reinforces power relations, leaving students in a passive position. This pattern is also evident in feedback that moves from critique to discouragement, such as *Liar! After Magufuli, this is no more headquarters of Government of Tanzania.* Hyland and Hyland (2001) caution that excessive negative feedback like this, which attacks the student personally rather than addressing the academic content, can lead to demotivation and anxiety. Such comments blur the line between critiquing the student's work and critiquing the individual, undermining the potential for intellectual growth.

CDA emphasizes the broader social and institutional context that shapes feedback discourse. The comment *And are you supposed to choose one and use it all over the report or wander about as a mad man?* reinforces an exclusionary academic ideology, positioning deviation from academic norms as something worthy of ridicule. Bourdieu's (1992) concept of symbolic violence is particularly relevant here, as the supervisor's derogatory language serves to assert dominance and diminish the student's agency. Similarly, the dismissive remark *Not important. Is there anything peculiar?* reflects an assumption that the supervisor's authority is unquestionable, offering no constructive guidance for improvement. According to Price et al. (2010) and Lizzio and Wilson (2008), feedback should be clear, specific, and aimed at student development, yet many of the comments analyzed perpetuate vagueness and negativity, hindering rather than helping the students' academic progress.

Translanguaging (Code Switching/Code Mixing)

The findings reveal that some supervisors use code-switching or multiple languages. In the case of the analysed dissertation comments, Kiswahili and English have been used in one dissertation. Consider the following examples:

40. *Hapa umejichanganyachanganya* no church goers cannot analyse the Bible
41. *Usibishane na examiner* 'Do not argue with the examiner'
42. *Bado* 'Still - indicating a need for further focus on studies'
43. *Hakuna mtiririko* 'There is no flow'
44. *Umeenda mbali sana* 'You have gone too far'
45. *Read this background, delete vyote nilivyodelete kisha uisome*. 'read this back ground, delete everything I have deleted'.

The examples provided demonstrate that code-switching and code-mixing in feedback can yield both constructive and potentially discouraging effects. The phrase *Hapa umejichanganyachanganya* 'here you have mixed up yourself', alongside *no church goers cannot analyse the Bible* or *Read this background, delete vyote nilivyodelete kisha uisome* 'read this background, delete everything I have deleted', exemplifies intersentential code-switching used to critique coherence, with Kiswahili contributing a personal and culturally familiar tone (Bhatia, 2004; Monika & Bale, 2023). Such feedback can resonate with the author's linguistic background, enhancing clarity and relatability. Similarly, the code-mixed phrase *Usibishane na examiner* 'Do not argue with the examiner' introduces directness, discouraging contestation and reinforcing academic norms. This aligns with Rossiter & Bale's (2023) assertion that culturally grounded feedback promotes adherence to expectations. However, this linguistic approach can also be perceived as harsh; *Hapa umejichanganyachanganya* may come across as overly critical, particularly to sensitive recipients (Gee, 2014), while *Usibishane na examiner* might seem excessively authoritative, potentially undermining the student's academic agency (Fairclough, 2003). Thus, while culturally embedded feedback can enhance understanding and compliance, it must be balanced with professionalism to mitigate negative impacts.

Discussion

This study aimed to provide a linguistic examination of supervisory comments in students Masters dissertation drafts. The main objective was to analyse the linguistic characterisations of these comments in order to determine whether they function as constructive criticism or discouragement. The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its theoretical framework. The findings reveal how supervisors' linguistic choices in dissertation feedback influence students' academic development and identity. It has been shown that the most frequent linguistic features include interrogatives, imperatives, personal pronouns, and modal verbs. These elements shape the tone, clarity, and perceived intent of feedback, while also revealing the power dynamics between supervisors and students. This aligns with Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick's (2006) perspective that feedback serves as both instruction and interpersonal discourse.

Interrogatives were the most common feedback type (37.78%), suggesting a pedagogical aim to prompt critical thinking. Questions such *as 'What English do you use?'* and *'Is it really new?'* encourage students to reflect and justify their choices, fostering metacognition (Sadler, 2010). However, poorly contextualised or repeated questions—such as *'What is* this?'—can create confusion or anxiety rather than clarity, as cautioned by Hyland and Hyland (2001). Imperatives followed (27.22%), with comments like *'Rewrite the* section' and 'Delete!' serving directive functions. While such clarity can guide revisions, the lack of rationale may hinder understanding. As Warrick (2024) argues, excessive directives can reduce student agency. Comments like '*Check!'* without explanation risk shifting feedback from constructive to authoritarian.

In addition to commands and questions, the study has revealed that judgmental adjectives, though less frequent (7.78%), were noted. Words such as *'bad,'* '*poor,*' and especially '*Liar!*' introduce personal judgment, crossing the line from academic critique to personal attack. Such feedback can threaten student identity and motivation. This echoes Leki's (1990) concerns about damaging, identity-threatening language in academic contexts, which may hinder students' sense of confidence and academic development. Personal pronouns also featured in the data; the frequent use of 'you' (22.78%) often placed blame, as in *'You cannot start discussing...*'. This direct tone can alienate students unless balanced with constructive language. The rare use of '*we,'* as seen in *'We know that TL is made of 4Is,'* promotes collaboration. As noted by Hyland (1998) and Straub (1997), a mix of directive and inclusive pronouns supports dialogic engagement and shared responsibility. Modal verbs such *as 'should,' 'can,'* and 'must' (10%) revealed varying degrees of authority. Strong modality, such as *'You must delete...,'* implies obligation and can reinforce hierarchical dynamics (Fairclough, 2001). However, softer forms like *'Can you confirm...*' invite negotiation and reflection, aligning with learner-centred practices. Thus, modal verbs subtly regulate power and student autonomy in feedback.

The study has also observed that some supervisors use excessively negative language in their comments, which constituted 7.22% of the feedback analysed. Remarks such as '*Too long a sentence!*' or '*Teach yourself how to write a better validity statement*' express dissatisfaction without providing constructive solutions. As Sommers (1982) and Black and Wiliam (1998) emphasise, effective feedback should be clear, supportive, and actionable—rather than demotivating or vague. The study has also noted that some teachers employ multiple languages, exhibiting instances of code-switching, which were the least frequent (6.67%). Code-switching or translanguaging in supervisory comments adds a cultural-linguistic dimension. Comments such as '*Umeenda mbali sana*' or '*Usibishane na examiner*' can enhance relatability by incorporating Kiswahili. According to Canagarajah (2012), this practice can aid comprehension and affirm identity. However, inconsistent use or a mix of academic and informal tones may confuse students or undermine the formality of academic guidance.

These linguistic choices reflect both pedagogical intentions and institutional ideologies. Feedback is not merely a tool for correction; it serves as a site for identity negotiation and power relations. The combination of interrogatives, imperatives, pronouns, and modals reveals efforts to balance authority and support. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) recommend, effective feedback should be specific, respectful, and growth-oriented. To enhance feedback practices, supervisors must develop metalinguistic awareness. Training in feedback literacy (Carless & Boud, 2018) can aid them in crafting language that motivates and empowers. For instance, changing '*Wrong word*' to '*Consider using a more precise term here*' maintains critique while

demonstrating respect. A shift towards developmental, dialogic, and inclusive feedback can foster student confidence, autonomy, and academic engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined the language used in supervisors' comments on Master's students' dissertation drafts. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the research explored how various linguistic features shape the tone and impact of feedback —whether constructive or discouraging. The findings indicate that interrogatives, imperatives, personal pronouns, modal verbs, and judgemental adjectives are commonly used. Each of these features influences how students receive and respond to feedback. Interrogatives were often employedused to prompt students to think more critically; however, without clear context, they sometimes caused confusion. Imperatives, which provide direct instructions, could appear overly authoritative and diminish students' sense of control. Personal pronouns shaped the relationship between supervisor and student, while modal verbs and judgemental adjectives reflected the supervisor's stance—whether supportive or critical. The study also identified instances of translanguaging, particularly through Kiswahili. This added cultural relevance but occasionally rendered the message less clear. This study demonstrates that feedback is not merely about correcting mistakes; it is a powerful form of communication that can either support or discourage students. The study recommends that supervisors maintain a feedback delivery mode that ensures comments are clear, respectful, and supportive. Finally, this study has adopted a synchronic approach to the linguistic examination of supervisory comments. Future research should explore this topic using longitudinal approaches and alternative frameworks, such as pragmatics, Appraisal Theory, or Interactional Sociolinguistics. This will help to gain a broader understanding of feedback practices in academic settings.

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