

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES
IN RHETORIC AND COMMUNICATION

The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk

A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis

Jo Mackiewicz



The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk

Writing centers in universities and colleges aim to help student writers develop practices that will make them better writers in the long term and that will improve their draft papers in the short term. The tutors who work in writing centers accomplish such goals through one-to-one talk about writing. This book analyzes the aboutness of writing center talk—what tutors and student writers talk about when they come together to talk about writing. By combining corpus-driven analysis to provide a quantitative, microlevel view of the subject matter and discourse analysis to provide a qualitative macrolevel view of tutor-student writer interactions, it further establishes how these two research methods operate together to produce a robust and rigorous analysis of spoken discourse.

Jo Mackiewicz is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Professional Communication at Iowa State University, USA, where she co-directs the Advanced Communication program. She earned a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Georgetown University. Her recent research focuses on tutoring strategies in writing center conferences. With Isabelle Thompson, she published *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors*.

Routledge Studies in Rhetoric and Communication

For a full list of titles in this series, please visit www.routledge.com.

- 20 **Communication, Public Discourse, and Road Safety Campaigns**
Persuading People to Be Safer
Nurit Guttman
- 21 **Mapping Christian Rhetorics**
Connecting Conversations, Charting New Territories
Edited by Michael-John DePalma and Jeffrey M. Ringer
- 22 **Identity and Power in Narratives of Displacement**
Katrina M. Powell
- 23 **Pedagogies of Public Memory**
Teaching Writing and Rhetoric at Museums, Archives, and Memorials
Edited by Jane Greer and Laurie Grobman
- 24 **Authorship Contested**
Cultural Challenges to the Authentic, Autonomous Author
Edited by Amy E. Robillard and Ron Fortune
- 25 **Software Evangelism and the Rhetoric of Morality**
Coding Justice in a Digital Democracy
Jennifer Helene Maher
- 26 **Sexual Rhetorics**
Methods, Identities, Publics
Edited by Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes
- 27 **Rhetorical Delivery and Digital Technologies**
Networks, Affect, Electracy
Sean Morey
- 28 **Rhetorics of Names and Naming**
Edited by Star Medzerian Vanguri
- 29 **Vernacular Christian Rhetoric and Civil Discourse**
The Religious Creativity of Evangelical Student Writers
Jeffrey M. Ringer
- 30 **The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk**
A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis
Jo Mackiewicz

The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk

A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis

Jo Mackiewicz

First published 2017
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2017 Taylor & Francis

The right of Jo Mackiewicz to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP data has been applied for.

ISBN: 978-1-138-68802-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-315-54206-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by codeMantra

This book is dedicated to Isabelle Thompson.
Thank you friend.

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1 A Mixed-Methods Approach to the Aboutness of Writing Center Talk	1
2 A Complement to Discourse Analysis of Writing Center Talk: Corpus Analysis	8
3 Methods	21
4 Analyzing the Aboutness of Writing Center Talk through Basic Characteristics	37
5 Analyzing the Aboutness of Writing Center Talk with Key Function Words	56
6 Analyzing the Aboutness of Writing Center Talk with Key Content Words	76
7 Analyzing the Aboutness of Writing Center Talk with Lexical Bundles	103
8 Conclusion	134
<i>References</i>	149
<i>Index</i>	159

This page intentionally left blank

Acknowledgments

As always, I am grateful for the support of my family, especially my parents, Joe and Sherry Mackiewicz. Also, I am thankful for conversations with my inspiring mentor, Tony Bukoski.

Thank you to my editor at Routledge/Taylor & Francis Books, Felisa Salvago-Keyes, for her upbeat attitude and super-fast responses to my questions.

This book would not have been possible without the help of my friend and co-author, Isabelle Thompson. Isabelle did much of the research that served as the basis for chapter 2. She also transcribed the conferences, copyedited, and proofread this book. With her characteristic tact and grace, Isabelle pointed out nonsense, inconsistencies, and overly complex (and convoluted) syntax. Writing and research are just so much more fun and interesting with Isabelle.

This page intentionally left blank

1 A Mixed-Methods Approach to the Aboutness of Writing Center Talk

To begin, here is a brief exercise in estimation.

The Writing Center Directory lists over 1720 writing centers in the United States alone. The list includes entries for writing centers in universities, colleges, seminaries, community colleges, technical colleges, and military institutes. It also includes some entries for writing centers in high schools and junior high and middle schools, as well as entries for community writing centers. In addition, the directory includes entries for over 360 more writing centers around the world, including writing centers in Australia, Columbia, Estonia, France, India, Japan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mongolia, and Vietnam (Writing Center Directory 2015). If each of the 2,080 writing centers listed in the directory employs two tutors each hour of an eight-hour day for five days each week, each center generates 80 hours of talk about writing every week. Each week, then, all the writing centers listed in the directory together generate about 166,400 hours of talk about writing every week. And that means each academic year, fall and spring semesters, these writing centers together generate 4,999,200 hours—nearly 5 million hours—of talk about writing. That's over 570 years of conference talk each academic year.

Even this ballpark (and rather conservative) estimate shows the amount of talk that tutors and student writers produce is vast. But here's a question to ponder: What is all of this writing center talk about?

Until now, no one has addressed this question—a question that gets at what makes writing center talk different from other kinds of talk and thus constructs its unique efficacy. In this book, *The Aboutness of Writing Center Talk: A Corpus-Driven and Discourse Analysis (Aboutness)*, I report a detailed answer to this question. In addition, I argue for and use a mixed-methods approach to empirically examine talk between student writers and tutors in order to describe and analyze the aboutness of writing center discourse (Goźdz-Roszkowski 2011; Phillips 1989)—the characteristics that constitute the content of one-to-one talk in writing centers. Then, I examine those linguistic features in context to understand how tutors and student writers used them. The mixed-methods approach that I describe and employ here combines corpus-driven analysis and discourse analysis to provide a rich, micro- and macrolevel view of writing center talk. In short, I have two main goals in this book: (1) to analyze the aboutness of writing

2 A Mixed-Methods Approach

center talk and (2) to show how the two research methods operate together to produce a robust and rigorous analysis of spoken discourse. To accomplish the first goal, I analyzed a specialized corpus of 47 writing center conferences to identify and examine words and sequences of words that revealed what writing center discourse is about. Then, I examined tutors' and student writers' key words and word sequences in context to understand how they functioned in the task-oriented talk that tutors and student writers co-constructed. To accomplish the second goal, I explain the theory and research results that underlie the mixed-methods approach and reveal its benefits.

Aboutness

As the term implies, “aboutness” refers to the content of a text or a large collection of texts—a corpus. The concept informs a range of disciplines, particularly information and library science (Hutchins 1978; Woolwine, Ferguson, Joly, Pickup, and Udma 2011). Recently, research on blogs and other web content has explored the extent to which social tagging can capture the aboutness of those online texts (Kehoe and Gee 2011, 2012). In linguistic terms, aboutness stems from lexical choices and patterns and the meanings that they create. Indeed, in relation to meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Joachim's (1906) philosophical treatise on the coherence theory of truth as the first use of the term “aboutness” (Rondeau 2014). The linguistic choices that determine aboutness fluctuate according to context—why and where the discourse occurs. For example, the aboutness of a corpus of face-to-face conversations among friends will differ from a corpus of operating-room discourse among doctors and nurses. The aboutness of the corpus of operating-room discourse would consist of more medical terminology than the corpus of everyday conversation. Similarly, the aboutness of writing center talk would differ from the aboutness of operating-room discourse and from everyday conversation.

Understanding the aboutness of a text or corpus (such as a corpus of writing center transcripts) by analyzing “large scale regularities,” says Phillips (1989), can help reveal a listener's or reader's “psychological perception of subject matter” (6–7, see also Goźdz-Roszkowski 2011). In the field of writing center studies, analyzing aboutness to understand the linguistic features and patterns that comprise writing center talk can provide insight into what tutors and student writers discuss—and what they do not. It also can provide insight into how they interact. For example, analyzing aboutness can provide insight into the stance, the attitude, or the level of certainty (Biber, Conrad, and Cortes 2004, 384), that tutors and student writers express. In contrastive studies, analyzing the aboutness of writing center talk can reveal how it differs from other types of instructional discourse and thus illuminate the linguistic characteristics that make it efficacious for some purposes and not others.

Determining aboutness involves using quantitative measures, identifying, for example, frequently occurring sequences of words. However, to expand the focus from the tight focus on the microlevel of particular words and word sequences to a broader macrolevel, many researchers supplement the quantitative analysis with qualitative analysis, particularly discourse analysis. In *Aboutness*, I followed a mixed-methods approach to analyzing writing center talk.

Mixed-Methods Analysis

As noted above, I used two analytical methods to examine a specialized corpus of writing center talk. First, I used corpus analysis, the quantitative method, to describe the aboutness of the conferences. It identified the frequently occurring and key words and the most frequently occurring word sequences, called lexical bundles. A corpus is a collection of representative samples of language from a particular situation, for example, writing center conferences (Biber and Conrad 2009; Biber Conrad, and Reppen 1998; O’Keefe, McCarthy, and Carter 2007). The intention is for the corpus to represent the language situation (for example, all of the talk in writing centers located in the United States) so that the researcher can then generalize from those findings. Hence, a corpus must include the range of linguistic variation that occurs in the language situation and, as a result, must be quite large. The present study’s corpus, a specialized corpus of transcripts from 47 writing center conferences, contained 157,665 words—not large enough to make generalizations but large enough to understand the specialized corpus’s aboutness.

As evident from its focus on single words and lexical bundles, corpus analysis reveals a corpus’s microstructure. With Anthony’s (2014a) AntConc 3.4.3 concordance application, I compiled tutors’ and student writers’ most frequently occurring words, type/token ratios, key words (words occurring statistically more frequently in a study corpus than in a reference corpus) and words collocating with (occurring in the environment of) writing-related key words, and frequently occurring four-word lexical bundles. After using corpus analysis to identify these linguistic features, I analyzed those features in context using discourse analysis, the study’s qualitative method. Discourse analysis of spoken language focuses on the macrolevel connections to identify how speakers co-construct their interaction on a moment-to-moment basis. Discourse analysis revealed how tutors and student writers used the aboutness-revealing linguistic features.

An Example

To get a sense of how a mixed-methods approach operates and how it differs from the kinds of research on writing center talk that have come before, I present below a short excerpt of talk from the opening stage

4 *A Mixed-Methods Approach*

(see Mackiewicz and Thompson 2015, 63–65) of a conference between a writing center tutor (T47) and a student writer (S47). During this opening stage of the conference, T47 began by reading aloud segments of the assignment sheet that delineated guiding questions. Then, T47 and S47 discussed a potential thesis statement that would make a claim about the relationship between two main characters from Alice Walker's book *The Color Purple*:

T47: I guess with all of these. Ok. "How does Celie view herself before Shug- Shug's effect on Celie? And then what is it about Shug?" Ok. So first, we need to come up with a topic sentence.

S47: Uhhuh. Thesis.

T47: Um. Yeah. A thesis statement.

S47: Yeah. Just write it down there.

T47: What in general- [3 seconds] In general, like, the most general quest- um, statement you can come up with. Ha. What general effect does Celie- I mean, does Shug have on Celie?

S47: Um. [2 seconds] She makes her feel like a- She makes her feel like a person. Well, she makes her feel- I can't explain it. Um. [3 seconds]

T47: Like a person.

S47: Yeah. She makes her feel alive. So-

T47: Makes her feel alive.

S47: Yeah.

T47: Makes her feel important.

S47: Yeah.

T47: Um. So I think we should start off at that idea. Um. And say something to the effect that- [2 seconds] 'Celie- Before Shug was' A B C. And then 'after Shug,' you know, 'she felt important. She felt alive.' Does that make sense?

S47: Yeah. We pretty much got to write- Um. Tell, um, how she makes her feel from beginning to end.

Writing center researchers could take a variety of approaches to analyzing the excerpted writing center talk above. Some researchers might focus on the different roles that T47 enacted even during this brief exchange. They might note how T47, through her questions and advice, moved from enacting an instructor role to enacting a peer or collaborator role before returning to an instructor role with her suggestion for potential words ("before" and "after") to structure a possible thesis statement. Other writing center researchers might home in on the ways that demographic variables such as sex (T47 is female, S47 is male), race (T47 and S47 are African-American), and age (T47 is late twenties, S47 is late teens) affected the interaction. They might also explore how those variables correlated with the conference's outcomes, for example, the quality of the student writer's paper and the result in terms of participants' satisfaction with the conference. These possible analyses focus on characterizing the conference participants,

possibly in terms of the conference outcomes, whereas the present study's corpus analysis focused on characterizing the content of what tutors and student writers said and how that content distinguished the writing center talk. The discourse analysis that follows the corpus-driven analysis allows more focus on individuals, even though it too is concerned with language in that it focuses on how the individuals used the aboutness-revealing words and bundles of words.

Because one short excerpt of writing center talk on its own will say little concerning the aboutness of writing center talk, I explain how I carried out the corpus-driven analysis and mention some of the overall findings from the analysis of the entire 47-conference corpus that this excerpt illustrates. I used this procedure of identifying aboutness-revealing words and bundles and then showing how tutors and student writers used them to co-construct their task-oriented talk throughout the book.

I began the corpus-driven analysis by considering basic measures (chapter 4). I analyzed tutors' and student writers' participation in conferences through their respective word counts. I also determined their most frequently occurring words and, particularly important in analyzing tutors' talk, their type/token ratios. Type/token ratios relate the proportion of unique word types to overall word (token) count. Type/token ratio is a rough measure of lexical variation and provides one way to gauge the difficulty of the vocabulary in spoken or written texts. Tutors' average type/token ratios, then, gave a rough sense of the difficulty student writers, particularly English-language learners, might have in understanding what tutors say. In addition, using Anthony's (2014b) AntWordProfiler, I determined the percentage of tutors' and student writers' words in West's (1953) General Service List (GSL) and Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) in order to get a rough sense of the lexical difficulty and thus comprehensibility of their talk.

The talk excerpted above illustrates a common finding in writing center research and in the present study: the tutor talked more—had greater volubility—than the student writer did. Therefore, the tutor's speech contained more tokens than the student writer's speech. The excerpt also shows the student writer responding to the tutor more than he initiated topics. This respondent role led to less volubility. In addition, the excerpt contains several words among the most frequently occurring words in the present study's corpus, including the function words (reference words) "I" and "you" and (hesitation marker) "um."

Although using basic measures such as word counts and word frequencies offers a sense of the content of tutors' and student writers' talk and the differences between tutors' talk and student writers' talk, these basic measures are not the best indicators of the aboutness of writing center talk; key words are a much better indicator of aboutness, and I examine the key words in the writing center corpus in chapters 5 and 6. Even though they may not be the most frequently occurring words in a particular corpus,

key words occur statistically more frequently in comparison to their occurrence in another corpus (or corpora), often a corpus that represents spoken English as people use it more generally. As I discuss in chapter 3, I used subsections of three large corpora, the Manually Annotated Sub-Corpus (MASC), the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), and the Michigan Corpus of Annotated Spoken English (MICASE) as the reference corpora. The excerpted talk above illustrates some key words emerging from the writing center corpus, including minimal responses “yeah,” “ok,” and “uhhuh” and the writing-related key words “thesis” and “sentence.” In addition, rather than looking solely at the key words, I also analyzed the immediate linguistic environments of the writing-related key words, identifying the words that collocated (co-located) with them statistically frequently. For example, the word “statement” strongly collocated with the word “thesis.” In the talk excerpted above, the two words appear together (“Um. Yeah. A thesis statement”).

Key words are not the only means of revealing the aboutness of a given corpus; analyzing frequently occurring word sequences, lexical bundles, also facilitates the process. A lexical bundle occurred in the talk excerpted above. T47’s question, “Does that make sense?” was the fourth most frequent lexical bundle in tutors’ talk. This lexical bundle, one of three in tutors’ talk that were syntactically complete sentences, marked tutors’ use of a motivational scaffolding strategy (see Mackiewicz and Thompson 2015), specifically, showing concern for student writers by checking on their understanding. In chapter 7, I discuss tutors’ and student writers’ most frequent lexical bundles—their formulaic language. Then, I analyze these lexical bundles in context, looking especially at how they fulfilled three functional types of lexical bundles that Biber, Conrad, and Cortes (2004) delineated: stance expressions, discourse organizers, and referential expressions.

Analyzing linguistic features that reveal aboutness in their contexts—combining corpus-driven analysis with discourse analysis—helped to reveal writing center talk’s unique contributions to the process of improving writers and their writing.

An Overview of *Aboutness*

In the seven chapters to come, I situate this study in the context of research that has come before, explain the study’s methods, and relate the findings on the aboutness-revealing words and lexical bundles and on the ways that tutors and student writers used them in context.

In chapter 2, I review relevant corpus analyses, especially studies focusing on spoken instructional discourse. In chapter 3, I relate my procedure for data analysis and discuss the need for a controlled data collection to house the shared video and audio recordings of writing center researchers.

As noted above, in chapter 4, I begin my analysis with basic measures of the writing center corpus: word counts, word frequencies, and type/token

ratios. With word counts, I show tutors' and student writers' relative contributions to their conferences, a measure in prior research used to evaluate student writer participation and tutor dominance (for example, Thonus 2002). I also determined word frequencies, comparing tutors' and student writers' most frequent words against each other's and against the reference corpora's most frequent words. Finally, I determined type/token ratios to understand the lexical variation of tutors' and student writers' talk. Lexical variation provides a general sense of lexical difficulty.

One of the best ways to understand the aboutness of a corpus in order to unmask what makes it unique is to compare it to a reference corpus (or corpora) to identify words that occur with statistical significance more or less frequently in comparison to other spoken or written texts. In chapters 5 and 6, I look at tutors' and student writers' most key function and content words. Chapter 5 focuses on key function words, while chapter 6 discusses content words. In chapter 6, I especially focus on writing-related key words such as "paper" and "thesis," and I analyze the words that collocated with these writing-related key words. I see chapters 5 and 6 as the core of the book, as key words so strongly reveal the differentiating qualities of a given corpus.

My analysis in chapter 7 is also critical to this examination of aboutness in writing center talk. In this chapter, I identify frequently occurring lexical bundles such as "I don't know" and "does that make sense?" in tutors' and student writers' talk, and I analyze the ways in which tutors and student writers used these bundles in context.

In chapter 8, I return to the two main goals for *Aboutness*: (1) examining the aboutness of writing center talk and (2) showing how a mixed-methods approach produces a rigorous and robust analysis of spoken discourse. I synthesize the findings to delineate the characteristics of the writing center talk in the study corpus. After, I discuss other results that reveal the benefits of combining corpus analysis with discourse analysis, and I discuss the limitations of this study and my plans for further research.

As I noted in my estimate at the beginning of this introduction, writing centers produce a vast amount of talk about writing—at least 570 years' worth—each academic year. In *Aboutness*, I discuss how I used an approach different from the methods of most writing center studies to examine writing center talk. A mixed-methods approach, I argue, can help writing center specialists better understand all that talk. Adding corpus-driven analysis to discourse analysis reveals the characteristics that make writing center talk unique—those characteristics that comprise its aboutness.