



## Crossed Words: Criticism in Scholarly Writing

**Françoise Salager-Meyer, Beverly A. Lewin (eds).**

Bern: Peter Lang, 2011. 371 pages. ISBN: 978-3-0343-0049-0.

One outstanding feature of the book under review that most immediately captures our attention is its paradoxical title, all-embracing and yet concise. The metaphor “Crossed Words” not only evokes the coexistence of conflict and consensus inherent in academic criticism, but also the polyphony it entails, both reflected in the volume structure. In effect, all throughout we are presented with issues regarding the interplay of positive and negative evaluation – known as the “praise/blame” tandem – which reveals the critics’ strategies to accomplish positioning and proximity (Hyland, 2010); that is, to express stance and authority while simultaneously following conventions. Such interplay is voiced across communities and shaped by cultures, disciplines, genres, and time.

In this respect and at a first glance, the table of contents devised by SALAGER-MEYER and LEWIN does not seem to differ much from the one in Hyland and Diani’s (2009) *Academic Evaluation*, also revolving around cultural, disciplinary, and diachronic variation and providing an overview of critical genres within the academic realm. Comparisons, I must note, need not be odious in the appraisal of new scholarly work: quite the contrary, they turn especially fruitful when the object of contrast, as is the case of *Crossed Words*, results as well from a coherent assemblage and careful thought. Its content headings agglutinate chapters that go a step beyond by expanding research horizons and offering alternative perspectives on review genres. As editors, SALAGER-MEYER and LEWIN take positions (this is, to my eyes, the major strength of the book) and focus their lens on “academic conflict” (that is, on negative evaluation or “blame”) and “procedural concerns”, two strands that pervade the intercultural, cross-disciplinary, generic and diachronic division and become an additional source of compactness involving the contributions compiled in a dialogue between sections – incidentally one more connotation of the “crossed words” metaphor in the title.

Tracing the thread of the procedural concern, we confront two questions implicitly posed by the editors: How can researchers approach review genres? Under what roles and with what tactics may critics convey opinion? The first one is directly answered by an opening block entitled “Methods of analysis”. In it, NAVARRO’s chapter, the only one in the section, gathers a wide variety of quantitative and contrastive angles based on Pragmatics, (Meta-) Discourse Analysis, Genre Theory, and Corpus and Systemic Functional Linguistics. While the rest of authors will indeed partake of this methodological plurality, we readers, however, are in the end left craving for more guidelines and missing at least a couple of extra contributions that dealt, for example, with the synergy of quantitative and qualitative approaches, or suggested less trodden paradigms such as Critical Discourse Analysis, Narratology, and Cognitive Linguistics (let us remember Low’s (2008) paper on metaphor repertoires in book reviews) to complete the picture.

Answers to the second question appear interspersed across sections and are mostly applied to the management of conflict. Integrated in a six-chapter description of genre research, BABAI’S and GIANNONI’S studies tackle the role of prosecutor and examine, respectively, the use of mockery and sarcasm as in-group boundaries in its gate-keeping function, and subjective imprints, bluntness and deliberate impoliteness in a supposedly self-detached hard science context. In this line, MIRHOSSEINI explores several concrete causes of conflict scrutinizing the successive review rounds of an unsuccessful applied linguistics paper. He brings to light a series of inconsistencies and contradictions leading to bias and emanating from clashes of preferences and orientations, as well as from the intended blindness of the review process itself. A mitigated version of this prosecuting role is addressed by KOUTSANTONI, who delves into the impact of attribution, hedging, and complimenting in rejected peer-reviewed grant proposal submissions. Likewise, LEWIN and PERPIGNAN discover to us that the scarce negative evaluation found in literary reviews is accounted for by their abundant recourse to balanced comments, shared responsibilities and the excusing of “mistaken” fellow critics, and thus alongside we learn how conflict may be affected by the specific stages and strategies dictated by certain disciplines. Closing the section and probing further into disciplinary influences, SALAGER-MEYER and ALCARAZ-ARIZA analyse a diversity of medical genres and refine the inventory of critics’ roles with their depiction of knowledge-holders, knowledge-builders and factual reporters, more or

less predominant depending on the genre and establishing a continuum of stances.

The three remaining parts (each with two chapters) equally nurture this dialogic multi-parallelism that helps us gain a better understanding of the critical act, formerly defined in the first chapter as a “pragmatic unit”. In the intercultural/cross-linguistic section and relating to the study of KOUTSANTONI and to that of LEWIN and PERPIGNAN, GOLEBIEWSKI looks at concession as mitigating device inside an Anglophone discourse community formed by native speakers of English and Polish. Next, MORENO FERNÁNDEZ and SUÁREZ resume the subjectivity/anonymity topic initiated by GIANNONI, BABAI and by KOUTSANTONI to show the inclinations of the Anglophone and Castilian Spanish cultures towards visibility and self-effacement, uncovering their face-saving or face-threatening effects.

Other instances of authorial visibility are stressed in the cross-disciplinary section. DAHL and FLØTTUM conclude there that in Economics and Linguistics introductions new claims tend to be persuasively posited as “difference” with preceding research to foreground the writer’s achievement rather than signal flaws in other colleagues’ work, which is sometimes rejected downright, mainly in Linguistics. In close connection with this chapter, PHO, MUSGRAVE and BRADSHAW compare how research niches are carved out in Applied Linguistics and Educational Technology: the former relies on existing research whereas the latter, a discipline established more recently, spotlights originality and innovation.

This complex network of notions, aspects and procedures is rounded off diachronically. PETRIĆ tracks the evolution of Serbian scholarly book reviews from 1900 to 2009 and detects a decreasing trend in the proportion, frequency and directness of conflict over time. Lastly, FONG-WA HA observes the patterns of musical critiques in record reviews from a leading journal in the UK, and reports on a decline in informative quality and a growth of evaluation and specificity in four decade-samples between 1921 and 1995. “Blame” is therein less frequent than praise and, unlike it, often mitigated.

SALAGER-MEYER and LEWIN’s co-edited work meets its objectives perfectly. Starting out from a classical view grounded in variation factors and Corpus Linguistics as common denominator, it adopts a critical standpoint on criticism by directing our gaze to academic disagreement and operational facets, and judges the editors’ own job, explained in the introduction.

Moreover, it informs of some genres still virtually untapped for scholars investigating academic criticism (medical editorials, review articles, case reports and letters to the editor in clinical journals, reviews of musical records, literary critiques and grant proposals), incorporates an inspiring methodological dimension that fuses Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, Ethnography and Systemic Functional Linguistics, and opens a window on Critical Discourse Analysis with MIRHOSSEINI's vindication of a "sighted" peer review or KOUTSANTONI's emphasis on the asymmetrical power relations between grant applicants and their assessors. It additionally broadens the current cultural scope with data from Anglophone, Spanish, Polish and Serbian populations and the catalogue of research fields (Physics, Medicine, Literature, Applied Linguistics, Economics, Sociology, Music and Educational Technology), and finally provokes a fresh reading of its chapters by cross-weaving a rich fabric of discursive, pragmatic and vindicating relationships. For these reasons I wholeheartedly recommend *Crossed Words: Criticism in Scholarly Writing* to any member of the academic community (students, researchers, ESP and EAP practitioners, scientists and technology professionals alike) interested in the inner workings of critical scholarly writing.

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