

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - You Think, I Know: Argumentation In Self-help Counseling



## 1. Introduction

As a hortatory genre, self-help counseling books aim at influencing readers' conduct. Regarding their obligatory semantic structure (Halliday & Hasan 1989), these texts are characterized by four main components:

- a. establishment of the authority/credibility of the author,
- b. presentation of a problem/situation,
- c. issuing of one or more commands,
- d. resort to motivation (Meurer 1998).

In this paper I explore the role of evaluative strategies typically occurring within two of these semantic components of the hortatory schema: motivation for readers to accept authors' arguments and establishment of authors' credentials.

I focus on the notion of *status evaluation* (Hunston 1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994), applying it to the analysis of a typical sample of self-help books, namely, *Calm Down: How to Cope With Frustration and Anger*, (by Paul Hauck, an American clinical psychologist. Sheldon Press, London, 1974, 8th impression, 1993). The analysis investigates how this author uses explicit and implicit evaluative strategies in order to

- a. strengthen his Proposed Claims and thus motivate readers to adopt them,
- b. establish and maintain his credentials as a counseling persona.

What follows is subdivided into four sections: section 2 discusses the notion of evaluation; section 3 investigates the role of evaluation as a form of reader motivation in the conflict between Hauck and characters presented in case histories reported in the book; section 4 investigates aspects of evaluation and its relation to authors' credentials; and section 5 presents the concluding remarks.

## 2. Evaluation

The term evaluation has been adopted in a number of strands of discourse analysis to encapsulate the general notion that, in addition to information, every utterance carries a certain 'orientation towards or an opinion about that

information' (Hunston 1993a: 98). Ten years ago, as also observed by Hunston, Stubbs (1986) urged linguists to provide - 'in a matter of prolonged field work' - for a description of language use that would 'take into account the attitude or evaluation that is encoded in every utterance' (Hunston 1993a: 98). Hunston (1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1994) has proposed a model of analysis where evaluation is 'operated along three different parameters': *status* or degree of certainty (certain-uncertain), *value* (good-bad), and *relevance* (important-unimportant). For the purposes of this paper, I will explore the notion of status evaluation only.

*Status evaluation* has to do with how certain or uncertain the author believes a given proposition in her/his text is regarding the type of information or knowledge represented by that proposition. Hunston (1993c: 120) defines status evaluation this way: 'The status assigned to a proposition indicates where it is located in terms of the process of knowledge construction, for example, whether it is an observation, an experimental result, an interpretation or a conclusion.' To grant higher status to a proposition is to evaluate a claim as superior to another claim based on its higher degree of certainty as a piece of information or a particular instance of knowledge. Within the perspective of status evaluation, a lexical item such as *fact*, for instance, is considered as conveying a higher degree of certainty and thus having a higher status if compared to *opinion*, for example. Lexical items such as *finding* and *result*, to further illustrate the point, have a higher status as compared to *interpretation* and belief. Thus, if a writer refers to a given state of affairs as being a fact and to another as being an opinion, belief or *assumption*, the state of affairs referred to as a *fact* is being "pushed up" (Hunston) the status scale, that is, the author implicitly evaluates that piece of information as representing a higher degree of certainty and, therefore, higher status.

Status evaluation is built into each one of the clauses of every text. Every proposition contains, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, some attitude in relation to the certainty of what is being conveyed. Therefore, 'status is attached to each clause - each clause must have one status or another, so that the whole text is evaluative in this sense' (Hunston 1994: 195), If one says, for example, 'it is raining', or 'it may be raining', or 'it will certainly rain', or 'they say it is raining', each one of these statements stands at a different level in the status evaluation scale because each one implies a different degree of certainty and commitment in relation to the truth of the proposition expressed. **[i]**

In written texts, the status of a proposition is conveyed by means of four different but connected meaning relations: the 'different activity' the writer is performing

(e.g., the writer states, interprets, reports), the connotations of the lexical item itself (such as fact and opinion previously mentioned), 'the ascribed source of the proposition' (i.e., the writer's own or somebody else's), and 'modifications such as modal verbs, report verbs and metalinguistic labeling' (Hunston 1994: 194-5). In this paper I concentrate on evaluation relatively to connotations of selected lexical items and the ascribed source of propositions.

### *3. Status evaluation: enhancing author's argument in self-help counseling*

In contrast to the language of written academic discourse, for example, where authors oppose the claims of other authors, in the language of self-help counseling, writers frequently oppose the assumptions held by characters in the case histories narrated in their texts and the assumptions of prospective readers of this kind of literature. As a result, frequently in self-help texts there is some conflict going on between views held by authors and the views supposedly entertained by case history characters and potential readers. In this section I examine status evaluation strategies used by the American clinical psychologist Dr. Paul Hauck as author of the specific self-help text already mentioned (*Calm Down: How to Cope With Frustration and Anger*). A self-help counseling book has been chosen because this genre constitutes a type of contemporary mass culture written discourse widely read by the general public but largely ignored in discourse analysis and argumentation.

My contention is that authors of this genre make use of status evaluation to argue for their claims and thus enhance their argument and advice as opposed to the claims they attribute to potential readers and characters in the case histories, which are utilized in the text for illustrative and community-building purposes (Meurer 1997; 1998). This strategic use of evaluation plays an important role in the motivation component of self-help counseling books.

I use Hunston's (1993c) terms *Opposed Claim* to indicate the claims attributed to, or assumed by the writer to be held by case history characters and potential readers, and *Proposed Claim* to refer to the claims of the author himself. I am specially interested in exploring how the author of *Calm Down* textualizes (Meurer & Motta-Roth 1997) the Proposed Claims so that they come out as having higher status than the conflicting Opposed Claims. This type of analysis may apply to argumentative texts in general.

The essence of Hauck's argument and the dispute with potential readers and case history characters in this specific self-help text - *Calm Down* - centers on the following sequence of situations and relations represented by A - B - C: it is not

some event (A) that causes anger (C), but it is one's beliefs, what one thinks or tells her/himself (B) about A that leads to the emotion of anger. According to this view, clients are urged to reject the idea that A causes C and to realize that what causes C is B, not A. The central thesis, therefore, is that one causes her/himself to be angry and not that anger is a direct consequence of a given event.

As is the case with all hortatory texts (Longacre 1992), the function of the motivation obligatory semantic component of Hauck's *Calm Down* is to encourage readers to restructure one or more of their beliefs, leading to some change in actual conduct. In the specific case of *Calm Down*, readers are urged to reconceptualizing B in such a way as to be able to avoid driving themselves into the 'emotional state' of anger.

A pervasive strategy used by Hauck to motivate readers to side with his views to coping with anger, is to grant higher status to Proposed Claims (i.e., his claims) and lower status to Opposed Claims (i.e., case study character's claims). To grant high status, as defined in section 2 above, means to evaluate a claim as conveying a high degree of certainty as a piece of information or a particular instance of knowledge. Let us take a stretch of text from *Calm Down* and look at it in its immediate co-text (S stands for sentence):

S1 - This is the tone our previous sessions had taken:

S2 - I trying to *show* her that she was getting herself angry over behavior her husband simply could not control and *she* always *arguing* with me that I just didn't understand her situation and that if I did I wouldn't talk like that.

S3 - *But it was she who was mistaken, not I.*

S4 - I had been through this debate with hundreds of people before, *I knew* almost word for word what their arguments would consist of, and *I also knew they thought* I was ridiculous for suggesting some of the views I did.

(*Calm Down*, p. 10. emphasis added)

The argumentation for the higher status of the author's perspective in this excerpt is revealed both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, the author states that the client is *mistaken* (S3), and he thus makes clear where he stands. The implicit argumentative strategies, on the other hand, are more numerous and not so obvious. Let us examine the second sentence of the quotation above. Through the choice of verbs the author implicitly portrays a slightly unbalanced situation: as a counselor, he reports that he tries to *show* something to be the case to a client (the protagonist in a previously narrated case history in the book), while the client is reported to *argue* that the counselor does not understand her problem. It is an

unbalanced situation in the sense that the counselor's and the client's verbal activities are given different weight: in a scale of status evaluation *show* is more positive than *argue*. An evidence for this is that while the author could say 'I was *arguing* that...', he would be unlikely to say that 'Mrs. Baker was trying to *show* me that...'

Different status is also implicit in the way the author uses different mental state verbs to report his verbal activity as opposed to the client's. Specifically, the author *argues* with the client not in terms of what he *thinks*, as the client does, but in terms of what he knows, on the basis of his experience with 'hundreds of people': 'I *knew* almost word for word what their arguments would consist of, and I also knew...' Two paragraphs later in *Calm Down* the author assigns further higher status to his side of the argument by stating that his perspective derives from institutionalized knowledge grounded on 'the latest psychological findings'. Being derived from experience and established knowledge, the author's claims stand for more than clients' opinions and feelings. Thus, on the one hand, opinions and feelings - the Opposed Claims - can be easily rejected. Rejecting the Proposed Claims, on the other hand, is tantamount not only to rejecting Hauck's statements but also to refuting the implied 'latest psychological findings'. As Hunston (1989: 36) puts it, by tying to a theory the knowledge s/he expresses, a writer creates a situation such that the rejection of the stated knowledge implies challenging the theory itself in which her/his thoughts are based.

Interestingly, Popper (1967) observes that English lacks a term to distinguish between *knowledge* as a *world 3* entity, knowledge that is available in texts and in libraries, as opposed to *knowledge* as a *world 2* entity, that is, knowledge as a state of mind. In spite of the unavailability of a specific term to distinguish these two types of knowledge, there is a general consensus that knowledge as a world 3 entity has greater impact and reliability, and hence higher status, than knowledge as a world 2 entity. We know, for example, that technology would not be possible without world 3 knowledge. (See for example Ong 1982). Of course, knowledge as a world 2 entity may eventually defy knowledge as a world 3 entity. But when this happens, and for it to have any significance, in general world 2 knowledge will already have been given a written representation, and will thus have been transformed into a world 3 entity as well. In fact, it is quite obvious that, in the modern world, authority - in the sense of being recognized as having something to offer in terms of knowledge in a given area - can hardly ever be constituted other than by the consumption and production of world 3 knowledge. All this is

supposed to further substantiate the argument that Hauck's claims as I have discussed so far are given higher status than the claims he attributes to his narrative character and readers for the simple reason that his knowledge is supposedly based on world 3 knowledge. This plays an important role in the reconceptualization the author tries to develop in *Calm Down*. This seems to apply to self-help authors in general.

Recalling Popper's (1967) notions of world 2 and world 3, we realize that the conflict between Hauck as the author of a self-help book and the client in the excerpt above is a conflict between world 2 and world 3 entities. World 2 in this situation is the clients' and readers' states of mind, their current understanding of the subject, what they *think* and feel about it. This is a process that exists only in so far as it goes on in someone's mind. It is thus an evanescent phenomenon. Hauck's viewpoint, on the other hand, is based on *knowledge* as a product, not a state, of the human mind: a world 3 reality. It is this knowledge that is associated with *know* and is thus seen as superior in terms of status because it does not exist simply as a process in the author's mind but is available in books and in libraries. It is a typical identifying attribute of world 3 entities. As such, it is permanent and can be used by whomever has access to it and is able to make sense of it. This feature therefore greatly enhances the motivation for readers to accept the author's Proposed Claims as opposed to the client's Opposed Claims.

#### *4. Creating and maintaining a persona*

The credentials backing statements, proposals, and teachings of authors of self-help books constitute another way of attributing status to these authors' Proposed Claims. As pointed out in section 1, the status of a proposition is revealed also by its ascribed source. This means that in general the proposition acquires a higher status when it is uttered by an expert rather than by a layperson. The status of a proposition in an academic text will be higher when its source are, for instance, *results* or *findings* (e.g. 'the *results* reveal that ...') as opposed to personal opinion (e.g.: 'I believe that ...').

In *Calm Down*, the credentials of its author spread throughout the text under different guises. His credentials as a professional are explicitly presented in the first page of the book in the form of an abridged résumé, as follows:

Calm down

Dr. PAUL HAUCK, PhD, is a full-time clinical psychologist in Rock Island, Illinois, USA. He is a fellow of the American Psychological Association, and has lectured widely on various aspects of psychology. He has written many articles for

professional journals, and is the author of the following books - *Calm Down, Jealousy, How to Stand up for Yourself, How to Do What You Want to Do, Why Be Afraid?, How to Love and Be Loved, Making Marriage Work, Depression, How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, and *Hold Your Head Up High* - all published by Sheldon Press.

However, as constructed throughout self-help texts, counseling personae come 'alive' in much more indirect ways than in this abridged résumé. Authors' credentials are to a greater or lesser extent encapsulated in a variety of textual strategies and, as such, they are part of the authors' implicit argument. An investigation of such strategies can also be carried out within the framework of *status evaluation*. In what follows I use this perspective, concentrating again on Hauck's *Calm Down*.

An initial evaluation strategy used by this specific author to present his credentials is *reference to experience* as a practicing therapist. For example, in the excerpt of *Calm Down* already quoted in the previous section, Hauck, reporting on a certain Mrs. Baker's arguments with him, affirms: 'But it was she who was mistaken, not I.' He then immediately provides the basis (Winter 1994) for this statement by saying:

I had been through this debate with *hundreds of people* before. *I knew* almost word for word what their arguments would consist of, and I also knew they thought I was ridiculous for suggesting some of the views I did.

(*Calm Down*, p. 10, emphasis added)

In this stretch of text, the author indirectly classifies his knowledge as being based on direct observation ('debate with hundreds of people'). Hauck's understanding of the problem is attributed higher status than is his patient's because experience constructs knowledge, and knowledge stands high in the hierarchy of certainty. Rhetorically, the mental process verbs (Halliday 1994) used here convey and reinforce the idea that the author knows (*I knew ...*, *I also knew ...*), while his (hundreds of) patients, like Mrs. Baker, think (*they thought ...*).

References to the author's own experience occur in several other places in the book, e.g.:

What happened to Mrs. Baker has happened to *hundreds of other clients* once they were shown how to think different (*Calm Down*, p. 21).

In this example, once again, experience ascribes higher status to the proposition

stated by the author as opposed to the activity the 'clients' are supposed to engage in. Based on his vast experience the author has *shown* the clients how to think differently, while clients just *think*, like Mrs. Bakers - mistakenly, not rarely. The high status of direct observation is perhaps most clear in scientific research. Hunston (1993a: 99) argues that in scientific research 'the status of utterances becomes less certain as researchers travel farther along the road from direct observation to theoretical conclusion'. Findings or results from direct observation, therefore, have a higher status than interpretations, discussions or conclusions based on the findings. This is so because direct observation somehow 'speaks for itself', and is thus supposed to be closer to 'reality' than an interpretation or a discussion of what has been observed.

A second strategy used by Hauck to establish his credentials as a counselor, and thus to give weight to his teachings, materializes through the use of narratives, which in his preface he refers to as 'case material'. This is a sort of expansion of the previous strategy. Out of the 37.000 words that make up Hauck's *Calm Down*. 11,189 occur in narrative stretches. These reported case histories are assumed to derive 'naturally' from the author's direct observation. They are supposed to be selected cases among the *hundreds of patients* that have consulted with the author. As such, narratives stand high in the status scale because they are assumed to represent a range of true facts known by the author. In so far as they offer the certainty associated with direct observation, they are undeniable. Experience of a large quantity of such case histories thus enhances the authority of the counselor. Altogether, the cases further substantiate the higher status of the meaning encapsulated in *knowing* than in *thinking*.

A third evaluation strategy used in the specification and maintenance of self-help authors' credentials is reference to institutionalized knowledge. In the specific case of *Calm Down*, the author refers to two important types of institutionalized knowledge: 'the latest psychological findings' and Dr Albert Ellis's 'rational-emotive therapy'. I will comment on these next. Reference to the *findings* - a nominalization of status - occurs four times (pp. 10, 21, 40, and 55) in the book. Below are three of these occurrences: (Notice that the author feels able to make definite statements about the future reactions of his readers):

Mrs. Baker was no different from you, the reader, will be as you discover some of *the latest psychological findings*. *These findings* are so unusual your first reaction to them will be denial. You will not be able to swallow all the *advice* I will give to help you overcome your hatred, resentment, or anger. Only after thinking about my advice for a long time will you be able to use my counseling and make the new



psychology work for you. Before that happens, however, you will simply go through the debating and questioning Mrs. Baker went through (p. 10. added emphasis).

In the following pages you will be informed of *the latest psychological findings* on the subjects of anger, resentment, fury, and hate, and how to control and rid yourself of all of them. Your life can change enormously by making you more easygoing, nicer to be with, and more patient, and you will be helped in your role as parent, spouse, or employee (p. 21)

*The latest psychological findings* are showing us that we become upset by thinking in upsetting ways, not by encountering frustrating situations. In other words, depressing thoughts bring on depressed feelings, scary thoughts make you feel afraid, and thinking angry and punishing thoughts brings on angry and vengeful feelings (p. 40).

Interestingly, the major points of the argument in *Calm Down* included under the high status super-ordinate *findings* make up the book's central theme. It is thus as if now and then the author reminded the readers that what he is teaching as a whole is part of such findings and, therefore, constitutes scientific knowledge.

Reference to Ellis occurs later in *Calm Down*, and Hauck acknowledges that he has drawn substantially on this author. The first time Hauck mentions Ellis (p. 54), he specifies that he as an *authority* in the field of therapeutic counseling. On page 95, Ellis is mentioned as 'the founder of rational-emotive therapy, whose philosophies underlie this book.' References to Ellis in the professional literature confirm that he is a recognized name in cognitive-behavior therapy, specifically associated with rational-emotive therapy. Thorpe and Olson (1990: 75), for example, state that Ellis is an 'important figure in cognitive-behavior therapy whose work on theory and techniques has enriched the field'. Ellis' main work is published in the book *Reason and emotion in therapy* (1962, New York: Lyle Stuart) which, according to Thorpe and Olson, 'has its roots in philosophy rather than in psychoanalysis' (p. 76). Quite clearly these general references are intended by Hauck to expose his community or institutionally-derived authority and thus to reassure the readers that his credentials grant him the right or classify him as able to give advice about the subject matter at hand. The strategic use of general, unspecific references to *hundreds of clients*, *latest psychological findings*, and *founder of rational-emotive therapy* in the textual environment where they occur adds a seemingly scientific tone to the text and by so doing gives the impression of added certainty about the conveyed information.

By drawing from supposedly recognized - though indefinite - sources of knowledge, the author pushes the status of his propositions up and gathers support for his argument. Based on such a persona he can encourage readers to take his 'advice seriously', similarly to Mrs. Baker, as reported in the very first sentence of the counseling text properly in *Calm Down*:

It was during the third session with Mrs. Baker that she finally took my advice seriously and decided I might have something worthwhile to offer her, though it sounded mad.

The status of the advice is therefore modified by the persona of the possessive. Lexical constructions such as *my advice* in the context of this example acquire higher status not because of their intrinsic meaning but because of the persona the writer develops and maintains throughout the text by means of rhetorical strategies such as the ones I have discussed. On the one hand, rhetorical strategies help create the persona. On the other hand, the persona guarantees that linguistic devices in the text will have a certain status and a certain meaning. This circularity is part of the nature of argumentation, of texts themselves and of the processes we use to make sense of them.

##### 5. Final remarks

One of the most important features of the ideational and interpersonal metafunctions of texts (Halliday 1994) is that through them authors explicitly and implicitly attempt to impose some classification upon given stretches of the world. Explicitly and implicitly, people evaluate the world around them and argue for specific ways of seeing 'reality'.

Using discourse analysis and drawing on philosophical principles, in this paper I looked into evaluation as an argumentative strategy used by the author of a typical exemplar of self-counseling books to motivate his readers to accept his argument. I gave emphasis to the notion of *status evaluation* in order to account for the contrast between the verbs *to think* (attributed to case study characters and prospective readers) and *to know* (attributed to the author). The analysis indicates that by using explicit and implicit evaluative strategies Hack positively evaluates and classifies his argument and advice as having higher status than the counter-arguments of characters portrayed in case histories and potential readers of such texts. This way the author implements one aspect of the motivation component of the self-help book as a hortatory genre, and encourages readers to adopt new forms of conceptualizations and conduct. In addition, the analysis demonstrates that besides favoring his own claims and thus his side of the

argument, the self-help writer studied in this paper makes use of evaluative strategies to establish his credentials as a counseling persona. These credentials in turn also contribute to the high status of the author's propositions and to the argumentative character of the self-help genre, the ultimate aim of which is to influence readers' conduct.

In spite of their popularity, self-help counseling texts have not been extensively analyzed either as text or as discourse and a form of contemporary social practice (see Meurer 1998). Though limited to the study of only one self-help manual, it seems that the findings reported in the present paper also apply to self-help counseling books in general. This, however, needs to be further investigated. The analysis of strategies such as the ones discussed in this paper is important for our understanding of how hortatory genres work as text and discourse. All together this is part of our better understanding of human interaction and reflexivity (Giddens 1991) in contemporary society and of human beings' socio-psychological needs.

## NOTES

i. The analysis of propositions like these ones can also be carried out in terms of the notion of modality, i.e., 'the speaker's judgement of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he is saying' (Halliday 1994: 75). As Halliday explains, a proposition 'may become arguable by being presented as likely or unlikely, desirable or undesirable - in other words, its relevance specified in modal terms' (ibid.). Looking at speakers' judgements as different types of evaluation as proposed by Hunston, however, seems to be more enlightening for the type of analysis carried out in this paper. Notice that Hunston does use the notion of modality, but as one of the devices realizing status evaluation. One reason to use Hunston's approach, then, is that it is more encompassing than the Hallidayan concept of modality.

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