

# Positioning constructed through employing engagement resources in examiners' comments on applied linguistics theses

Zahra Alimorad \* & Mitra Behrouzi 

Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

**Abstract:** The present study investigated the way positioning is constructed through utilizing engagement resources by male and female examiners in their comments on applied linguistics theses. To this aim, nine examiners' written comments were collected through a convenience sampling procedure and semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit their perceptions of their own positions and those of the students. Drawing on the ENGAGEMENT of the system of APPRAISAL, the researchers coded all comments and calculated frequencies and percentages of different categories. To compare the two genders, a chi-square test was run after normalizing the data. Findings indicated that heteroglossic resources were utilized almost three times more than the monoglossic ones and expand resources outnumbered contract. Furthermore, female examiners tended to use all resources except for proclaim and attribute more than their male counterparts but the difference in terms of heteroglossic, expand, and entertain resources seemed to be more substantial. Analysis of the interviews revealed the positions reflected in the comments were in accordance with the examiners' view of themselves and the students as expressed in their interviews. Overall, examiners positioned themselves as kind and supportive teachers and the students as novice researchers/learners.

**Keywords:** *engagement resources, evaluative language, examiners, gender, positioning.*

## Posicionamiento construido mediante el empleo de recursos de participación en los comentarios de los examinadores sobre tesis de lingüística aplicada

**Resumen:** La presente investigación investigó cómo se construye el posicionamiento mediante el uso de recursos de participación por parte de examinadores masculinos y femeninos en sus comentarios sobre tesis de lingüística aplicada. Con este fin, se recopiló los comentarios escritos de nueve examinadores a través de un procedimiento de muestreo por conveniencia y se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas para obtener sus percepciones sobre sus propias posiciones y las de los estudiantes. Basándose en el compromiso del sistema de evaluación, los investigadores codificaron todos los comentarios y calcularon frecuencias y porcentajes de diferentes categorías. Para comparar los dos géneros, se realizó una prueba de chi-cuadrado después de normalizar los datos. Los hallazgos indicaron que se utilizaron recursos heteroglósicos casi tres veces más que los monoglósicos y que los recursos de expansión superaron a los de contrato. Además, las examinadoras tendieron a utilizar todos los recursos excepto proclamar y atribuir más que sus contrapartes masculinos, pero la diferencia en términos de recursos heteroglósicos, de expansión y de entretenimiento parecía ser más sustancial. El análisis de las entrevistas reveló que las posiciones reflejadas en los comentarios estaban de acuerdo con la visión de los examinadores sobre sí mismos y los estudiantes expresada en sus entrevistas. En general, los examinadores se posicionaron como profesores amables y de apoyo y a los estudiantes como investigadores/aprendices novatos.

**Palabras clave:** *recursos de participación, lenguaje evaluativo, examinadores, género, posicionamiento.*

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\*Corresponding author: [zahra.alimorad@shirazu.ac.ir](mailto:zahra.alimorad@shirazu.ac.ir)

## 1. Introduction

Despite the adversities students may face while accomplishing a thesis, it has a number of benefits, including having the opportunity to discern one's potentiality in doing research and learning from an experienced researcher's detailed advice, which makes this "long and (virtually endless) journey" (Bui, 2014, p. 4) worth the effort. One of the hardships that learners experience in the process of writing a thesis is the examination process. That is why examiners' comments in their written reports and viva discussions have sparked research interest from multiple perspectives such as the criteria they use (Holbrook et al., 2004a; 2004b; Johnston, 1997), the extent to which examiners of Ph.D. and M.A. theses see the importance of criteria differently (Bourke & Holbrook, 2013), the form their comments take (Holbrook et al., 2004a; 2004b), and the difference of the comments on high- and low-quality theses (Holbrook et al., 2004b). Still, some other studies centered on face-saving acts and the use of lexical hedges in dissertation defenses (DDs) (Don & Izadi, 2011; Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2018), the use of pragmatic force modifiers in DDs (Lin, 2017; 2020), and modality in DDs (Recski, 2005) as well as in examiners' reports (Starfield et al., 2015).

Another strand of research focused on viva participants' use of engagement resources and their positioning of themselves and others (Lau et al., 2020; Starfield et al., 2015). ENGAGEMENT is one of the three subsystems of APPRAISAL (Martin & White, 2005) which was developed under the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) put forth by Halliday (1994). SFL is a multi-perspectival model that offers complementary lenses for exploring meaning in language relating language use to its social context (Martin & White, 2005). At the most basic level, Halliday elaborated on the way language simultaneously achieves three functions in constructing meaning; the ideational metafunction constructs ideas and experiences, the interpersonal enacts social roles and power dynamics, and the textual manages the flow of information to make extended discourse coherent and cohesive. The second level, realization, considers language as "a stratified semiotic system involving three cycles of coding at different levels of abstraction" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 8). As displayed in Figure 1, these coding cycles include phonology and graphology, grammar and lexis, and discourse semantics. Given that APPRAISAL is placed in the third cycle, discourse semantics, which deals with meaning beyond the clause, this cycle was the main concern in the current study.

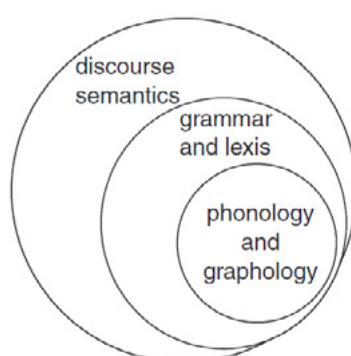


Figure 1. Language strata (Martin & White, 2005, p. 8).

At the discourse semantics level, APPRAISAL, along with two other systems - NEGOTIATION and INVOLVEMENT – co-articulate interpersonal meaning. In this regard, NEGOTIATION focuses on “the interactive aspects of discourse, speech function and exchange structure” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 33), and INVOLVEMENT focuses on “non-gradable resources for negotiating tenor relations, especially solidarity” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 33) to complement APPRAISAL. APPRAISAL itself comprises three subsystems: ATTITUDE, ENGAGEMENT, and GRADUATION.

ATTITUDE is concerned with our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgments of behavior and evaluation of things. ENGAGEMENT deals with sourcing attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse. GRADUATION attends to grading phenomena whereby feelings are amplified and categories blurred. (Martin & White, 2005, p. 35)

Lau et al. (2020, p. 5) postulate that, in the context of evaluation, “each participant must acknowledge the ideas of the others in a role-dependent way, and *Engagement* can be used to classify particular acknowledgement methods” (Italics in original). However, despite the importance of examining engagement, little attempt has been made to explore it in “academic English genres” including written reports of examiners “so that speakers may learn to better exploit the power of evaluative language” (Lau et al., 2020, p. 19). This is what Starfield et al. (2015, p. 15) have also called attention to, “the need for examiners to reflect more critically on their choices in evaluative language when writing reports”. Despite such recommendations, scrutinizing the language of examiners’ written comments using the ENGAGEMENT system has remained almost untouched. Furthermore, given that literature indicates “positioning interacts with various social markers, with gender being the most common” (Kayi-Aydar & Miller, 2018, p. 4), the possible influence of examiners’ gender on their use of ENGAGEMENT resources warrants more investigation. Hence, to fill these gaps, this study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What positions does the frequency of different ENGAGEMENT resources in the examiners’ comments on M.A. theses construe?
2. How do male and female examiners employ ENGAGEMENT resources while evaluating M.A. theses?
3. Are the examiners and the students’ positions reflected in the comments in accordance with the examiners’ view of themselves and the students as expressed in their interviews?

## 2. Background to the Study

About two decades ago, Lovat (2004) studied examiners’ reports in terms of Habermas’s ‘ways of knowing’ and found that almost all reports reflected the examiners’ empirical/analytical frame of mind because they perceived themselves as experts. In the same year, Lovat et al. extended Lovat’s study and showed that the most frequent way of knowing observed in the examiners’ reference to both the candidates and the supervisors was empirical/analytical knowledge. Likewise, the dominant type of positioning was the

examiners' positioning themselves as experts even in the theses rated as 'top box'. They attributed this to the unbalanced power relationship between examiners and candidates in evaluative contexts. In this study, not even one examiner mentioned the candidate as a 'researcher'. Instead, they used their names or labeled them as 'author', 'candidate', 'applicant' and "ensured the candidate could not begin to assume the role of researcher, which might imply some measure of equal status with the examiner" (p. 174).

Starfield et al. (2015) discovered a language mismatch in the examiners' comments; that is, while based on the examination criteria, just appreciation resources were expected to be seen, the examiners had used appreciation, affect and judgment resources. This study suggested that examiners sometimes align themselves with candidates and sometimes distance themselves from them in their comments. In another study in 2017, Starfield et al. analyzed the discourse of evaluation and instruction of the written reports on Ph.D. theses. Drawing on SFL, they identified up to 10 roles including examiner, institution, expert, editor, supervisor, peer, evaluator, reporter, commentator and viva examiner.

Besides examining positioning in general, some other researchers ventured into uncovering the relationship between examiners' gender and their language choices more specifically. In this vein, Lovat and Monfries (as cited in Monfries & Lovat, 2006) concluded that female examiners tended to protect the candidates' ego and accordingly, use a much softer language than males did. They also explained that although both male and female examiners were positioned as expert in asymmetrical dialogs with students, female examiners were less inclined to use language in ways "that are designed to increase their personal power base" (Monfries & Lovat, 2006, p. 3).

In 2006, Monfries and Lovat examined 62 examination reports on 31 high- and low-quality Ph.D. dissertations using Habermas's tripartite forms of knowledge. After analyzing the discourse of the examiners' reports, they observed differences in the balance of expression between male and female examiners. In case of low-quality dissertations, more comments were provided by both genders, but males tended to be more "objective and succinct in their criticism" whereas females attempted to soften the criticisms by "balancing negative comments with positive" ones and offering suggestions and assistance (p. 5). On the other hand, in their reports on high-quality dissertations, males were egocentric and felt like they had to criticize the dissertations and were inclined to provide understated praise. Females were, on the other hand, more self-reflective while commenting on high-quality dissertations and tended to use emotive superlatives. The researchers concluded that females are "less authoritative and less confident in the way they express their evaluations irrespective of the quality of the thesis" and "male examiners express their view with unequivocal confidence" (p. 6).

All in all, reviewing previous research suggests that the evaluators' language can be either motivating and encouraging and inspire the examinees to make more effort in their learning path or demotivating and discouraging and prevent them from learning and making progress (Bastola & Hu, 2021). Nevertheless, although a surging number of scholars have devoted their attention to examiners and supervisors' language, most of

these studies (Don & Izadi, 2011; Lau et al. 2020; Lin, 2017, 2020; Lin & Lau, 2021; Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2018; Recski, 2005) have focused on oral evaluative language of examiners, i.e., during dissertation defense sessions, while their written comments have largely been overlooked. Therefore, to bridge this gap, in this study, the researchers attempted to analyze the examiners' written comments on M.A. theses employing the system of APPRAISAL while keeping an eye on the possible effect of gender on their evaluative language.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Context of the Study

This study was carried out at Iranian public universities where M.A. students have to do research and write its report in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree. At least, two university instructors guide and support the student during this process: a supervisor and an advisor. After the thesis has been completed, another instructor, most likely from the same department/university, reviews the manuscript as the examiner. Examiners are supposed to provide the research team with their written comments on the draft itself. They also elaborate on the comments orally during the defense session in which the student is expected to first, orally present the report of their study and then, be ready to respond to the examiner's comments and concerns.

#### 3.2 Data Collection Procedures

To collect the necessary data, first, the researchers contacted some university instructors who had been examiners and also some graduate students who had already defended their theses and solicited their cooperation. After obtaining their approval, they explained the general objectives of the study to them while trying to reassure them that everything would strictly be kept anonymous and confidential throughout the study as well as in its written report. To mitigate any possible social desirability bias, no information regarding the specific objectives of the study was disclosed to the examiners. After receiving 9 theses (i.e., for each examiner, there was one thesis commented by them), the researchers extracted the comments for further analysis and interpretation. Having analyzed the comments, they contacted the examiners and asked them to arrange a time for an interview. The participants were interviewed only once and one by one. During the interviews, some excerpts from their comments along with their interpretation and analysis were given to them and their ideas regarding those interpretations were sought.

#### 3.3 Corpus

The comments made by nine examiners from three different public universities in Iran on applied linguistics students' theses served as the corpus in this study (Table 1). Given that the focus was on applied linguistics theses which are written in English, the language of all comments was English, too. These theses were chosen based on a convenience sampling procedure in that availability and willingness of the examiners and students to cooperate with the researchers determined whose theses to be examined.

**Table 1.** Number of comments and words.

Examiners	Comments	Words
E 1	30	321
E 2	28	1109
E 3	30	644
E 4	12	304
E 5	77	1524
E 6	25	312
E 7	50	741
E 8	163	1000
E 9	40	459

### 3.4 Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used to uncover any possible accordance/discordance between the examiners' perceptions and the meanings they had conveyed through their comments. Because the interviewees were applied linguistics university instructors who were fluent English speakers, all interviews were conducted in English. Some of the interview questions were metalinguistic commentaries through which the examiners were asked about their intention behind making specific comments and the meaning they aimed to convey. The second researcher conducted the interviews under the supervision of the first one who was her supervisor. Each interview lasted about 20 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the examiners' consent and then transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

### 3.5 Participants

The nine university instructors whose comments were analyzed were asked to partake in the interview phase of the study in order to cross-examine the data collected. Eight of them accepted to take part in this phase whose demographic information is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The Participants' Demographic Information.

Examiners	Gender	Rank	Age	Years of experience
E 1	Male	Professor	46	12
E 2	Male	Professor	55	25
E 3	Male	Associate Professor	55	8
E 4	Male	Professor	63	14
E 5	Male	Assistant Professor	38	6
E 6	Female	Assistant Professor	46	15
E 7	Female	Associate Professor	57	8
E 8	Female	Associate Professor	45	8
E 9*	Female	Associate Professor	53	20

\*E9 did not attend the interview.

### 3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

This study enjoyed a mixed-methods conversion design as the qualitative data collected needed to be “quantitized by counting the number of times a particular” engagement resource/code was used to answer the first two research questions (Ary et al., 2019, p. 523). The coding of ENGAGEMENT resources was performed by the second researcher using the manual annotation of UAM Corpus Tool 3 considering the context-baseness of the comments. To ensure the reliability of the coding, after a period of 40 days, she coded the whole data set an additional time. Moreover, a part of the corpus was coded by a Ph.D. candidate who knew the framework well. While the index for the former was 98.6, that of the latter was 88.84, which were satisfactory for the purpose of the current study. UAM calculated the frequency and percentage of every single category and subcategory for the reports of all the examiners using its statistics part. Then, following the suggestions offered in a number of previous studies (Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Biber et al., 2011; Gablasova et al., 2017), the frequency of each category and subcategory was normalized to a per 10000 words of text due to the unequal size of the sub-corpora (the number of words used by each examiner in their comments). After normalizing the data, a chi-square test for independence was run to check whether there existed any statistical difference between male and female instructors' evaluative language.

To answer the third research question, the researchers listened to the interviews several times to familiarize themselves with the data. Then, having transcribed the data, they extracted recurrent themes during repeated conferences with each other by identifying a number of possible codes indicating the positions the examiners had defined for themselves as well as the students. These codes were then compared with the results of the first research question to check whether they were in agreement or not. The researchers shared the interview codes and their interpretations with the examiners to identify and clear up any possible miscommunication and misinterpretation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 The Positions Construed by Differential Use of ENGAGEMENT Resources

As displayed in Figure 2 below, results suggested that, overall, heteroglossic utterances (n=489, 73.97%) were used almost three times more than monoglossic ones (n=172, 26.02%) in the first dataset (i.e., examiners' comments). Likewise, regarding heteroglossic categories, expand (n=352, 71.98%) was used much more than contract (n=137, 28.01%) and with respect to expand and contract subcategories, the most frequent ENGAGEMENT resource was entertain (n=351, 71.77%) followed by disclaim (n=118, 24.13%), proclaim (n=19, 3.88%), and attribute (n=1, 0.20%) resources, respectively. To clarify the point, a few illustrative examples are given:

- Extract 1: For the first time, give the full names (imperative verb, monoglossic). (E1)
- Extract 2: This is stated in very general terms (bare assertion, monoglossic). (E3)

Monoglossic utterances are 'single voiced' and there is no sign of overtly referencing to other voices or consideration of alternative positions in them (Martin & White, 2005). In a similar vein, in neither of the extracts above, the examiners refer to other viewpoints, thereby leaving no room for the student's disagreement about the idea. However, in dialogically contractive utterances, the examiners take the student's viewpoint in consideration as a possible alternative and challenge or reject it as is the case with the following comment.

- Extract 3: In reality (pronounce), the texts we encounter in our daily lives are short. We normally (concur) do not (deny) read long texts unless (deny) there is a reason. (E2)

In Extract 3, E2 applies pronounce (In reality), concur (normally) and deny (do not and unless) resources to close down the space for the student's alternative view. First, he shows the warrantability of his view using "In reality" and then, aligns the student with himself using "normally" and finally, rejects the alternative viewpoint employing deny resources "do not" and "unless" and contracts the discourse. This utterance is contractive because while the student's viewpoint has been recognized, it is held not to apply.

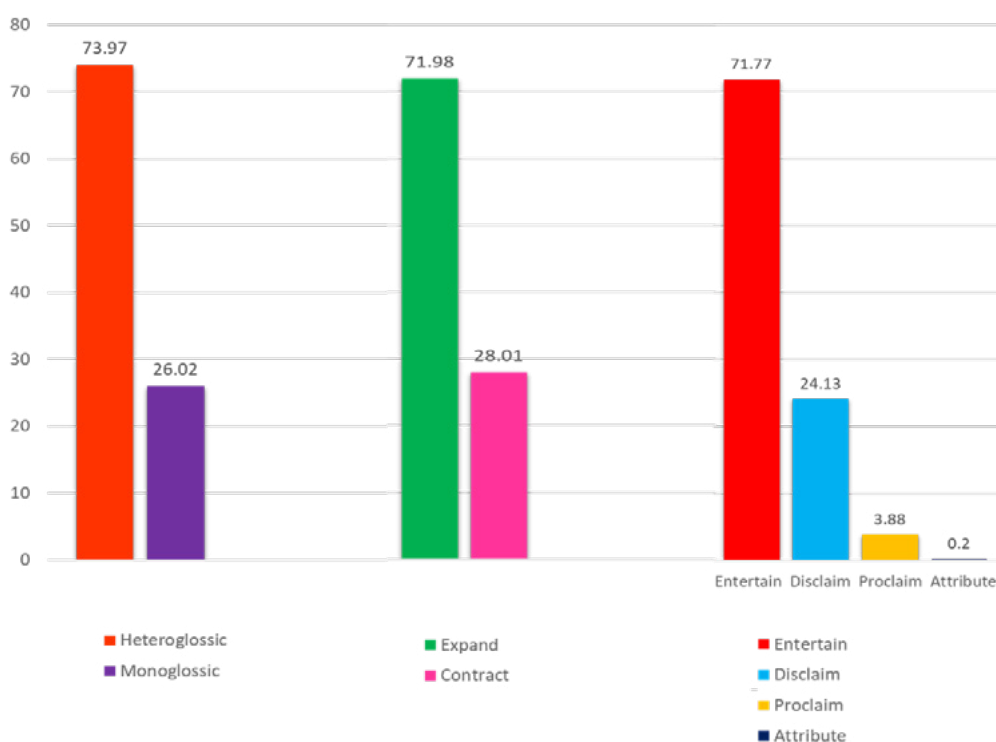


Figure 2. Patterns of the Use of ENGAGEMENT Resources at Each Level.

Dialogically expansive utterances, on the other hand, open up the space for dialogic alternatives. Unlike Extract 3, in the following extract which is an example of an expansive utterance, the student is allowed to have their own view and choice by E8 as she has lowered the interpersonal cost using the entertain resources "I think" and "you should have".

- Extract 4: I think (entertain) at the beginning of each chapter, you should have (entertain) an introductory paragraph in a separate section to introduce that chapter and its different parts. (E8)

In Extract 5, E5 entertains the student's alternative voice by asking an expository question and giving a suggestion started by "You could have". In the last two sentences, the examiner presents the student's viewpoint in order to counter that view using "only" and "merely". Although he counters the student's viewpoint, in fact, he considers alternative viewpoints by placing the modal "may" in the sentence to represent his proposition as one of a range of possible ones.

- Extract 5: How can you make sure that teachers' writing assessment practices conform to their real writing assessment practices?? (entertain) You could have (entertain) asked them to take a writing assessment test ... Your data here are only (counter) based on self-reports of teachers who have already negative attitudes ... Having merely (counter) knowledge may not (entertain) necessarily lead to knowledge in practice. (E5)

The least frequent engagement resource in the dataset was attribute (0.15%) resource with only one occurrence in the whole dataset as an acknowledge resource:

- Extract 6: ... So, can we rely on self-assessment and self-report of teachers who have already negative attitudes about scoring accuracy and assessment methods and also are inadequately familiar with technical writing assessment concepts?? Based on DelleBovi, 2012; Dempsey et al., 2009; Hout, 1996; Lam, 2019; Weigle, 2007 (acknowledge). (E5)

In the above extract, the examiner provides the student with some ideas and questions followed by a series of references. Citations are dialogically expansive in that "they associate the proposition being advanced with voices and/or positions which are external to that of the text itself and present the authorial voice as engaging interactively with those voices" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 112).

Overall, analysis of the comments indicates that the examiners primarily tended to recognize the students' voice by frequent use of heteroglossic, expansive and entertain resources. Nevertheless, despite considering alternative viewpoints, their sporadic use of monoglossic and contractive resources could construe the possible hierarchical power relationship between the examiners and the students which, in some situations, could limit the space for disagreement.

#### 4.2 ENGAGEMENT Resources Used by Male and Female Examiners

To uncover any possible differences between male and female examiners in terms of the engagement resources they had used, chi-square test was run three times for different levels of ENGAGEMENT: 1. monoglossic vs. heteroglossic, 2. contract vs. expand, and 3. proclaim, disclaim, entertain, and attribute resources. As mentioned earlier, prior to running the test, the data were normalized. Table 3 reports the results of chi-square tests at different levels.

**Table 3.** Chi-square Tests.

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-tailed)		Value	Approximate Significance
Continuity Correction (Monoglossic vs. Heteroglossic)	41.739	1	.000	Phi	.139	.000
Continuity Correction (Contract vs. Expand)	55.398	1	.000	Phi	.184	.000
Pearson Chi-Square (Proclaim & Disclaim vs. Entertain & Attribute)	105.882	3	.000	Cramer's V	.253	.000

As can be seen, the difference between female and male examiners' use of monoglossic and heteroglossic resources was statistically significant,  $X^2(1, n = 2202) = 41.73, p = .000$ . Female examiners tended to use more heteroglossic resources (68.7%) than male examiners (31.3%) did (Table 4 details these percentages at different levels). The phi coefficient value was .139 for this level which is considered a small effect size using Cohen's criteria (as cited in Pallant, 2016). It means that while the effect of gender on use of these resources is significant, this effect is small. In terms of contract and expand resources, overall, female examiners tended to use both expand (73.9%) and contract resources (54.5%) more than their male counterparts (26.1% and 45.6%, respectively) and this difference was statistically significant although the difference in terms of expand resources seems to be more substantial (73.9 vs. 26.1%),  $X^2(1, n = 1656) = 55.39, p = .000$ . The phi coefficient value was .184 which is considered a small effect size. Finally, with respect to contract and expand subcategories, the difference was significant,  $X^2(3, n = 1658) = 105.88, p = .000$ . Female examiners tended to use more entertain and disclaim resources (74% and 59.6%, respectively) than their male peers (26% and 40.4%, respectively) although the difference in terms of entertain resources is larger (74% vs. 26%).

**Table 4.** Crosstabulations.

Gender	Monoglossic	Heteroglossic	Contract	Expand	Proclaim	Disclaim	Entertain	Attribute
Male	46.6%	31.3%	45.6%	26.1%	84.6%	40.4%	26.0%	100.0%
Female	53.4%	68.7%	54.5%	73.9%	15.4%	59.6%	74.0%	0.0%

Taken together, these results suggest that there appears to be an association between the examiners' gender and their use of ENGAGEMENT resources in that female examiners seem to be more inclined to let students' voices be heard and recognized than their male counterparts. This might also be indicative of a more balanced power dynamic reflected in the way they utilized these linguistic resources while serving as M.A. thesis examiners.

### 4.3 Positions Expressed in the Interviews

The interviewees believed that an examiner's identity and duties have partially been determined by the institutional regulations. In light of such regulations, the main responsibility of an examiner is to evaluate the students' theses, which indicates that the university expects them to assume the position of an "evaluator". In this regard, E2 mentioned that a part of their responsibility is "officially defined" and E7 stated that it is expected of them to "see if it [thesis] meets the necessary qualifications". Nevertheless, E2 believed there exist "some professional responsibilities which are not officially defined". Therefore, examiners may also position themselves and their students differently based on the obligations, commitments and duties they perceive. Some of these positions are elaborated on in more detail in the following sections.

#### 4.3.1 Examiners as Supportive Teachers

Regarding the positions examiners hold, E2 opined that defense session "besides being evaluative, is also an instructional session" not only to the student who is defending their thesis but also as E7 remarked, "to other people, guiding other people, in fact, to do the job properly in the future". Further, E1 put that after evaluation, the main responsibility of an examiner "is to provide constructive feedback so that the student who has written the thesis can improve its quality", which indicates that the examiners position themselves as teachers not only in defense sessions but also in their written comments. A reasonable justification could be the fact that before being examiners, almost all of them are teachers, which is why they have the mindset of supportive teachers even when they function as examiners.

#### 4.3.2 Graduate Students as Novice Researchers

Despite being perceived as learners by the examiners, the students are expected to meet minimum requirements as they have passed some related prerequisite courses before engaging in their thesis study. The expectations are even higher of Ph.D. students given that they are considered to be more experienced in carrying out a research study since they have already conducted and reported at least their M.A. thesis study. In this regard, E8 explained that the language of her comments on M.A. theses might differ from that on Ph.D. dissertations,

- Extract 7: ... if it is an M.A. thesis, I will be more lenient and try to kindly guide the student because I do not expect M.A. students who are novice researchers to do an excellent job. But regarding Ph.D. dissertations, I am stricter because Ph.D. students are more experienced and I expect them to be more responsible and careful. (E8)

E8 positions M.A. students as "novice researchers" who have little or no experience of conducting research. Nevertheless, despite being novice, they are expected to have the basic knowledge of research. Ph.D. students, on the other hand, are envisaged to be more

experienced, which leads to higher expectations of them. Such a position results in less tolerance of their mistakes on the part of the examiners. Similarly, E1 referred to students as researchers,

- Extract 8: The main responsibility is to help the researcher improve the quality of the dissertation. So, this is done by critically reading the manuscript and providing relevant questions and comments with the purpose of improving the quality. (E1)

Positioning a student as a researcher might indicate a more equal power relationship, thereby making the student more accountable for what they have done and written.

### 4.3.3 Students as Accountable Addressees

Examiners believed that students themselves are fully responsible for what they have done and written:

- Extract 9: Basically, I consider the student as the addressee because I do believe that the main job is done by the student, i.e., the researcher is considered to be the student. Although there is a committee and there are some members who provide help to a student, I think the main job of the research is done by the student; so, I just when I'm just providing some comments or questions, I'm talking to the student not to the committee members. (E1)

Nevertheless, different types of errors might provoke various reactions from the examiners. For instance, while facing major problems or when a thesis is replete with errors, the examiner might delegate responsibilities to the supervisor too.

- Extract 10: sometimes if a thesis is replete with problems, I consider all committee members as well as the student accountable. I mean, when major issues are found in a thesis, I think maybe the supervisor has not guided the student sufficiently. In such situations, both the student and the committee members will be my addressee but of course, this is not something which is explicitly mentioned in my comments. This is what I have in my mind. (E8)
- Extract 11: Well, I explicitly address the student... there's also some hidden reference to the supervisor and the advisor when I am addressing the student ... that's why they sometimes interfere and well they try to justify the position of their student. (E2)

E2 further pointed out that this hidden reference is rooted in the difference of supervisory processes in Iran and other countries.

- Extract 12: [In other countries] The study is considered to be the original work of the student who visits his/her supervisor a number of times getting general and sometimes detailed support and suggestions and then, the student himself/herself is considered to be the major player in this project and he/she has to decide what to do and the supervisor provides overall judgement of that work. He/she does not find themselves responsible for correcting the language use and the like or

getting into the details of the methodology. They usually discuss the methodology, but how it should be written and how the text should be woven into something that is textually acceptable, that's the responsibility of the student himself/herself and there's no expectation of any joint publication. (E2)

As mentioned by E2, in some other countries, supervisors are just guides and not accountable for what the students write. As a result, in the examiners' comments, they might not be considered as the addressee neither explicitly nor implicitly.

- Extract 13: But in the context of Iran, the situation is different. The project is defined in the first place in the name of the supervisor in the research management system of the university because it is the academic member who is officially recognized and so the project can be defined in his/her name, not the student. The student would be second, officially. And then, there's the expectation of joint publication and this is specially required of Ph.D. students and so, the expectation is that the supervisor should indulge in the study intensively and provide general and detailed support.

What is worthy of notice in the Iranian context, as put by E2, is the effect of obliging Ph.D. students to publish papers extracted from their dissertations as joint publications. Such mandatory obligations will undoubtedly make supervisors more accountable in the Iranian context compared to the contexts of other countries, thereby placing less responsibility on the students.

#### 4.3.4 Students Who Plagiarize as Deceivers

In Extract 14, E8 emphasized that detecting plagiarism in students' writings could affect the language the examiners use in their comments. She believed that committing plagiarism implies deception of the examiners because the students have already learned about plagiarism and are expected to avoid committing it. Not surprisingly, encountering "deceivers" arouses negative feelings of annoyance and anger, which subsequently affects her language choices.

- Extract 14: One thing I cannot stand is plagiarism. If I find plagiarism in a Ph.D. dissertation, or even an M.A. thesis, I choose words and structures to show that I am angry because when I see a student has plagiarized too much, I think s/he has tried to deceive me. That makes me annoyed and changes the tone of my comments. (E8)

In a similar vein, E6 acknowledged that she uses a "respectful" language unless she detects plagiarism. In such cases, her comments are critical and direct, but not sarcastic or ironic. This indicates that "respect" is mutually constructed during the examination process; by committing plagiarism, students implicitly insult examiners (and other committee members); therefore, they do not deserve to be respected.

- Extract 15: As I said, I try to use a respectful language. In some cases, the mistakes or plagiarism are very evident, which may cause a direct criticism, but not by using a sarcastic or ironic language. (E6)

#### 4.3.5 Using Punctuation Marks as a Positioning Strategy

The examiners' evaluative language seems to be extremely complex since even the punctuation marks are purposefully and meticulously chosen and are intended to play a pivotal role in the way positions are constructed. This interesting finding which emerged as the examiners were describing their evaluation strategies seems to merit more detailed investigation.

- Extract 16: In extreme cases in which it seems that the manuscript is not studied by the supervisor or the errors are so glaring and the plagiarism is so evident that it lacks all the essential requirements of an academic text, these punctuations are usually used. Mostly exclamation marks! (E6)

In the above extract, E6 remarked that by using exclamation marks, she positions the supervisor as an accountable person. However, different examiners use exclamation marks in different ways and for different purposes.

- Extract 17: ... exclamation marks, I use many of them. I can say, in my comments, the exclamation marks are used a lot. This is, probably, a kind of idiosyncratic style. That's my personal style, but I prefer this. I usually go on with a statement and then, go on with a number of exclamation marks. For some of them, the researcher may have written something which is really strange to me and doesn't make sense at all or something which is totally unexpected; then, I put a lot of exclamation marks saying that you are really off track. (E1)

According to E1, his marked use of exclamation marks indicates that his expectation of the students is high because he views them as "researchers". Likewise, strange and senseless stuff could trigger his marked use of exclamation marks as a device to raise the student's awareness. However, contrary to other examiners, E5 believed that excessive use of exclamation marks to show your surprise, even when you are really surprised, may not be appropriate in an academic context.

- Extract 18: Yes, I use exclamation marks, usually one or two. When I'm really surprised, I put at most one or two exclamation marks at the end of the statements. More exclamation marks, I think, is far from the academic and in fact, desirable politeness. (E5)

Sometimes, the examiners use exclamation marks and question marks together to display more intense negative emotions, which is indicative of unfulfilled expectations.

- Extract 19: ... or even sometimes, well, to show my fury at the way that a part has been treated, again, I might use exclamation marks, well, exclamation marks and question marks, the two punctuation marks that I usually use. (E2)

In summary, this phase of the study identified a diversity of positions the examiners defined for themselves and the students. Conspicuously, these positions were mainly favorable in that examiners tended to view themselves as supportive teachers and their students as novice researchers who should be accountable for what they have done and reported. Nonetheless, engaging in unethical misconduct such as plagiarism or making too many glaring mistakes could negatively affect examiners' perceptions, thereby contributing to redefining students' positions.

## 5. Discussion

Frequent employment of heteroglossic, expand, and entertain resources by the examiners found in the current study corroborates what [Lau et al. \(2020\)](#) reported about the most frequent resource used by all of the viva participants including examiners in their oral feedback in DDs. The examiners' excessive use of entertain could be attributed to their asking questions to get more information or to avoid misunderstanding and their mitigating the criticisms. On the other hand, in this study, the least frequent engagement resource was attribute while in [Lau et al. \(2020\)](#)'s research, attribute was the second frequent resource used by all the participants including the examiners. The low utilization of attribute compared with [Lau et al. \(2020\)](#)'s study could be justified in terms of contextual differences existing in the two study situations. In [Lau et al.](#)'s research, the comments were oral, thereby suggesting the need for contextualizing them by "making reference to specific sections of S's dissertation" (p. 15), to the student's utterance or to the external examiner's question "to draw the conversation back in line with the intended point to be made" (p. 5). In this study, on the other hand, the comments were written and made on manuscript drafts in the absence of the research team. Overall, expand had a higher frequency than contract, which indicates that the examiners are concerned with softening criticisms through "opening up the dialogic space for alternative positions" ([Martin & White, 2005](#), p. 103). They do this by asking questions or giving suggestions and clarifications which contain modals.

The second major finding of this study was the differential use of ENGAGEMENT resources by male and female examiners, which lends support to the idea of the difference between the speech of men and women brought up by [Lakoff \(1973\)](#) some decades ago. Although her research did not enjoy an appropriate methodology, more recently, other researchers like [Dousti and Eslami Rasekh \(2016\)](#) tested the hypothesis again. These two studies emphasized that females' speech was heavily hedged in comparison to that of males though they expressed different reasons for this variation. More specifically, [Lakoff \(1973\)](#) maintained that females' language is "in many ways more polite" than that of males, which is reflected in their use of hedges to soften and add uncertainty. She also added, "the reason for this is that politeness involves an absence of strong statement, and women's speech is devised to prevent the expression of strong statements" (p. 57). [Dousti and Eslami Rasekh \(2016\)](#), on the other hand, explained that according to their participants, the reason for females' more use of hedges is not due to their lower social status or the unequal power relationship between men and women; rather, female speakers employed

hedges to welcome and facilitate others' participation in the discussions to achieve general consensus, to mitigate their utterances to show their concern and respect for interlocutors' opinions and their possible disagreements, and finally as a device to be friendly (p. 226).

Hedges constitute a category of expand resources; hence, what the female examiners in this study mentioned (e.g., to be kind) for using specific words and mitigating face-threatening criticisms supports the reasons [Dousti and Eslami Rasekh \(2016\)](#) referred to in their study. Lovat and Monfries (cited in [Monfries & Lovat, 2006](#)), too, acknowledged that female examiners comment on the candidates' dissertations in a much 'softer' way than males do and they tend to protect the face of the candidate and are not much inclined to boast the unequal power relationship between themselves and the candidates. They also remarked that "male examiners appear to express their evaluations in ways that more obviously uphold institutional power as well as reinforce their own personal power" ([Monfries & Lovat, 2006](#), p. 3).

The male examiners' more use of monoglossic and contract resources in the present study is in line with [Monfries and Lovat's \(2006\)](#) finding. They concluded that by using these resources, the examiner wanted to tell the students that he was an expert and they were wrong and not allowed to have their own voice. However, the current participants gave a variety of plausible reasons for such excessive use of monoglossic and contract resources. For instance, they believed that their comments went to the work not to the student and assumed that the student was aware of this underlying motive and therefore, there really was not a need for mitigation (E2). Sometimes, they even intentionally used direct language and criticized students in a severe way to show that they expected the students more and to show their anger at the errors (E1). Being pressed for time was another reason for examiners' direct and unmitigated language (E3).

Finally, analysis of the interviews showed the diversity of the positions the examiners adopt for themselves and the students. Given that before being examiners, they are teachers, they seemed to be deeply engrossed with this role even when examining theses. Therefore, they mostly positioned themselves as kind and supportive teachers who could embody other positions such as experts, evaluators and examiners, too. On the other hand, they mostly positioned the thesis writers as novice researchers, researchers, accountable addressees, and respected people. Such positions could be suggestive of a more symmetrical power relationship than a teacher/student one between the two parties involved. This is congruent with the result of the analysis of comments which showed that heteroglossic utterances outnumbered monoglossic and expand resources were used more frequently than contract ones. Given that more frequent use of heteroglossic and expand resources could imply more dialogic interactions in which alternative viewpoints are recognized, it could convincingly be argued that the examiners' language is supportive and open to dialogue and disagreement, which construes a more balanced power dynamic.

In contrast to these results, working on the positioning of examiners and candidates in defense sessions, [Lovat et al. \(2004, p. 174\)](#) concluded that even in the theses rated as 'top box' and accepted as they were, "not one examiner referred to the candidate as a

researcher". The students were referred to as candidate, author, applicant or investigator, but not researcher, which indicates that this kind of labeling was probably related to the disparity in expertise and power relationship. By conscious or unconscious use of labeling, the examiners ensured the candidate could not claim the role of a researcher which might imply an equal position and status with that of the examiner.

Contrary to Lovat et al.'s (2004) findings, in the present study, monoglossic and contract resources which are known to be negative and prevent the student from having voice were less frequent than heteroglossic and expand resources which are positive and less face-threatening. This contradiction could be justified considering contextual differences because while the present study focused on the examiners' written comments on M.A. theses, Lovat et al. investigated examiners' written reports on Ph.D. dissertations which might lead to associated heightened expectations of the candidates. Further, unlike Lovat et al.'s study which revealed an asymmetrical positioning and hierarchical orientation in examination, the analysis of the examiners' comments and interviews in the present study did not depict examiners as all-knowing experts and the only people who enjoy voice and power.

Don and Izadi (2011) also referred to examiners' creating power differentiation and distance to show their separateness from the students in their study on Iranian DDs participants. Nevertheless, the examiners remarked that their duty was to "correct flaws and improve the quality of the thesis" (p. 3786) and believed that their comments were instructive and constructive in nature despite being bitter. The current findings lend support to what was found by these scholars although the contexts of the two studies were different; while this study centered upon the examiners' written comments and their answers to interview questions, Don and Izadi examined the oral utterances of students and committee members in defense sessions. Such consistent findings highlight the point that examiners are supportive in both their written and oral comments.

In the present study, the examiners reiterated that encountering numerous or glaring errors, they did not consider the student as the sole responsible person. Although in such cases, they wished to explicitly address committee members, in practice, almost always, they did this implicitly, which contradicts the findings of Lovat et al. (2004). In their study, the examiners' language disclosed they expected the thesis under examination to be "of an appropriately high technical standard" and "when this does not occur", the candidates are "not singularly criticized; rather, criticism is also applied to the standards of supervision as well" (p. 168). This contradiction could be explained considering contextual features; whereas in the present study, the examiners might have had considerations for their colleagues whom they meet every now and then in the university, in Lovat et al. (2004)'s study, the examiners were both internal and external examiners of Ph.D. dissertations who may not be in direct contact with the research team or may not be physically present in the evaluation context.

## 6. Conclusions and Implications

In response to the three research questions posed earlier, the evidence from this study suggests that heteroglossic and expand resources outnumbered monoglossic and contract ones, respectively. Moreover, gender also played a role in the use of these resources in that female examiners tended to use most of the resources more than their male peers even though a more substantial difference was observed in their use of heteroglossic, expand, and entertain resources. The interview results also indicated that the positions reflected in the comments lent support to the teacher/student positions perceived and explicitly mentioned by the examiners during the interviews. More specifically, examiners primarily positioned themselves as kind and supportive teachers while considering their students as novice researchers/learners.

Given such perceived role relationships, the examiners participating in this study believed that their comments were intended to help the students improve the quality of their scholarly work. In a similar vein, in oral examination of thesis, their purpose was to elaborate more on their written comments to help the students revise their thesis and to teach other viva participants useful points to be employed while working on their own theses or articles. Therefore, it could safely be suggested that the term “defense session” be replaced with the term “viva voce” because the word “defense” might imply that somebody, mainly the examiner, is supposed to attack another person, the student who is defending their thesis, thereby implying the need to defend. Such a negative perception could make the situation threatening to the student as well as the audience who are most likely other prospective “defenders”. On the other hand, “viva voce” which is a Latin word meaning “with a living voice” or “an examination conducted orally typically for an academic qualification” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) could be more positive making the situation less stressful for them.

From a theoretical point of view, findings indicated that the language of evaluation is highly complicated in that even punctuation marks could reflect different kinds of positioning. On this basis, it is suggested that in future revisions of the system of APPRAISAL, especially with regard to written evaluative language, the role of punctuation marks in constructing positions be also considered. From a practical standpoint, on the other hand, it could be argued that in the context of evaluation, especially where non-native English speakers serve as examiners, institutes and universities can hold workshops or training sessions for examiners to make them aware of the impact of language of feedback and to provide them with the effective ways of using different linguistic devices. If examiners get trained on how to use their linguistic resources more effectively while examining and commenting on theses, they could display the true picture of themselves as teachers/trainers and at the same time, foster a more caring interpersonal relationship with the students, thereby inspiring their students “to invest effort in learning” (Bastola & Hu, 2021, p. 9). The findings could also contribute evidence of the differences between the language used by male and female examiners, which implies the need for the training sessions to be tailored to the gender of the examiners. Moreover, graduate students can benefit from

the findings as thesis writing and the examination process are likely new, challenging and stressful for them. The findings could help them know that the examiners are not their enemies against whom they should “defend” themselves and their work. In this way, they might feel more relaxed and could perform more satisfactorily trying to make more effective use of the examiners' comments.

However, despite such potential implications, the study was not void of some issues. The convenience sampling procedure employed and the relatively small size of the sample might question the generalizability of its findings. Moreover, future research can study the language of a number of examiners when they function as examiners compared with when they are supervisors or advisors. Comparing language choices of M.A. thesis examiners with those of Ph.D. dissertation examiners could also provide us with illuminating insights into the positioning of these two groups.

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Methodology / *Metodología*: Zahra Alimorad & Mitra Behrouzi.

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