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Discursive mingling and agentiveness in recontextualising "doing HDR research": A self-critical sequel to De Rycker (2014)

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This update is part of an ongoing research project into the recontextualisation of "doing HDR research" as a social practice complex. In this commentary, I revisit the claims and conjectures I made in this journal in 2014 in view of more systematic follow-up analyses that have since been conducted, still using – as before – Van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic model. I will also provide new findings and insights based on the seven-year graduation data that were obtained in 2019 for the original group of Malaysian Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students who participated in the structured interviews. It was found that none of the earlier hunches about the discourse of "doing HDR research" could be confirmed. Specifically, discursive mingling does not differentiate between future completers and non-completers, and there is no discursive evidence for any "disempowerment". On the contrary, agentiveness is a marked feature of how students recontextualise their HDR practice. Somewhat unexpectedly, it also turns out to be a statistically significant difference for the non-completers. Further qualitative engagement with the original interview data also led to a first cautious generalisation about what sets the eventual completers apart.

Key Words: HDR research, social practice complex, recontextualisation, linguistic representation, non-completion, Malaysia.

1. Introduction

This paper reports progress and findings based on research following on from my *Journal of Academic Language & Learning* article, "How do postgraduate students recontextualise 'doing research' as a social practice?" (De Rycker, 2014). It is meant to be a commentary aimed at sharing ideas and insights as well as reporting new facts and figures. When the project got under way, it was my hope that a deeper understanding of the HDR process from the students' point of view would help improve HDR supervisory practice and even students' self-efficacy. That ambition is still intact, and I intend to share the latest and most comprehensive findings to date in a separate article soon. First, however, it is important to re-assess and correct the earlier findings that I reported in 2014 based on the work that has been done since. I will not assume familiarity with the original study and instead provide a detailed recapitulation in Sections 2 and 3.

2. Background and starting point

The focus will be on the "structured interview" questionnaires from the original study and exclude the other semiotic sources that I relied on in that study (e.g. research methodology textbooks or

doctoral programme brochures).[1] To recap, the structured interviews were conducted on 23 December 2011 at the Universiti Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The 44 Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students[2] who participated represent a wide range of academic disciplines – both STEM and non-STEM – and were on average six months into their master's or doctoral programmes. The interview questions were specifically designed to cast the HDR candidate as an active, self-efficacious participant in their academic research practice.

The questionnaire consisted of seven open-ended questions about the activities that they were carrying out at the time, their evaluations of these actions, their work plans and one problem-solution episode.[3] Since I will refer to them from time to time below, here are the interview questions in full again:

Question 1: What are you doing right now?

Question 2: And how is it going?

Question 3: What have you already done so far?

Question 4: And how satisfied are you with what you have done already?

Question 5: What are you planning to do next?

Question 6: And what are your expectations about how it will go?

Question 7: Report one problem that has hindered work on your thesis. And how did you solve it?

The interviews – as concrete discursive events – were meant to be systematically analysed, using Van Leeuwen's (2008, 2009) socio-semantic model for the study of discourse in society. What sets Van Leeuwen apart from other forms of discourse analysis is his view that discourse is modelled on what people *do* and is thus based on social practices. Social practices – and thus, also academic practices – are about human agency, about doing, about concrete actions. Additionally, when one social practice (e.g. doing a PhD) is incorporated into another (e.g. *talking about* doing a PhD), the recontextualisation creates new "socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality" (Van Leeuwen, 2009, p. 144).

My initial research objective, therefore, was to discover the social constructedness of "doing research" among HDR students. The following questions guided the study in 2014:

   a. Would there be any patterned meanings to emerge from their discursive representations – a "way of speaking" unique to the students?

   b. If so, what would be the deeper, invisible layer of conceptualising "doing HDR research" – their "way of knowing" this academic practice?

   c. And finally, how would this conceptualisation compare to the perhaps more dominant and normative discourses about HDR research promoted by their supervisors, departments, discipline-specific communities of practice and even by UM as a whole?

It was my hope that a deeper understanding of the process from the students' point of view would help improve HDR supervisory practice. Insofar as the discourse analysis uncovered certain

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[1] Permission was not sought to reanalyse the interview data from the 36 of the original 44 participants who will be the focus of this comment. They had already given their consent in December 2011, when the data were collected, and the purpose of the analysis had not changed. In my judgement, there was no breach of confidentiality and there were no risks stemming from the additional analyses.

[2] I am now using "HDR students" as it is more accurate than the "postgraduate students" of the original paper.

[3] This questionnaire was my own work. I wanted to learn more about students' representations of their past, present and future "doing", as well as their evaluations of it. The questions were to be taken matter-of-factly so that, for example, answers to Question 6 would be of the form "I don't expect it to go well" or "My expectations are that it will go smoothly", with at best some descriptive detail or justification. I did not intend for the seven questions to be a more general writing prompt, an opportunity for HDR students to disclose personal information, share experiences or express feelings and opinions.

relevant issues, it could also inform the work academic language and learning (ALL) educators do with HDR students. More generally, I also set out from the idea that ALL practitioners should help higher education students develop a "language" to communicate *about* their academic experience. My professional ambition was that with our knowledge and guidance, they could learn a "language" in which to represent that experience more accurately and fairly, and that this would help them build a unique academic identity, ease socialisation into the community of practice, and improve academic performance. The assumption was – and still is – that the way that HDR students talk about what it is they think they are doing encodes idiosyncratic and/or socially shared cognitions; in their turn, these cognitions may influence – as a student-specific "way of knowing", what doing a research degree entails – the performance of the social practice being recontextualised, that is, the so-called constructive potential of discourse.[4]

My initial concern in this investigation was not so much attrition, drop-out or non-completion rates *per se* – the institutional-managerial perspective – but students' development, learning, experience and well-being. Because obtaining an HDR qualification – and especially a doctorate – is a high-cost and high-stakes academic practice (Denecke, Fraiser, & Redd, 2009, p. 37), failure is likely to affect non-completers adversely.

In respect of Van Leeuwen (2008, 2009), the gist of his discourse-analytical framework – and the justification for using it – can be found in De Rycker (2014). For reasons of space, I will have to assume familiarity with notions such as discourse, social practice, recontextualisation and representation. Van Leeuwen is also known for his fine-grained taxonomies for describing and interpreting the transformations that can take place when social practices are recontextualised.[5] What is important for the purposes of this comment is that Van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 6–12) distinguishes eight structural elements in a social practice: the principal two are (i) the actions that make up the practice and (ii) the participants (or social actors) involved; without "people doing things", there would be no rationalised, proceduralised social (inter)action to begin with. For a comprehensive account of the discourse produced by HDR students and a thicker description, due consideration should also be given, however, to the other six elements: (iii) times, (iv) locations, (v) resources like tools and materials, (vi) performance modes ("stage directions" as to how to carry out a particular action in the practice), (vii) presentation styles (the "dress and body grooming requirements" of participants) and (viii) eligibility conditions (what qualifies a person, an object, a place, etc. to play their role in the practice).[6] So, the central research concern can be reformulated in terms of the following related questions:

1. When HDR students talk about their research projects and programmes, which practices show up in the recontextualisations?
2. Which elements of these practices are recontextualised?
3. And in what way?
4. And what would all these patterns and regularities add up to in terms of students' "ways of thinking" relative to their personal agency and self-efficacy in carrying out their research?

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[4] Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 3) – citing social theorist Max Weber – emphasizes the importance of describing a social practice in terms of whether it "work[s]" or "achieve[s] its purposes". In my view, this also holds true for a recontextualising practice such as the student interviews: Does the discourse to emerge from the seven questions asked help the recontextualised social practice achieve its purpose? Put differently, does the way that HDR students *talk about* their research help or hinder them in *doing* their research?

[5] Van Leeuwen (2009) himself refers to it as "a clear tool" (p. 277). To quote Walkó (2009), it "combines the 'neatness' of linguistic categories with the underlying 'messiness' of socio-semantic analysis" (p. 210).

[6] Van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 10–12) only mentions participants, locations and resources, but in principle, the other elements are also subject to eligibility conditions.

It should be pointed out that this kind of discourse-analytical approach goes beyond mere content or thematic analysis, that is, the examination of *what* is said, *how often* and what it may mean (e.g. the number of times that participants talk about data collection or which negative emotions they express such as worry or guilt). Instead, it tries to identify configurations of features in *how* the interview questions are answered linguistically, and what these lexico-syntactic representations – as part of the overall recontextualisation – convey about the social practice itself. Moreover, in studying discourses, the analytical focus is often on aspects of language production that are "less consciously controlled or controllable" (Van Dijk, 2009, p. 72) such as syntax (e.g. transitivity). Equally importantly, in the process of recontextualising the HDR experience, the interviews may also reveal which social practices – or elements of a social practice – are (i) represented (by means of substitution and rearrangement), (ii) deleted or (iii) added. Taken together, both types of analysis – one macro, the other micro – were expected to give us an idea of how the group of 44 UM students perceive and interpret the practice of undertaking an HDR programme.

Before reporting the earlier and new findings, it may be helpful to illustrate how the analyses were conducted, using the following example.

> **Example 1.**
>
> *Question 2: And how is it going?*
> – I am so worried [affective reaction] that because I haven't started writing the wit [*sic*] writing papers to be submitted to ISI journals in order to fulfill the university's requirement.
> – There are so many works to be done!! [2406MPHD]

In the process of recontextualising the social practice complex of "doing a doctoral degree", some constitutive practices – and elements of these or other, non-academic practices – are represented by means of substitution and rearrangement, while others may be deleted and still others (e.g. evaluations and legitimations) added. In the example above, 2406MPHD represents several actions related to both communicating research findings and meeting programme requirements, but without rearranging them. Closer analysis reveals that the substitutions combine agentive and non-agentive constructions (e.g. use of the passive voice in "to be submitted" and "to be done") as well as both material and semiotic actions ("start", "write", "submit", "fulfil", "do"). Moreover, the practice representation also includes an addition in the form of a negative affective reaction ("worried"). It is also potentially significant that the two phrases "writing papers" and "to be submitted to ISI journals" involve collectivisation through pluralisation at the expense of individuation and informative detail. Finally, the nominalisation, "writing papers", is also a form of objectivation, and thus, a construction that deactivates the activity. As observed above, Van Leeuwen has developed intricate, highly ramified taxonomies for describing the transformations that take place when social practices are recontextualised. This is especially the case for social action and social actor representations – see the overview tables in Van Leeuwen (2008, pp. 52 & 73).

3. Earlier findings and conjectures from 2014

At the time of the original publication in 2014, I outlined the basic idea, rationale and methodology, but was only able to report two concrete findings as outlined in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 below.

3.1. Discursive mingling of practices

First, the HDR students who were interviewed did not always distinguish clearly among what I argued were essentially *three* distinct academic practices: (i) conducting the various research activities that uniquely make up their supervised research project, (ii) communicating their research findings in the form of a dissertation, research article or oral presentation, and (iii) satisfying a particular academic or practical requirement of their HDR programme. I labelled these constituent academic practices "doing research", "communicating research" and "satisfying requirements",

using the capital letters A, B and C in curly brackets as a coding shorthand. Note that {O} refers to still other, not directly related practices (e.g. household chores and meditation).

Consider the coded extracts below. Interviewees' written answers have been left unedited as in the 2014 study, hence, the occasional use of [*sic*] in the examples. Many of them also use point form and phrases rather than sentences; some write in capitals. An eight-character code is used to identify each participant uniquely.

> **Example 2.**
>
> *Question 3: What have you already done so far?*
>
> I'm almost done with data collection {A}, I have 5 more stakeholders to meet + interview {A}, writing proposal is almost done as well {C} just need to fine tune the lit. review portion & intro {C}. Need to really start writing the "real" thesis soon {B}! [2507MMAO]

> **Example 3.**
>
> *Question 4: And how satisfied are you with what you have done already?*
>
> 1. 30% because I haven't really started with the writing part just yet {B}. [2507MMAO]
> 2. 20% – feeling my progress too slow.
> – As I d As [*sic*] a part time student, at time I feel guilty [affective reaction] for not able to have a consistance [*sic*] reading daily {A}, may lage [*sic*] if workload {A?, O?} too heavy.
> – As mother, at time need to spent time for family {O} and this sometimes have taken my time for reading {A}. [4312MPHD]

In my 2014 paper, I speculated but no longer think that this kind of discursive convolutedness or mingling of practices – at least, as it shows up in the interviews – could be one of the factors behind students' failure to make steady progress or meet HDR programme milestones. Maybe discursive mingling or a distracting focus on {O} would be a surface indicator of a particular student's failure to organise their work efficiently and successfully; the phenomenon could point to difficulty in "putting like with like" and completing "to do's" in a logical sequence. This failure or difficulty might even shape candidates' physical, mental and emotional well-being and partly explain drop-out and non-completion incidence.[7] After all, the relationship between the well-being of academics – for example, feelings of being stressed or overwhelmed – and their productivity and efficiency has been well documented (e.g. Schmidt & Hansson, 2018), also among PhD students in specific disciplines (e.g. Mura & Wijesinghe, 2022).

My reasoning for the above conjectures was that these three different practices position the key participant differently, with especially different degrees of expected agency, control and self-determination. Though dialectically and ecologically interrelated practices, the processes involved and the corresponding roles – as agent, patient or beneficiary – are not isomorphic. On the one hand, HDR students are expected to be creative, pro-active and self-driven in setting up, moving forward on and completing their unique research project, and throughout the programme they are encouraged to adopt a critical attitude by "questioning everything" ({A}). On the other hand, and at the other end of the spectrum, they have to be compliant with and "unquestioningly" apply a

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[7] In a recent email (11 February 2022), one of my PhD supervisees – just starting out – wrote: (i) "Seems that I was stuck [affective reaction] in how I want to figure out what I want to do in my research" {A}, (ii) "I feel a bit depressed" [affective reaction] and (iii) "To complete this PHD program, I also need to publish an article in a Scopus index journal" {C}. It is remarkable that this final comment is so similar to what non-completer 2406MPHD wrote ten years earlier – see Example 1.

relatively large number of often arbitrary and formal requirements[8] ({C}). Communicating one's research – constituent practice {B} – is closer to {C} as successful performance typically depends on following the numerous conventions of academic research communication. My argument was that no one embarks on an HDR research project ({A}) because they are good at and/or enjoy writing *per se* ({B}) or derive satisfaction from complying with requirements ({C}). In linguistic terms, these two co-dependent practices situate students as *patients* rather than *agents*, creating room for conflict or tension with their role as an independent, self-motivated and productive researcher. This positioning of students as a group of people who have things done to them or have to undergo things would then fit in neatly with the second tentative finding to be presented in the next section.

3.2. Deagentialisation

The second tentative finding related to the use of (de)agentialisation at the micro level (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 66), that is, "[a]ctions and reactions can be […] represented as brought about by human agency […] or as brought about in other ways, impervious to agency". My interest was in finding out to what extent the HDR students talked about their research agentively or not, and what uses and frequencies of agentive words and phrases might tell us about their "way of knowing". It is potentially significant that, for example, PhD student 2406MPHD uses a syntactically non-agentive construction, "There are so many works to be done!!" instead of the more agentive alternative "I have yet to do so many works!!" – see Example 1 above. Similarly, another student, 0702MPHD, says that, "Ethics has been approved", rather than, "I have obtained ethics approval", which is peculiar as this is supposedly positive news.[9] At any rate, I thought in 2014 that this type of deagentialising representation – if found to be a regular feature of a student's overall discourse – might point to a reduced sense of agency, control and self-efficacy associated with the "doing HDR research" practice itself. At the time, I interpreted these and similar findings as putative evidence of a *discourse of disempowerment*, in which HDR students would appear as "victims" of a systemic, institution-specific dynamic of power hierarchies, social inequalities and insidious processes of exclusion or subordination. New findings to be reported in Section 4 now suggest this conjecture needs to be reconsidered.

That was as far I got. For various reasons no further progress was made until it occurred to me in 2019 that an unintended seven-year hiatus could work out advantageously. If I could obtain information about which of the 44 HDR students had – in the intervening period – completed their respective master's or doctoral programmes, then it would be possible to compare the recontextualising and representational practices of completers and non-completers and arrive at *correlational* tendencies and even *predictive* generalisations. If so, this knowledge could form the basis for identifying at-risk students relatively early and designing appropriate interventions, also at the ALL level.

However, after reconsideration, while the relationship between answering interview questions in writing at one point in time (predictor variable) and successfully completing an HDR programme at a much later point in time (outcome variable) may be intuitively appealing, the relationship is tenuous at best. Though HDR programme completion is a fairly straightforward binary concept, it is the hard-to-predict outcome of a complex, multi-factorial process in which a student's discourse is at best only one of the numerous plausible indicators of current performance and future

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[8] At my current workplace, a typical formatting requirement is that "[d]etails on the title page [of the doctoral dissertation] should be in CAPITAL LETTERS" and that the title should be "[a]rranged in [an] inverted pyramid" (UCSI University, 2018, p. 12). No justification – or to use Van Leeuwen's (2008, p. 150) term "legitimation" – is given.

[9] The representation of the approval is peculiar from a "self-serving attribution bias" perspective, where positive events tend to be attributed to internal causes; equally curious in this respect is another PhD student's use of agentialisation in communicating the *negative* version of the same event instead of backgrounding or deleting his or her role in it and shifting the focus to external factors (e.g. Hayes & Corrie, 2020, p. 87): "HAVE NOT OBTAINED ETHICS CLEARANCE" [0602MPHD].

success.[10] Most of the dependent, moderating and mediating variables that are in play are difficult to control for at the time of collecting data, let alone, to capture and measure over a seven-year period. In respect of discourse, bidirectionality cannot be completely ruled out, with HDR students' "way of talking" itself being influenced by the ongoing programme completion process. Owing to the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and attitudes, an HDR student's "way of speaking/knowing" is unlikely to remain stable over the duration of the programme. If anything, the more detailed analyses that have been conducted since 2019 suggest that interview discourse features and eventual completion vary independently.

4. New findings and insights from 2019 and 2022

4.1. Changing direction

In May 2019, I was fortunate enough to obtain the then seven-year graduation data from the Registrar's Office of the Universiti Malaya. For 36 out of the original 44 "structured interview" participants, there were status updates on record, including information about those who had meanwhile obtained their HDR degrees versus those who had not. The additional information gave me an opportunity to rethink the original project, formulate new research questions, and in terms of theorisation and overall objectives, move away from the critical approach to discourse with its focus on power, inequality and lack of autonomy. According to Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele (2012, p. 149), "20 to 40 interviewees is a normal range" for conducting this type of in-depth qualitative research. So, the slightly smaller sample size ($N = 36$) would be sufficient to allow cautious generalisation of the findings, and since the subsample of doctoral students numbered 20, these interviews could be reliably analysed and discussed separately, too.

As of 2019, I started using the term "complex" to refer to the three core HDR practices that were identified in 2014. As Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012, p. 17) argue, social practices tend to co-exist, but while some are only loosely associated as so-called "bundles", others represent "stickier and more integrated arrangements including co-dependent forms of sequence and synchronization", and it is the latter that they refer to as "complexes". Though the co-dependence of {A}, {B} and {C} is not entirely absolute,[11] the three practices do, of course, co-exist within the same time-space configuration and display a high level of integration. The three are bound tightly enough – especially for HDR students – to justify their categorisation as a complex. In what follows, I will also occasionally refer to social practices as either performances or entities.[12]

In what follows, I will share previously unpublished findings – for the reduced sample of 36 HDR students, that is, 17 completers versus 19 non-completers – based on a paper I co-presented at the *7th University of Malaya Discourse & Society (UMDS) International Conference* in 2019. My grand conjecture then was – as it is now – that:

> the discourse employed in recontextualising research as a social practice can be a barrier to novice researchers' understanding of what it is they are – and should be – doing. Perceptions and construals motivate linguistic

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[10] In a recently published review of the literature, factors which can influence student success include "funding, quality of supervision, scientific discipline, exposure to questionable research practices, institutional factors, organizational climate, involvement and socialization in the academic environment, community support, mental health, financial and nonfinancial costs, and personal factors, such as life situations and attitudes towards doctoral studies" (Kis, Tur, Lakens, Vaesen, & Houkes, 2022, pp. 4–5).

[11] Different social actors can be involved in the co-performance of this academic practice complex, for example, in cases of plagiarism or when a researcher ({A}) outsources the communication of the research ({B}) to someone else.

[12] The distinction between practices-as-performance and practices-as-entity has been around since earlier praxeological theories and also features in Shove et al. (2012, p. 7). It is through the actual *performance*, the immediacy of doing, that the constituent elements of a social practice – such as those identified by Van Leeuwen (2008) at a categorical level – are integrated.

representations that may affect performance negatively (De Rycker, Dupree Fine, & Mahdizadegan Attar, 2019).

In retrospect, this conjecture is more defensible than the one claiming a predictive relationship between certain discourse features and seven-year graduation rates. Unlike in 2019, I will, therefore, no longer interpret discursive and linguistic differences between the two groups of HDR students as early warning signs of eventual completion or non-completion. Moreover, for the purpose of this commentary, I will only report the two updates and not the preliminary work done in 2019. I will, however, include additional findings based on the analyses I have carried out over the past three years.

4.2. Updates on earlier findings and conjectures

4.2.1. Discursive mingling of practices

No statistical significance could be established in respect of: (i) completers and non-completers' recontextualisation of the three core practices {A}, {B} and {C}, (ii) their representation of one or more structural elements of unrelated, non-academic practices {O} or (iii) an observed linguistic inability – assumed to be consonant with an underlying conceptual inability – to differentiate clearly and consistently among the practices within the complex of obtaining an HDR degree.

As Table 1 shows, non-completers – far more frequently than completers – refer to "other" practices, that is, practices that are unrelated to the complex of "doing research", "communicating research" and/or "satisfying requirements". However, the difference did *not* turn out to be statistically significant (χ^2 (3, $N = 231$) = 1.068, $p > 0.05$),[13] strongly suggesting that social practice recontextualisation *per se* does not differentiate between eventual completers and non-completers as I conjectured in 2014.

Table 1. Social practice recontextualisations by type* and by completer versus non-completer.

	{A}	{B}	{C}	{O}	All
Completers	50	11	16	28	105
Non-Completers	57	14	15	40	126
Both	107	25	31	68	231

* {A} "doing research", {B} "communicating research", {C} "satisfying requirements", {O} "other".

If anything, and contrary to my initial claim about discursive mingling, completers and non-completers behave very similarly. For both, almost half of all actions that are being represented are about "doing research" (107 out of 231, or 46.32%), followed by "others" (29.44%) and at a distance, "satisfying requirements" (13.42%) and "communicating research" (10.82%). To get an idea of the sorts of micro-actions represented, see Example 4 below: summarising, reading, collecting data, writing up a chapter, meeting the supervisor, etc.; the unrelated practices include activities such as sleeping or taking care of children.

Example 4.

Question 5: What are you planning to do next?

1. I am planning to summarize {A? B?} ~~w~~ all what [*sic*] I have read {A}. The specified my problem [*sic*] and adjust my objective of the study {A}. Then after that, I will feel relieve [*sic*] [affective reaction] of [*sic*] what I am doing {A? B? C? O?} and can go further write [*sic*] my literature finding {B}

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[13] Chi-squared tests were performed using Preacher's (2001) online calculator.

and the introduction chapter {B}. And after that I plan to continue to collect my data {A}. [3108MPHD]

2. – Speeding up my reading {A}/writing process {B}.
– Less sleep {O} and rest {O} equals to [*sic*] progress!
– Adjust my study life {O} - more focus more on study {A} and family {O}. [2406MPHD]

3. – After exam {C}, meet supervisor {C}, determing [*sic*] the method and scope {A}

– Write up chap. 1 {B} [1904MPHD]

The first two students in Example 4 are eventual non-completers, while the third one is a completer. In other words, the conclusion must be that completers and non-completers share a similar understanding of what it is they are doing or supposed to be doing, at least on the measures used here.

4.2.2. Deagentialisation

In their discursive transformations and lexico-syntactic representations of the HDR practice complex, students use a considerable amount of *deactivation* – especially objectivation through nominalisation (Van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 63–66) – and *deagentialisation*. To illustrate, consider the following scale of human agency representation.

Example 5.

1. I am recruiting respondent [*sic*]. [3611MPHD]
2. About 80% of respondent has been recruited by me for first interview. [hypothetical example based on (6.3) below]
3. About 80% of respondent [*sic*] has been recruited for first interview [*sic*].[14] [3611MPHD]
4. The next stage is doing recruitment [hypothetical example based on (6.5) below]
5. The next stage is recruitment. [0702MPHD]

Grammatically, these five utterances range from active-voice and tensed verb constructions to their passive-voice equivalents – with or without the *by*-phrase[15] – to nominalisations (or so-called process nouns) involving "do" and next, to nominalisations without "do". All five of them refer to certain aspects of the broader academic research stage of sampling, selection and recruitment, but arguably, not all of them position the HDR student as a pro-active, agentive and self-efficacious individual. The five utterances are not interchangeable but encode different construals of the social practice or one of its elements. While Example 5.1 is dynamic, agentive, personal and relatively specific, Example 5.5 at the other extreme is static, non-agentive, impersonal and general. In other words, the scale moves from representing an action as part of a practice-as-performance ("recruiting") to representing the same action as part of that same practice-as-entity ("recruitment").

To give another example, compare the two answers in Example 6:

Example 6.

Question 4: And how satisfied are you with what you have done already?

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[14] Incidentally, 3611MPHD uses the term "respondent" incorrectly: a respondent is a "research participant who answers questions on a survey" (Vogt et al., 2012, p. 350). What is meant here are interviewees. In fact, these and related inaccuracies may be an indication that the "doing research" process is not well understood on a deeper, more internalised level and that for some doctoral candidates, no clear conceptual differentiation exists among (research) participants, subjects, respondents, interviewees, etc. I will come back to accuracy in recontextualisation in Section 5.

[15] No *by*-phrases were attested in the interviews.

1. I still have to improve my proposal [hypothetical example]
2. Still need an [*sic*] improvement [4412MPHD]

Within the critical study of discourse, the assumption is that when aggregated over a large number of instances across a larger number of texts, these recontextualising and representational configurations reflect and construct alternative "ways of knowing". Depending on the exact nature and occurrences of these configurations, the discourses associated with a particular social practice or practice complex will, thus, vary in terms of – among other things – objectivity, accuracy, evaluativeness and fairness; in addition, within that "plurality of discourses" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 6), there is usually also variation in terms of spread, dominance and degree of resistance or contestation. My own interest – as mentioned above – is whether a particular discourse also helps achieve the purpose of the practice that it recontextualises.

To confirm – or disconfirm – the idea mooted in 2014, I conducted a systematic analysis of the presence or absence of agentiveness, using the PhD students' answers to Questions 1, 3, 5 and the second part of 7 rather than the interviews in their entirety. This selection would help capture the more descriptive, reporting-style representations of actions rather than the evaluations or legitimations typical of the remaining questions. Agentiveness will be taken to mean representations of social actions that are activated and agentialised: "searching for (the) literature" rather than "doing a literature search" or the compound nominalisation "literature search" on its own. I am glossing over the problem of determining which other potential discursive or linguistic features may be indicators of agency; more generally, I will also have to leave aside issues of defining and operationalising the concept in terms of Van Leeuwen's (2008, p. 73) social action network.

The main point for now is that my initial conjecture about the dominance of deagentialisation was *not* confirmed; as Table 2 shows, the majority of social action representations are agentive (81.55%).

Table 2. Social action representations by agentiveness* and by completer versus non-completer.

	Agentive	Non-agentive	All
Completers	85	27	112
Non-completers	105	16	121
Both	190	43	233

* activation and agentialisation

My second hunch had been that agentiveness would differentiate completers from non-completers, with the former representing themselves and their actions predominantly as "brought about by human agency", while the latter would appear "impervious to agency" (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 66). The quantitative breakdown of all social actions represented shows, however, that it is precisely the other way round. In talking about their progress, plans and solutions to problems, future non-completers use a higher proportion of agentive constructions (86.77%) than completers do (75.89%). Moreover, the difference between both groups is statistically significant (χ^2 (1, $N =$ 235) = 4.578, $p < 0.05$).

4.2.3. Social actor representations: "Self" and "other"

Recent analyses of social actor representations further support the agentiveness update on the earlier 2014 study, but also qualifies the negative results found for discursive mingling. A total of 273 social actor references were attested in the interviews. Given the nature of the seven questions asked, it is not surprising that the vast majority refer to the interviewees – the HDR students – themselves: there are 242 "self" representations compared to 31 for "others" (88.64% and 11.36% respectively). Van Leeuwen's (2008, p. 52) social actor network distinguishes two major

recontextualisation categories: (i) *inclusion* (with more than 25 substitution options such as individualisation, nomination or functionalisation) and (ii) *exclusion* (i.e. suppression or backgrounding). To illustrate, consider the following answers – "self" representations only – with their broad top-level coding:

Example 7.

Question 1: What are you doing right now?

1. Sample Collection {A} [exclusion: nominalisation] [2707MPHD]
2. I am on stage [*sic*] doing collecting data/ fieldwork at hospital and shelters {A}. [inclusion: pronominalisation] [3611MPHD] [inclusion: pronominalisation]
3. – I am doing literature review [*sic*] {A}. [inclusion: pronominalisation]
    – Planning Learning and understanding the new theories that are related to my study/ research {A} [exclusion: ellipsis] that I've never come accross [*sic*] before. [inclusion:
      pronominalisation]
    – Planning the contents of my study/research {A}. [exclusion: ellipsis]
    – I have to alter the previous contents {A? B?}. [inclusion: pronominalisation]
    – Preparing my proposal defence {C}. [exclusion: ellipsis] [2406MPHD]

The distribution for the entire set of interviews can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. "Self" representations by type of transformation and by completer versus non-completer.

	Inclusion*	Exclusion**	All
Completers	21	83	104
Non-completers	62	76	138
Both	83	159	242

* pronominalisation and nomination
** ellipsis and nominalisation

Remarkably, the completers predominantly use exclusion, while the non-completers refer to themselves by means of both inclusion (substitution) and exclusion in about the same proportion. These findings may seem counterintuitive in that the expression of lower levels of linguistic agentiveness turns out to be a discourse feature of the completers rather than the non-completers. One explanation could be that completers manage their workflow more efficiently, using agent-less and non-agentive constructions as a practical shorthand for planning, coordinating and monitoring their tasks; in other words, constructions such as Example 6.2 are not to be interpreted as a reflection of their inability to get things done or a lack of self-efficacy. It is difficult, however, to interpret these and similar differences – but also the commonalities reported in Section 4.2.1 – without considering the full picture. I will come back to this in a separate study in which I will report on the combined recontextualisations of all practice elements. Moreover, the differences between both are statistically significant (χ^2 (1, $N = 242$) = 16.102, $p < 0.05$). Non-completers also use significantly more first-person pronominal references (e.g. "I" and "my") than completers do – 134 and 57 respectively (χ^2 (1, $N = 191$) = 17.789, $p < 0.05$), as is shown in Example 7.3.

HDR students also refer to other participants in the practice complex, but on the whole, do so much less frequently. As Table 4 shows, these "others" are predominantly participants in {C} (e.g. the supervisor, the ethics committee or the university) and next, {A} (e.g. respondents, participants [in the research] and interviewees). To a far lesser extent, they also refer to social actors in non-research-related activities {O} (e.g. colleagues, friends, family and the household help).

Table 4. "Other" representations by type of social actor and by completer versus non-completer.

	Supervisor, university, ethics committee, …	Respondents, participants, interviewees, …	Colleagues, friends, family, …	All
Completers	4	11	1	16
Non-Completers	11	1	3	15
Both	15	12	4	31

Closer inspection of the frequencies reveals a complementary distribution between the three categories of "other" representation: among the non-completers, there is a higher proportion of social actors that participate in {C} and {O}, while nearly 70% of all social actors represented by the completers belong to {A}. As with "self" representations, the difference between both groups is statistically significant (χ^2 (3, $N = 31$) = 9.313, $p < 0.05$).

5. Concluding remarks

Contrary to what was conjectured in my 2014 article, there is no empirical evidence that HDR students would construe "doing research" as if characterised by some form of disempowerment, that is, as a practice complex in which their room for agency, control, initiative or self-efficacy were somehow constrained, and that this disempowerment would perhaps also affect their progress and performance. Instead, those whose performance was expected to be influenced negatively – the future *non*-completers – emerged as being least "disempowered" and displayed significantly more agency than the completers, at least, at the level of social action and social actor representation.

In respect of all HDR students, the updates and follow-up analyses reported above suggest the following generalisation. For the most part, the discourse consists of dynamic, agentive representations of actions within the "doing HDR research" practice and emphasises the key social actor's personal agency in performing them. In addition, "self" representations outnumber "other" representations almost 8 to 1. The discourse shows that HDR students realise that they have to take ownership. Perhaps for the same reason, 65% of the "self" references are left implicit through ellipsis and nominalisation: it is self-evidently the interviewed student whose actions make up the practice-as-performance.[16]

Whether a particular recontextualisation of a social practice is objective, accurate and/or fair depends on external knowledge about the practice being recontextualised. In respect of agentiveness, the construal of obtaining an HDR qualification as an individual process – a solo endeavour – is to be expected in view of the official discourse and the purposes that the practice is meant to achieve. An HDR programme involves an "*independent* research project" [italics mine] (e.g. Monash University Handbook 2022, among others). To cite from Australia's Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021, a PhD programme requires a "capacity to scope, design and conduct research projects *independently*" [italics mine] (§1.4.5b). Independence is also emphasised in Malaysia's MQF Level 8 description: a doctoral degree or PhD "involves substantial, advanced, *independent* and original research and scholarship in a most advanced area of knowledge and emerging issues of a specific area of study in a discipline or

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[16] As Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 18) points out, it cannot be ruled out, however, that it is the semiotic recontextualising practice itself – i.e. the interview-as-genre – that accounts for some of the regularities observed in the recontextualisation of a particular social practice.

multidiscipline, assessed against international standards" [italics mine] (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2017, p. 26).

However, the emphasis on independence and personal agency may inadvertently downplay the importance of the supervisor, especially in the initial stages of the PhD programme, and suppress or background the role of others in providing material help or social support. In addition, whether foregrounding agentiveness discursively is also self-enhancing and helps in performing the practice is another matter. At some point in the last three years, I began to realise that I had in fact tacitly assumed that HDR students' academic progress and eventual success depended on a range of desirable personality traits, cognitions and material and semiotic behaviours. Two of these indicators were examined in the original paper: (i) keeping the three practices within the "doing HDR research" complex strictly separate – no discursive mingling – and (ii) a strong, positive and reliable sense of agency. I also assumed that both would translate into a unique set of discursive transformations and lexico-syntactic representations that would differentiate eventual completers from eventual non-completers. Ironically, the follow-up analysis has now shown that eventual completers are less agentive in their "way of speaking". Alongside other discursive tendencies (yet to be published), non-agentiveness depicts the completers as being singularly focussed on the actual research project, casting this focus in terms of the impersonal, business-like and timely execution of processes; unlike the non-completers, they do not make it about themselves or others and appear less influenced by non-research-specific activities within or outside the academic practice complex.

Of course, the interpretation of these and related features requires a comprehensive, thicker description of the discourses produced by both groups of HDR students; ideally, *all* aspects of the recontextualisation process have to be examined and interpreted *simultaneously*. Since 2019, I have managed to conduct a more comprehensive, systematic and detailed analysis of the interviews along the lines of Van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic model. If anything, these recent research efforts suggest that there is no relationship whatsoever between how the HDR students wrote about themselves or their research in the interviews and the likelihood of successful programme completion seven years later. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, there are a handful of statistically significant differences between completers and non-completers such as those reported for social actor representations in Section 4.2.3. These findings warrant closer scrutiny as they may shed additional light on why some students graduate – and others do not – relative to their construal of the "doing HDR research" practice complex. The discourse features in question are agentiveness, the proportion of semiotic and material action representations (e.g. reading and writing versus collecting data, visiting the library or looking after the children) and the use of first-person pronominalisation and nominations of social actors in non-research-related practices. It is my intention to report and discuss these findings in a separate article.

Acknowledgements

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