

STRATEGIC USE OF NOUNS AND PRONOUNS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF THE FINE-TUNING OF THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION POLICY IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

This paper discusses how the first person pronouns ‘I’ and ‘We’ and the two proper nouns ‘the Education Bureau [EDB]’ and ‘the Government’ were used strategically by government officials in an attempt to delineate the level of involvement and commitment of the officials themselves, the EDB and the Hong Kong Government in the course of implementing and fine-tuning the medium-of-instruction policy in Hong Kong’s secondary schools. The data comprises the speeches delivered at various formal educational occasions and the documents issued and distributed to various stakeholders of the secondary education in Hong Kong. The clauses having these pronouns and proper nouns as either the Agent or Beneficiary were identified and examined in order to find out: (1) the level of commitment of the officials/administrative entities with reference to the process types used; (2) the level of commitment of these officials/administrative entities with reference to the modality level chosen; (3) the power status of the officials/administrative entities; and (4) the specific role, if any, played by the officials/administrative entities. Systemic functional grammar was the framework being drawn upon in undertaking the analysis.

Keywords: Medium of instruction; Agent; Beneficiary; Process type; Modality.

1. Introduction

The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (the HK Government) has been constantly, where the needs arise, undertaking reforms in various policy areas, ranging from education to healthcare to political structure. Before the actual launching of these reforms, extensive public consultation is undertaken in ways ranging from the issuing of White Paper and Consultation Documents to the organizing of seminars and forums at which government officials can listen to the public opinion directly. Whichever form the consultation may take, the main vehicle with which the HK Government conveys to the public the details of the reform – the rationale, schedule, pros and cons – is language, or discourse. Similarly, upon the completion of the consultation and the consolidation of the opinions thus collected, the HK Government will publish another document – also a discourse-based medium – informing the public the summarized version of the public opinion and the way forward, that is, how it

intends to implement its reform initiatives. This paper focuses on the ways the authors of speeches and documents construct their discourse concerning one particular education reform initiative, the medium of instruction (MOI) in local secondary schools. It attempts to discuss how the authors delineate the level of commitment and involvement of the government officials either delivering the speech or signing the document composed by them, the EDB and the HK Government in the implementation of the MOI policies. The next section Background to the Study will summarize the rationale, as put forward by the colonial and HK Governments, for the local secondary schools to adopt either Chinese, English, or both as their MOI. The Literature Review section will discuss previous studies concerning language – the use of pronouns in particular – and politics. The Methodology section will outline the steps taken in analyzing the data in association with a brief discussion of the analytical framework used – systemic functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). The ways the authors construct the discourse of the reform documents will be presented and discussed in the Results and Discussion section. The Conclusion section summarizes the main findings of the study.

2. Background to the study

Both the colonial government before 1997 and the HK Government after – have been promoting the use of either Chinese, English or both as the MOI since more than 150 years ago for political, social or economic reasons. Back in the 1860s, to have enough English-speaking locals acting as intermediaries between the colonizer – the British – and the colonized – the local Chinese, the colonial government accorded priority to the provision of English education to students. In the 1960s, a study on the education needs of Hong Kong indicated that students would benefit more from using Chinese as the MOI at schools (Marsch and Sampson 1963). However, the colonial government still preferred to make English the MOI in most of the local schools. It justified its adherence to English from both the social and economic perspective. Socially, it said that parents preferred “Anglo-Chinese secondary education”, i.e. secondary schools admitting Chinese students and teaching them in English. Economically, it emphasized first the importance of English in international communication, and second people’s knowledge of the language had “undoubted commercial value in Hong Kong” (Hong Kong Government 1965: 83). In 1974, the colonial government published a White Paper on Education Policy rejecting the recommendation made a year earlier that Chinese should be made the MOI at junior secondary level with English being taught as a subject with the same reasons given back a decade ago. The only concession the colonial government made was it allowed the secondary schools to choose its own MOI. Such MOI status continued and received further backing when the Education Commission (EC), a government-appointed advisory body on education matters, published its first Report in 1984 maintaining explicitly the status quo and arguing against making compulsorily Chinese the MOI. In 1990, the EC in its fourth report, however, recommended mandating Chinese as the MOI giving an educational reason – “In catering for the needs of our economy, we believe that the interests of the majority of our students should not be sacrificed” (Education Commission 1990: 102). However, the colonial and HK governments did not implement the EC’s recommendation until 1998, that is, a year after the handover of sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to

China. The HK Government issued the consultation document *Proposed Arrangements for Firm Guidance on Secondary Schools' Medium of Instruction* to invite the public to express their opinion on the use of Chinese as the MOI. The Legislative Council, upon the completion of the consultation, gave unanimous support to using Chinese as the MOI in local secondary schools (Education Department 1997). However, the various stakeholders of the schools including teachers, students and their parents strongly objected to such policy for two main reasons: (1) students' reduced exposure to English would result in a lower English proficiency which would adversely affect their future studies and career; and (2) the schools having Chinese as the MOI and their students would be labeled as less capable.

Despite such opposition, starting from the 1998/99 academic year, all the secondary schools were using Chinese as the MOI (referred to as CMI schools) except the 114 of them which fulfilled the requirements laid down by the Education Department – they were allowed to use English as the MOI (referred to as EMI schools). The number of CMI schools was around 300. The HK Government, with a view to evaluating the effectiveness of the MOI policy, commissioned the EC to conduct a review in 2003. The EC published its *Consultation Document* in February 2005 for public consultation and released the *Report on review of medium of instruction for secondary schools and secondary school places allocation* in December 2005 proposing its basic stand,

In principle, all secondary schools should adopt mother-tongue teaching at junior secondary levels and endeavour to raise students' English proficiency at the same time. There is no objection to individual schools choosing English as the MOI if they fully meet the prescribed criteria. These schools should also enhance their language education, both in Chinese and English. (2005: 16)

That is, the MOI policy would remain unchanged and the schools would still be using either English or Chinese as the MOI – no mixed-code was allowed.

However, as the various stakeholders kept voicing out their concerns over the effectiveness of the MOI policy, in particular the bifurcation of schools into CMI schools and EMI schools, in catering for the needs of individual students (Education Bureau 2009: 2), the Education Bureau (EDB) of the HK Government proposed the fine-tuning arrangements for the MOI policy in 2009. The arrangements allowed schools to use either English, Chinese, or a mixture of both in teaching different classes, subjects and forms as long as the policy objective of “upholding mother-tongue teaching while enhancing students' proficiency in both Chinese and English” (Education Bureau 2009: 1) was upheld and observed. In other words, there would no longer be EMI schools or CMI schools upon the implementation of the fine-tuned MOI policy.

After implementing the original MOI policy which required schools to choose either English or Chinese as the MOI for more than 10 years, the HK Government is now allowing the secondary schools in Hong Kong more flexibility and autonomy in their choice of their MOI provided that professional judgment has been made and accountability is observed. The fine-tuned MOI policy, though favored by the various stakeholders of the secondary education in Hong Kong, may still face different degrees of objection. The officials responsible for promoting and implementing the policy will then need to construct their discourse strategically to either associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from the policy.

3. Literature review

Through discourse, politicians can change the way people think and then make them act in a way which is in the politicians' best interest and against the people's (van Dijk 2006: 360). One of the discursive tools politicians use is the pronominal system (Inigo-Mora 2004). Bull and Fetzer (2006) and Wilson (1990) claim that pronouns are manipulative and that politicians use them for such purposes as indicating, accepting, denying or distancing themselves from political responsibility, and designating and identifying supporters and enemies. Pennycook (1994) also points out that pronouns are favored by politicians because of their implication of power relations. Another reason for pronouns to be favored by politicians is they can perform a persuasive action. Teo (2004) studies the way the Singaporean government promoted its cleaning the country campaigns and finds that the government's choice of pronouns in their various publicity materials successfully persuades the people to share the responsibility by collaborating with the government on one hand and to get them to do their part on the other. The fact that pronouns can serve a persuasive function is partly a consequence of the variability of their scope of reference which is determined by the hearers (Wilson 1990; Zupnick 1994). The hearers – the general public or a particular sector of them – can choose to interpret the politicians' pronoun-laded propositions appearing in various bills and policies as including or excluding them. Such an inclusion and exclusion of people by the choice of pronouns has also been reported elsewhere (e.g Fairclough 1989; Fetzer and Bull 2008; Pyykkö 2002; Zupnick 1994). Kamio (2001) attempts to explain the inclusion effect achieved by the choice of pronouns using a territory of information model. The model first recognizes the existence of a psychological construct the 'perceived space' (Kamio 2001: 1113) of the speaker. The perceived space is divided into two areas, the proximal one (P2) and the distal one (D2). P2 is regarded as the conversational space between the speaker and hearer and is further bifurcated into two subareas – P1, a subarea proximal to the speaker and distal to the hearer; and D1, a subarea distal to the speaker and proximal to the hearer. According to Kamio (2001), when the speaker uses 'we', s/he is concerned with the proximal subarea of the conversational space lying between him/herself and hearer on the one hand, and is attempting to form alliance with the hearer on the other. In other words, the speaker should be attempting to include the hearer. In an earlier study, Kamio (1994) proposes a theory which states that the choice of pronouns will reflect the psychological distance between a proposition and the speaker or hearer as perceived by the speaker/hearer. Thus, an individual will adopt a different linguistic strategy when s/he is putting forward a proposition which s/he considers inside his/her territory than when s/he considers such proposition outside his/her territory (Inigo-Mora 2004). Kamio (1994) offers a list of information which the speaker is likely to associate him/herself with:

1. Information concerning the speaker's direct experience.
2. Information about the speaker's plans, actions, and behavior.
3. Information concerning the speaker's expertise.

The first aim of this paper is to find out what kinds of information the authors tend to associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from.

Research question 1:

What kinds of information concerning the implementation of the MOI policy in Hong Kong do the authors tend to associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from?

The second aim is to explore the way the authors associate themselves with, or dissociate themselves from, political responsibility (Bull and Fetzer 2006; Wilson 1990), i.e. information about their plans, actions and behavior (No. 2 above) through the choice of pronouns, nouns, and other grammatical resources.

Research question 2:

How do the authors associate themselves with or dissociate themselves from the propositions they made in relation to the implementation of the fine-tuning of the MOI policy in Hong Kong with their use of pronouns, nouns and other grammatical resources?

One interesting area which the present study will explore is how the way the authors dissociate themselves from their propositional content differed from that of others – mainly politicians – as discussed in previous research. For example, Bull and Fetzer (2006) describe how a politician can distance himself from a particular political viewpoint by first using ‘We’ instead of ‘I’ when answering a question directed at him by the interviewer, and second switching his/her footing between author, animator and principal (Goffman 1981), resulting in equivocation. The present study, however, explores not only the pronominal choice, but also the lexicogrammatical choice as well (see discussion that follows).

Previous studies have established that a speaker’s choice of pronouns can be affected by factors like the environment in which the speaker is in and the topic the speaker is on (Givon 1976; Wilson and Zeitlyn 1995). The environment and topic factors have been further pursued by Proctor and Su (2011) in their study of the pronominal choice by the four American politicians involved directly in the 2008 presidential election: Sarah Palin, John McCain, Joe Biden and Barack Obama. However, few studies of the factors affecting the choice of pronouns has been approached from a perspective concerning linguistic choice, that is, how the pronominal choice interact with the speakers’ choice of other linguistic resources (e.g. lexicogrammar) in effecting the speakers’ association with or dissociation from the propositions they made. Ho (2010a, b), among the few, finds that an email author could construct desirable personal identities by a suitable combination of choices of pronouns, modality level and/or process types.

The third aim of this paper is to find out and discuss the factors affecting the authors’ degree of association with the propositions they made. Reference will be made to the choice of the process types and modality level in the clauses making up the propositions. That is, we will analyze the discourse by looking at the interpersonal metafunction and ideational metafunction language performs.

Research question 3

(a) Do the authors associate themselves with the propositions they made to the same degree?

(b) Why do the authors associate themselves with the propositions they made to the same / a different degree?

Process types, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), refer to the type of verbs functioning to express the “going-on” (2004: 170), that is, the internal or external experience of the speaker. There are all together six process types, namely (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 170-171) (respective process highlighted in the examples),

Material – construing experience concerning what is going on in the outer world of the speaker

(1) ... we will **conduct** the mid-term review in accordance with EDB Circular Memoranda No. 47/2006 and 48/2006 (document c).

Mental – construing experience concerning what is going on in the inner world of the speaker

(2) We would **consider** holistically the information provided by the schools (document i).

Relational – construing experience concerning identification and classification

(3) As mentioned earlier, I **have** full confidence in the professional MOI arrangements of the education sector (document d).

Behavioral – representing the outer manifestations of inner workings

(4) The students are **laughing** (my own example).

Verbal – representing symbolic relationships enacted in language

(5) ... the Education Bureau have **reiterated** that schools must present detailed information of their school-based MOI arrangements to the stakeholders in a professional manner, ... (document e).

Existential – construing experience concerning existence

(6) There **were** all together 114 secondary schools using English as the medium of instruction (my own example).

The relationship between the choice of process types and the level of commitment to and involvement in an action or event has been demonstrated by Fairclough (1993) and Ho (2010a, b). Using his first-hand experience as an example Fairclough (1993) explains how the use of a material process could convey a stronger sense of action than a relational process to the selection panel when he was campaigning as an election candidate in his workplace. He would then project an image to the voters that he was heavily involved in running an organization and thus others would be more likely to see him as having more commitment to his work. Ho (2010a) discusses the construction of various desirable personal identities with the use of the material process types in the workplace. He points out that with the use of the material process types in the clauses making up their request e-mails sent to others, peers can construct the identity of a responsible member in the workplace. In other words, the peers would appear to be more committed to their work.

Functioning to “construe the region of uncertainty that lies between ‘yes’ and ‘no’” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 147), the modality chosen by a speaker can

indicate to the listener how high an “affinity” (Hodge & Kress 1988: 123) the speaker has for his/her proposition. In other words, the modality chosen can reveal how strongly one is committed to what one says. Ho (2010b) finds that the leaders of a group of teachers in Hong Kong constructed the identity of an accountable leader by choosing a high level of modality in their propositions. For example, when a leader requested her subordinates to attend a departmental meeting and the subsequent training sessions in order to familiarize themselves with the new English syllabus which would be used in a couple of years, she wrote “It is thus important for every member of the panel to know about it and prepare ourselves and our students for it.” (Ho 2010b: 2257). She could have used a lower level of modality as in ‘It should thus be important for ...’ or even ‘It would/might thus be important for ...’. The level of modality, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 116, 128 & 147), can be delineated as Table 1 below shows:

Table 1: Level of modality

	highest	high	medium	low
positive	Absence of modal verbs, e.g. It snows in winter.	must, ought to, need, has / had to, certainly, definitely, no way, always, never	will, would, should, is / was to, probably, usually	can, may, could, might, dare possibly, perhaps, maybe, hardly, sometimes, occasionally, seldom, rarely
negative	absence of modal verbs e.g. it doesn't snow in winter.	mustn't, oughtn't to, can't, couldn't, mayn't, mightn't, hasn't / hadn't to	won't, ouldn't, shouldn't, isn't / wasn't to	needn't, doesn't / didn't + need to, have to

This paper discusses how strongly the government officials committed themselves to their propositions made in speeches or documents by looking at their choice of process types and levels of modality.

Research questions 1 to 3 focus on the clauses having the pronouns (‘I’ and ‘We’) or nouns (‘the EDB’ and ‘the Government’) as the Agent of the process. Research question 4 below, however, has its focus on the clauses having the pronouns or nouns as Beneficiary – the participant of a clause receiving or experiencing the effect of the process.

Research question 4

- (a) Which pronoun(s) or noun(s) were made Beneficiary of the process of the clause?
- (b) For what reason did the authors make the pronoun(s) or noun(s) Beneficiary?

4. Methodology

The following 11 documents relating to the fine-tuning of the MOI for secondary schools in Hong Kong, obtained directly from the website of the HK Government and published since the release of the first review report on the implementation of the MOI policy in December 2005 up till April 2011, were made the data of the present study –

- a. Report on review of medium of instruction for secondary schools and secondary school places allocation (December 2005)
- b. Legislative council brief: Fine-tuning the medium of instruction for secondary schools (May 2009)
- c. Education Bureau Circular No. 6/2009: Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools (June 2009)
- d. Press-release: Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools – Support for Schools Progress in Partnership (October 2009)
- e. Speech by the Secretary for Education, Mr Michael Suen, at the “Knowledge Fair 2009”: Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools – Holistic Support for Teachers” (November 2009)
- f. Enriching our language environment realizing our mission – Fine-tuning of medium of instruction for secondary schools (April 2010)
- g. Speech by Permanent Secretary for Education at the Opening Ceremony of the Reading Fair 2010 (April 2010)
- h. Education Bureau Circular Memorandum No. 105/2010: Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools (June 2010)
- i. Education Bureau Circular Memorandum No. 139/2010: Refined English Enhancement Scheme (August 2010)
- j. Speech by Under Secretary for Education at Fine-tuning the Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools Experience Sharing Session: “Learning English and learning in English: Getting in tune with our students’ needs” (November 2010)
- k. Speech by Permanent Secretary for Education at the Opening Ceremony of the Reading Fair 2011 (April 2011)

Each of the documents was read closely and the following steps were taken:

1. Locating all the clauses containing the first person singular pronoun ‘*I*’ (also ‘*me*’, ‘*my*’ and ‘*mine*’), first person plural pronoun ‘*We*’ (also ‘*us*’, ‘*our*’ and ‘*ours*’), and the nouns ‘*the EDB*’ and ‘*the Government*’;
2. Identifying the type of the process associated directly with the above pronouns or nouns with reference to the functions of the six process types as stated in Literature Review;
3. Determining the level of modality demonstrated by referencing the modal verbs and adverbials used against the levels shown in Table 1;
4. Undertaking a frequency count to determine how often the two pronouns and two nouns co-occurred with (a) each of the process types identified in Step (2); and (b) each of the modality levels identified in Step (3); and
5. Identifying the role and function of the pronouns and nouns – Agent (effecting the process and thus getting things done) or Beneficiary (gaining some kind of effect as a result of the behavior of the Agent) (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004).

Since we are only interested in how the authors associated themselves with or dissociated themselves from the propositions they made, only the exclusive ‘we’ will be studied, that is, in Kamio’s (2001) term, we will be concerned with P1.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. The choice of process type

The frequency count undertaken in Step (4) in the Methodology section above resulted in two tables showing the Agent-process type co-occurrence frequency (Table 2) and the Agent-modality level co-occurrence frequency (Table 3).

Table 2: Agent-process type co-occurrence frequency

	Material process	Mental process	Relational process	Verbal process	Total
I	5 (20.8%)	7 (29.2%)	8 (33.3%)	4 (16.7%)	24 (100%)
We (exclusive)	86 (62.3%)	29 (21%)	5 (3.6%)	18 (12.2%)	138 (100%)
The EDB	33 (80.1%)	5 (12.2%)	1 (2.4%)	2 (4.9%)	41 (100%)
The Government	8 (89%)	--	--	1 (11%)	9 (100%)

Table 2 shows the number and percentage of clauses containing each possible combination of Agent (‘I’, ‘We’, ‘The EDB’, ‘The Government’) and process types (only the material / mental /relational / verbal process, the existential and behavioral processes were not used). The authors demonstrated a systematic preference for Agent-process type co-occurrence. When they made ‘I’ the Agent, they showed the greatest preference for a relational process (the clauses containing ‘I’ as the Agent and a relational process made up 33.3% of all the ‘I’-Agent clauses). As the relational process characterizes and identifies the Agent and the other participant of the clause, it therefore signals the “abstract relationships of class membership and identity in all domains of experience” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 214). Example (7) below shows how the author used the relational process together with ‘I’ as the Agent of the clause (The emphasis as appears in this and other examples are mine).

- (7) Today, I **am** glad to have this opportunity to tell you more about our support measures and the planned monitoring system. (document d)

With the use of the relational process ‘am’, the author was characterizing himself as a member of the class of people who were glad to have the opportunity to address the audience about the support measures and monitoring system.

As the other three process types also co-occurred with ‘I’ with a comparable frequency to that of the relational process, the way these process types were used are also shown in the examples below (document d).

- (8) (verbal process) In May this year, I **announced** that the arrangements for fine-tuning the medium of instruction (MOI) would be implemented starting from the 2010/11 school year at Secondary One (S1) level.
- (9) (material process) I myself also **attended** the workshop.
- (10) (mental process) However, I do **believe** that with concerted efforts and the interest of students in mind, we will surely be embracing the opportunities presented by the fine-tuning and help each and every student to develop his or her potential to the full.

The relational process, however, was not the preferred process type when the authors made 'We', 'The EDB', or 'The Government' the Agent of the clause – it only co-occurred with 'We' in 3.6% of the 'We'-Agent clauses, with 'The EDB' in 2.4% of the 'The EDB'-Agent clauses, and did not co-occur with 'The Government'. The material process, on the other hand, was the mostly preferred process type by the authors – it co-occurred with 'We' in 62.3% of the 'We'-Agent clauses, with 'The EDB' in 80.1% of the 'The EDB'-Agent clauses, and with 'The Government' in 89% of the 'The Government'-Agent clauses. Examples 11 to 13 below show such co-occurrence.

- (11) Moreover, *we* will **conduct** a large-scale longitudinal study to collect data and analyse the modes and effectiveness of the various MOI arrangements. (document e)
- (12) In December 2009, *the EDB* **held** a series of parent briefing sessions at which some 4,000 parents learnt how to select schools in accordance with the abilities of their children. (document f)
- (13) For schools to grasp the golden opportunity through MOI fine-tuning to achieve this target, *the Government* has **invested** substantially in developing support measures for schools. (document j)

The material processes chosen by the authors indicated a higher level of activity than the relational process as we have just witnessed in examples 11 to 13 above. In other words, when the authors chose to make 'I' the Agent, they showed the strongest preference for a relational process illustrating identification or classification; when they chose to make 'We', 'The EDB', or 'The Government' the Agent, the preference for a relational process was replaced by one for a material process illustrating some form of action involving a higher level of activity.

Why did the authors demonstrate a differential pattern in the association of the process types with Agent? Judging from the frequency of use of the material process – the type of process which indicates a higher level of activity and thus requiring the Agent of the process a higher level of commitment, we can see that the authors tended to demonstrate a committed attitude to the implementation of the fine-tuning of the MOI policy in a collective capacity. That is, when they made 'We', 'The EDB' or 'The Government' the Agent of the clause, they showed a remarkably higher frequency in

using a material process. The percentages of clauses containing the Agent ‘I’, ‘We’, ‘The EDB’, or ‘The Government’ and a material process were respectively 20.8%, 62.3%, 80.1% and 89%. The higher the collectiveness of the Agent, the higher the percentage of such an association. It suggests that while the authors were not willing to commit themselves to the implementation of the fine-tuning of the MOI policy personally, they were comparatively more willing to do so collectively. A similar observation has been recorded in Bolivar’s (1999) study in which the use of pronouns of two Venezuelan politicians in political interviews and speeches on different occasions are examined. It is found that the politicians tend to distance themselves from future responsibility by using ‘We’ instead of ‘I’.

5.2. The choice of modality level

Table 3 below shows the authors’ choice of modality levels in the clauses denoting future actions. The number and percentage of clauses containing each possible combination of Agent (‘I’ / ‘We’ / ‘The EDB’ / ‘The Government’) and modality level (highest / high / medium / low), as well as the linguistic realization of the modality level, are shown.

Table 3: Agent-modality co-occurrence frequency

	highest	high	medium	low	total
I	--	--	‘will’ – 1 (100%)	--	1 (100%)
We	--	‘must’ – 1 (1.2%) ‘need to’ – 3 (3.6%)	‘will’ – 65 (78.3%) ‘should’ – 2 (2.4%) ‘are (not) going to’ – 2 (2.4%)	‘would’ – 6 (7.2%) ‘may’ – 1 (1.2%) ‘do not/cannot rule out the possibility of’ – 3 (3.6%)	83 (100%)
The EDB	--	--	‘will’ – 22 (91.6%) ‘should’ – 1 (4.2%)	‘would’ – 1 (4.2%)	24 (100%)
The Government	--	--	--	--	--

The authors predominantly used a medium level of modality in signaling to others how strongly they were committed to the future actions as represented in the propositions containing the modal elements – the percentages of propositions using a medium modality level with ‘We’, and ‘The EDB’ as the Agent were respectively 83.1% and 95.8% (that with ‘I’ as Agent is not included as there was only one such proposition). The high modality level was only found to associate with ‘We’, but then only 4.8 percent of the propositions saw such an association. The low modality level, like the high modality level, was not commonly associated with the three entities – it was only used in respectively 12% and 4.2% of the ‘We’-Agent and ‘The EDB’-Agent clauses.

Table 3 also shows two interesting phenomena. First, the authors had not committed themselves to future actions in the capacity of, or on behalf of the Government. Second, the authors had not shown unreserved commitment – the use of the highest modality level was not found in all the 11 documents.

Why did the authors demonstrate a differential pattern in the association of the choice of modality level with Agent? Having established that the choice of modality level can be a reflection of the authors' willingness to commit themselves to the proposition (Hodge and Kress 1988; Ho 2010a, b), we can see that in most cases the authors chose the medium modality level. They tended not to commit themselves too much or too little to their own propositions concerning future responsibilities and when they did, they only did so in collective capacity – 'We' was occasionally associated with both the high and low levels of modality (only 4.8% and 12% of the 'We'-Agent clauses had respectively a high modality level and low modality level), and 'The EDB' was associated very rarely with a low modality level (only 4.2% of the 'The EDB'-Agent clauses had a low modality level).

The results suggest that the authors would not be willing to commit themselves strongly to future responsibilities in personal capacity. They distanced themselves from these responsibilities using a low modality level. They would be willing to commit themselves strongly to future responsibilities very occasionally only when they involved others in making the commitment – 'We' involved the authors as well as some others in the government. They associated themselves (the whole group of personnel) with these responsibilities using a high modality level.

The highest level of modality, which can be translated into unreserved commitment, had not been used by the authors regardless of the Agent choice. The absence of this high modality level should not be surprising as it would not be wise for the government officials to commit themselves unreservedly to the future which is subject to a basket of uncertainties of various natures like political, economic or environment. Any of these uncertainties, or any combination of them, could in some way make it necessary for the government to change its course of action or decision. Following the same line of reasoning, it was not unnatural for the authors not to commit the government to any extent to future responsibilities – 'The Government' as Agent was not seen to commit itself to the future.

5.3. The non-agent participant role – beneficiary

It is found that only 'We' and 'The EDB' were represented in the clauses as Beneficiary – the participant "to whom or for whom the process is said to take place" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 293). While functioning as Beneficiary, 'We' is represented grammatically as 'us', and 'The EDB', however, does not need a different representation. 'The EDB' and 'us' have assumed the Beneficiary role in the 11 documents 16 times and 4 times respectively. Examples 14 to 17 below show how they are used as Beneficiary in the documents.

- (14) We will set up an advisory panel drawn from the education sector to consider observations and findings made at the focused inspections and **make recommendations to the EDB** on follow-up actions. (document c)
- (15) Schools are required to **report annually to the EDB** their school-based MOI arrangements including any subsequent revisions. (document c)

- (16) I am very pleased that the relevant school councils and school head associations **have reached a consensus with us** earlier to appeal to schools not to emphasize the names of "CMI School" or "EMI School" any more. (document e)
- (17) In a moment, Dr Angel Lin, Dr KK Tong and Dr Evelyn Man **will share with us** their valuable insights and experiences on how to use English as the MOI to teach non-language subjects ... (document j)

Why did the authors frequently make 'The EDB' the Beneficiary? 'The EDB' was made Beneficiary of a clause a total of 16 times. On 15 such occasions, it was depicted as the authority to which schools or their heads of the English Department should report, submit documents for vetting or approval, provide explanation for their decisions, or make recommendations. Extract 5 has already shown that 'The EDB', as Beneficiary, was the authority to receive recommendations from an advisory panel and to receive reports from secondary schools detailing their MOI arrangements. Examples 18 & 19 below shows two more occasions on which 'The EDB' was depicted as the authority with power.

- (18) As such, **they will be required to provide the EDB with explanations** whenever necessary and must review and revise their arrangements where appropriate and if situation warrants. (document f)
- (19) Applicant schools are also requested to complete the attached "Application Form" and **submit it together with their school-based proposal (Annex 2) to the EDB** by e-mail (e-mail address: refined_ees@edb.gov.hk) before the closing dates of the respective batches of applications. (document i)

Example (18) shows that secondary schools (they) are required to explain to the EDB their MOI arrangements; Example (19) shows that secondary schools will need to submit their application for adopting English as the MOI to the EDB. On both occasions, 'The EDB' was depicted as the authority with the legitimate power to request an explanation from schools or to vet and approve schools' applications. Such a depiction was necessary for at least two reasons – one administrative and the other political. Administratively, only the Bureau, but not the individual author would be seen as the right entity to be vested with such a considerable magnitude of power to require schools or advisory panels to report to it their work progress, to explain to it their decisions, or to submit applications to it for vetting or approval. Politically, the individual author should not be the one to possess the right and power for carrying out the above work. Hong Kong is a rule-by-law city and government officials are required legally to strictly adhere to rules and regulations in the course of discharging their duties. In other words, the exercise of power is closely governed by law, rules and regulations; and that it is not up to individual official or officials to decide whether or not the schools could adopt a particular MOI or the recommendations made by an advisory panel were to be taken – it should be the decision of the department or bureau.

5.4. A specific and unique role – the government

While various types of commitments were found to be pledged by the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘We’, and noun ‘The EDB’, as Examples 7 to 12 above have shown, the financial commitment, however, was only made when ‘The Government’ was either made the Agent of the clause or transformed through grammatical metaphor from a Thing (a noun) to an Epithet (an adjective) through grammatical metaphor as in ‘the Government’s injection’ (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Examples 20 & 21 show such a commitment pledge.

- (20) For schools to grasp the golden opportunity through MOI fine-tuning to achieve this target, *the Government* has **invested** substantially in developing support measures for schools (Example 13 reproduced here). (document j)
- (21) Since 2006, about \$700 million has been approved after the **Government’s injection** into the Language Fund for more than 400 secondary schools to join the English Enhancement Scheme. (document j)

Why did the authors make the Agent only ‘The Government’ when financial commitment was concerned? ‘The Government’ has only assumed the Agent role and appeared a total of nine times in the 11 documents studied. The authors had not committed the government to future responsibilities (see Table 3 above), they only associated the government with past events, on-going tasks or the provision of monetary resources. Examples 22 to 24 below show such association.

- (22) In May 2009, the Government **announced** that the arrangements for fine-tuning the medium of instruction (MOI) for secondary schools would be implemented with effect from the 2010/11 school year. (document f)
- (23) The Government **accepted** these recommendations and agreed to implement the revised MOI arrangements in secondary schools from September 2010 onwards. (document f)
- (24) The Government **has been promoting** the use of the mother tongue as the MOI in secondary schools since the early 1980s. (document f)

Examples 22 & 23 show that the government did something in the past – it *announced* some arrangements (Example 22), and *accepted* some recommendations and *agreed* to implement the MOI arrangements (Example 23). Example 24 shows what the government has been doing – *promoting* the use of mother tongue. The government has not been represented as being committed to future responsibilities.

The government, on the other hand, is found to play a unique role among the four pronouns or nouns – it was the source of financial support for the implementation of the MOI initiative. The authors had never once assumed such role in personal capacity (‘I’) or such collective capacity as represented by ‘We’ or ‘The EDB’. We have already seen how ‘The Government’ was associated with the provision of financial support in Examples 20 & 21 above. Example 25 below shows another instance in which ‘The Government’ was made the Agent for providing monetary support.

- (25) Following MOI fine-tuning, the Government has **earmarked additional funding** for a two-year Refined English Enhancement Scheme. (document j)

The assumption of such a unique role by the government (represented by ‘The Government’ at the lexicogrammatical stratum) should be seen as natural and normal. The various bureaus of the HK Government receive funding allocation from the government annually and the amount of the funding is decided by the Secretary for Finance and announced in the annual Budget the Secretary delivered at the Legislative Council. The bureaus themselves do not generate income, and the officials deployed to the bureaus do not work for revenue, they mainly provide various kinds of services mainly to the people of Hong Kong. It is therefore normal and natural for the authors (1) not to associate the personal pronouns ‘I’, ‘We’ and the noun ‘The EDB’ with the provision of monetary resources in support of the MOI policy implementation, and (2) to only make ‘The Government’ responsible for such provision.

4. Conclusion

While previous studies have focused on the distancing effect that results between the speaker and some other groups of people from the use of an exclusive ‘we’ (e.g. Reyes-Rodríguez 2008), the present study reports on the distancing effect achieved in political speeches or written documents through the use of first person singular and plural pronouns and the choice of process types and modality levels. The paper discussed the way the authors associated themselves with the propositions they made through a combination of choice of pronouns, process types and modality levels. They expressed such an association with the first person singular or plural pronouns ‘I’ or ‘We’, plus a material process and / or a high level of modality. On the contrary, if such an association was not desired or appropriate, first they could combine the personal pronouns with a process type involving less activity than a material process like a mental process or a relational process, or a low modality level. Second, they could use a material process in combination with a collective noun – ‘The EDB’ or ‘The Government’ – instead of a pronoun. ‘The EDB’ and ‘The Government’ were made the Agent for the highest percentage of clauses in which a material process was used. These two entities, however, had not been found to be associated with a high modality level. That is, the authors did not commit the bureau or the government strongly to future responsibilities. Despite such an absence of strong commitment to the future, these two entities were portrayed either as one with strong administrative power or the only one with the power to manage monetary resources. ‘The EDB’ was the entity to which schools and advisory panels needed to report to or were held accountable, whereas ‘The Government’ was the entity from which funding for the implementation of MOI policy came from.

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