Evaluation in English-Medium Medical Book Reviews

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is twofold: 1) to identify the evaluative speech acts, either positive or negative, contained in a corpus of 30 English-written medical book reviews published in *The British Medical Journal* in the period 2000-2009; 2) to analyze the linguistic-rhetorical strategies used to convey this evaluation. Our main results illustrate that various mitigating strategies are used not only to soften criticism, but also to help maintain social harmony and solidarity with the reviewees. Moreover, negative evaluation is on many occasions voiced at aspects outside the book reviewed, which would mean that apart from showing their expertise in the field tackled, book reviewers also want to discuss certain issues of their concern and to put forward their cultural background.

KEYWORDS:
Book reviews, medical journals, evaluation, critical discourse analysis.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo tiene dos objetivos: 1) identificar los actos de habla evaluativos, positivos y negativos, en un corpus de reseñas de 30 libros médicos escritas en inglés y publicadas en el *British Medical Journal* en el periodo 2000-2009; 2) analizar las estrategias lingüístico-retóricas utilizadas para transmitir estos actos de habla. Nuestros resultados principales muestran que no sólo se utilizan diversos mecanismos lingüístico-retóricos para atenuar los actos críticos, sino también para ayudar a mantener un clima de armonía social y solidaridad con los autores de los libros reseñados. Además, la evaluación negativa se dirige en numerosas ocasiones a aspectos ajenos a los libros reseñados, lo que implica que aparte de mostrar su competencia en el campo abordado, los reseñadores también desean debatir determinados temas de su interés y hacer gala de su cultural general.

PALABRAS CLAVE:
Reseñas de libros, revistas médicas, evaluación, análisis crítico del discurso.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Evaluation being an important feature of language, it is not surprising that it has been the object of many studies, some of them compiled by Thompson & Hunston (2000). Because of its *elusiveness* (Bondi & Mauranen, 2003: 269) and complexity, the concept of evaluation has overlapped with other concepts such as, for example, *appraisal* (Martin & White, 2005; Painter, 2003), *modality* (Hyland, 1998; Stubbs, 1996), or *stance* (Charles, 2003; Hyland, 2005). Despite these different headings, a point that all them share is that "whenever speakers (or writers) say anything, they encode their attitude towards it" (Hyland & Diani, 2009: 4; Stubbs, 1996: 197)[1]. Broadly speaking, it can be said that evaluation is used to refer to "the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities that he or she is talking about" (Thompson & Hunston, 2000: 5). Such broad conceptualization allows the inclusion within the concept of evaluation not only of appraisal, modality or stance, but also of the values ascribed to the entities and propositions which are evaluated. Moreover, evaluation plays a vital role in stimulating research and contributes to progression and refinement of scientific knowledge (Sniderman, 1999; Vandenbroucke & de Craen, 2001).

If we take into account the primary sense assigned to evaluation, it is quite understandable that one of the academic genres in which this concept has been widely studied is that of the book review, the major purpose of which is to inform readers about new books in a given discipline and "to evaluate the scholarly work of a professional peer within the scholarly community" (Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998: 40). Along the same lines, Motta-Roth (1998: 33) remarks that a book review is "an overall structure of information (i.e., description and evaluation of a book) that is commonly associated with the genre as a pattern of discourse". For Hyland (2000: 41) book reviews are "centrally evaluative", whereas for Gea Valor (2000: 12) a book review is "a discourse type which basically involves description, information and evaluation", and for de Carvalho (2001: 262) "the genre is characterized by both descriptive and evaluative functions". Apart from the above-mentioned studies, the academic book review genre has also been studied in different disciplines and from different perspectives: cross-linguistic/cross-cultural (Giannoni, 2006; Salager-Meyer et al., 2007a/b; Moreno & Suárez, 2008), cross-disciplinary (Tse & Hyland, 2006), diachronic/intercultural (Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz-Ariza, 2004; Alcaraz-Ariza & Salager-Meyer, 2005), etc.

The quite extensive body of research has then put forward that this "direct, public, and often critical, encounter with a particular text, and therefore of its author, who must be considered as a primary audience of the review" (Hyland, 2000: 41), implies that, from a pragmatic standpoint, book reviews pose a serious face threat for both writers and readers and their interpersonal relationships (Brown & Levinson, 1987). On the one hand, book reviews basically involve the assessment of a colleague's work. On the other hand, they stand out as an important rhetorical means to challenge textual authority for the general benefit of the discipline, and to establish rapport and solidarity with the members of the academic

community. In addition, and if we draw on Halliday's functional view of language (1994), it can be stated that book reviews fulfill two primary functions: 1) an ideational function where book reviewers express their opinions on the book they are reviewing; 2) an interpersonal function that refers to the effort book reviewers make to strike a balance between "their praising comments and their criticisms and suggestions for improvement" (Gea Valor, 2000: 25) or, in Hyland's (2000: 41) and Salager-Meyer et al.'s (2007b: 1761) parlance, "between critique and collegiality".

2. PURPOSE AND CORPUS

As Shaw (2009: 217) puts forward, book reviews are a *disinterested genre* in the sense that "to be credible they must have evaluations with both positive and negative polarity". This is why our purpose in this study was twofold:

1. To identify the positive and negative evaluative speech acts contained in our corpus, which involves identifying the evaluative language used by reviewers to express an opinion, either positive or negative, on the book under review.

2. To explore the most salient linguistic-rhetorical strategies employed by reviewers when assessing the books under review.

In studies of this kind, it is recommended to draw the sample texts from top-ranking journals because the articles published in these journals have undergone a strict peer review and editorial scrutiny (Connor, 2004). Such a procedure allows us to assert that the book reviews selected are fairly representative of the journal genre in content/style and that the texts are "situationally effective" (Bazerman, 1994: 23) as well as the results of an "expert performance" (Bazerman, 1994: 131). Following these recommendations, and given that our aim was to observe how evaluative speech acts on the books under review were conveyed, we decided to describe a corpus of medical book reviews published in a well-known international journal. This will ensure that the texts were written by successful writers or, at least, were considered acceptable in their final shape by the gatekeepers of the corresponding disciplinary community. This is why we randomly drew our corpus from a large circulation, authoritative and prestigious general medical journal such as the British Medical Journal.

Three main criteria were used to form the corpus: 1) a manageable sample was collected since the texts were going to be submitted to a manual qualitative analysis; 2) book reviews which were written by a single reviewer were chosen so as to eliminate individual differences in the use of lexico-grammatical features; 3) the number of book reviews was conditioned by the on-line availability of issues. The resulting sample of texts consisted then of 30 medical book reviews published in the period 2000-2009, the size of which amounts to 14,894 running words, with an average number of 496.50 running words per book review. To locate patterns that imply any kind of evaluation stance on the writer's part, each of these 30 book reviews was used in its entirety as our basic unit of analysis and was scanned manually.

3. METHODOLGY

A definition of both positive and negative evaluative speech acts is in order here. A positive speech act is "defined as an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute, skill, etc., which is positively valued by the writer" (Hyland, 2000: 44). By contrast, a negative speech act is to be understood as a statement that reflects a discrepancy between the stance of a writer and that of another scientist or research team. Making connections with Halliday's (1994) framework of functions of language (the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual), our definition of positive and negative evaluative acts falls therefore within the scope of the propositional plane of language, which would perform both its ideational and interpersonal functions. Our study is thus focused on evaluative language that "enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them" (Halliday, 1994: 101). Such definitions are related to several criteria of evaluation, the presence or absence of which can be used to assess a book positively or negatively: coverage, depth, strength, focus, consistency, coherence, balance, interest, usefulness/relevancy to a given field/potential audience, reader-friendliness, clarity/conciseness of style, organization of contents, references, diagrams, illustrations, writer's/editor's prestige/experience/expertise, price, etc.

Several of these criteria are illustrated in the following examples[2] which encode three positive speech acts [Example (1)] and two positive speech acts [Examples (2) and (3)].

(1) The *excellent figures* for this book present *clear summary data*, with *detailed legends* providing any necessary explanation.

The foci of positive comments included in Example (1) are the figures, data and legends included in the book and the criteria used to assess them positively are the excellence of the figures, the clarity of the data, and the completeness of the legends.

(2) There is also an impressive array of references and a useful glossary.

The targets of positive remarks contained in Example (2) are the bibliography, which is one of the most common aspects evaluated by reviewers, and the glossary. The criteria used to assess both elements positively are the numerous bibliographic references and the usefulness of the glossary.

(3) These chapters are written by *experienced practitioners* (including consultants) and *comprehensively discuss* the historical background, philosophy, scientific evidence base, clinical application, and often patients' experiences of each therapy.

In Example (3) the positive assertions refer on the one hand to the experience of the authors who wrote some chapters of the book under review and, on the other, to the detailed discussion of some issues. With reference to the positive remark addressed towards the book's authors, it confirms that "congratulating the author or praising the work of the author is another way of recommending the book" (Motta-Roth, 1998: 111).

If Examples (1), (2), and (3) illustrate positive speech acts, Examples (4), (5), and (6) on the contrary include negative speech acts:

(4) Measuring 125×85 mm and weighing in at 0.8 kg, *this is no pocket reference book* for those who find themselves resuscitating a child before the ambulance arrives or en route to hospital.

In Example (4) the criterion used to assess the reviewed book negatively is the weight of the book.

(5) The authors fail, however, to consider people getting so angry and depressed about risks because their fears are inflated by books like Priceless that have a jaded view of modern society.

The criterion to negatively evaluate the book under review in Example (5) is the authors' erroneous opinion on a given issue.

(6) The text, however, is vexatious. The author has the irritating habit of referring to the likes of neurophysiologist Ronald Melzack as *Ron* throughout the book, in much the same way that used car salesmen use your first name in an overly familiar way.

In Example (6) what is criticized is the style of writing. Moreover, this example would illustrate that providing reasons to justify criticisms (and also compliments) helps the reviewers to maintain their positive face and makes them come across as rational individuals who evaluate books on the basis of their expertise and knowledge of the subject (Gea Valor & del Saz Rubio, 2000-2001). In addition, the clause *The author has the irritating habit of referring to the likes of neurophysiologist Ronald Melzack as "Ron" throughout the book* supports the previous negative comment and can be considered as a case of evaluation serving the interpersonal function of discourse. This utterance thus can be said to 'label' an evaluation retrospectively (Moreno & Suárez, 2008; Charles, 2003). This is why it was not considered as an act of evaluation in the strict propositional sense since it helped to support propositional meaning created in the text itself rather than to add further propositional meaning. Worth pointing out is also the sarcastic and ironic tone used when formulating this negative comment, something which was found to be a characteristic rhetorical feature of end-of-19th and mid-20th century English-written book reviews (Salager-Meyer, 2001) and of Spanish-written book reviews (Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz-Ariza, 2004).

The approach adopted in our analysis is further illustrated by Examples (7) and (8):

(7) *This is a valuable reference* for *a topic poorly covered in mainstream textbooks* and is a compelling read for clinicians who wish to develop the skills to manage affected women capably and sensitively.

Example (7) shows two evaluative speech acts, one positive focusing on the book reviewed and one negative focusing on books different from the book reviewed. This example also contains a very common resource such as that of referring to a potential readership which constitutes a criterion used by linguists to praise news publications (Motta-Roth, 1998; Hyland, 2000). Moreover, the comparison established between the positive adjective

valuable, which stresses the merit of the reviewed book for covering a given topic against other publications that *poorly covered* it, views scientific progress as an increasing process whereby new publications generally correct and integrate established knowledge (Kuhn, 1970). Likewise and as in Example (6), the clauses *is a compelling read for clinicians who wish to develop the skills to manage affected women capably and sensitively* can be said to reinforce the previous instance of positive evaluation and were not coded as new speech acts.

(8) I enjoyed reading this book and <u>believe</u> that it will be a useful guide for residents, graduate students, physicians, and scientists approaching these remarkable anucleate cellular fragments from different perspectives.

In Example (8), which consists in one positive speech act, the emotively-charged clause I enjoy reading this book on the one hand apparently contravenes the impersonal stance normally assumed in academic writing and, on the other hand, anticipates the praise that follows. The use of the first singular personal pronoun I and of the epistemic verb believe allows the book reviewer to simultaneously intrude into the text and soften his/her positive statement, which is presented as a personal, and hence, subjective rather than objective opinion.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Qualitative analysis

In all the here-above mentioned examples evaluation was explicitly formulated by means of the standard semantic meaning, either positive or negative, of the adjectives, nouns, verbs and adverbs used to qualify the different elements evaluated (excellent, clear, impressive, experienced, no, jaded, vexatious, etc.). Still, evaluative speech acts are not always so easy to identify. One the one hand, evaluation is very often characterized by its implicit nature and, on the other hand, it is not always encoded by lexico-grammatical means. Hence, if we want to identify the evaluative (positive as well as negative) remarks contained in a corpus, we need to take a corpus-driven approach (Butler, 2004), i.e., an approach based on the manual analysis of the texts which takes the context into account. In other words, the identification of positive and negative evaluation is very often inferred from a pragmatic point of view, such as in Example (9):

(9) This meticulous book, with a copious bibliography and references, provides much concrete detail (including a table of relevant cases from 1788 to the present) that will illuminate ongoing discussion of medical ethics.

Following our definition of evaluative acts, we can first say that Example (9) is formed by a sequence of three acts of evaluation that focus on the book proper, its bibliography and the details it contains. In the case of the bibliography, there is no doubt that it is positively assessed thanks to the positive semantic value of the adjective *copious*. As for the information

contained in the book, it is also positively evaluated because it is preceded by the positive adjective *concrete*. Likewise, the preceding qualifying adverb *much* acquires a positive orientation not only because its juxtaposition to the adjective *concrete* (*much concrete*), but also thanks to the two following clauses *including a table of relevant cases* and *will illuminate ongoing discussion of medical ethics*. Like in Examples (6) and (7), both clauses serve to reinforce the evaluation contained in *provides much concrete detail* and can, therefore, be categorized as retrospective labels which do not add any propositional meaning. Finally, the positive remarks *copious bibliography and references* and *much concrete detail* also help to disambiguate the adjective *meticulous*, the meaning of which may be positive ('careful') or negative ('fastidious') depending upon the context, and interpret it as positive.

Apart from being explicitly, implicitly and straightforwardly formulated, speech acts may also be indirectly expressed through a series of different linguistic and rhetorical devices which signal the writer's reluctance to present propositional information categorically. Some of these different mitigating strategies used to tone down the interpersonal damage that may be caused by critical comments are illustrated by the following examples:

(10) This is not my central point. <u>Rather</u>, it is that her account is an insufficient one for the purposes of presenting a picture of healthcare accountability in Britain.

(11) <u>*Probably*</u>—*politicians are too often fooled by their own rhetoric* (remember Mrs Thatcher's famous pronouncement that "we are a grandmother"?).

In Examples (10) and (11) the sentence adverbial *rather* and the adverb of probability *probably* function as hedges, the purpose of which is to mitigate the negative evaluation.

(12) Their argument, though powerful, has weaknesses.

In Example (12) the softening of the illocutionary force of the criticism is obtained thanks to the so-called "good news-bad news" (Belcher, 1995: 145) or "polar comments in praise-criticism pairs" (Hyland, 2000: 55), where criticism prefaced by praise serves to reduce the face-threatening effect of the negative speech act (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

(13) The choice of words is always intensely individual and *many of those suggested* <u>*will*</u> <u>*seem*</u> *awkward to* <u>*some*</u> <u>*readers*</u>, *but the enthusiasm of the authors is infectious and their encouragement to select and try just two or three is persuasive.*

In Example (13) five linguistic-rhetorical strategies are used to attenuate criticism: 1) the modal verb *will*; 2) the epistemic verb *seem*; 3) the quantifier *some*; 4) criticism followed by praise; and 5) the attribution of the critical comment to an abstract reader or general audience, which permits the reviewer to diffuse his/her link with the face threatening act at the same time that he/she encourages readers to accept criticism by "assuming common ground as membership of a community dedicated to particular standards of scholarship and a shared pursuit of knowledge" (Hyland, 2000: 58; Hyland & Diani, 2009: 11).

(14) *Given its heavy emphasis on basic science*, <u>*I suspect*</u> *that this book will not be of great interest to practicing dermatologists*, since similar research-focused review articles - written by many of the same authors who contributed to the book- are already readily

retrievable via PubMed. *This book will, however, be an extremely welcome and valuable addition to any medical school library, as well as to libraries that are housed within academic departments of dermatology, immunology, rheumatology, and pediatrics.*

Like Example (6) here-above, Example (14) contains reasons to justify criticism. It also includes three softening devices. First, criticism is conveyed as a personal opinion, which allows the reviewer to adopt a less threatening authorial voice and to react as an ordinary reader rather than an expert (Hyland, 2000). This implies that others may hold alternative positions which are equally valid. Second, and the same as Example (13), it contains an epistemic verb (*suspect*) and a criticism-praise pair in which praise is introduced by the adversative conjunct *however* that serves as a counterbalance of the previously-stated criticism. Finally, and like in Example (8), the recommendation to a potential audience included in the positive comment is enhanced by the boosting adverb *extremely* and the adjective *valuable* which show that the tension possibly generated in the negative speech act is going to get released by providing immediate praise, which is effectively the case. Moreover, positive remarks similar to those included in this example are typical of the closing sections of book reviews because "a concluding positive comment not only serves to offer a stronger endorsement of the volume, but also reconfirms an attention to reader sensitivities, creating a socially appropriate solidarity framework for the entire text." (Hyland, 2000: 54).

Other rhetorical strategies used to redress face-threatening acts are illustrated in Examples (15), (16), and (17):

(15) *The evidence base for the book is <u>unclear</u> and selective.*

In Example (15) mitigation is obtained by using the adjective *unclear* which "condenses its negativity into a private prefix" instead of using "a negated form such as *confused* (Giannoni, 2009: 29).

(16) *Underestimating the power of chance, <u>we</u> see patterns where none exist and causal relationships where there are none. <u>We</u> overvalue evidence that confirms <u>our</u> hypotheses; and instead of searching, like true scientists, for information that will destroy <u>our</u> hypotheses <u>we</u> look for evidence that will confirm them.*

In Example (16) the plural self-reference pronouns *we* and *our* which refer to a single reviewer could be termed as *exclusive* and could be explained as a rhetorical strategy to reduce their degree of responsibility for their negative comments and at the same time to highlight the relevance of their contribution to the field. Nevertheless, these *we* items could also be called *inclusive* since they may show the reviewer's self-alignment with other researchers who share the same problem. In both cases the use of these plural personal pronouns indicates an intention to reduce personal attribution although it may not always be the self-effacing device it is often thought to be (Hyland, 2001) since whenever one speaks for a larger group "there is always this double assumption of authority and communality" (Pennycook, 1994: 174). On the one hand, this strategy of exclusiveness or inclusiveness (Fortanet, 2004; Kuo, 1999; Pennycook, 1994, *inter alia*) may be viewed as an alternative,

less direct means, by which book reviewers claim common knowledge with the scientific community (Myers, 1989) and, on the other hand, it also allows them to reduce their personal intrusion and at the same time to emphasize the importance that should be given to their statements.

(17) While the prospect of greater health service funding will appeal to many of <u>us</u>, *could <u>we</u> really endorse a government spending policy that prioritised population life expectancy over social reforms and the possibility of greater social justice*?

In Example (17) and apart of the inclusion of the plural personal pronoun *we*, which functions as a softening device like in Example (16), the use of a question that leaves the reader to supply negative evaluation allows the reviewer to generalize the problem that he/she finds to wider scholarship.

4.2. Quantitative analysis

A careful reading of the 30 book reviews examined shows that 29 out of 30 contain positive and negative evaluation, which agrees with the guidelines for submitting book reviews provided by, for instance, the *Linguist List* where, in addition to summarising the book's purpose and contents, reviewers are asked to "point out some of the merits and defects of the book, identify problems, ask questions, and present positive or negative implications of the analyses contained in it" (*Linguist List*, 2009: 2)[3].

Before discussing our quantitative findings, we would like to mention a book review which is not in agreement with the guidelines of the *Linguist List*. This review refers to a book entitled *The Oxford Companion to the Body* and it contains 22 positive speech acts, all but one being formulated directly. The book review opens and closes as follows:

(18) First things first: *this book is a hugely good read*, whether **you** are looking for something specific or just browsing. *You will learn the most weird and wonderful facts—as well as sound and up to date science—about the human body, and answers to <u>almost</u> any question*.

(19) *It can take up literally hours just to leaf around, finding out all **you** ever wanted to know about Islam, Bobbitry (remember the man whose severed member spawned a thousand jokes?), body snatchers, brassieres, and so forth. This volume is perfect for browsing, simultaneously comprehensive and eclectic, and great fun*!

Interspersed everywhere in the text is the second personal pronoun *you*, a linguistic feature very common in advertising discourse. In this sense, this text is similar to a blurb, an interested genre whose communicative purpose is to provide a description of the content and to promote the work (see, among others, Basturkmen, 2009; Gea-Valor, 2005; Gesuato, 2007). It could also be included within the so-called 'review response', the purpose of which is to inform the reader about the content of a new publication in very positive terms (Lorés Sanz, 2009)[4].

As has been pointed out in previous lines, the analytical framework adopted in our study of evaluative meaning has to do with the propositional plane of language. Following this methodology we counted a total of 460 evaluative speech acts with an average of 15.33 evaluative speech acts per book review. According to Table 1, of this total of evaluative speech acts, 270 are positive and 190 are negative.

Evaluative speech acts	Positive	Negative
Directly formulated	243 (52.83%)	104 (22.60%)
Indirectly formulated	27 (5.87%)	86 (18.70%)
Total = 460	270 (58.70%)	190 (41.30%)

Table 1. Number of evaluative speech acts.

The fact that our corpus contains 460 evaluative speech acts illustrates once again that book reviews are an essentially evaluative genre and that from a pragmatic standpoint they must be regarded as highly face-threatening since they essentially involve the assessment of colleague's works. The presence of positive and negative remarks also contributes to the dual purpose of book reviews which consists in providing "an overview of the text for prospective readers while raising particular problematic issues for the field" (Hyland, 2000: 48). That is, praise and criticism are elements essential to the dynamic process of scientific knowledge, the latter being an "integral feature of the book review genre" (Hyland 2000: 61) and "the common thread that holds this genre together." (Giannoni 2002: 356).

Our quantitative analysis also shows that the book reviews analysed contain more praise (58.70%) than blame (41.30%), a point that has already been corroborated in previous studies (Hyland, 2000; Giannoni, 2007; Lorés Sanz, 2009; Moreno & Suárez, 2008; Shaw, 2009). Apart from creating solidarity, rapport and consensus seeking, the frequent use of praise to soften criticism is a convention frequently followed in most review genres (Johnson & Roen, 1992). Likewise, Table 1 shows that direct positive speech acts (52.83%) are more than twice as numerous as direct negative speech acts (22.60%) and that indirect criticism (18.70%) outnumbers by far indirect praise (5.87%). The difference between direct (52.83%) and indirect praise (5.87%) is worth pointing out, which would be in agreement with Giannoni (2009: 30) in the sense that "reviewers feel a need to employ indirect realizations almost only for negative comments". In addition, the low difference between direct (22.60%) and indirect criticism (18.70%) apparently contradicts other studies on book reviews which reported that a large part of negative speech acts were mitigated (Hyland, 2000; Gea-Valor, 2000). This discrepancy could be attributed to the fact that Hyland and Gea-Valor only analysed epistemic modality in fields other than medicine and in a different period. By contrast, this result would be in line with Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz-Ariza (2004) and Salager-Meyer et al. (2007a/b)'s studies on medical book reviews which showed a low frequency of hedged negative comments.

A further fact to be pointed out is that out of the 190 negative speech acts 84 are formulated at external aspects, i.e., outside the book reviewed, as in the following examples:

(20) *It's one of many indictments of the English libel system that whoever has the most money will usually win.*

(21) Despite growing public alarm about *this corrupt entanglement*, *the vast majority of professional associations remain firmly in bed with their commercial sponsors.*

(22) In the case of gambling, tobacco, alcohol, and possibly cannabis, *the vested financial interests have a strong lobbying effect, working assiduously to ensure further reduction in state control.*

The presence of external criticism could mean that on some occasions the medical book review may become a springboard for bringing up some issues of concern for its writer. Apart from reflecting their expertise in their field of research when assessing a given book, book reviewers also put forward their cultural background by discussing some topics related to the field of medicine (medical education, lack of progress in some medical branches, health care systems, medical professionals, etc.). They even discuss topics having to do with society, the media, financial lobbies or politicians. This exploiting of the book review as a discursive space to raise and tackle issues concerning the inner life of the medical community as well as its influence on society at large is common to Spanish academics (Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz-Ariza, 2004) and is similar to *Type 1* editorials[5] (Carnet and Magnet, 2006). In this sense, it could be said that evaluation of different areas of knowledge turns book reviewers into opinion and knowledge holders (Tang & John, 1999; Hemais, 2001) and, as a consequence, into knowledge-builders and knowledge-transmitters. This is why book reviews play an important role in the life of disciplinary communities as they support both the manufacture of knowledge and the social cohesiveness of disciplinary communities (Hyland, 2000).

Although all the linguistic-rhetorical softening devices included in Table 2 can be considered as hedges, we decided to separate them into different headings according to their lower or higher frequency of occurrence, and even to their absence when referring to positive evaluation. The aim of this distinction is to try and get a better understanding of what happens in this matter. Under the *hedging* category, we have included sentence adverbials (*rather*), adjectives and adverbs of probability (*probable*, *probably*), adverbs of degree (*almost*), attitude markers (*unfortunately*), epistemic verbs (*seem*), and suggestions (*would have been*). The impersonal construction refers to the reviewer and is typically realized with the pronoun *one*, whereas the shifting strategy attributes criticism to an abstract reader or general audience. The results yielded out by this grouping are ten variants for indirect negative evaluation and five variants for indirect positive evaluation, i.e., the linguistic-rhetorical variants used when expressing indirect negative speech acts are just twice as numerous as those used when expressing indirect positive speech acts. Like Hyland (2000) and Gea Valor (2000), we believe that book reviewers tend to use a larger array of linguistic and rhetorical strategies to modulate negative evaluation in order to express affective meaning and maintain politeness. Moreover and with reference to positive evaluation, it "must also be mitigated and balanced so that the writer maintains credibility as a disinterested genre" (Shaw, 2009: 233).

Indirect evaluative speech acts	Negative	Positive
Hedging	33	7
Singular self-reference pronoun/oblique forms	10	8
Plural self-reference pronoun/oblique forms	10	-
Adjectives with private prefixes	9	-
Praise-criticism pairs	7	-
Adverbs with private prefixes	6	-
Modal verbs	6	3
Criticism-praise pairs	2	-
Impersonal constructions	2	2
Shifting strategy	1	7
Total	86	27

Table 2. Number of negative and positive evaluation softening devices.

In terms of frequency, hedging shows to be the most frequent device used by book reviewers to soften their negative comments, which is not surprising as this mitigating strategy may function at three levels: 1) it allows reviewers to show modesty by tentative statements; 2) it invites readers to draw inferences by themselves; and 3) it permits reviewers to be cautious and avoid or minimize possible criticism from other researchers. By contrast, hedging to reduce positive evaluation has only been found on seven occasions and its purpose is probably to make praise not too lavish. The academic world being generally a small one, fulsome praise can be considered superficial the same as strong criticism can weaken an author's credibility (Hyland & Diani, 2009).

The second and third positions in the list of linguistic-rhetorical strategies used by book reviewers to mitigate criticism correspond to singular and plural self-reference pronouns. As has already been said, negative evaluation softened with singular pronouns shows personal and hence subjective, i.e., less face-threatening behavior, whereas negative evaluation mitigated with plural pronouns indicates an intention to reduce personal attribution and to reflect the solidarity established between the book reviewer, the book author(s) and the future reader(s) within the scientific community to which all them belong. As for negative and positive speech acts modulated with singular self-reference pronouns, hardly any difference is yielded between both and this could be explained as an attempt on the reviewer's side to be polite, balanced and truthful (Shaw, 2009). By contrast, a high difference does strike when comparing negative and positive comments expressed with plural personal pronouns, which are non-existent in positive speech acts. It could be speculated that this softening device is probably not needed to express general positive opinions as the community's face is not at stake. All in all, the rhetorical practice of using self-reference pronouns may contribute to the interaction that the review writer wants to establish with the book author and the general audience and may represent an efficient strategy to gain acceptance and credibility within the discourse community.

The linguistic-rhetorical softening devices following in the frequency scale are adjectives and adverbs with private prefixes, praise-criticism pairs and modal verbs, the

purpose of which is again to reduce the face-threatening effect of negative evaluation. Not very significant in comparison with the above strategies used to soften negative speech acts are criticism-praise pairs, impersonal constructions, and shifting strategies. With regards to the criticism-praise sequences, their lower presence when comparing them with the praise-criticism sequences could be interpreted in the sense that in book reviews "it is almost as important to mitigate face-enhancing acts so as to publicly preserve one's disinterested status, as it is to mitigate face-threatening acts so as to be interpersonally polite." (Shaw, 2009: 232). As for impersonal constructions, its low presence either in indirect negative and positive evaluation runs parallel with the numerous examples of personal pronouns observed in our sample and would be in line with the growing trend towards self-representation reported in other studies (Ivanic, 1998; Tang & John, 1999; Kuo, 1999; Hyland, 2001). Finally, the last point to be commented upon is the shifting strategy or adscription to the readership when expressing evaluation. The fact that writers prefer to appeal to readers for softening positive evaluation is probably due not only to their desire to stand a little apart from their comments, but also again not to appear as heaping too much praise when formulating them.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As we hope to have demonstrated in the previous sections, book reviews can be said to play an important role in the discursive construction of disciplinary knowledge since they perform the following functions: 1) they provide the research community with newly published books that might otherwise pass unnoticed; 2) by evaluating new contributions book reviews contribute to the ongoing process of knowledge and practice within a given discipline; 3) they allow the reviewers for some space to shape their own background disciplinary knowledge; and 4) by offering a discussion forum in which new contributions to a particular discipline are assessed for their quality, integrity and value to a given field, book reviews reflect the delicate and complex functioning of the social interaction between their different participants who are supposed to be members of the same academic or scientific community (the author of the book, the editor who solicited the book review, the publisher of the book, the reviewer who accepted to review it and to inform any potential reader, and the reader who decides to buy the book or not).

Moreover and from a pragmatic point of view, book reviews must be regarded as a highly face-threatening act since they basically involve the assessment of colleagues' works for the general benefit of the discipline. Statements formulated either explicitly or implicitly to a given academic and/or scientific community presuppose a certain degree of interpersonal conflict that is usually reduced with the help of varied linguistic and rhetorical devices, in order to reach a "cooperative, humble, respectful and harmonious 'science once-made'" (Salager-Meyer, 2010: 62).

As for the present research on the analysis of praise and criticism in English-written medical book reviews, we would like to insist on the fact that we have considered as positive/negative acts of evaluation those remarks whose semantic content directly leads to their positive/negative interpretation and those which –though descriptive or ambiguous meaning at first sight– can be interpreted as positive or negative thanks to the context in which they appear. In this sense, our analysis shows the strong connection between evaluation and pragmatic meaning already acknowledged in other studies (Alcaraz-Ariza, 2009; Moreno & Suárez, 2008), who situate evaluation on both the semantic and the pragmatic levels.

A fuller understanding of both praise and criticism in medical book reviews would obviously require the analysis of a more extensive/varied sample and analysis. First, the present study focuses on a small corpus from a single journal and the findings cannot be generalized as they need to be replicated on a larger corpus. Second, the results obtained in this research may have to do with the kind of journal we deliberately consulted, i.e., an upper-stratum journal such as the *British Medical Journal* which is expected to publish reviews of books useful to its discursive community. It could happen that the essentially evaluative nature of book reviews differed in less prestigious journals, i.e., that giving personal opinions, assessing either negatively or positively others' contributions, may be non-existent and that book reviews may be more neutral summaries of the book objectives, descriptions and content, than truly evaluative analyses. We however believe that the features found here are sufficiently numerous to give some insight into the issue at hand.

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NOTES

[1] The importance acquired by the topic of evaluation led to special issues entirely devoted to this concept in JEAP (Journal of English for Academic Purposes) (2003, 2: 4) and TEXT (2003, 23: 2), and even to the celebration of an International Conference in July 2005 at the University of Augsburg (Germany).

[2] Evaluative speech acts are in italics and limitation/reduction of their illocutionary force is underlined.

[3] Available at http://www.linguistlist.org/pubs/reviews/guidelines.html.

[4] Contrary to the 'critical response', the 'review response' turns the positive assessment act into a strategy of "in-group solidarity, thus strengthening the links between the book reviewer, the author of the book and the reader of both the book and the book review, all of them belonging to the same disciplinary community." (Lorés Sanz, 2009: 157).

[5] As Carnet and Magnet (2006) posit, Type 1 editorials address general practitioners and the general scientific community, this is why they can be found in leading scientific journals and in medical journals.

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