



Engagement Strategies in the USU English Debate Forum: An Appraisal Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Previous studies on engagement have a primary focus on textual discourse or written communication analysis rather than on interactive, spoken communication. This leaves a room for further exploration into how engagement functions dynamically, such as in debates. This study aims to find out the engagement strategies used in the USU English Debate Forum 2023 through the lens of Martin and White's (2005) appraisal theory of engagement. Using a qualitative content analysis, this study categorizes debate discourse into monoglossic and heteroglossic engagement systems to analyze how the debaters construct meaning, position themselves in relation to their audience, and employ linguistic features to sustain engagement. The data were collected using observation and documentation methods and were analyzed using an interactive model of data analysis. The findings indicate that heteroglossic engagement overwhelmingly dominates the debate discourse, accounting for 83.3% of the engagement strategies used. Among the heteroglossic features, dialogic contraction strategies such as Deny (21.17%) and Counter (16.47%) were frequently employed, highlighting the competitive nature of debate discourse. Dialogic expansion, particularly Entertainment (32.94%), also played a significant role, allowing the debaters to introduce assessments of probability and possibility. The results suggest that the debaters strategically navigate linguistic resources to challenge opposing arguments, reinforce their stance, and engage with alternative perspectives. This study contributes to the understanding of engagement strategies in academic debates, offering implications for debate training and rhetorical education.

Keywords: appraisal theory, engagement, debates, spoken discourse

INTRODUCTION

Communication plays a fundamental role in human interaction, which facilitates the exchange of ideas, collaboration, and the construction of social relationships. Within the domain of human communication, language serves as an essential tool for engagement, which allows speakers to connect with their audience, negotiate meaning, and construct social identities. Language allows individuals to engage in discourse, express emotions, and navigate their social environments (Jureddi & Brahmaiah, 2016). One of the theoretical frameworks that provides insight into this

process is the appraisal theory of engagement, which explores the intersection of language and emotions in communication (Hood & Martin, 2007).

Based on the appraisal theory, as introduced by Roseman (1996), individuals evaluate events based on their relevance to personal goals and values. These evaluations, in turn, shape emotional responses and influence linguistic choices. Within this framework, the engagement system examines how individuals use language to negotiate stance, align with or challenge viewpoints, and engage with their audience. Martin and White (2005) argue that all linguistic expressions, whether spoken or written, carry some degree of stance, positioning the speaker in relation to the discourse. This perspective underscores the dialogic nature of language (Coffin, 2004; Coffin & Donohue, 2014; Huang, 2019; White, 2012), where utterances are shaped by prior discourse and anticipate responses from listeners or readers.

Building on the dynamics of communication observed in debate, engagement emerges as a crucial factor that shapes the effectiveness of interaction among participants. In this context,

In the context of debate, engagement is particularly important, as debaters must strategically employ language to persuade, rebut arguments, and establish credibility. Nodoushan (2006) identifies three key variables that influence engagement in discourse: meaning, shared knowledge, and intonation. The effectiveness of communication in debate depends on how well speakers navigate these factors, which ensure that their arguments are relevant, contextually appropriate, and compelling. Building on the importance of engagement in debate, where meaning, shared knowledge, and intonation shape the effectiveness of communication (Nodoushan, 2006), the relational maxim proposed by Grice (1989) further highlights that relevance and coherence are essential in maintaining audience engagement, reinforcing the need for linguistic strategies that foster connection and persuasiveness.

Despite the extensive research on language, stance, and engagement, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the specific application of the appraisal theory of engagement in competitive debate settings, particularly within university-level English debate forums. While studies such as Hyland (2005), Martin and White (2005), and Turk et al. (2024) have examined engagement broadly, limited research has explored how debaters employ linguistic strategies to engage audiences, negotiate ideological positions, and construct persuasive arguments in real-time discourse. In addition, previous studies have primarily focused on written discourse or textual analysis rather than interactive, spoken communication, leaving room for further exploration into how engagement functions dynamically, such as in debate settings.

Recent studies have increasingly explored the application of appraisal theory, particularly the engagement subsystem, in competitive debate settings (Almutairi, 2019; Berracheche, 2020; Fayyadh, 2014; Gunawan et al., 2017; Halomoan, 2024; Mardiana, 2018; Tarigan & Lubis, 2024). For instance, Fayyadh (2014) conducted a discourse analysis of linguistic strategies in the debate between Moses and Pharaoh, which offered insights into argumentative structures and engagement techniques. Mardiana (2018) examined the role of appraisal and debate structure in English debate competitions among senior high school students, which emphasized the importance of evaluative language in shaping competitive discourse. Besides, Almutairi (2019) identified significant patterns of appraisal in online debates, which demonstrated how participants construct engagement and negotiate positions. Furthermore, Ziliwu (2020) analyzed engagement strategies in Les Brown's speech "Enough is Enough", which explored the rhetorical techniques used in motivational speaking. Halomoan (2024) investigated the strategic use of hedges and boosters in the 2024 U.S. presidential

debate, which illustrated how these linguistic devices influenced political discourse by modulating confidence and authority. Moreover, Tarigan and Lubis (2024) explored the impact of debate techniques on English language speaking competence among students in Medan by employing classroom action research methods to assess improvements in speaking skills and critical thinking.

However, there remains a lack of research focusing specifically on how university-level English debaters utilize engagement strategies in real-time, interactive spoken communication. Most existing studies emphasize textual analysis or political contexts, leaving a gap in understanding the dynamic application of engagement resources in academic debate forums. Addressing this gap is significant because university debates not only train students in critical thinking, persuasion, and public speaking but also reflect broader patterns of language use in educational and institutional settings. Therefore, further exploration is needed to elucidate how debaters construct persuasive arguments, engage audiences, and negotiate ideological positions within the spontaneous and competitive environment of university debates.

This study aims to address this gap by analyzing engagement strategies used in the USU English Debate Forum through the lens of the appraisal theory of engagement. By examining how debaters construct meaning, position themselves in relation to their audience, and employ linguistic features to sustain engagement, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of language in persuasive discourse. The findings will offer valuable insights for both theoretical linguistics and practical applications in debate training and rhetorical education.

Literature Review

Brief Overview of Engagement

Engagement, as outlined in the Appraisal theory by Martin and White (2005), refers to the linguistic resources that speakers and writers employ to position themselves in relation to other voices, perspectives, and potential responses within discourse. It functions as a framework for understanding how speakers align with, oppose, or remain neutral toward alternative viewpoints, thereby managing the interpersonal dimension of communication (White, 2003). Engagement not only reveals the speaker's stance but also anticipates the audience's possible reactions, strengthening the argument's persuasiveness and rhetorical effect.

According to Martin and White (2005), language users employ engagement resources such as projection, modality, polarity, and concession to negotiate meaning. Projection introduces perspectives from external sources using verbs like "say", "believe", or "claim", allowing speakers to distance themselves from or align with the projected opinion. Modality expresses degrees of certainty, obligation, or probability using modal verbs and adjuncts (e.g., must, might, probably), while polarity affirms or negates propositions to emphasize agreement or disagreement. Concession, on the other hand, acknowledges alternative perspectives but ultimately reinforces the speaker's stance by countering opposing views. These resources work together to construct meaning and establish the speaker's position in a dynamic, interactive way (Martin & White, 2005).

Monoglossic Engagement vs. Heteroglossic Engagement

The engagement system is concerned with how speakers position themselves toward the utterances of others or potential other views. According to White (2004), engagement enables speakers to signal whether they treat a proposition as uncontested (monoglossic) or as open to alternative viewpoints (heteroglossic) as illustrated in

Figure 1. Monoglossic utterances assert propositions without reference to other voices, treating statements as self-evident truths. Conversely, heteroglossic utterances acknowledge dialogic diversity and respond to it through dialogic expansion or contraction (Martin & White, 2005; Hood, 2010).

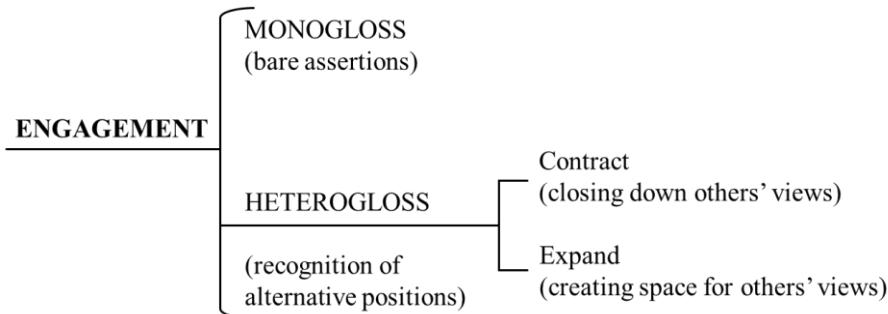


Figure 1. Engagement system

Dialogic contraction narrows the dialogic space by limiting other perspectives. It includes disclaim (e.g., deny and counter) and proclaim (e.g., concur, pronounce, and endorse). For instance, “pronounce” involves an overt assertion of the speaker’s authority or conviction, while “endorse” supports external voices or propositions (Martin & White, 2005; White, 2012). In contrast, dialogic expansion opens up the dialogic space, inviting or acknowledging alternative perspectives. This includes entertain, which presents the speaker’s claim as one among many (e.g., might, it seems), and attribute, where other voices are directly cited or referred to, either neutrally (acknowledge) or with distancing (distance) (White, 2000; Coffin, 2004; Hood, 2010).

Hood and Martin (2007) argue that engagement not only reflects a speaker’s stance but also constructs interpersonal alignment with the audience. It enables the speaker to anticipate and address potential challenges, making the discourse more persuasive and rhetorically effective. In evaluative writing, for example, the skillful use of engagement markers helps the writer navigate between asserting opinions and acknowledging other possible interpretations (Lee, 2008).

Contextual variables also play a crucial role in shaping engagement choices. Based on Halliday’s (1973, 1999) context of situation, the field (what is happening), tenor (the relationships between speakers), and mode (spoken or written communication) all influence linguistic decisions. In debate, for example, the tenor involves an adversarial yet respectful relationship between interlocutors of equal footing. This context often demands greater use of dialogic contraction (e.g., countering opposing arguments) and strategic expansion (e.g., entertaining opposing views for rebuttal) to effectively manage the flow of argumentation (Coffin & Donohue, 2014).

Furthermore, the mode of spoken debate—as a real-time, interactive form—necessitates rapid engagement shifts. Speakers often use entertainments (e.g., I believe, perhaps) to hedge claims, and contractions (e.g., This is clearly false) to strongly assert their positions (Liu, 2013). The dynamic use of these resources shows how engagement functions not merely as a grammatical system but as a rhetorical and strategic tool.

Taken together, engagement as a linguistic system is crucial in spoken academic discourse, such as debate. It provides a rich lens for analyzing how speakers construct meaning, anticipate responses, and manage interaction through language. The nuanced use of heteroglossic resources, especially dialogic contraction and expansion, reflects

the speaker's ability to position themselves authoritatively while maintaining rhetorical flexibility and audience engagement.

Research Question

Based on the elaborated background, the problem of this study is formulated into the following question: "What are the engagement strategies used in the USU English Debate Forum through the lens of the appraisal theory of engagement?"

METHODS OF THE STUDY

This study employed a qualitative content analysis to examine the engagement strategies used in university-level debates. Content analysis is a systematic technique for gathering and organizing data to identify patterns and infer meanings within written and recorded materials (Krippendorff, 2004; Majhi et al., 2016; Schreier, 2012). This method effectively captures trends, structures, and communicative strategies, which ensures a comprehensive understanding of the discourse.

The data collection employed observation and documentation methods. The observation was carried out during the debate to assess its impact and analyze communication dynamics in real time. The debate, organized under the USU English Debate Forum, was facilitated by the lecturer of the Advanced Speaking class at the end of the odd semester of the 2022–2023 academic year in the English Literature Study Program, Universitas Sumatera Utara. The debate involved 12 students, divided into a Government Group (supporting the motion) and an Opposition Group (opposing the motion), each consisting of six students. The debate spanned three rounds, discussing the motion "Toxic Positivity", which critiques the excessive promotion of happiness while disregarding negative emotions. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the lecturer of Advanced Speaking course who organized the debate forum, ensuring that the research adhered to established academic and ethical standards. Prior to data collection, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their identities would remain confidential. Consent was obtained from all students, who voluntarily agreed to take part in the debate and to have the proceedings recorded for research purposes.

The documentation was employed to record conversations throughout the debate, which enabled the researchers to identify patterns and track communication strategies. Video recording and note-taking techniques were used to ensure accuracy. A voice recording device, including a mobile phone with a recording application, captured the debate to analyze the evolution of verbal communication strategies. During observation, the researchers documented all utterances from both groups and recorded key events relevant to the research questions. The data collection also involved systematic note-taking on data cards. To maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and cross-checked against the field notes to avoid omissions or distortions. Triangulation was applied by comparing data from multiple sources—video, audio, and observation notes—to ensure consistency and reliability. In addition, peer debriefing among the research team was conducted to minimize individual bias during the coding and interpretation process. After the note-taking process, the researchers categorized and clarified the data for further analysis. The combination of observation and documentation ensured a comprehensive examination of verbal exchanges and strategic discourse, providing nuanced insights into argumentation and engagement within the debate setting.

The debate discourse was categorized into engagement systems—monogloss and heterogloss—based on Martin and White's (2005) theory. The analysis used an

interactive model of data analysis proposed by Miles et al. (2014), including data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This systematic approach facilitated the categorization and interpretation of linguistic strategies within the debate, ensuring a rigorous and methodologically sound analysis of engagement strategies employed by university-level debaters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the analysis, the findings of the research are presented in Table 1, which illustrates the distribution of engagement systems used in the USU English Debate Forum.

Tabel 1. Engagement system in the USU English Debate Forum

Engagement System	Frequency	
	Number	Percentage
Monogloss	17	16.7%
Heterogloss	85	83.3%
Total	102	100%

The results displayed in Table 1 indicate that the heteroglossic engagement system is overwhelmingly dominant in the USU English Debate Forum, accounting for 85 clauses, which constitutes 83.3% of the overall engagement system. In contrast, the monoglossic engagement system is significantly less frequent, with only 17 clauses, making up 16.7% of the overall engagement system.

The prevalence of heterogloss suggests that debaters in the USU English Debate Forum frequently engage with diverse perspectives, acknowledge opposing arguments, and incorporate various viewpoints into their discourse. This finding aligns with the fundamental nature of debating, where participants must not only present their stance but also interact with alternative opinions to strengthen their arguments. In addition, the prevalence of heterogloss reveals a dynamic interaction between competing viewpoints, where the debaters strategically employ various linguistic resources to support their arguments, challenge opposing claims, and engage with alternative perspectives. The detailed distribution of the linguistic features used by the debaters is presented in Table 2.

Tabel 2. Linguistic features of heteroglossic engagement in the USU English Debate Forum

Heteroglossic Engagement								
Dialogic Contraction				Dialogic Expansion				
Disclaim		Proclaim		Entertain		Attribute		
Deny	Counter	Concur	Pronounce	Endorse	Entertainment	Acknowledge	Distance	TOTAL
Number	18	14	11	-	1	28	13	-
Percentage	21.17	16.47	12.94	0	1.18	32.94	15.30	0
								100%

The results presented in Table 2 indicate that the heteroglossic engagement system used in the USU English Debate Forum is characterized by three primary

features: Entertainment (28 clauses, 32.94%), Deny (18 clauses, 21.17%), and Counter (14 clauses, 16.47%). These linguistic features reflect how debaters engage with and respond to differing viewpoints, either by entertaining alternative positions, explicitly rejecting claims, or countering opposing arguments.

Those features fall into two broad categories, i.e., dialogic contraction and dialogic expansion, with Dialogic Contraction (44 clauses or 51.76%) occurring more frequently than Dialogic Expansion (41 clauses or 48.24%). This suggests that the debaters predominantly suppress, reject, or challenge opposing perspectives rather than engage with alternative positions as equally valid. Dialogic contraction consists of two primary subsystems: disclaim and proclaim. Among these, Disclaim, which includes Deny (18 clauses, 21.17%) and Counter (14 clauses, 16.47%), is the more dominant system. In the debate, Deny serves as a resource for introducing an alternative position only to reject it. The exchange in (1) illustrates this strategy.

(1) Prime Minister : But this is very regretful because it makes people blindly think.

Leader of Opposition : When they said about this kind of positivity will harm those kinds of people and make them blind and not be able to see anything clearly, we totally say it is no.

The Prime Minister countered the previous opinion that people think blindly. The phrase “very regretful because it makes people blindly think” suggests that the Prime Minister perceives a particular situation or mindset as detrimental, as it leads individuals to think without critical evaluation or independent reasoning. By using “very regretful”, the Prime Minister expresses a strong negative stance, indicating that the perceived consequence, i.e., people thinking blindly, is undesirable and unfortunate. The phrase implies that certain influences or narratives have shaped public perception in a way that discourages independent thought and rational judgment.

In response, the Leader of the Opposition explicitly rejected the Prime Minister’s assertion. This response demonstrates a clear Disclaim-Deny strategy, as the phrase “we totally say it is no” outright negates the claim made by the Prime Minister. The Leader of the Opposition challenges the notion that positivity leads to harm, dismissing the idea that it renders people unable to perceive reality clearly. The phrase “we totally say it is no” is a categorical rejection, reinforcing their position that the Prime Minister’s claim lacks validity. The use of “totally” further strengthens the denial, adding emphasis and reinforcing the certainty of their stance.

By employing Disclaim-Deny, the Leader of the Opposition introduces an alternative viewpoint that contradicts the Prime Minister’s claim. This strategy allows them to distance themselves from the opposing argument while asserting their perspective with confidence. In addition, the phrase “make them blind and not be able to see anything clearly” conveys an extreme consequence, which the Leader of the Opposition refutes outright, suggesting that the Prime Minister’s claim is exaggerated or unsubstantiated.

Overall, this exchange exemplifies how dialogic contraction is utilized within the debate. The Prime Minister employs a Counter strategy by positioning their statement as a response to an opposing perspective, whereas the Leader of the Opposition employs Deny to reject that counterargument and reinforce their own position. This interaction highlights the dynamic nature of debate discourse, where

participants actively challenge and refute opposing viewpoints to strengthen their argumentation.

Another dialogic contraction strategy, Counter, is used to present a proposition that directly replaces or supplants an alternative perspective, thereby countering an expected claim. A clear example of Counter found in the USU English Debate Forum can be seen in (2).

(2) Prime Minister : Even if they fail, we think because they think they will success one day.

Leader of Opposition : People will not become realistic to themselves, people will only think that they just need to try even if how many times they fail.

In this exchange, the Prime Minister advances an argument centered on optimism and perseverance. The clause “even if they fail, we think because they think they will success one day” reflects a belief in self-motivation and resilience, emphasizing that failure should not deter individuals from striving toward future achievement. The use of “we think” signals the deployment of Entertainment, a linguistic feature that allows room for alternative perspectives while still asserting the speaker’s stance. Here, the Prime Minister frames the proposition as an encouragement to persist, portraying optimism as a driving force behind eventual success.

Conversely, the Leader of the Opposition challenges this viewpoint by countering the claim that optimism alone guarantees success. The rebuttal in (2) presents an alternative perspective that replaces the original assertion. By stating that “people will not become realistic”, the Leader of the Opposition implies that over-reliance on optimism may lead individuals to ignore practical limitations and objective assessments of their abilities. The clause “even if how many times they fail” emphasizes the idea that failure alone does not necessarily lead to success, and excessive persistence without adaptation or reflection may be counterproductive. A key linguistic marker in this counterargument is the use of “even”, which signals a contrast or contradiction to the Prime Minister’s assertion. The use of “only” further strengthens the opposition’s stance by limiting the scope of the Prime Minister’s claim, suggesting that persistent optimism could lead to a lack of self-awareness and an unrealistic outlook.

The exchange in (2) illustrates a fundamental debate between optimism and realism. The Prime Minister’s argument champions motivation and determination, portraying perseverance as a crucial ingredient for future success. On the other hand, the Leader of the Opposition highlights the necessity of realistic self-assessment, cautioning against an overemphasis on positivity that disregards practical considerations. By employing Counter, the Leader of the Opposition directly replaces the Prime Minister’s optimistic perspective with a more cautionary stance, reinforcing the idea that success is not solely a product of persistence but also requires realistic expectations and strategic adjustments. This interplay of arguments exemplifies how Counter serves as a powerful rhetorical tool in debate discourse, allowing debaters to challenge and redefine existing propositions to strengthen their own position.

While Disclaim strategies are realized through Disclaim-Deny and Disclaim-Counter, the Proclaim category encompasses three distinct strategies: Concur, Pronounce, and Endorse. However, in the USU English Debate Forum, only Proclaim-Concur and Proclaim-Endorse are observed, with Proclaim-Concur appearing in 11 clauses (12.94%) and Proclaim-Endorse in just 1 clause (1.18%).

The Proclaim-Concur category includes formulations that explicitly signal agreement or shared knowledge between speakers. This alignment is linguistically marked by expressions such as of course, naturally, not surprisingly, admittedly, and certainly. These markers function to affirm a previously stated position and establish solidarity between interlocutors. One of the examples can be seen in the exchange in (3).

(3) Prime Minister : We think that in that case they will regret with the result of the competition.

Leader of Opposition : What actually the people need is just simply as hope.

In the exchange in (3), the Prime Minister expresses a governmental stance, presenting an evaluative claim about the emotional response to the competition's outcome. The clause "We think" signals Entertainment, which allows space for alternative perspectives while still presenting an opinion. The Prime Minister's assertion implies that regret will inevitably follow, emphasizing the weight of competition results on individuals.

The Leader of the Opposition counters this argument with an alternative perspective, emphasizing hope over regret. By stating "What actually the people need is just simply as hope", they propose a more optimistic and solution-oriented approach, shifting the focus from an assumed negative consequence (regret) to a more positive emotional framework (hope). The key feature in the Leader of the Opposition's response is the use of "actually", which functions as a Proclaim-Counter strategy within Proclaim, subtly challenging the Prime Minister's assertion while reaffirming the Leader of the Opposition's perspective as the more accurate or essential one. The term "actually" signals a corrective stance, reinforcing the belief that hope, rather than regret, should be the central focus. This choice of wording serves to reposition the debate, implicitly dismissing the Prime Minister's claim by asserting a competing and more affirmative viewpoint.

The Proclaim-Endorse strategy is also found in the USU English Debate Forum, albeit minimally, accounting for 1 clause (1.18%) of the total data. Endorse refers to the rhetorical mechanism through which propositions attributed to external sources are presented as correct, valid, undeniable, or otherwise maximally warrantable. This endorsement is typically conveyed through verbal processes, or their nominalized equivalents, that establish the presumed authority of the sourced information. Common verbs associated with this strategy include show, prove, demonstrate, find, and point out, all of which function to construct a sense of legitimacy and evidential backing for the claim being made. In doing so, the speaker positions the endorsed proposition as a

justified and reliable truth, minimizing the space for contestation. The only instance of Proclaim-Endorse in the dataset is presented in (4).

(4) Prime Minister : Bill Gates also coming from the prestigious college like Harvard and it is very different from other people.

Leader of Opposition : We need this positivity to become a support for them. It proves them help them to continue to working hard towards their dream.

In this exchange, the Prime Minister begins by referencing Bill Gates' educational background at Harvard, emphasizing its prestige and differentiating Gates from others. The clause "it is very different from other people" suggests an implicit argument that attending a prestigious institution like Harvard contributes to an individual's uniqueness or success. This statement frames Gates' background as a significant factor in his achievements, reinforcing the idea that elite education serves as a key differentiator.

The Leader of Opposition responds by shifting the focus toward positivity as a motivational force, arguing that positivity serves as a form of encouragement that drives individuals toward their goals. The clause "we need this positivity to become a support for them" functions as a call to action, advocating for the role of optimism in fostering perseverance and success. The key feature of this response is the use of the verb "proves" in the clause "It proves them help them to continue to working hard towards their dream". The verb "proves" signals the use of Proclaim-Endorse, as it implies that external evidence supports the argument that positivity enables individuals to persist in their efforts. By employing this verb, the Leader of Opposition constructs their claim as validated by external truth, thereby increasing its persuasive force. The choice of "proves" portrays the assertion as factually supported, leaving little room for dispute and reinforcing the idea that positivity is an essential driver of ambition and perseverance.

In the USU English Debate Forum, Dialogic Expansion operates through two primary categories: Entertainment and Attribution. Within Attribution, there are two subcategories, they are Acknowledge and Distance. However, no instances of Attribution-Distance were found in the analyzed debates, suggesting that debaters predominantly engage with external sources in a neutral or accepting manner rather than deliberately distancing themselves from them.

Among these categories, Entertainment emerges as the most dominant strategy, appearing in 28 clauses (32.94%) of the total data. Entertainment allows speakers to introduce assessments of likelihood, probability, or possibility, thereby opening the dialogic space for alternative perspectives. This is achieved through various linguistic markers, including modal auxiliaries (e.g., may, might, could, must); modal adjuncts (e.g., perhaps, probably, definitely); modal attributes (e.g., it's possible that ..., it's likely that ...); circumstances of subjectivity (e.g., in my view, from my perspective); mental verb projections (e.g., I think, I believe, I suspect, I'm convinced that, I doubt); evidence-based postulations (e.g., it seems, it appears, apparently, research suggests

...); and rhetorical/expository questions that raise possibilities without assuming specific responses.

In the USU English Debate Forum, the most frequently occurring realization of Entertainment is the phrase “we think”, which signals the speaker’s subjective stance while allowing space for counterarguments. In addition, some utterances employ modal auxiliaries such as might, may, and could, further reinforcing the notion of probability and openness in argumentation.

A clear example of Entertainment can be observed in the exchange in (5).

(5) Prime Minister : But for other people, it’s kind of hard, and that is why some people need encouragement.

Leader of Opposition : We think that we are fine with not having this kind of support.

Here, the Prime Minister acknowledges that some individuals struggle without external encouragement, positioning support as a necessary factor in achieving success. The use of “but for other people, it’s kind of hard” signals an implicit contrast between different personal experiences, reinforcing the argument for encouragement as a vital component.

In contrast, the Leader of Opposition challenges this assertion by stating, “We think that we are fine with not having this kind of support”. The phrase “we think” serves as a subjective qualifier, presenting the argument as a belief rather than an absolute fact. This choice aligns with Entertainment, as it frames the opposition’s stance as a perspective rather than an indisputable truth, thus leaving room for further debate.

The prevalence of Entertainment in the USU English Debate Forum demonstrates the importance of stance-taking strategies that balance assertiveness with openness to alternative viewpoints. By frequently employing “we think” and modal auxiliaries, the debaters maintain dialogic engagement, fostering an argumentative style that is both assertive and receptive to contestation. This highlights the dynamic nature of debate, where speakers strategically navigate between persuasion and inclusivity in discourse.

The second category of Dialogic Expansion found in the USU English Debate Forum is Acknowledge, which appears in 13 clauses (15.30%) of the total data. Acknowledge refers to the authorial voice engaging with external propositions neutrally or affirmatively, positioning these propositions as legitimate contributions to the discourse without necessarily endorsing them. This function is typically realized through reporting verbs, such as: Say, Report, State, Declare, Announce, and Believe. These verbs function as mechanisms for acknowledging the presence of an external viewpoint within discourse, allowing debaters to integrate outside perspectives into their arguments while maintaining dialogic openness.

A representative instance of Attribution-Acknowledge can be seen in exchange in (6).

(6) Prime Minister : We are not against ambitious people.

Leader of Opposition : We do believe that in this world, people face a lot of difficulty. For some people, they may be able to fight for it, or just move on from their own passion.

In (6), the Prime Minister asserts that the government's stance does not oppose ambitious individuals. The clause "we are not against ambitious people" introduces a Deny strategy, as it explicitly rejects a possible counterclaim that the government side is antagonistic toward ambition. This formulation not only negates an opposing position but also subtly reinforces the government's positive stance towards ambition.

In response, the Leader of Opposition employs an Acknowledge strategy by using the clause "we do believe that..." This clause functions as an explicit acknowledgment of a widely accepted reality, positioning the statement as an assertion of collective belief rather than mere personal opinion. The Leader of Opposition then expands on this idea, recognizing that people experience hardships differently: (i) Some individuals choose to actively fight against obstacles in pursuit of their ambitions; and (ii) Others, however, may opt to move on from their passions, either out of necessity or changing priorities. This statement integrates Attribution-Acknowledge because it recognizes multiple possibilities within the debate, presenting them as valid perspectives rather than dismissing one in favor of the other.

While Attribution-Acknowledge is present in the USU English Debate Forum, there is no instance of Attribution-Distance in the dataset. Attribution-Distance typically involves an explicit dissociation of the authorial voice from the reported material, often realized through the reporting verb "claim" and scare quotes which signal irony or distance. The absence of Attribution-Distance suggests that the debaters in this forum tend to neutrally report or integrate external perspectives rather than critically distancing themselves from them. This aligns with the debate format's emphasis on engagement and response, where debaters acknowledge counterarguments instead of outright dismissing them.

Discussion

In analyzing the Engagement System used in the USU English Debate Forum, the dominant categories identified were Entertainment, Deny, Acknowledge, and Counter. These categories reflect different rhetorical strategies employed by debaters to construct their arguments effectively. Entertainment emerged as the most prevalent, followed by Deny, while Acknowledge and Counter were also commonly used. The least frequent categories were Concur and Endorse, and Pronounce and Distance were entirely absent from the dataset. These findings align with Martin & White's (2005) engagement framework, which categorizes how speakers position themselves concerning alternative voices and viewpoints in discourse. The dominance of certain categories and the absence of others can be attributed to the nature of competitive debating, where strategic rhetorical choices are essential for persuasion and argument development.

When compared to previous studies on engagement strategies in debates and discourse, the findings align with existing research on competitive argumentation (Fayyadh, 2014; Mardiana, 2018). For instance, Fayyadh (2014) examined the linguistic strategies in the debate between Moses and Pharaoh, which also demonstrated a strong reliance on argumentative structures that counter and reject

opposing claims. Similarly, Mardiana's (2018) study of senior high school debates emphasized the strategic use of evaluative language to assert positions, reinforcing the trend observed in the USU English Debate Forum.

However, the findings are in contrast with Almutairi's (2019) study on online debates, where engagement strategies were more varied, including both dialogic expansion and contraction. This suggests that online platforms may foster a more interactive and exploratory exchange of ideas compared to structured debate settings, where assertiveness and countering arguments are prioritized. Furthermore, Ziliwu's (2020) analysis of Les Brown's speech demonstrated how engagement strategies can be employed in motivational speaking, which differs from the confrontational nature of debate. While both contexts involve persuasion, the emphasis in motivational speech is on expanding the discourse to include shared experiences and encouragement rather than outright rejection of opposing views.

The prevalent use of Entertainment suggests that debaters frequently frame their arguments as possibilities rather than absolute claims. This category includes modal auxiliaries (may, might, could, must), modal adjuncts (perhaps, probably, definitely), and cognitive verbs (think, believe, suspect), which allow debaters to soften their assertions and create space for alternative perspectives. According to White (2003), Entertainment serves as a hedging strategy, making statements appear more tentative, negotiable, and dialogically expansive. This approach is particularly useful in debates for several reasons. The first reason is strategic flexibility (Adi et al., 2019; AlRubaie et al., 2024). By using locutions such as "we think", debaters leave room to adjust or refine their arguments in response to counterpoints. The second reason is persuasion and audience engagement (Asih et al., 2022; Broda-Bahm et al., 2004; el Majidi et al., 2021; Prayogi & Laili, 2022). Softening claims with modalized language helps debaters appeal to judges and the audience by presenting their views as reasonable and open to discussion rather than dogmatic. The third reason is compensating for lack of evidence (Kabli, 2020). Debaters may rely on Entertainment when they lack concrete data or authoritative sources. Instead of presenting factual claims, they construct arguments based on speculation and reasoning, using phrases like "we think that..." to create an impression of credibility.

However, an over-reliance on Entertainment can weaken arguments. Hyland (2005) highlights that excessive hedging in academic discourse can lead to ambiguity and reduced persuasiveness. In debates, using tentative language without substantive evidence may result in a superficial engagement with the topic, limiting the strength of the debater's position.

The second most common strategy, Deny, involves explicit rejection of opposing arguments through negation (e.g., "not", "never", "no", "we disagree", etc.). The high frequency of Deny suggests that debaters prioritize direct refutation of opposing claims rather than merely presenting their own stance. This is in line with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, where every utterance exists in response to another, shaping the debate as an ongoing exchange of counterclaims.

The strategic use of Deny offers several advantages. First, by explicitly rejecting the opponent's claims, debaters establish a strong stance, making it easier for judges and the audience to follow the contrasting viewpoints. Second, debate rounds are time-limited, and Deny allows debaters to quickly dismiss weak or irrelevant points without engaging in lengthy explanations. Third, in some cases, Deny serves as a protective tactic (Benoit, 1997), allowing debaters to defend their position without fully engaging with the opponent's arguments. This can be advantageous when opponents

raise complex issues that may be difficult to address comprehensively within time constraints.

However, Deny can also be a double-edged sword. According to van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004), outright rejection without justification can make arguments appear dogmatic rather than critically engaged. If debaters fail to substantiate their denials with reasoning or evidence, they risk weakening their credibility.

The presence of Counter in the debate data indicates that debaters frequently engage in direct rebuttals rather than merely rejecting opposing viewpoints. Countering involves refuting an opponent's argument by providing an alternative perspective or evidence-based reasoning. This strategy aligns with argumentation theory (Toulmin, 1958), which emphasizes the importance of warranted claims backed by evidence.

However, an over-reliance on Counter can shift the debate into a combative rather than constructive exchange. Walton (2007) notes that debates should aim for dialectical progress, meaning that arguments should evolve through dialogue rather than becoming a series of disconnected attacks. If debaters focus solely on countering their opponents without developing their own case, they risk undermining their argumentative depth.

Interestingly, the Engagement categories of Pronounce and Distance were entirely absent from the findings. Pronounce (e.g., "I contend", "we can only conclude that") is often used to strongly assert a position, leaving little room for alternative perspectives. Debaters may avoid Pronounce expressions because they invite direct challenges from opponents. Distance (e.g., "It is claimed that...", "They argue that...") is typically used to dissociate the speaker from an external viewpoint. Its absence suggests that debaters prefer to engage with arguments directly rather than distancing themselves from attributed claims. According to Fairclough (1992), Pronounce strategies often signal authority, but in a debate setting, they can appear dogmatic and overconfident if not backed by strong evidence. Similarly, Distance may be avoided because debaters in this forum prioritize affirmative engagement over detached critique.

One of the most apparent findings is that Entertainment was the dominant category, while Pronounce (which signals certainty) was absent. This suggests that debaters frequently rely on subjective reasoning rather than empirical evidence. Entertainment compensates for a lack of factual data. Instead of presenting concrete evidence, debaters often rely on personal insight and tentative reasoning. Avoiding Pronounce prevents overcommitment to unverified claims. By not using assertive phrases like "the truth is", debaters minimize the risk of making unsubstantiated declarations. This finding aligns with Hyland's (2005) study on hedging in academic writing, which suggests that speakers use modalized language when they lack strong evidence. However, excessive hedging can weaken an argument's persuasive force, as it creates an impression of uncertainty or lack of confidence.

CONCLUSION

The prevalence of heteroglossic engagement in the USU English Debate Forum suggests that the debaters frequently engage with diverse perspectives, acknowledge opposing arguments, and incorporate various viewpoints into their discourse. This finding aligns with the fundamental nature of debating, where participants must not only present their stance but also interact with alternative opinions to strengthen their arguments. The relatively low occurrence of monoglossic engagement indicates that the speakers rarely use assertions that present information as absolute or uncontested.

Instead, their discourse remains open to negotiation, reinforcing the interactive and dialogic nature of debate.

The dominance of heteroglossic engagement highlights the dynamic and argumentative strategies employed by the debaters. These data provide valuable insights into how engagement systems shape persuasive discourse, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging different perspectives in a competitive debating environment. Besides, the presence of Proclaim-Endorse, even in a limited capacity, suggests that debaters occasionally appeal to external validation to strengthen their arguments. The use of endorsement adds a layer of authority, making claims appear more definitive and less open to challenge. However, the limited occurrence of Proclaim-Endorse indicates that debaters may rely more on personal opinions, counter-arguments, and agreement (Concur) rather than asserting claims as irrefutable truths. This may reflect a debate style that prioritizes negotiation and reasoning over absolute declarations, allowing for more dynamic exchanges of viewpoints.

While this study has provided valuable insights into the engagement strategies employed in the USU English Debate Forum, future research can further expand on these findings by exploring the following areas. First, future research can conduct a comparative analysis across debate formats by investigating whether different debate formats exhibit similar engagement trends or display variations in the use of heteroglossic and monoglossic engagement. Second, future research can explore cross-cultural perspectives by comparing engagement strategies used in debates conducted in different linguistic and cultural settings to determine if cultural factors influence the balance between dialogic contraction and expansion. Third, future research can examine the role of technology in debate engagement by analyzing how digital platforms and online debate settings influence engagement patterns, particularly in environments where interaction is asynchronous and mediated by written communication.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings of this study highlight the importance of integrating debate-based activities into courses such as Advanced Speaking and Discourse Analysis. By explicitly teaching engagement strategies—such as managing dialogic contraction and expansion—lecturers can help students enhance their persuasive competence, critical thinking, and ability to negotiate meaning in both academic and professional communication. Debate practice can also serve as an effective supplement to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses, where students need to construct arguments, anticipate counterarguments, and maintain relevance in interaction. Therefore, this study not only contributes theoretically to discourse studies but also offers practical guidance for curriculum design and classroom practice, particularly in fostering communicative competence and rhetorical awareness among university students.

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