

“Follow the Procedure”: Online Metapragmatic Commentary on the Five Paragraph Essay

Mark Lewis

University of Pennsylvania

The genre of the five paragraph essay (5PE) is familiar to many US high school and middle school students because it is often included in the teaching of literary analysis and general argumentation. Learners of the 5PE participate in its social life consisting of its learning, change, and spread. In this paper, I present a description of some of the online social life of the 5PE. Examining online metapragmatic commentary under theoretical frames of speech genres (Bakhtin, 1986), enregisterment (Agha, 2007), and language governmentality (Flores 2014; Pennycook 2002, 2006), and with the new methodology of citizen sociolinguistics (Rymes & Leone, this volume), I show how numerous instances of metapragmatic commentary on the 5PE, regardless of their positioning, reinforce a governmentality that constructs the 5PE as a practice totally dependent on authoritarian specifications.

Close observers of language use are often reminded that there seems to be no end to the number of things we can learn to do with language. However, in spite of this great enormity of practices, we always seem to have some idea or another about how we should be doing what we’re doing. In other words, as we are socialized into any language practice, we are always working alongside typifications of that practice. The genre of the five paragraph essay (5PE) is familiar to many US high school and middle school students because it is often included in the teaching of literary analysis and argumentation. As they do with all uses of language, learners of the 5PE participate in its social life consisting of its learning, change, and spread. This social life extends beyond school walls. In this paper, I present a description of some of the online social life of the 5PE by examining sources including YouTube, Urban Dictionary, and Reddit. I undertook this study to ask:

1. What kinds of metapragmatic commentary on the 5PE might a student writer encounter online if they were searching for help on their homework, perhaps the night before it is due? What typifications recur across commentaries from many sources?
2. What do the ecology and interactions of these commentaries tell us about how the 5PE is generally characterized in relation to students? In particular, what are the apparent political consequences of recurring typifications of the 5PE?

I employ theoretical frames of *enregisterment* (Agha, 2007), *speech genres* (Bakhtin, 1986), and *language governmentality* (Flores, 2013; Pennycook, 2002, 2006) to see online metapragmatic commentary as partially constituting the politically consequential enregisterment of writing in the 5PE genre.

All language practices have certain things in common based in their being socially situated, as briefly described above. However, practices also vary greatly in how they are taken up by the societies that participate in them. In this analysis, I attend to the ways that the 5PE is taken up as a high-stakes practice. Of all the things US students do with language, only a few matter for their grades, their standardized test scores, the way they are viewed as thinkers and people with things to say, and so on. Unlike other investigations showing conflicting and multifaceted metapragmatic commentary (e.g., Boellstorff, 2004; Leone, this volume; Moore, 2011; Rymes, 2014b) my work does not reveal much variety in typifications of the 5PE. I propose that this is true because of the 5PE's greater importance in and symmetry with systems of language governmentality implicated in ideologies about Standard American/Academic English. In online metapragmatic commentary on the 5PE, actors in the roles of teacher, student, and critic all have different stances that sum to help sustain the rationalizations underlying the 5PE. Teachers and others who position themselves (and who might be institutionally positioned) as authorities on the practice often have license to unreflexively describe the genre in neutral terms. Students and others positioned as or who position themselves as targets of the 5PE take absurdist or otherwise totally oppositional stances against the 5PE, leaving themselves outside the bounds of hegemonic writing practices, perhaps implicitly accepting these bounds rather than breaking or challenging them themselves. If they do not take oppositional stances, they take receptive ones, seeking a person in a teacher role who will tell them how the 5PE works so that they can successfully meet this aspect of the idealized model of the good student. Commentary from other critics is firm but closed off from any effort to imagine new models of students learning to do things with language.

In presenting this analysis, I hope to extend the nascent body of work relying on *citizen sociolinguistics* methods (Rymes, 2014b; Rymes & Leone, this volume) and present material for reflection by teachers of argumentative writing. Additionally, the topic of the paper gives occasion to comment on goals for conducting critical research into language in education.

Theoretical Frames

A critical understanding of the 5PE begins with taking all ideologies about it as data, not fact. Therefore, I need to start by stating what we know about it from the widest and simplest gaze possible, then adding on more complexity and theorization. The 5PE is only one of many things that people learn to do with language. It is also a thing done with language that has a name; not all things we do with language have a name. Also, as alluded to previously, the 5PE has clear consequences as a thing involved in the institution of schooling. For a theoretical frame to understand things done with language, I employ Bakhtin's (1986) notion of *speech genres*. For a frame to understand the 5PE's quality of being named and typified, I employ Agha's (2007) work on *enregisterment*. Finally, to be ready to

examine the political consequences of a linguistic practice, I employ the frame of *language governmentality* as explicated by Flores (2013).

Instrumental to his work as a literary theorist, Bakhtin makes claims about the fundamental nature of language. Most importantly for our understanding of the 5PE, Bakhtin argued that our use of language is describable in terms of the *speech genres* we regularly use. Bakhtin (1986) writes, “each sphere in which language is used develops its own *relatively stable types* of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres*” (p. 60, emphasis in original). Bakhtin stresses that the range of possible speech genres is “boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible” (p. 60). The simple insight here is that some uses of language have much more in common with each other than they do with all other uses of language. Bakhtin argues that speech genres are necessarily a part of language, saying, “If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them, if we had to originate them during the speech process and construct each utterance at will for the first time, speech communication would be almost impossible” (p. 79). In other words, what we do with language can accomplish the purposes we set it to mainly because others recognize our language as belonging to a genre of use that shares certain purposes or qualities. We are able to greet because our interlocutors share with us some idea of what a greeting might sound like and expect that greeting might be one of the things we could be doing at the moment. So too does a knock knock joke rely on our interlocutor sharing enough of our idea of the genre to ask the necessary “Who’s there?”

If we see language use as depending on infinite possibilities of choosing among shared norms (and which to follow and which to bend), then we need to see the knock knock joke as equally socially situated as the greeting. We cannot separate greeting styles from knock knock jokes on the grounds that greetings are somehow self-evidently necessary and natural whereas jokes are cultural. Instead, if we want to recognize the huge internal diversity of language, we need to see that all uses of language belong to a particular time, space, and social domain. A speech genre is never natural or somehow uncreated. Since the 5PE, as well as its cousins in academic writing more generally, are frequently typified as rarified uses of language, it can be hard to change our perspective and see it as just another speech genre. However, words like *argument*, *reasoning*, and indeed *five paragraph essay* are socially and historically constructed labels¹ for particular speech genres, not essential and culture-free elements of civilized society. To call something a social construction is not to call it unreal, but rather simply created by social action, not inevitable, and open to change (Butler, 2014).

If we know that the 5PE is only one of many typifications of linguistic practices that have been formulated over the eons, we can rightfully seek an account of how a formulation comes to be, as well as how it grows and changes. Agha’s (2007) concept of *enregisterment* gives an account of how typifications of language use spread and survive. Agha most concisely defines enregisterment as roughly meaning the process by which “semiotic registers,” also called “cultural models of action” are “formulated and disseminated through semiotic activities that evaluate specific behavioral signs as appropriate to particular scenarios of

¹ *Social labels* is a good shorthand for thinking about the socially situated aspects of speech genres, but the idea of a *label* is not completely adequate for speech genres. Bakhtin is careful to point out that not all speech genres have names, and are indeed innumerable (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 80).

social-interpersonal conduct” (Agha, 2007, p. 81). This means that to call the 5PE a register (what we could also call a speech genre, or a part of a communicative repertoire as in Rymes [2014a]) is to say that within a certain social domain (a group of people), there are regularities of metapragmatic stereotypes and typifications about the 5PE, including how a text comes to be recognized as a 5PE, how the 5PE is valorized and in what contexts, and what kinds of people the 5PE is associated with.

Processes of enregisterment can be examined by paying attention to instances of metapragmatic commentary where linguistic practices themselves are discussed, typified, and debated. Though language’s habit of commenting on itself was largely ignored by linguistics for much of its development as a discipline, reflexivity is a fundamental part of language and necessary to a huge number of functions we take for granted, like proper names, discussing a verbal composition, or offering direct instruction about any linguistic practice (Agha, 2007; Jakobson, 1990; Lucy, 1993; Rymes, 2014b).

Metapragmatic discourse can be explicit: “Here is how you...” If a teacher tells a student, “The 5PE has an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion,” as they surely often do, they are identifying a specific genre of language and giving some instructions about its composition. Further, as an interactional issue, they are also packaging these instructions as a *nomie truth*, a statement of fact with no subjective viewpoint implied, like “birds sing” (Agha, 2007, p. 44). Metapragmatic commentary can also be more implicit, as in “Great job!” from a teacher in response to some linguistic product, meaning partially, “You have successfully adopted the conventions of this language practice!” These examples are typifications of particular language practices, as in enregisterment. I must note that this line of reasoning is an extension of the term *enregisterment*, since the examples of things undergoing enregisterment that Agha (2007) presents in his work are usually named varieties or styles of language (e.g. *alus* vs. *kasar* speech, Received Pronunciation) rather than named genres or practices (or languages themselves). As I show in this paper, the 5PE is certainly undergoing enregisterment at least in the respect that “certain patterns of typifications *recur* in the behaviors of many speakers” (Agha, 2007, p. 153, emphasis in original).

Whatever analytic term might already exist for this particular flavor of metapragmatic commentary, the matter at hand is that individuals regularly encounter typifications of linguistic behavior (and of the types of people who engage in that linguistic behavior), and they can and do further respond reflexively in an unending chain of further metalinguistic description. Metapragmatic commentary is therefore essential to and inseparable from socialization into any linguistic community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Our ability to say “that’s a birthday card,” “that’s a joke,” “that’s a constitution,” or “that’s a love letter” is always dependent on metapragmatic commentary that came before our moment of genre typification/practice, and our typification/practice would be further metapragmatic commentary for others to pick up on.² Since the commentary I focus on in this paper is largely explicit and focused on a named language practice, I will not further explore the intricacies of metapragmatic function (e.g. Silverstein, 1993). For now, we just need to recognize that in the case of the 5PE, like for any

² And indeed, metapragmatic commentary is also the way by which we can come to negatively typify, as in, “That’s a weird birthday card,” “I don’t get the joke,” etc.

other practice, speech genre, or register, metapragmatic commentary constructs and transforms its status and character.

Examining the political consequences of metapragmatics of the 5PE requires attention to power in and around language. To understand the 5PE, we need to explain why it is more important, or seems to feel more important, than a knock knock joke. A concrete way for us to talk about power here is to say that in the case of the 5PE, users and learners of the genre often feel a sense of having measured up or not. What is the quality of measuring up? What exactly are students measuring up to? These questions are particularly pressing for the 5PE and other consequential linguistic practices.

It is not sufficient to say that schools are the reason for this, because then we would need to say why and how schools are especially empowered to accomplish this. Instead, we need to see schools as merely one aspect of a phenomenon of social regularity and regulation: *governmentality*. The Foucauldian notion of governmentality is explained by Flores (2013) as “the process where people are made governable subjects of the particular socio-historical contexts in which they reside” (p. 3). Governmentality is a useful way by which we can refer to the symbolic powers that schools and other language-evaluative institutions hold. Flores further clarifies governmentality as involving the ways in which “knowledge produced through a variety of institutions coalesces in the creation of governable subjects and governable populations through the development of regimes of truth” (p. 3). The more recent notion of language governmentality is an attempt to link Foucault’s work to understandings of how language is used as an object and tool of power, especially national and colonial power (e.g., Flores, 2013, 2014; Pennycook, 2002, 2006). Governmentality concerns ways that people are compared to idealized subjects, usually found lacking, and possibly punished physically, socially, or symbolically for this lack. Flores (2013) finds cause to specify particular kinds of governmentality that correspond to particular idealized governable subjects, so he introduces the term *nation-state / colonial governmentality*. This flavor of governmentality has as its idealized governable subject a pure person with a single national attachment or single essential ethnic classification, and as Flores highlights, a single and monolithic language. With the frame of language governmentality with a nation-state/colonial focus, we can link the mundanely inevitable metapragmatics of the 5PE with the idealized linguistic products and student subject positions it constructs.

Pennycook (2002) applies a frame of language governmentality to analyze language policy discourse in British colonial education in Hong Kong and Malaysia. He shows how English-medium and vernacular-medium education policies advocated by distinct factions among colonial administrators, which might seem in conflict on the surface, actually ultimately supported the same idealization of governable colonial subjects (a key insight also highlighted by Flores, 2013). A system of governmentality is linked to a specific rationality that so naturalized as to comfortably contain both sides of a supposed debate, by controlling the common premises from which the debate is waged.

Through the governmentality involved in the 5PE, written products and their writers are compared to an idealized standard. Foucault’s (2007) description of governmentality details how many social technologies, far more than only the government itself, work in this process of producing ideal governable subjects

shaped toward particular ends. The specific frame of language governmentality, or of the aspects of governmentality more directly relevant to language, helps us see how constructed standards of the right kinds of linguistic products or speech genres are always inseparable from standards of the right kind of people. These linguistic standards rely on metapragmatic typifications, which have been shown to be a basic capability of language that researchers are easily able to document in online participatory spaces. Language governmentality and enregisterment are compatible and complementary frameworks, with enregisterment showing us the growth and change of our models of specific language practices and varieties and with language governmentality showing how these models have political consequences. An idealized linguistic product and idealized literate subject mutually constitute each other. The language governmentality underlying metapragmatic commentary on the 5PE privileges only particular kinds of explanation and argument as appropriate for schools and befitting the type of educated person who can employ them. In my analysis of online metapragmatics on the 5PE, we will see both a regularity of this language governmentality and a regularity of the typification of the 5PE genre.

Methods and Data Sources

New theorizations of *citizen sociolinguistics* (Rymes, 2014b; Rymes & Leone, this volume; Leone, this volume) focus on online metapragmatic commentary, especially as embedded in participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009), as both an untapped source of sociolinguistic data and a site of new possibilities for critical language awareness pedagogy. This paper focuses on online metapragmatic commentary on the 5PE, but the preceding theoretical framework should suggest that whatever fascinating examples of metapragmatic commentary we find online, metapragmatics are a fundamental part of language that occur in any space where language is used. In this section of the paper, I describe aspects of the methodology of citizen sociolinguistics imported for this study, as well as my cautious stance on some of its theoretical underpinnings.

Online participatory spaces offer rich examples of recontextualization, metacommentary, and remixing of other content, cultural products, language varieties, and of anything else we might care to look for (Anderson et al., 2010; Rymes, 2012). However, in discussing the online social life of the usually offline 5PE, it is important to clarify that mere online-ness does not ensure these remixing practices. Jenkins (2009) argued that the generativity of YouTube “has little to do with technological structures” and more to do with particular cultures of the use of YouTube (p. 116), and I believe this is true extended to other so-called Web 2.0 realms. While participatory online spaces (Burgess & Green, 2009) may be especially powerful tools for researchers to document and find records of metapragmatic commentary, I remain unconvinced that these spaces add fundamentally new powers to their users’ metapragmatic toolboxes. Therefore, while I approached online spaces with the belief that they were, as citizen sociolinguistics argues, rich sites of interaction and recontextualization, I did so with the understanding that possibilities for this interaction are a fundamental part of all spaces. I adopted some guidelines of citizen sociolinguistics work to sift effectively through available data, but attention to online-ness did not alter my chosen theoretical frames, which I

expect would also be appropriate for investigations of offline metapragmatic commentary as well. While online spaces may not be uniquely participatory, they do allow a record of participation to be preserved and analyzed by researchers long after the interaction. This can be especially interesting when we are able to track extended interaction on metapragmatic matters. Rymes (2014b) has shown that we can learn a great deal about valuations and typifications of speech varieties from such online metapragmatic discourse, much more (or at least much differently) than classic variationist sociolinguistics (e.g. Labov, 1973) can offer. But again, not all individuals have equal power or advantages with respect to the uptake of their language. So in examining the huge expanse of online commentary, we also need to also track the social positions that are taken on and ascribed to the commentators.

When gathering data for this review of online metapragmatic commentary on the 5PE, one of the challenges was determining a coherent principle of selection for data sources to include. There is simply a huge volume of metapragmatic online material about the 5PE, including thousands of instructional guides on YouTube alone. The most important guidelines from citizen sociolinguistics were those dealing with how to move from one data source to another. As Rymes and Leone (2014b) have written, laying out a prospective methodology for citizen sociolinguistics:

The questions that lead to the next step of the data collection process are largely dependent on the metacommentary found in the initial data source(s), and they will likely lead in several directions rather than proceeding linearly to the next piece of relevant data. For the researcher, documenting these paths is also critical to the overall analysis (p. 20).

Following this suggestion, I mainly approached the problem as if I were a student looking for help writing my own 5PE and detailed the exact path I took through the data I gathered alongside my analysis, which I discuss in the next section. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly describe the general principles of my data collection.

In my data collection and initial analysis, I was guided by attention to search rankings and search suggestions on Google and YouTube. On searches that generated thousands of results, I restricted detailed viewing to the first page of results as many students would do looking for help on their essay.³ However, I could not completely adhere to the “looking for helpful advice” approach without ignoring spaces like the crowdsourced and often farcical Urban Dictionary, to which no sensible student would turn for advice but which has proven valuable for other citizen sociolinguistics researchers (Rymes, 2014b, Rymes & Leone, this volume) as well as for the analysis presented here. Another deviation from the student-perspective approach that I took was viewing threads asking for help on the large and multi-faceted discussion and media aggregation website Reddit, where if I were really a student in need of help I could actually have posted myself, instead of only viewing comments of other users.

One worry I had while collecting data, which I believe I mitigated as best I could, was that given the processes of many search engine algorithms which tend to aggregate Internet user behavior as a guide to relevance, critical and radical material on the 5PE may be buried under the conventionally instructional work that many searchers are looking for in the first place. But in this way, difficulties in

³ Metapragmatics of how far to look through Google searches: <http://xkcd.com/1334/>

gathering data tend to reinforce parts of the argument of the paper: the Internet is no great haven from the hegemony of schooled evaluation of persuasive writing or the ubiquity of the 5PE. While ultimately I can only study a very small portion of the total amount of metapragmatic commentary about the 5PE, I did view a large portion of the most viewed and talked about commentary that is available to simple searches online in English from a United States IP address.

Analysis

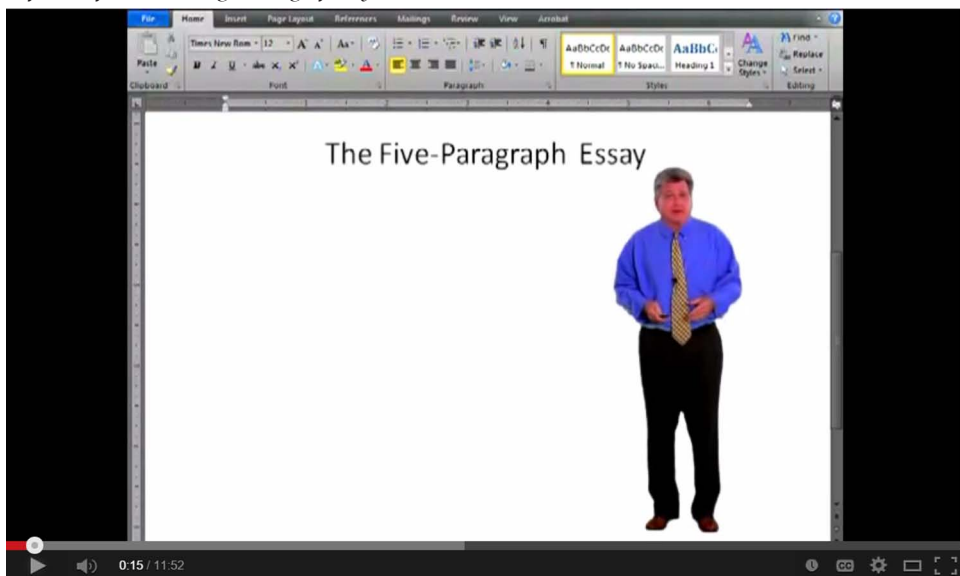
As metapragmatic acts, the descriptions and typifications that comprise the media artifacts described here contribute to the enregisterment of a specific speech genre, the 5PE. I describe the different positions adopted by different commentators as well as showing how they all operate under the same language governmentality, in which student work is always compared to an idealized product whose specifications a teacher is empowered to enforce. Analysis of these data also suggests how this language governmentality is implicated in creating idealized subject positions of literate students as governable subjects.

The first search result on YouTube for “how to write a five paragraph essay” is entitled “The five-paragraph essay: Three formulas for writing the basic academic essay” and produced by David Taylor (2012). Taylor identifies himself on his YouTube profile page as a “university teacher of writing and communications.” If Taylor’s video were not the first search result, I would still want to include it in this analysis because of its special style of presentation. Figure 1 shows a frame from the video. The video is very dry. It accomplishes what it sets out to do—describe rules of a particular genre and establish itself as an authority—but it does not show signs of having been designed for entertainment, special appeal to youth, or humor.

In his presentation, Taylor makes frequent use of nomic typifications, like “the number three has important place in our culture” and “Follow these three

Figure 1.

A frame from the beginning of Taylor’s (2012) video.



formulas and you'll be producing a good, tight, organized essay." The dominant concern in this video is explaining the rules of the format so that listeners can learn to follow them. Taylor (2012) connects his directives to larger purposes of clarity, intelligence, or the purpose of college, as here:

You come up with a position, because you've got to have a position, that's what being in college is all about. You're able to take a position, state an opinion, and then support it in a logical, acceptable way.

Taylor encourages his viewers in their writing, but his instructions about the 5PE center on students doing what they are told to do.

Taylor's video does not motivate much interaction or exchange about the metapragmatic topics of the 5PE or academic writing in general. Almost every viewer comment (of the total of over 250 as of 5/3/2014) are thankful, and about half of them are acknowledgements and forms of "you're welcome" from Taylor. Here are two detailed expressions of gratitude:

I have been attempting to do my essay all day but had no luck and have been completely stuck on how to structure it all day... [sic] All I can say is that I wish I had seen this this morning! Very helpful and I can now enjoy writing my essay's :D It all seem's so obvious now :) Thank you! (Liana Vincent, comment in Taylor, 2012)

I'll take the TOEFL test on Friday, 06/11/2013. Before I watched this video I was very insecure, but now I am confident and pretty sure that I will write down an effective essay. The fact is that your method is simple and useful for any topic or essay style. Thank you ;) (Fernanda Jesus, comment in Taylor, 2012)

These comments show us some of the uptake of Taylor's video, which in turn reinforces our sense of Taylor's expectations for his audience. The comments that explicitly thank Taylor for explaining or revealing the rules to the 5PE reinforce the poetic structure of a rules-giving video, almost as a kind of metapragmatic adjacency pair (Schegloff & Sacks, 1973). In other words, "thank you" is something you might tell someone who has just let you in on the standards of good writing, someone who has saved you from ignorance. These expressions of gratitude are co-textual evidence that Taylor's video is intended and taken up for consumption, not discussion. It is so easy to consume not only because it was designed for this goal but also because it participates in a governmentality that prizes the idealized product, always demanding idealized literate students who meet (but never question) the rules of the 5PE.

It would be easy to make fun of Taylor's video for being boring, but even a video that tries quite hard to be uninteresting can still operate under the same language governmentality as Taylor's video. The "How to Write an Essay Rap" (Bloom, 2013) has a deliberately much more youthful presentation. (For another discussion of some pitfalls of an appeal to youthiness, see Rymes, 2011). Bloom's video, which he describes as a "rap slideshow," gives the essential rules of the 5PE format, as well as other directives about proper language use in an essay (e.g., "no need for 'I think' or 'I believe,' just state it"). Figure 2 shows a frame that is illustrative of the "slideshow" format. The instrumental track is pulled from the 1999 single "Still D.R.E." by Dr. Dre, featuring Snoop Dogg. The lyrics, while spoken by Bloom, are displayed mostly verbatim over a series of colorful images related to schools or writing. Taylor's presentation could not easily be more different from Bloom's.

However, Bloom's video is still fundamentally centered on a determination of whether or not a student's written product meets the rules for the form in question. These repeated lyrics are the best example of this ideology:

You want to write an essay?
 You want to earn the best grade?
 Gotta follow the procedure
 And let the pen lead you

These four simple lines summarize the tone of the entire video, which is all nomic and didactic in the same style as Taylor's video. The design of the video is clear. Mr. Bloom, the composer of the *How to Write an Essay Rap*, is here to tell you how to write an essay. You don't know how to write one, but he does. In the reference to grades, the quoted lines also illustrate part of the power of schools over students' language use. The implied threat of an inferior grade is a familiar form of *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu, 1991).

Figure 2.

A frame from Bloom's (2013) video.



While Bloom's video has a smaller circulation (5,786 views to Taylor's 127,856), his much smaller commenter base (only 10 comments) seems similarly appreciative. I was surprised to see the view count so low, since I found Bloom's video through a suggested search result: I typed "how to write an essay" in the YouTube search bar, and was suggested several expectable searches like "how to write an essay outline" and "how to write an essay in mla format," but "how to write an essay rap" stuck out as a must-click for a researcher of metapragmatics!

Even if this video is more of a pet project than something intended for a wider audience the way Taylor's clearly was, it operates from the same interactional position of someone who knows more about essays than his audience does. In

both videos, the authors position themselves as information givers and position their audiences as information receivers. Both videos describe writing standards as nomic truths and exhibit a larger regularity of videos working to socialize students into comparing their products to idealized writing standards.

These two videos, the lecture and the rap, are good examples of the range of presentation styles that can still operate under the language governmentality of the 5PE, but they are not unique. Other YouTube search results for “five paragraph essay” are similar. Of the 20 results on the first page, all give nomic instructions about how to compose the 5PE. There are 8850 search results for this term on YouTube. The search “how to write a five paragraph essay” brings up a mostly identical set of results on the first page. Bloom’s video is among the 20 results. The searches “essay writing” (about 429,000 results) and “how to write an essay” (about 240,000 results) connect to other similarly instructional videos as well—rules upon rules and whiteboards upon whiteboards.

In addition to these numerous YouTube tutorials, anybody can also find lots of lesson plans and static webpages with similar qualities. The first page of a Google search (conducted May 2014) for “five paragraph essay” shows eight instructional guides, a Wikipedia article on the 5PE, and an education blog post advocating the end of teaching the 5PE (discussed below). Similar searches also yield high proportions of instructional guides.⁴ All are difficult to distinguish from each other. Search results for “five paragraph essay lesson plan,” which we might imagine a teacher conducting, read very similarly to the student-oriented material. All these search results and the two videos by Bloom and Taylor, explain familiar standards for the 5PE: the use of a simple thesis stating the writer’s argument, three reasons that support the thesis and that are explained in three body paragraphs, each of which has its own topic sentence, then a conclusion summarizing or restating the argument as well as opening up the essay to some bigger thematic point, and so on. In all of these sources, the unified typification comes also with elements that position the 5PE as a genre with clear, unquestioned, and sensible characteristics for good writing. Bloom’s video has given us the best summary of how this linguistic typification is linked to an idealized subject position of a receptive student: “You want to write an essay? Follow the procedure.”

But plenty of students hate essay-writing! Where can we find some of that juicy metapragmatic rage? Guided by the efforts of other researchers seeking citizen sociolinguistic data (Rymes, 2014b, Rymes & Leone, this volume), I investigated descriptions of essays on the crowdsourced definitions website, Urban Dictionary (UD). As of May 4, 2014, there were 27 definitions on UD for “essay.” Six are jokes or other comments about the use of the word *ese* by or about speakers of Mexican Spanish. Two are sexual references. Four describe the denotation of some text or utterance being needlessly long. The remaining 15 definitions discuss the essay as school writing assignment. All of these are attacks on the genre, expressing outrage at its existence. The user kaly, with the top-rated definition, writes that the essay is “useless work used to torture

⁴ One exception is that the first page of Google results for “essay writing” yields only two instructional guides and eight websites offering paid essay writing services. I strongly suspect a corpus analyst or market researcher could say more about why this is so (e.g. Crystal, 2011), but I am not a specialist in those areas.

billions of kids in this world” (January 2, 2004). The user PissedHonorStudent writes that the essay is:

assigned by teachers as a form of torture viewed as acceptable by society. Complaining to the teacher about the work it entails it [sic] wrong, but said teacher is allowed to bitch and moan about grading it as long as he/she pleases (December 30, 2009).

Others are similarly acidic and intense. One particularly long definition is a reversal of the instructional videos, giving almost identical information about the genre but decrying it with every phrase:

In the educational system, an essay is a long informational paper that is supposed to be 3 or more pages long with an introduction, at least 3 “detailed” body paragraphs with “source citations” up the wazoo, a conclusion, AND a bibliography with at least (insert large number here) “reliable” sources (NOT Wikipedia). Oh, and did I mention that some of these sources need to be from books & magazines that we always need to run to the library for, too? The topics for these wretched pieces of work are almost always going to be out of your control, so prepare to write about absolute bull. Research for these papers require hours of web surfing and/or book searching, since you need both a “reliable” source and a source in which you can extract a considerable amount of info from. So don’t be surprised if you find yourself venturing beyond page 2 of the Google results. In addition to the pain you must endure from just finding useful info in a sea of crap, you must also cite almost EVERYTHING using MLA Format, putting the icing on the cake of frustration. If you don’t, your whole essay will be a complete waste (see plagiarism). If you are in high school or college, you also have to write a lengthy evaluation of the sources themselves in your bibliography (a.k.a. “Annotated Bibliography”), which means even MORE running around. Once that cluster of bull is dealt with, the average academic essay is done, and the hell-bent burden of essay writing is lifted. . . for now. (BCB5, December 1, 2012)

This definition by BCB5 contains much of the same information as the intentionally instructional sources discussed above. That is, even though BCB5 finds the genre of the 5PE distasteful, from the perspective of metapragmatics, they still have obviously learned certain (enregistered) typifications of the 5PE, and indeed continue to spread these typifications. This critique by BCB5 suggests that essay writing is a “wretched piece of work” and a “hell-bent burden” for students, but stops short of any further critique of the governmentality of the 5PE. The same can be said of the two previous definitions quoted here as well as the other 15 definitions that share their focus. So beyond simply contributing to the enregisterment of a particular genre, these typifications are also political responses to the subject position of literate student that the language governmentality of the 5PE creates.

The UD critics, though they certainly seem to have let off some steam and to feel very righteous in their anger, do not ultimately operate outside of the language governmentality that sustains the instructional videos. They reject the conventions of the 5PE, yet whatever their displeasure, the UD writers do not really question a teacher’s position to evaluate their writing or prescribe certain generic forms

like the 5PE. And while they may reject the position of idealized literate student it is unclear what position with respect to literacy they do adopt. They may detest following the rules, but elsewhere, like on YouTube, these rules are constantly and successfully reinforced as just. Unfortunately, in the world as constituted by the governmentality of the 5PE, the UD critics would seem to deserve their lack of success. Imagine how the grateful commenters on Taylor's video might respond to the UD users. *What are you so upset about? This guy just told us all the rules we have to follow—there's no problem.*

UD is not the only place to find critiques of the 5PE. To understand how the rage of UD does not dismantle the governmentality of school's evaluative purview, we will examine a policy-oriented and mostly more subtle version of these critiques. Blogger and teacher Ray Salazar's May 2012 column entitled "If You Teach or Write 5-Paragraph Essays--Stop It!" is among the first 10 Google search results for "five paragraph essay," making it part of the metapragmatic commentary our hypothetical stressed student searcher would encounter. We can easily imagine this student clicking on this result in between some of the other more instructional material, partly as procrastination and partly as reinforcing their possible indignation at their assignment. Salazar (2012a, para. 2-3) argues that the 5PE is a bad writing style:

It's bad writing. It's always been bad writing. With the Common Core Standards designed to shift the way we teach students to think, read, and write, this outdated writing tradition must end. If you're teaching it--stop it. If your son, daughter, niece, or nephew (or a young person you care about) is learning it--prepare to engage with the teacher to end it.

The five-paragraph essay is rudimentary, unengaging, and useless.

Salazar develops his criticisms further, focusing on what he sees as severe limitations to the simple three part argument of the 5PE. He proposes students and teachers adopt a more flexible argumentative format modelled on the work of Aristotle:

Aristotle became one of the godfathers of rhetoric by creating structures for persuasive writing and speaking that--if taught to young people today--would transform writing instruction and facilitate the implementation of the Common Core, proving that students--when guided appropriately--can succeed with critical thinking in the 21st century. (Salazar, 2012, para. 5)

The system of language governmentality implicated in the Bloom and Taylor YouTube videos was one in which a product was compared to an idealized standard. Success in writing was construed as a matter of meeting the form of the 5PE, and the idealized governable student was cast in terms of one who would follow that procedure. Salazar is critiquing the form of the 5PE, but he is only suggesting a new idealized standard for students' writing to be compared to. The fundamental idealized literate subject is not changed.

While there is not sufficient room here to devote to a full discourse analysis of the comments on Salazar's article, some selected material will help cement this portrait of Salazar's argument. The discussion is mostly congenial except for a

conversation with a reader with the handle Ignatz. Ignatz's first post is a strong attack on Salazar's article:

Hey Ray, the five paragraph structure teaches you to use evidence to back up your arguments. Something you fail to do in your essay.

You make a bunch of specious claims and then never support them.

Instead we get a rambly mess of an argument that doesn't really go anywhere. The biggest bone I have to pick with you is the old saw you repeat that I keep hearing from curriculum faddists- that this structure is never used in "real life."

This is a bogus argument due to the fact that we do not teach all writing forms to be just used in the work place (this is what you mean by real life- right?) There is a value in learning a writing technique that is used to train good mental habits- such as supporting information with evidence.

Mostly I hate this real life argument because we do use it out side of school. I used to write for newspapers and magazines and used it (in a mutated form) all of the time. Turn to any newspaper page of any good newspaper and you will see an article written with an introduction/ a body/ and conclusion. This method is used in debates and in writing college acceptance essays to name a few formats.

To put down the five paragraph work horse is a fad. Don't eliminate it, just add it to your arsenal of writing. Students need to know how to structure thoughts and this is one very useful method.

One last point, not teaching this to students sets kids up for failure in college, where - like it or not- they are expected to know this formula. (Ignatz, 2012)

Salazar's response (and the subsequent discussion between the two which continues on for several turns not quoted here) shows the rationalization they have in common:

Ignatz, if we're not preparing student for real life, we should just turn off the lights, close the doors, and go home. The five-paragraph essay is useless outside of the classroom. There are so many other ways to teach persuasion--and to persuade. (Salazar, 2012b)

Salazar's reference to the need "to teach persuasion" is similar to Ignatz's reference to the need for students "to structure thoughts" in that both imply the ability for a teacher to hold perfect knowledge about what forms accomplish these tasks and to impart this perfect knowledge to a student. Both rely on a rationalization of the idea that the difference between structured and unstructured thoughts is both easily judged and related directly to linguistic practice. Again, as we saw in Pennycook's (2002) work, a theoretical frame of governmentality reveals how a system of rationality can contain more than one side of a debate. Though the two writers do not share the same ultimate conclusion about the value of the 5PE, both Ignatz and Salazar are concerned with same question: what form is appropriate to teach students? The most focused part of Ignatz's comment

that reveals this premise is the appeal to the need for students “to know how to structure thoughts.” The basic validity and utility of this question they base their advocacy on is never discussed or justified, which might be expected since traditional models of schooling itself also rely on this instructional mindset. We can see here and across the metapragmatic artifacts surveyed in the paper how models of linguistic practice and models of schooling and student personhood are deeply intertwined.⁵ At the same time that Ignatz and Salazar compete over partially dissimilar typifications of a specific text genre, they seem to largely share background rationalization about students, schools, and power over language.

So far, the data presented has been mostly ostensibly one-directional, designed for an audience, with little invitation for further discussion. But language governmentality relating to the idealized governable writer does not just inhabit instructional or didactic spaces. More collaborative or interactional spaces, like the forums of Reddit, a large and multi-faceted discussion and media aggregation website, show some of the same patterns. For example, a thread posted by *tantalicatom689* entitled “Can Reddit help me write an essay?” created an interactional space about the 5PE. The thread is only responded to by one other user, *Mrlucky77*, who provides tailored advice at least as helpful as any YouTube video. There are no deviations from the advice found elsewhere on the web. But this interaction does not supplant the authoritarian basis of 5PE norms. It is possible that this post had a relatively small circulation. The subreddit⁶ */r/HomeworkHelp*, where *tantalicatom689*’s thread was posted, only has 12,051 subscribers as of May 5, 2014, and the thread was posted March 26, 2012. Other Reddit threads on essay writing in */r/HomeworkHelp* are similarly small in circulation (with usually fewer than 20 comments). In contrast, the very large subreddit */r/AskReddit*, which focuses on “open-ended discussion questions” according to its rules, contained a popular thread on writing posted August 2, 2014 and entitled “Writers of Reddit, what are exceptionally simple tips that make a huge difference in other people’s writing?” (*ajago12598*, 2013). This thread generated 4232 comments. The subreddit */r/AskReddit* is followed by 5,639,595 subscribers as of May 5, 2014, so part of this question’s greater appeal is simply a result of its greater circulation. It is also revealing that a question like “How do I write a 5PE?” would not be allowed on */r/AskReddit*, if enough subreddit moderators believed, as many of the sources already described do, that this is not an open-ended question. Echoing Jenkins’s (2009) argument that culture trumps mere technology, even though Reddit is potentially a more interactive home for citizen commentators on metapragmatics, there is no sign that the Reddit posts on the 5PE host substantial deviations from the language governmentality seen elsewhere.

The many Internet users and producers who explain rules of the 5PE agree on many aspects of this form. Even its harsh critics sometimes agree on these rules. Some critics are discerning and earnest about their concerns about the 5PE. There is a rich metapragmatic ecology where these language users can interact and

⁵ Salazar and Ignatz also allude to and implicitly debate the relevant meanings of “the workplace,” “real life,” and other spaces “outside of the classroom.” The connections between the language governmentality of the 5PE and the discourses that construct these spaces are outside the scope of this paper, though they certainly suggest further research with the same goals and frameworks.

⁶ A subreddit is a subdivision of the community with its own moderation, theme, and posts. Popular, very active subreddits include */r/wtf*, */r/funny*, and */r/gaming*. But there are numerous smaller ones also, like */r/runningmusic*, */r/hookah*, and */r/imaginaryleviathans*.

connect online. However, all these actors operate within a governmentality that will always eventually leave students outside the safety of its norms, a system that is designed to flunk a few as an example to the rest.

Conclusion

As often, this research into language use rooted in school contexts gives rise to two closely related implications, for education and for language research.

As critics of education, we can ask ourselves: *Am I still playing by the rules, even though I'm fighting?* Surveying commentary on the 5PE shows that the answer can easily be *Yes*. We must be relentless in uncovering whose interests are served by an idealized model of students whose linguistic practice consists only of following standards set by authorities. We do not have to settle for the unquestioned 5PE, or whatever replacement format gets dreamed up next. Teachers can prepare themselves to engage with and question the constructed nature of generic forms. In a space with radically different subjectivities of language available, there would still be writing that could be improved, and even bad writing. The fictional but feasible classroom described by Flores (2013), as well as Canagarajah's (2013) project with students exploring translingual composition that questions and breaks the conventional bounds of language are both exciting prospects for new kinds of thinking about students working to expand and hone their communicative repertoires. Unlike under the governmentality involved in the standards of the 5PE, success and failure in writing in these new models is a matter of meeting local, contextual, audience driven goals, not a matter of following a predetermined form or not. The questions driving assessment shift away from "Does this meet the standard?" toward "Does this accomplish my goals in some social practice I participate in? Does this meet my needs?" Canagarajah and Flores both have their own justifications for the projects they describe. My analysis can be seen to make their calls more urgent, because online metapragmatic commentary about one academic genre, and likely others, shows no significant challenges to an entrenched language governmentality that cheapens linguistic practice to a matter of following authoritarian rules.

As researchers of language we can ask ourselves: *Does my work improve material conditions for someone, and can I use it to imagine new forms of language subjectivity that do the same?* So many language research questions will lead us to be critics of education, if we are ethically attentive to the realities where our research is focused (Cameron, Frazer, Harvey, Rampton, & Richardson, 1992; Labov, 1982). When it comes to sharing accumulated knowledge of language use with teachers, students, and other educational actors, we must choose our theoretical frames carefully, and we do not always need to prioritize their refinement if they are helpful to material educational conditions in their current forms. For example, anthropological models like enregisterment are probably too arcane to be of use to a typical teacher. Semiotic anthropology is happy to investigate social phenomena at the smallest possible scale, in order to avoid analytic terms that gloss over the huge number of steps and moments that ideologies take to keep living. But teachers and other practitioners who are doing the daily work of expanding communicative repertoires, seeding critical language awareness, or any other worthwhile goal, will have a much easier time reconceptualizing their work if we can construct

our radical visions for education with building blocks larger and more complex than links in a speech chain (e.g. Agha, 2005). And if that means sacrificing some theoretical precision, I can accept that. Even though they have their own arcane moments, the frame of language governmentality and other emphases on language ideology have strong potential to be those building blocks (though possibly not by those polysyllabic names!). Investigations into online and other non-school spaces will be useful also. Citizen sociolinguistics has the potential to drive further productive research into language ideologies and language governmentality in an accessible way, though I believe it can only do so as an explicitly political project that aims to subvert not only traditional variationist sociolinguistics but other forms of racism, imperialism, and oppression. The analysis presented here helps me see that we should not underestimate the spread of the governmentality underlying the 5PE, and surely other practices as well. In particular, we should not assume that online or participatory spaces are in any special way insulated from relations of power we know are present in offline spaces. As is often the case with research into language and schooling, with the present work we have found a little bit more to be worried about, a little bit more to look into, and a little bit of an idea of what we can do better.

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Mark is a Ph.D. student in Educational Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests focus on how people in learning contexts make sense of language. He is currently assisting in research at the Philadelphia Bilingual Education Project. He welcomes correspondence at markle@gse.upenn.edu.

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