The Good, the Bad and the Downright Mediocre: Quality Judgments in Book Reviews

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Abstract

Evaluation of research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) is a thorny problem as the bibliometric measures designed for the life sciences simply do not apply. While current research has explored a number of methods to assess quality, this paper presents an innovative and potentially more neutral assessment of our academic productions, based on published book reviews. This pilot study uses corpus linguistics methodologies within a genre analysis framework to look at reviews in French literature studies, using a small collection of articles from the field of corpus linguistics as a control sample. It demonstrates that, unlike in English language scientific journals, where the aim is to evaluate research, the reviews published in the *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* are more descriptive and are rarely negatively critical. This limits their use as a self-evaluation system for this academic community and raises the question about distinguishing the good and the mediocre in the field.

Keywords: *peer review, genre analysis, book review, quality representation, SSH*

Introduction

Finding the most suitable methods and indicators for assessing quality in humanities research is nowadays one of the most discussed topics in research evaluation. Recent developments have tried to answer the current running criticism among scholars of the field, who consider that existing practices of evaluation do not take into account their own view of quality. This situation is rendered even more complex in that political, as well as technical, initiatives are confronted with a lack of clear ideas about what is esteemed by humanists and social scientists. While the general claim to be evaluated by peers is well understood and broadly accepted, the question remains as to what criteria intervene in this process.

Questions of what constitutes quality are particularly important when it comes to defining publications which may be judged as being of insufficient academic quality. Thus, in academic terms, the aspect treated here means evaluating not the highly published high performancers, the very good, nor the also-ran, the bad, but trying to decide what constitutes quality in the mass of middle ground research, the reasonably good down to poor. It is all too easy to say what is bad, and what is very good, but in judging mediocrity we are looking at an unclear middle ground. Few of us are Nobel material, so defining what is an acceptable norm in research dissemination is a thorny problem, but it is one that, in international research, cannot be overlooked. The extent to which mediocrity is in the eyes of the beholder is difficult to judge.

In this pilot study, we shall look at how an analysis of published book reviews might be another tool in the panoply of research evaluation, helping to tackle notions such as "good", "bad" or "mediocre". After a short presentation of the literature on quality representations in research evaluation, and the book review article as a genre, we will describe our corpus and specify the analytical methods we have used. The results will be briefly commented, before formulating a series of conclusive remarks which will take, for many of them, the form of open questions to be further explored.

Background

This article is part of a larger study being carried out within the EvalHum Initiative (www.evalhum.eu) aiming to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the objectivation of quality judgments in the SSH, and more particularly, in the peer review processes. In response to recurrent criticisms of evaluation procedures applied to the SSH[1], past initiatives have mainly focused on describing the conditions by which evaluation can be bibliometric informed[2] and rendered fairer and as less biased as possible.[3] More recently, cognitivist studies were conducted in order to understand "how professors think" in the peer evaluation process[4] or what indicators are considered as the most suitable for SSH evaluation by dedicated panels of scholars from different SSH disciplines.[5] The approach proposed here is complementary to these, whilst being based more closely on an analysis of the published material itself.

Based on methods and tools developed in the fields of genre analysis and corpus linguistics, our approach considers value judgments expressed in book reviews. The aim is to observe and organize quality perceptions conveyed in what is an accepted and frequent research-related output, which, whilst having an evaluative function, is detached as such from any fears of a possible managerial use, which would inevitably interfere with expressions of authorial position when research evaluation is stated as the object of a survey. Such a focus has the added advantage of providing access to the representations of the "shop floor researcher", who will not necessarily take the steps to express his views about scientific quality in a dedicated paper or to get involved in drawing reports and grey literature on evaluation processes. It is also to be noted that a focus on book reviews is of particular interest given that books are seen as a major tool for dissemination in SSH research[6], and have recently come under increasing scrutiny.[7]

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[1] See Anton J. Nederhof, "Assessing the Usefulness of Bibliometric Indicators for the Humanities and the Social Sciences : A Comparative Study," *Scientometrics* 15, no. 5-6 (1989): 423-435; Anton J. Nederhof, "Bibliometric Monitoring of Research Performance in the Social Sciences and the Humanities: A Review," *Scientometrics* 66, no. 1 (2006): 81-100; Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie wan Wetenschappen, *Judging Research on Its Merits*, Rapport van de Raad voor de Geesteswetenschappen en de Sociaal-Wetenschappelijke Raad (Amsterdam: 2005).

[2] See Gunnar Sivertsen, "A Performance Indicator Based on Complete Data for the Scientific Publication Output at Research Institutions," *ISSI Newsletter* 6 no.1 (2010).

[3] See The Royal Society, *Peer Review – An Assessment of Recent Developments* (London: 1995).

[4] Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think. Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[5] KNAW, *Quality Indicators for Research in the Humanities*, Interim Report by the Committee on Quality Indicators in the Humanities (Amsterdam, 2011). ; Michael Ochsner et al., " Indicators for Research Quality in the Humanities : Opportunities and Limitations," *Bibliometrie – Praxis und Forschung* 1 no. 4 (2012), URN:urn:nbn:bvb:355-bpf-157-0.

[6] Diana Hicks "The Dangers of Partial Bibliometric Evaluation in the Social Sciences," *Economia Politica* XXIII, no. 2 (August 2006):145-162.

In genre analysis and corpus linguistics, there is a relatively abundant literature of investigations into the evaluative orientation of academic discourse in general, and of book reviews in particular.[8] Much of this work goes back to Swale's notion of genre[9] as being intimately linked to a definable discourse community which has a restricted size and which has its own accepted norms of communication. This inevitably means restricting the very wide notion of genre to a slightly more precise academic discourse community, as for example the scientific discourse community defined by Williams[10], which can be either thematic, as in multidisciplinary research, or discipline based. In the case of academic productions in general, and the book review in particular, this means restricting the broader community to those who are actually in academia and who publish with fellow members of academia, generally their peers, as audience. Consequently, this precludes reviews written for and published by the press, or any other channels, as these must be considered as a separate genre. It also means accepting that national or language-based thematic or disciplinary communities will have developed their own variations on the wider genre type, which have their own specificities and validity as a form of expression.

To date, work carried out in genre analysis and corpus linguistics has tended to concentrate only on English language review articles, whereas the activity of reviewing is ubiquitous to all academic cultures, and the genre will inevitably vary with language, national and disciplinary research cultures. Even in English, much genre research has been carried out on relatively small numbers of texts, and often in the hard sciences[11]. Whilst such research does give valuable insights into the wider notion of academic genre, the more recent corpus-based analyses proposed by Römer[12] and Diani[13] allow

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[7] Alessia Zuccala, "Quality and Influence in Literary Work: Evaluating the 'Educated Imagination'," *Research Evaluation* 21 (2012): 229-241.

[8] Susan Hunston and Geoffrey Thompson, eds., *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Giuliana Diani, "The Representation of Evaluative and Argumentative Procedures: Examples from the Academic Book Review Article," *Textus* XX, no. 1 (2007): 37-56; Giuliana Diani, "Authorial Identity and Textual Voices in English Review Discourse across Disciplines." *Linguistica e Filologia* 27 (2008):181–203; Ken Hyland and Giuliana Diani, eds., *Academic Evaluation: Review Genres in University Settings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Polly Tse and Ken Hyland, "Gender and Discipline: Exploring Metadiscourse Variation in Academic Book Reviews." *Academic Discourse Across Disciplines*, edited by Ken Hyland and Marina Bondi, 177-202. Bern: Peter Lang, 2006; Polly Tse and Ken Hyland, "'So What is the Problem this Book Addresses?': Interactions in Academic Book Reviews." *Text & Talk* 26, no. 6 (2007):767–790.

[9] John Swales, *Genre Analysis* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[10] Geoffrey C. Williams, "Collocational Networks: Interlocking Patterns of Lexis in a Corpus of Plant Biology Research Articles," *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 3, no.1 (1998): 151-171.

[11] Françoise Salager-Meyer and Maria Angeles Alcaraz Ariza, "Negative Appraisals in Academic Book Reviews: A Cross-Linguistic Approach," in *Intercultural Aspects of Specialized Communication*, ed. C. Candlin and M. Gotti (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007); Françoise Salager-Meyer, Maria Angeles Alcaraz Ariza and M. Pabón Berbesí, "Collegiality, Critique and the Construction of Scientific Argumentation in Medical Book Reviews: A Diachronic Approach,".*Journal of Pragmatics* 39, no. 10 (2007): 1758–1774; Françoise Salager-Meyer et al., "The Voice of Scholarly Dispute in Medical Book Reviews, 1890–2010," in *Stance and Voice in Written Academic Genres,* eds. Ken Hyland and C. Sancho Guinda (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012).

[12] Ute Römer, "Identification Impossible? A Corpus Approach to Realisations of Evaluative Meaning in Academic Writing," *Functions of Language* 15, no.1 (2008): 115-130, Ute Römer, "Establishing the Phraseological Profile of a Text Type: The Construction of Meaning in Academic Book Reviews," *English Text Construction* 3, no. 1 (2010): 95-119.

[13] Giuliana Diani, "Exploring the Polyphonic Dimension of Academic Book Review Articles in the

broader representations to be drawn. Both of these looked at linguistics discourse communities, but through potentially very different genre, internet-published reviews for the former and peer-reviewed journals for the latter.

Method

Genre and corpus studies are aimed at language analysis, in order to understand what is happening and to put this knowledge to use in the teaching of languages for specific purposes. The aim here is not linguistic in that we are using linguistic approaches to look at these reviews as part of an evaluative exercise, and, above all, as a potential tool in research evaluation procedures.

For this preliminary study about conceptualizations of good, bad and mediocre research in SSH, we chose to focus on a discourse community of French literature scholars; a second community was selected as a control sample, that of specialists of corpus linguistics. The latter essentially serves as a control sample and is not studied in depth in this paper. This selection is justified, on one hand, by the fact that literature studies in general represent very accurately what can be called "prototypical" humanities. These disciplines follow closely the schema described by Solesbury[14] in that they tend to be nationally based, they develop individual rather than team based research and have a strong tendency to publish in a national language. However, even though this might be broadly true, French is one of the most representative languages in Europe, from a cultural and scientific point of view and is thus a major academic language shared by many scholars on the European continent. On the other hand, while epistemologically relatively close, the French literature and corpus linguistic communities present interesting discriminating characteristics. To cite but a few:

- while the first group uses French as a publishing medium, scholars in corpus linguistics predominantly use English as a *lingua franca* for dissemination, despite the fact that they come from numerous countries around the world and may often be investigating their national languages,
- team work is less common among French literature scholars, and much more frequent in corpus linguistic studies;
- internationalisation of journals is very different in the two fields. Corpus linguists have access to dedicated international journals with high impact factors, published by a highly reputed Dutch publishing house, specialised in academic works. The selected journal in French studies, on the other hand, is published by the most reputed university publishing house in France, and relies on a network of *correspondants étrangers*, but displays a much lower level of articles signed by foreign scholars, compared to that of the corpus linguistics journal.

The degree of familiarity of the authors of this article with the above-mentioned domains of speciality was also a strong argument in favour of such a preliminary selection.

A corpus was assembled from the review sections of 19 issues of the *Revue*

Discourse of Linguistics," in *Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Academic Discourse*, eds. Eija Suomela-Salmi and Fred Dervin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2009).
[14] William Solesbury, "Knowledge Transfer: The Medium and the Message," *Research Evaluation* 4, no. 1 (1994): 55-58.

d'histoire littéraire de la France (RHLF), from 2008 to date. This journal was selected for its representativity; aiming to cover all forms of French literature since the Middle Ages, it appears therefore as occupying an intermediary position in language studies between the non-specialised outlets, largely addressing scholars focusing on all kinds of language and literature studies (ex. *Papers of Modern Languages Association of America*), and publications centred on narrower subjects (ex. *Revue Dix-huitième siècle*). Published by the Société d'histoire littéraire de la France since the beginning of the 20th century, it is also one of the most long-lived and most widely read publications of its type.

The RHLF reviews were downloaded in html format and partially cleaned of extraneous indexing material. The total size of this corpus is 486328 running words, tokens, representing 33773 types. This is deemed as an adequate size from which preliminary conclusions can be drawn.

The first stage consisted of manual annotation of four issues, comprising 68 reviews by 60 different authors. The breadth of this distribution is to be noted, as the views expressed and terms used cannot be considered as representing only the perceptions and idiosyncrasies of a small core group of reviewers, but a very wide pool from which reviewers have been drawn. From this sample, lists of seed terms were extracted, representing different evaluative functions. Each list consists of a number of lemmatized forms that represent different value judgments. Using AntConc[15], the frequencies in the full corpus were calculated using regular expressions so as to obtain the lemmatized data. These were partially cleaned so as to remove obvious anomalies, such as the combination *belles lettres*, when the adjective *belle* is being sought as a judgment on a published work. The relative frequency (per thousand) is then calculated for each lemma and for each list. Collocates are then studied for any lemma with more than 10 occurrences. Collocate analysis was done using a span of 4/4 so as to extract collocates and evaluative frames. The resulting collocate list enabled the definition of four cluster types that will be fully described in the following section: publication type, analysis type, subsection of publication, evaluative metafunctions.

A comparative collection of texts was also assembled from the *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* (IJCL). This is a small set of five reviews from recent issues of the journal. These were downloaded as PDF and a text version generated for analysis with AntConc. The total size is 13718 running words, far too small to be considered as a corpus, but providing a usable core set for comparative purposes. It will provide the basis for a much larger corpus that will seek to reveal genre differences between journals and disciplines in English. Just as in the case of the RHLF articles, these were studied manually to discover their own characteristics and to allow a comparison with the genre specificities outlined in the findings of Römer and Diani. However, the main task was to discover potential specific evaluative functions. The collection was also analyzed by AntConc, which revealed the dominance of adverbials as an evaluative tool, but with a very low frequency of each adverb.

It is to be underlined again that this is still exploratory work, which traces a way rather than seeking to reach sound reproducible conclusions. The approach adopted in the global study aims to combine a CV analysis of peers with a look into the editorial procedures behind the publication of book reviews in scholarly journals, in addition to the discourse and corpus analysis of content illustrated here. Several review editors have

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[15] See Lawrence Anthony, AntConc (Version 3.2.4u) [Computer Software] (Tokyo: Waseda University, 2011), Available from http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/.

already been contacted and asked to complete a short questionnaire that aims to give an insight into the editorial choices involved. In an iterative process, this questionnaire will be refined and then put online for use in the main study involving a much wider range of journals in both English and French. Issues about the choice of the reviewers and its justification with regard to the general policy of the journal will therefore be tackled in the future, while such questions cannot be answered for the current samples. In this respect, it is worth noting that academic affiliations of reviewers are not specified in RHLF.

Findings

Three series of findings will be presented in this section. They concern the differences and similarities observed in the corpus within the book review genre, the specificities in expressing value judgments, and the representation of the quality in this particular discourse community of SSH researchers.

Specificities of Book Reviews in the Observed Field

Book reviews in French literature studies seem to present some striking differences when compared to similar practices in the other field. For a start, the medium length of the reviews in the 68 sample is of 1200 words, rather short when compared to the reviews published in IJCL, where 2800 words is average. Each issue of the French journal has a large number of relatively short reviews within the review section, thus the full corpus we have built accounts for some 323 individual articles. This is a fundamental difference with the corpus linguistics journal, as here each issue has a very limited number of relatively long, highly developed review articles, with an average length of 6.6 pages. In the absence of a larger survey, it is not possible for the moment to say which length is to be considered the most spread academic norm across SSH publications.

In the RHLF corpus, a special category of reviews can be mentioned, that of new editions of a (more or less) classic text; these represent 33% (23 reviews) of the initial sample of 68 reviews. Considering the high presence of "edition reviews", and leaving aside a certain number of books of the most various types (bibliographies and interviews, for example), it appears that only 57% of the reviewed publications in the RHLF initial sample concern "research books"; herein defined as works whose content is not a collection of materials and is due almost exclusively to the research of an individual scholar or a team (by opposition to literary writers). If this choice is coherent with the orientation of the journal, whose focus on literary history explains the interest for new materials of various types offered to the academic community, it constitutes nevertheless an important difference with the reviews in linguistics, where only "research books" are analyzed. In order to check this variable, a corpus from the *International Journal of Lexicography* is also being built, as this area does publish reviews of new or commented editions of great works, which is rare in IJCL.

In addition, the manual analysis showed that RHLF authors of "edition reviews" focus as much on the literary content as on the work of the individual editor or team producing the new edition, therefore revealing a very different understanding of the aims of the book reviewing exercise. In many reviews, the aesthetic value of the literary text and its context are seen as of greater significance than the description and the

evaluation of the editors' choices, principles and results. Significantly the two sub-genres are not signalled as such, for instance by creating two separate sections.[16]

In her study of book reviews based on a very large corpus of internet published reviews, the 3,5 million word BRILC corpus, Römer looked at the formulaic aspect of expressions of judgment. Römer found that simple word lists supplied little information of generalizable value, but that a study of phraseological units extracted after a study of n-grams gave an interesting picture of how judgments are expressed. However, the RHLF reviews appear much less formulaic than those studied by Römer and do not lead to such clear cut findings, even when applied to the full corpus of RHLF reviews. On the other hand, in our work, collocations are much more revealing, as a focus on the use of *très* will show.

One of the aspects of genre analysis is the analysis of a text in terms of what Swales, in the book cited above, termed rhetorical moves, a set of more or less compulsory actions that a writer performs when structuring a text. Originally designed to describe the introductory section of scientific research articles, particularly those in the life sciences, the move approach has been applied to a number of genres, including book reviews. It is to be noted that moves of the French texts tend not to be the same as those identified by Motta-Roth in her 1998 article, and corrected as follows by Diani in her 2004 paper:

> Move 1. INTRODUCING THE BOOK
> Sub-function 1 Defining the general topic of the book and/ or
> Sub-function 2 Informing about potential readership and/ or
> Sub-function 3 Informing about the author and/ or
> Sub-function 4 Making topic generalization and/ or
> Sub-function 5 Inserting the book in the field
> Move 2. OUTLINING THE BOOK
> Sub-function 6. Providing general view of the organization of the book and/ or
> Sub-function 7. Stating the topic of each chapter and/ or
> Sub-function 8. Citing extra-text material
> Move 3. HIGHLIGHTING PARTS OF THE BOOK
> Sub-function 9. Providing focused evaluation.
> Move 4. PROVIDING CLOSE EVALUATION OF THE BOOK
> Sub-function 10/A Definitely recommending/ disqualifying the book or
> Sub-function 10/B Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings.

In the texts being analyzed here, if moves 1 and 2 are systematic, move 3 appears very seldom, while 4 tends to be followed by a fifth move, more factual, in case of a negative reviews. *Une bibliographie, un index des noms et un index des notions complètent l'ouvrage*[17] ("a bibliography, an index of names and an index of concepts completes the work") is the last phrase of one of these texts, which in a certain sense compensates for the global disqualification stated two long paragraphs before. By and large, authors prefer to define the general topic of the book rather than to inform about the author, to make topic generalizations or to insert the book in the field (sub-functions 3, 4 and 5). Extra-text material is seldom cited (sub-function 8). When fulfilled, which is not systematic, sub-function 2 appears rather in the closing section of the review. On the whole, the organisation of the reviews privileges the second move, displaying a

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[16] These exist in other French studies journals, for instance in *Revue Dix-huitième siècle*.
[17] Luc Fraisse, *RHLF* 112, no. 3 (June-September 2012): 724.

tendency to describe more than to evaluate, which is further confirmed by our analysis.

Value Judgments

This section looks at the four clusters introduced earlier, namely publication type, analysis type, subsection of publication, and evaluative metafunctions. Each section is analyzed in terms of its primary collocates.

The Publication_Type cluster is made up of seven words: *édition, essai, livre, oeuvre, ouvrage, texte, volume*. Analyzed together, it is possible to find the main collocates, limited here to more than 10 occurences, which are then classified by a part of speech. Figure 1 shows how the categories of modifier, noun and verb relate to the whole; only the five most frequent items in each category are shown.
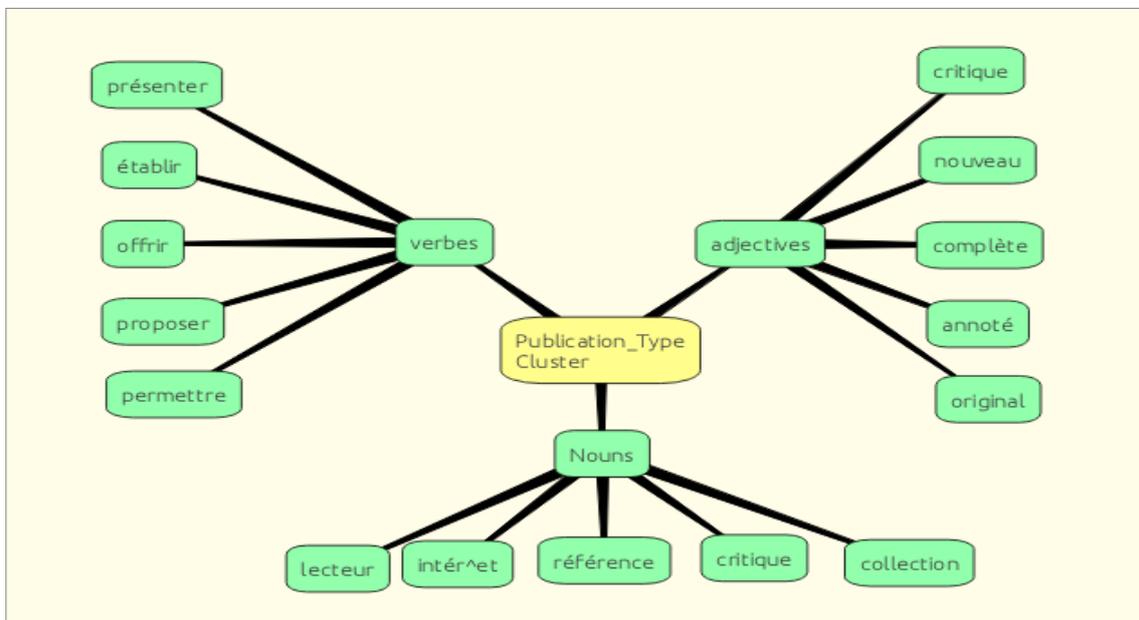

Figure 1. Modifier, Noun and Verb Collocates of Publication Type

As can be seen in Figure 1, the verbs remain fairly neutral and simply introduce the publication being reviewed. The modifiers concern the type of publication and its nature, but here we already find an insistence on novelty, either of the approach (*originale*) or, more frequently, of the publication (*nouvelle édition*). Thoroughness is underlined by the modifier *complète*. Similarly, the nouns denote classes by announcing a critical edition, a collection of articles or referring to the readership. Here again though, evaluation is already present, as the interest (*intérêt*) of a work and its referential status ([ouvrage] *de référence*) are mentioned.

The Analysis_type cluster is composed of six terms, *analyse, contribution, étude* (study), *projet, production,* and *travail*. This section has a very different distribution for its top collocates with only two verbs, both neutral, *montrer* (show) and *proposer* (offer). The noun collocates are similarly neutral, it is the modifiers that begin to show a

real evaluative function with a high use of words such as *minutieuse* (meticulous) and *remarquable* (remarkable). The modifiers are illustrated in figure 2.
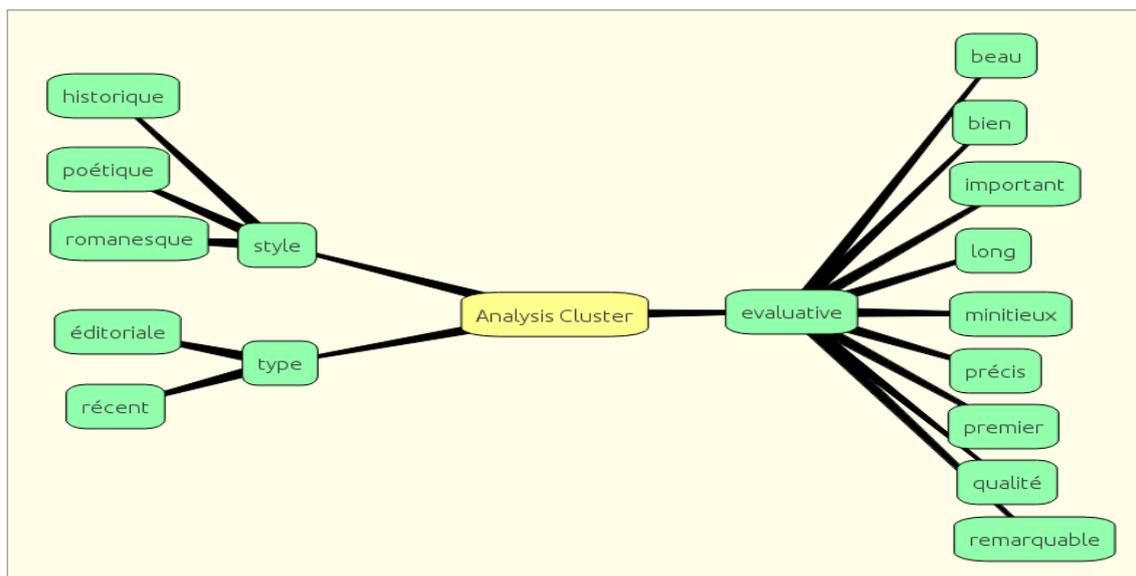

Figure 2.Collocates of Analysis Cluster

The modifiers can be divided into three types, stylistic, typological and evaluative. The latter is full of praise, acclaiming the quality, importance, length, meticulousness and precision of the work. If the product type under study is fairly neutral in its description, it is clearly not the case when discussing the study itself. The collocate (not listed) is the qualifier *très* (very) as this will be dealt with on its own as appearing in all the categories.

The Subsection cluster looks at how the different sections of the work being reviewed are treated. These consist of subdivisions of the work, articles and chapters, and also the major subsections as the bibliography, introduction, notes and preface. Apart from mentioning other sections as glossaries and indexes, the majority of collocates are modifiers, all laudatory, as can be seen in Figure 3.
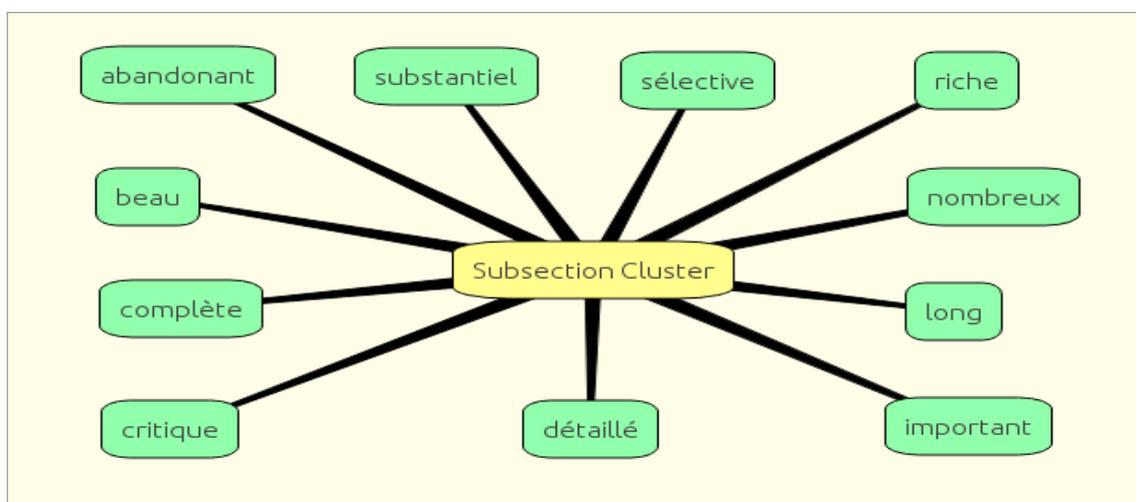

Figure 3. Modifier Collocates of the Subsection Cluster

The overall conclusion that emerges from this study of French book reviews in RHLF, is that the French literature discourse community seems not to be a critical one. Several forms of evidence tend to point to this conclusion.

The first one is that evaluative markers, forming the fourth cluster, are overwhelmingly positive. The manual analysis leads to the constitution of a list of 80 markers of appraisal, mainly adjectives, while negative markers amount only 40 formulae. This is very different from the Römer study, where single word forms, and their collocates, did not prove good markers of appraisal. While good reviews can propose 15 or 16 appraisal markers, negative reviews in the 68 sample never go beyond 8 or 9 critical comments. As mentioned above, the intensifier *très* is highly present with 476 occurrences and a relative frequency of 0.98 per thousand. The collocates of *très* and the fourth cluster will be delineated in the following section.

Correspondingly, criticisms are to be found only in a small number of reviews. In the sample of 68 reviews manually analysed, negative judgments appear only in 29 texts (42% of cases); if figures are higher when one focuses only on the "research books" (20 reviews out of 39, thus 51%), this still means that in half of the cases the reviewer felt no need to criticise, did not consider him~ or herself entitled to do so, or found nothing to be pointed out as needing to be improved. A close reading shows that only 8 out of the 29 "critical" reviews present more than one or two occurrences of negative judgments; in the vast majority of cases, reviewers just express an objection (*réserve*), without much development about the reasons why they drew such conclusions; therefore, such a case appears very often as a "personal taste ill satisfied". One of the few formulas comparable to those identified by Römer in her corpus is to be found in such situations, build around the pivot lemma *regret*: *on regrettera l'absence, on regrettera que, on ne peut que regretter*. Hedging strategies evoked by Diani in her 2004 paper are visible in such phraseological devices, visibly destined to minimise the impact of the position expressed[18].

The initial question about the stratification of the middle ground research comes back here. On the one hand, the general orientation to appraisal renders difficult the identification of peaks of quality in the mass of commented books. Particular attention was paid to the phraseological unit *de référence* (*ouvrage, texte, édition*) as well as to words *somme* (big volume) or to different forms of *érudit* (erudite). Our attempt was to identify forms of expressing the outstanding. All these words score quite highly in relative frequency (0,11 for *érudit*, 0,07 for *référence* and *somme*); especially when compared with the other lemmas selected for building the clusters; they are certainly not the rarest units in the corpus. This seems therefore to indicate that they are not reserved

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[18] For other studies on hedging strategies, see Maria Luisa Gea-Valor "The Pragmatics of Positive Politeness in the Book Reviews". *RESLA* 15 (2000-2001), 145–159 ; Hirotaka Itakura and Polly Tse "Evaluation in Academic Discourse: Managing Criticism in Japanese and English Book Reviews." *Journal of Pragmatics* 43 (2011): 1366–1379 ; Hirotaka Itakura "Hedging Praise in English and Japanese Book Reviews." *Journal of Pragmatics* 45, no.1 (2013): 131–148; Jo Mackiewicz "Compliments and Criticisms in Book Reviews about Business Communication." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 21 (2007), 188–215; Ana I. Moreno and L. Suárez "A Study of Critical Attitude across English and Spanish Academic Book Reviews", *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 7 (2008): 15–26 ; Ana I. Moreno and L. Suárez "Academic Book Reviews of Literature in English and Spanish: Writers' Visibility and Invisibility Strategies for Expressing Critical Comments." In *Crossed Words: Criticism in the Academy*, edited by Françoise Salager-Meyer and Beverly A. Lewin, 225-258. Bern: Peter Lang, 2011.

to talking about the best books. This is even more obvious when one looks at the relative frequency of *remarquable* and *majeur* (0,17). In addition, the manual analysis reveals that this type of unit does not appear only in the longest reviews, or in those displaying the highest figures of praise markers; in some cases, they even appear in reviews which convey a fair amount of criticism. Therefore, in spite of the implicit reference to a substantial difference between the commented book and the rest of the literature in the field, they cannot be considered as pointing out the most successful pieces of research.

On the other hand, the analysis of the criticisms leaves one with the same kind of incapacity to decide if the concerned books are to be considered bad, or just mediocre. The difficulty here is related to the fact that, as mentioned in the previous section, when the judgment is globally negative, reviewers avoid summarizing their evaluation in a final section. The reader must therefore decide by him~ or herself if the objections brought render the book utterly unacceptable by academic standards, or just put it in a lower category.

On the whole, the reader leaves with the impression of a field where an overwhelming proportion of the published material is not only good, but of the best quality, and where failures are rare. To a certain extent, this is not surprising, as book reviews concern texts having passed the screening process of a publishing house, and are therefore bound to be of a certain quality. But the confrontation to the amount of criticism present in book reviews in linguistics, where the selection process for publishing is equally tough, reveals that praise is a question of field orientation as much as of inherent quality.

Another relevant observation is that, while the general tendency of the field is to the appraisal, many reviews score low in comments of any kind, including the laudatory ones. In the manual analysed sample, 15 out of 68 reviews express no more than one or two evaluations about the work accomplished by the scholar, and tend to be conceived as mere summaries of the content. Reviews authors tend, in such cases, to *prolonger l'analyse* ("carry forward the analysis") a very illuminating formula used in one of these texts. If such an exercise is obviously more frequent when the book studied is the academic edition of a literary text, "sequel" reviews can also be found about research books. While the idea of a non-evaluative academic book review seems to be counter-intuitive, and contradictory to the stated expectancies in literature about "how to write a book review", this seems to be the case, to a certain extent, in the observed corpus.

Perception of Quality

If recurrent phraseological units are much rarer in the studied corpus, when compared to the one explored by Römer, and while relative frequencies of significant terms are generally low, the reader of the reviews cannot suppress a feeling of a certain repetition. Manual, as well as automatic analysis, reveals a clear tendency to cultivate lexical variety, but many different terms are, in fact, close due to the meanings they carry, and some are utterly synonymous.

By considering their semantic relationships, the 80 appraisal lemmas retrieved through manual analysis have been organised in 8 evaluative metafunctions. These point out that reviewers evaluate the _originality_ of the topic broached upon: books are *original*, but also *inédit, nouveau* and, in certain cases, *rare*. Methods applied are appreciated as _sound_ (the analyse conducted can be *attentive, complète, détaillée,*

documentée, exigeante, érudite, exhaustive, fouillée, informée, méthodique, minutieuse, patiente, pointue, poussée, rigoureuse, savante, scrupuleuse, soignée, solide, concernant en totalité un domaine), and/ or <u>*sharp*</u> (*fin, délicat, subtil, souple, nuancé*). With regard to the result, this can be appreciated by its <u>*quantity*</u> (*long, ample, vaste, portée, développé, ambitieux, immense, impressionnant, imposant, riche, dense, abondant, foule de, nombreux*), by its <u>*utility*</u> (*utile, précieux, stimulant, fécond, intéressant, outil*), by its <u>*persuasiveness*</u> (*convaincant, pertinent, précis, clair, juste, réussi*) and by its <u>*aesthetic quality*</u> (*beau, bon, bien, accompli, intelligent, brillant, élégant, puissant, captivant, passionnant*). A separate cluster was built with terms sustaining a form of <u>*comparison*</u> between the commented book and other samples of research in the field: *de référence, somme, essentiel, important, majeur, irremplaçable, remarquable, excellent, dépasser, avancée, démythifiant*.

We thus have an evaluative cluster consisting of the following eight evaluative metafunctions divided into three groups, which are "originality of the study", "methods" and "results". The first section, *originalité de l'étude*, has only one member. The second, entitled *Method*, is broken down into soundness (*solidité*) and fineness (*finesse*). The results group is made up of five categories: quantity, *quantité*, usefulness, *utilité*, comparativity, *comparé*, convincingness, *convaincant* and beauty, *beau*. The significance of each of these metafunctions can be seen in Figure 4.
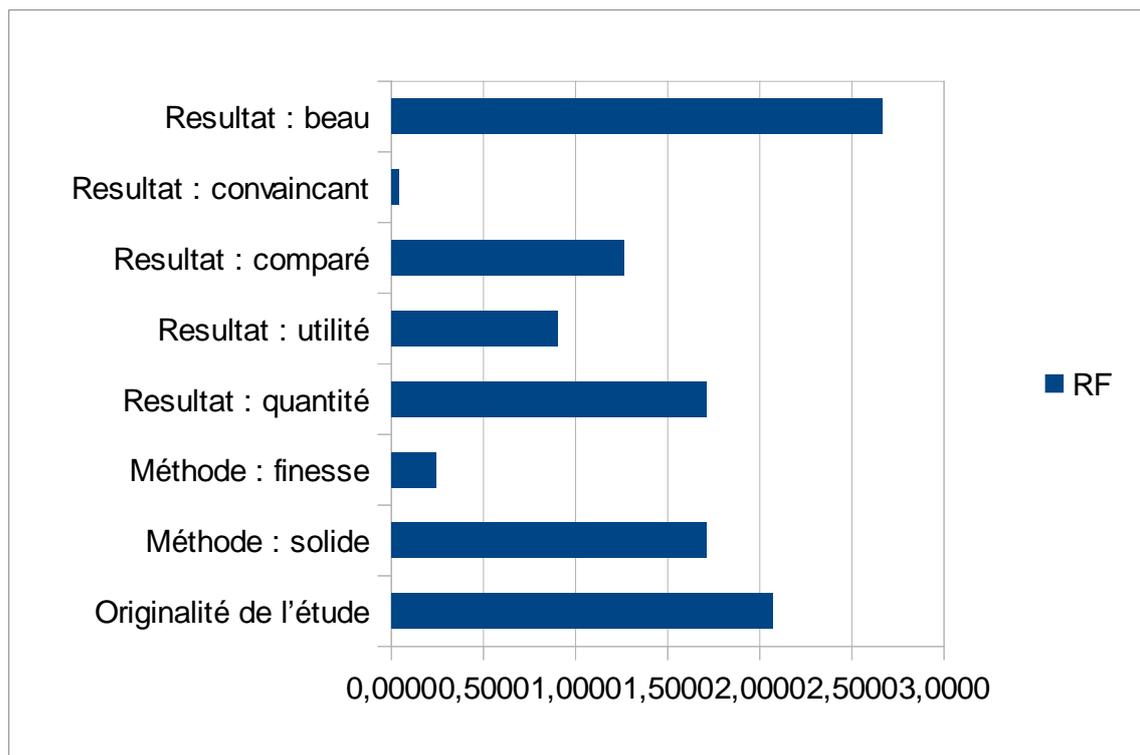

Figure 4. Relative Frequency of Metafunctions in Evaluative Cluster

The diversity of the terms related to certain clusters, as opposed to the relative paucity of others, is a first pointer to how scholars in the field of French literature studies see quality. Reviewers appear to be particularly attentive to soundness and length, as well as to the aesthetic quality of the books. This trait is not surprising in a field where scholarly expertise is built on the foundations of "rhetoric studies".

Obviously, the model remains that of the *somme*, a book of a relative impressive format, aiming to the exhaustivity of the material studied (in this case, a pre-defined type of literary texts), and characterised by an important metatextual apparatus (footnotes, index, bibliography, annexes proposing primary sources with their possible translations). *Original* research tends, by comparison, to be less identified and expressed, and such is also the case for the *sharpness* of the researcher.

These findings are confirmed by the corpus analysis conducted. The *aesthetic* cluster comes first, followed by the terms related to *quantity* and *soundness*. These two clusters score at 1,7 each. It is true that the "originality" cluster amounts to 2,06, but this is only when the 685 occurrences of "nouv*" are included; however, the manual filtering operated on a hundred of these occurrences shows that value judgments are expressed only in 50% of cases, while the other forms appear in formulas such as *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*[19] , or *la nouvelle critique*. Among the first, many are signalling the novelty of the writer's vision analysed in the book, and do not apply to the research evaluated by the reviewer. Once this type of occurrence has been removed, it is to be expected the cluster "originality" to score much lower. Unfortunately, due to the large variety of formulas in which a non-judgmental "nouv*" can appear, a satisfactory automatic cleaning of this part of the corpus could not be conducted; based on a partial manual cleaning, the results on this particular point remain to be rendered more reliable.

Throughout, a key modifier has been the quantifier *très (very)*. With a relative frequency of 0.98 per thousand, *très* can be considered as a high frequency word in the corpus. If one of the major features of the corpus is its significant reliance on adjectives of praise, then it is *très* that qualifies the greatest number of these as can be seen in the table below, that lists the most frequent collocates in terms of lemmas.

Freq.	collocate		Freq.	collocate
15	précise		8	tôt
13	nombreux		8	souvent
12	bien		7	large
11	peu		6	utile
11	belle		6	détaillée
10	complète		5	éclairante
9	riche		5	nombreuses
9	convaincante		5	loin

Table 1. Lemmatised Collocates of *très* (Very)

Looking at the concordances, we find formulae such as:
x propose a son lecteur une étude très précise et minutieuse
nous livre d'ailleurs une analyse très précise et éclairante

Many aspects come in for praise such as numerous notes, citations, and admittedly in one of the rare highly critical reviews, de *très nombreuses coquilles* (very numerous typing mistakes). However coupled with adjectives such as *beau, convaincant, détaillé, riche* (beautiful, convincing, detailed, rich), the quantification only manages to strongly reinforce the positive aspect of these reviews. Even the use of *peu* (little) does not comments on the actual review, but the inconsistencies of the original text overcome in the published work.

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[19] *Nouvelle* is the French name for "short story".

These findings are corroborated by a similar clustering of the negative comments. If the lack of originality is clearly reproached in three of the reviews manually analysed, this type of negative judgments is rare compared to the overwhelming amount of comments pointing to an imperfect use of the scientific tools: *trop asservi* (too close)*, trop spécialisé* (too specialised)*, trop longs développements* (too long development)*, trop subtil* (too subtle)*, pas assez* (insufficient)*, lecture réductrice* (simplistic reading), etc. Weak methodology leads to contestable results, the *unconvincing* cluster being quite well visible in the negative reviews, in the same way the *persuasive* one was visible in the positive critiques; among the units composing it (*contestable, dubitatif* (doubtful)*, sceptique* (sceptical)*, soulève plusieurs questionnements* (raises several questions)*, moins convaincant* (less convincing)*, aurait mérité discussion* (would have merited discussion)...), reservation (*réserve*) scores quite high in relative frequency (0,06), with 32 occurrences out of 80 hits. A smaller cluster formed by formulae pointing at the gaps of the books (*s'étonner de l'absence de* surprised by the absence of)*, regretter l'absence de* (regret the absence of*, il serait utile de* it would have been useful)*, on aurait aimé* (we would have liked)) is worth noticing, as it shows that in the most part of the cases these regrets concern quantitative more than qualitative issues: erudite metatexts missing (index, notes...) are especially pointed out. Therefore, *soundness* appears as a major value for the scholars in the field, being an object of praise and a reason for criticism at the same time.

On the contrary, it is interesting to note that, while the utility of the book is often underlined by the author in praise reviews, it never appears as a motive for criticism in negative texts. This raises the question as to the real value given to what a book can bring to the community. Authors seldom specify for what kind of research the new book is useful, and almost never confront it to existing literature covering the same topics. In certain reviews, one can find lists of readers potentially interested by the book : *des dix-septiémistes, des musicologues, des historiens de la littérature, des spécialistes de l'histoire du spectacle, enfin des interprètes de la musique baroque* (people interested in the seventeenth century, musicologists, historians, specialists of the history of the show, finally singers of baroque music), but in most of the cases only large areas of study are pointed out: *cet essai rend ainsi honneur aux masculinity studies […] très utile aussi pour les études seiziémistes*[20] (this essay gives full justice to masculinity studies […] also very useful for sixteenth century studies). The utility seems therefore to be more a theoretical principle than a precise concern, some books being praised for their capacity to interest any reader: *ce bel ouvrage intéressera aussi bien l'amateur que le spécialiste.*[21]" (this marvellous work will interest both the amateur and the specialist); *une aide précieuse pour qui veut tirer profit d'un enseignement incomparable d'histoire politique et d'engagement éthique* [22] (a precious assistance for those wishing to benefit from the incomparable teaching of political history and of an ethical involvement).

Another striking difference is the lack of negative comments about the aesthetic qualities of the material analysed. *Regrets* and *réserves* do not concern, with a few exceptions, the style of the book. High scores obtained by the praise remarks are therefore to be pondered by the idea that literary quality of an academic text is not a compulsory feature of a good book.

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[20] Daniel Maira, *RHLF* 112, no.4 (October-December 2012): 968.
[21] Michèle Fontana*, RHLF* 112, no. 2 (April-June 2012): 486.
[22] Béatrice Laville, *RHLF* 112, no. 1 (January-March 2012): 245.

A Few Concluding Remarks

Looking for mediocrity in SSH productions through the lens of academic book reviews has revealed itself to be disappointing, but this disappointment is also in itself revealing. Reviews depict a field where excellence reigns, and where the rare failures are difficult to situate on a value scale between "mediocre" and "bad". This can be explained as a result of an unwise choice of genre: the "back office reviews" are probably more interesting with regards to a scalar quality perception. Their analysis is therefore programmed in the larger study we intend to undertake. But this can also be related to the fact that critical discourse in French Literature studies tends to escape evaluative functions, or to fulfill this duty only when appraisal remarks can be made. In this case, mediocrity is to be seen not so much as inexistent, but simply not acknowledged. It is disguised under a clothing of excellence, easy to borrow in a context where benchmarks are never clearly stated, or vanishing in a grey zone of non-summarised negative comments.

While the analysis of book reviews has revealed unfit itself for identifying a stratification in good, bad and mediocre, it seems to work better when it is meant to circumscribe the academic expectations of scholars in the field of French literature. Organizing lemmas by clusters, calculating relative frequencies and identifying the most prominent reasons for praise and criticism offer an incipient answer to the question of how to design evaluation procedures based on the quality perceptions of scholars in a particular field. In spite of the actual limitations of the method, which calls for more in-depth analyses of the corpus and for a refining of the clusterisation methodology, the first results appear reasonably sound and sufficiently innovative to merit further development of the model.

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Bun, prost sau mediocru: cronicile de carte în domeniul academic

Evaluarea cercetării în ştiinţele umane şi sociale este o problemă spinoasă, în măsura în care uneltele bibliometrice concepute pentru ştiinţele exacte nu pot fi aplicate. Diferite alternative au fost, până în prezent, explorate. Acest articol prezintă un mod inovant şi potenţial mai neutru de evaluare a produselor academice, bazat pe cronicile de carte. Studiul foloseşte metodele lingvisticii de corpus, combinate cu analiza genurilor, pentru a explora o serie de cronici de carte în domeniul studiilor de literatură franceză, în timp ce o colecţie mult mai restrânsă din domeniul lingvisticii de corpus serveşte drept element de control. Se ajunge la concluzia că, spre deosebire de revistele ştiinţifice în limba engleză, al căror scop este evaluarea cercetării, cronicile publicate în *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* sunt mult mai descriptive şi rareori critice. Astfel, ele se dovedesc mai puţin pertinente pentru auto-evaluarea cercetării în acest domeniu şi suscită problema diferenţierii reale între cărţile bune şi cele mediocre.