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The Pragmatics of Margin Comments: An empirical study

EPSRC Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
SAFeSEA Supportive Automated Feedback for Short Essay Answers

1 Objective

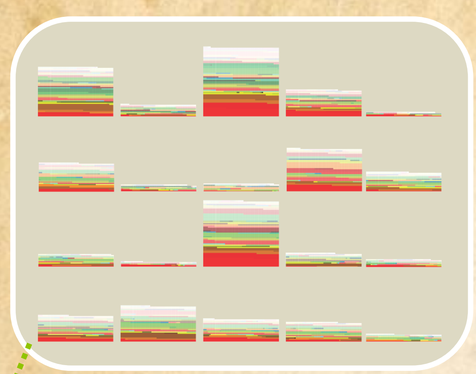
- Design a classification scheme for margin comments

Goal

- Explore the linguistic relationships between margin comments and the passages to which they point

Ultimate Aim

- Build an automatic formative feedback generator



2 Corpus

- 1,408 assessed university essay assignments
- 24,387 English natural language margin comments by 20 markers
- **Many corpus margin comments look like informal conversation**
  - Very short, fragmented, non-sententials
  - Fillers
  - Questions
  - Contractions

3 Are margin comments conversation? No!

- Looks like a WH question
  - BUT marker M is not desiring or expecting addressee A to supply the requested information to M
- Looks like an action directive
  - BUT M's comments were added to final, submitted version of essay and M did not desire or expect that A would revise it
- Common ground ✓
  Accommodation ✓
  Turn taking ✗
  Grounding ✗
- **Margin comments are judgements**
  - Express WHETHER the associated essay part attained the required standard
  - Express HOW the associated essay part attained (or failed to attain) the required standard

But rarely explicitly

[2a]: **Excellent!**
[5a]: **Why not?**
[2b]: **OK, well-argued.**
[5b]: **Why bold?**
[2c]: **Who, how, when?**
[5c]: **Who by?**
[2d]: **What's the difference?**
[5d]: **Who focussed?**
[3a]: **Who, how, when?**
[3b]: **Explain why**
[6a]: **No conclusion**
[6b]: **No apostrophe**
[6c]: **No italics**
[6d]: **No issues**
[6e]: **Not sure I understand.**
[3c]: **A strong argument**
[3d]: **A big claim!**
[3e]: **Another long quote**
[3f]: **This section is a bit short.**

Layer	Cohen's Kappa
Attitude	.874
Target	.791
Act	.822

4 Marker judgements can be grouped into a few judgement types

- **miss** M believes something is missing that should be present
- **reject** M believes something is present that should not be
- **condemn** M believes something is present that needed amending
- **commend** M considers that something in the essay has attained or exceeded the required standard, or is pleasing or interesting to M
- **doubt** M believes something present is of questionable value

5 Identifying a comment's targeted skill is often critical to understanding its message

- Targeted skill is **argument**, therefore Judgement is **miss**
- Targeted skill is **formatting**, therefore Judgement is **doubt**
- Targeted skill is **situating** (in literature), therefore Judgement is **miss**
- Targeted skill is **presentation**, therefore Judgement is **condemn**

6 Result: 3-layered categorisation scheme

miss	structure	description
reject	punctuation	instruction
condemn	formatting	instruction
commend	unknown	assertion
doubt	clarity	assertion