The Pragmatics of Margin Comments: An empirical study

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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

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

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**

Result: 3-layered categorisation scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Judgement</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Act</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>miss</td>
<td>structure</td>
<td>description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reject</td>
<td>punctuation</td>
<td>instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>condemn</td>
<td>formatting</td>
<td>instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commend</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>assertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doubt</td>
<td>clarity</td>
<td>assertion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Layer</th>
<th>Cohen's Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude</td>
<td>.874</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>.791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act</td>
<td>.822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

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