

# A Probe into Academic English Writing from the Perspective of Ideational Grammatical Metaphor: A Study of 30 IELTS Argumentative Essays

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## Abstract

In light of the thirteen types of ideational grammatical metaphors (IGM) proposed by Halliday and based on thirty IELTS argumentative essays, the author tries to explore the characteristics for the usage of IGM by different candidates and the implications for English teaching. The data shows that candidates' ability to use IGM is directly proportional to their final achievements in the test, and those with higher scores are better than those with lower ones in terms of both the number and type of IGM used by them. In addition, the use of IGM is one of the key elements to realize the coherence and cohesion of the writing, as well as its diversity and accuracy of vocabulary and grammar.

**Key Words:** Ideational Grammatical Metaphor, Academic English, IELTS Writing, Coherence and Cohesion, Vocabulary and Grammar

## 1. Introduction

Grammatical metaphor (Halliday & Christian, 2014) is an important concept in systemic functional linguistics, which refers to an indirect mapping between the semantics and the lexicogrammar. Ideational grammatical metaphor is one of them. Halliday believes that ideational grammatical metaphor is closely related to education, science, bureaucracy, and legal discourse, and divides them into thirteen types (Halliday, 1998, 2004). Therefore, ideational grammatical metaphor has become an important feature of academic discourse and is closely related to academic English expression.

Since the commencement of this century, grammatical metaphor has gained a growing concern from scholars both inside and outside China year by year; among them, there are many studies related to ideational grammatical metaphors, which can be roughly summarized as follows: (1) researches on ideational grammatical metaphor in English teaching and second language acquisition, especially on verbalization and nominalization in English teaching (Chai & Liu, 2019; Chen & Wen, 2020; Tang, 2013; Zhu, 2006), and ability analysis of learners' ideational grammatical metaphor (Sun & Song, 2008; Vinh To, 2020; Zhou & Liu, 2017), as well as analysis of ideational grammatical metaphors from the perspectives of information density (Li, 2010) or based on a corpus (Zhao, 2017); (2) researches on ideational grammatical metaphor from a cognitive or semantic perspective, including cognitive interpretation of IGM (Cong, 2011; Liu & Zhang, 2014; Yang, 2013) and exploration on models of ideational grammatical metaphor based on semantic change (Cong & Wang, 2013); (3) translation of ideational grammatical metaphor, including news translation (Liu, 2020), English-Chinese translation of English for science and technology (Ye, 2005), and reflections on translation teaching (Jia & Zhang, 2012); (4) studies on ideational grammatical metaphor in other applied discourse, covering scientific and technological discourse (Yang, 2011), business contracts (Xu, 2011) and political discourse (Chai & Liu, 2019; Liardét & Black, 2020), and so on.

Scholars have carried out very valuable descriptions and analysis of ideational grammatical metaphor and its characteristics, which provides a valuable reference for the teaching and learning of IGM, especially those specific studies on IGM, such as the nominalization of verbs and adjectives (Chen & Wen, 2020), verbalization (Zhu, 2006) or adjectivization of nouns (Fang & Cong, 2020). However, there are few pieces of literature comprehensively discussing and analyzing all thirteen types of IGM together. Therefore, it's worthwhile to explore how to enable English learners to have an overall grasp of ideational grammatical metaphor; on the other hand, existing research lacks a discussion on the usage of IGM in IELTS argumentative essay writing. As one of the well-known international English standardized proficiency tests, the analysis of the IELTS argumentative essay can help us to discover the characteristics of English learners' (especially L2 learners') ability to use ideational grammatical metaphors and bring inspiration to the teaching of academic English writing.

The author selects 30 IELTS argumentative essays as a research object to analyze the characteristics of using ideational grammatical metaphors by learners at different academic English levels. The related research questions are: What are the characteristics for the use of ideational grammatical metaphors in IELTS argumentative essay writing by candidates with higher final achievement? What are the characteristics for the use of ideational grammatical metaphors in IELTS argumentative essay writing by candidates with lower final achievement? What are the implications for the teaching of academic English writing, including IELTS?

## 2. Ideational Grammatical Metaphor and Its Classification

The categorization of ideational grammatical metaphor proposed by M. A. K Halliday (Halliday, 1998) consists of thirteen types altogether. From the perspective of the rank shift at the lexicogrammatical level, ideational grammatical metaphor is mainly divided into nominalization, adjectivization, verbalization, prepositionalization, zero-type nouns, and zero-type verbs, etc.

Among the selected 30 IELTS argumentative essays, there are 10 essays with a score of 5 and below (ESOL, 2005-2020), 10 essays with a score of 7 or 7.5 (ESOL, 2005-2020), and 10 essays with full marks of 9 which are written by examiners (Ieltspodcast, 2020). In this way, the relationship between the use of ideational grammatical metaphors and academic English ability is analyzed from the perspectives of both the examiners and candidates. All corpora will be manually annotated by UAM and then counted. The annotation framework (Li & Guo, 2020) is as follows:

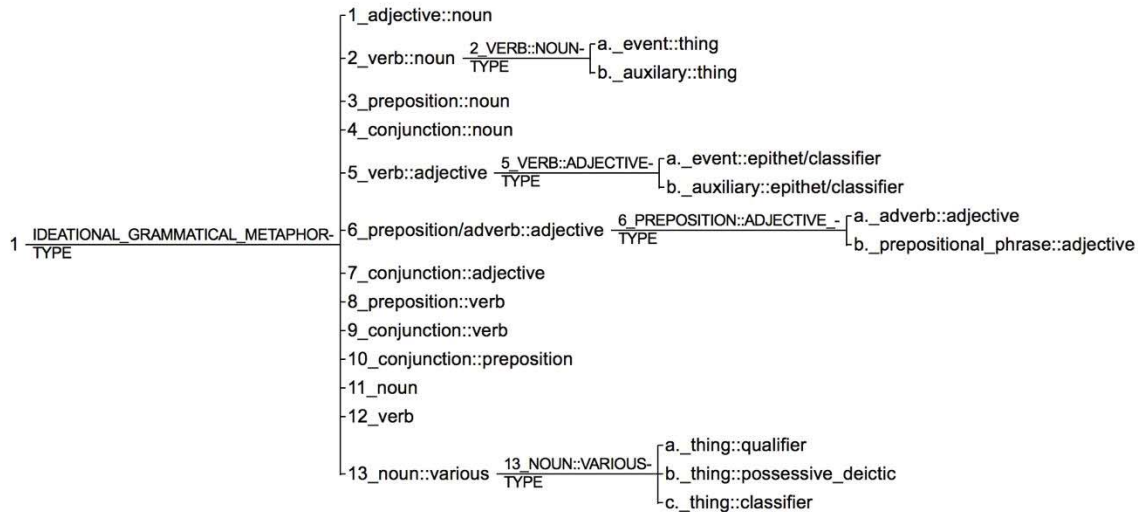


Figure 1. Annotation Framework

### 3. Statistical Results of IGM in the Sample

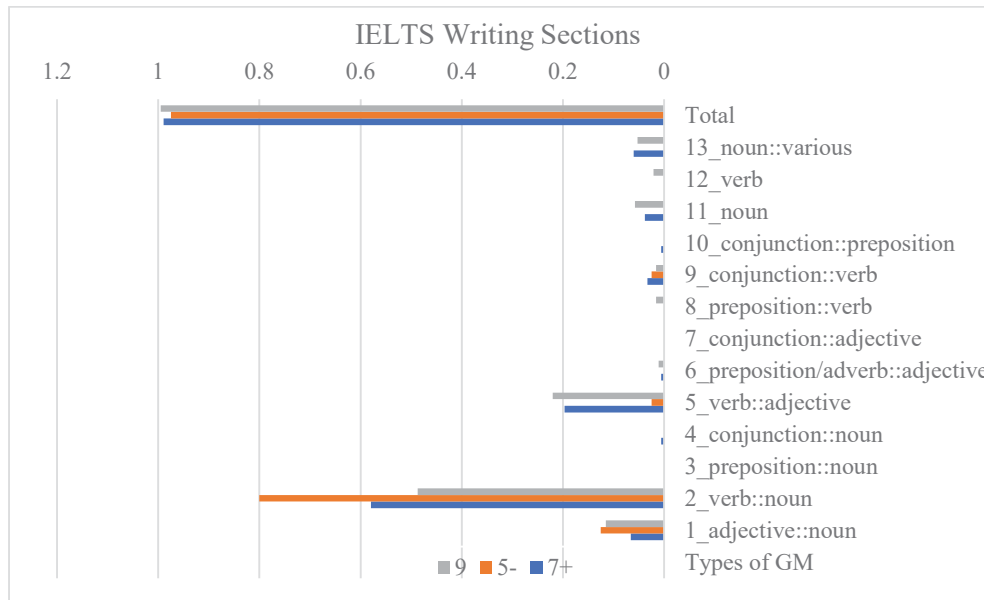


Figure 2. Statistical Results of IGM

The statistics in the above figure show that, overall, verb nominalization is the most used grammatical metaphor among all score levels, followed by verb adjectivization (around 20% at both band 9 and 7, only 2.5% at band 5), adjective nominalization takes up a more even percentage at three levels, all above 6% (among which band 5 and band 9 reach 12.5% and 11.52% respectively). Among the three score levels, no preposition nominalization and conjunction adjectivization appear, which shows that these two grammatical metaphors are not commonly used.

In a comparison of each score level, band 5 uses the fewest types of grammatical metaphors, namely only four. Except for the nominalization of verbs and adjectives, the adjectivization of verbs, and the verbalization of conjunctions, none of the other grammatical metaphors are used; among them, up to 80% are the metaphorical form of verb nominalization (all the other three types only account for nearly 20% together), which far exceeds the frequency of verb nominalization at other score levels (57.92% and 48.69% at band 7 and 9 respectively), which shows that candidates with lower scores are best at using the grammatical metaphor of verb nominalization, lacking understanding or exposure to other metaphorical forms. The use of ideational grammatical metaphors in band 7 and 9 have a certain degree of convergence. From the above figure, we can see that the frequency of use of verb nominalization, verb adjectivization, adjective nominalization, and noun adjectivization in the two bands are in a similar downward trend. In addition, the use rate of zero-type nouns is also very close in the two bands. The only difference between the two is that the specific types used in each band. The former uses a total of nine ideational grammatical metaphor forms (excluding conjunction propositionalization, conjunction adjectivization, conjunction nominalization, and proposition nominalization), while the latter adopts nine kinds too (except for zero-type verbs, preposition verbalization, conjunction adjectivization, and preposition nominalization). In a word, the variety of grammatical metaphors used in these two bands greatly outnumbers that at the lower band.

In IELTS argumentative essay writing, candidates with higher scores have stronger grammatical metaphor ability, in other words, higher academic English level, which is more in line with the examiner's expectations. Specifically speaking, it's not enough for candidates to master only one certain form of grammatical metaphor, because overusing one certain form may be counterproductive. A close look at the band-9 sample essay written by the examiner clearly shows us that the number of grammatical metaphors used by candidates is not the first thing that matters in IELTS argumentative writing but the variety of grammatical metaphors. Therefore, candidates are supposed to master as many kinds of grammatical metaphors as possible and use them alternately, thus fundamentally improving their academic English skills.

It is also worth mentioning that the respective congruent form of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> ideational grammatical metaphors do not involve specific semantic components, and their metaphorical forms are derivatives of other types of ideational grammatical metaphors; likewise, the 13<sup>th</sup> type is the derivatives of the first and second type of ideational grammatical metaphor (Yang, 2020). Therefore, the above statistical results show that in bands 7 and 9, the frequency of adjectivization of nouns, type-zero nouns, and type-zero verbs is slightly higher than that of other grammatical metaphors because of the high usage rate of the first and second categories of grammatical metaphor. On the other hand, the above data also proves to a certain extent that in the transfer of components involved in ideational grammatical metaphor in English, objectification or nominalization is the main trend, while the transformation of things into traits is a subsidiary product of the main trend, which can only arise in the company of the two main types of nominalized grammatical metaphors (type 1 and 2) (Yang, 2020).

#### **4. Discussions on IGM and Academic English Writing**

The grading criteria for argumentative essay writing in the second part of IELTS writing consists of four aspects, namely, task achievement/response (TR), coherence and cohesion (CC), lexical resources (LR), and grammatical range/diversity and accuracy (GRA). Specifically, the first criterion (TR) refers to whether a candidate can fully address all parts of the task (including word count) and present a fully developed position in answer to the question with relevant, fully extended, and well-supported ideas. While coherence and cohesion are mainly reflected in whether there is a skillful management of paragraphing, and a logical organization of information and ideas with clear progression, as well as appropriate use of a range of cohesive devices by the candidate. In contrast, the third and fourth criteria focus more on a lexical and grammatical level. The lexical resource gives the examiner information about whether a candidate can use a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features, in other words, effective and non-repetitive wording in different situations. The final criterion (GRA) shows whether a candidate can accurately use a variety of sentence structures (such as compound and complex sentences) with full flexibility and accuracy.

Among them, the latter three criteria, namely coherence and cohesion, lexical resources, and grammatical diversity and accuracy of the argumentative essay indicate how well a candidate can make use of ideational grammatical metaphors.

##### *4.1 Ideational Grammatical Metaphor VS. Coherence and Cohesion*

Different from Chinese, English is a hypotactic language, which emphasizes the connection within a sentence or between sentences by using grammatical means of the language itself, including syntactic devices and lexical devices. In other words, instead of semantic connection, cohesive ties are far more frequently used to organize information or ideas in English. Therefore, in IELTS academic argumentative essay writing, the usage of cohesive means is essential for the structure of the text, especially the cohesive devices that link the previous and the next. Like road signs and beacons, they give the reader direction to better understand the writer's thinking.

The statistics in Section 3 show that in the writing of IELTS argumentative essays, nominalization is the most popular form of grammatical metaphor, and it is also the main trend of component transfer in ideational metaphors. The discourse cohesion function of nominalized metaphors is mainly embodied by theme-rheme structure and lexical devices (Liu et al., 2020); among them, the former is the most important means for nominalized metaphors to realize English discourse cohesion (Fan, 1999), while the latter refers to the repetition of the original word, the recurrence of synonyms or antonyms, etc. (Yu, 2006). According to the three main theme-rheme patterns summarized by Hu Zhuanglin, the R1→T2 pattern is the main way of realizing the "theme-rheme" cohesion of nominal metaphors, namely, the rheme of the previous sentence or a part of that rheme is the theme of the latter sentence (Hu, 1994).

The following excerpt is from a 7.5 argumentative essay in the self-built corpus, and the black boldface represents the ideational grammatical metaphor used in the writing.

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**Fixing** punishments for each type of crime has been a debatable issue. There are many arguments supporting both views, those for and those against **fixed** punishments.

On the one hand, **fixed** punishments will have a **detering** effect on society. Individuals **knowing** that they will be subject to a certain punishment if they are convicted of a **given** crime will reconsider **committing** this act in the first place.

This **detering** effect also **leads to** social **stability and security**, by **minimizing** the number of crimes committed.

If people knew they would be able to convince the court or the jury of a reason for **having** committed the crime they are accused of, penal decisions would be largely arbitrary. This would **result in** criminals **getting** away with their crimes and a high level of injustice caused by the subjective approach of different courts.

On the other hand, **taking** the circumstances of a crime and its motivation into consideration is a prerequisite for **establishing** and **ensuring** justice and equity.

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Because the verb *fix* is nominalized in the first sentence of the first paragraph, *fixing punishment* becomes the theme; then it is transformed into the adjective form *fixed* to act as a part of the rheme in the second clause, which does not only avoid the repetition of the same form but also achieves coherence at the semantical level.

There are two sentences in the second paragraph, both of which adopt ideational grammatical metaphors. The phrase *fixed punishments* in the rheme remains the same as above. Additionally, the verb *deter* is adjectivized into *detering* to modify *effect*, which introduces new information and lay a foundation for the rest of the paragraph. The *detering effect* also echoes in the third paragraph, where the *detering effect* becomes a theme (R1→T2 pattern) due to the transformation of new information into old one, which ensures the coherence and logic of the meanings of the two paragraphs.

In the third paragraph, there is only one sentence, whose congruent form is the *detering effect* can minimize the number of crimes committed, thus the society will become stable and secure. Through the nominalization of adjectives (*stable and secure* becomes *stability and security*), the nominalization (*minimizing*) of the verb *minimize*, and the verbalization of the adverb *thus*, the clause complex in the congruent form is compressed and degraded into a single one, and metaphorically transformed into an NG1+VG+NG2 (noun phrase + verb phrase + noun phrase) structure, the noun phrases act as participants, while the verb phrase indicates the logical-semantic relationship between the two (Liu et al., 2020), strengthening the cohesion.

There are two sentences in the fourth paragraph. The congruent form of the first sentence is *if people knew they would be able to convince the court or the jury of a reason, for which they have committed the crime they are accused of, penal decisions would be largely arbitrary*, where the verb *have* is nominalized into *having* preceded by the preposition *for*, so that the clause complex in the congruent form is compressed into one clause. In this way, its connection with the theme *this* in the second sentence becomes more natural and reasonable. In succession, the second sentence verbalized the conjunction *so/as* as a result in the congruent form (*so criminals will get away with their crimes, and a high level of injustice will be caused by the subjective approach of the different courts*) into *result into*, at the same time, the verb *get* is nominalized into *getting*, so the clause complex is compressed into a clause with a higher lexical density, making the cohesion of the discourse smoother, compared with the loosening structure of the congruent form.

#### 4.2 Ideational Grammatical Metaphor VS. Lexical Resource

The criteria of IELTS academic argumentative writing tell the candidates that they are supposed to use a wide range of words. Under this guidance, it's easy to equate a wide range of vocabulary with a large vocabulary. Based on the findings, it seems that IELTS examiners pay more attention to how candidates make good use of the words they have already understood to express their thoughts. After all, a piling up of ornate terms doesn't indicate a candidate's large vocabulary; instead, it might show the candidate's little understanding of a certain word. Worse still, it will destroy the overall style of the writing. On the

other hand, the variety of vocabulary is embodied by knowing how to choose the most appropriate vocabulary in different situations and using synonyms if possible based on the mastery of the known words.

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Today more people are traveling than ever before. The reasons for this increase are many and varied. On a simplistic level, there are larger numbers of means of transportation – there are more cars, buses, and trains in operation. However, the sheer number of transportation means is not enough to explain this increase. The cost of traveling; even though it is at present increasing due to an economic slowdown globally; is still relatively affordable to many people. This **affordability** is further enhanced by the use of credit cards and loans to fund travel, especially for holiday purposes. An **increase** of travel companies in competition with each other has also helped bring package prices down, while an increase in the number of operating flights globally has also increased, giving rise to **falling** air-fare prices.

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In the above example, when the underlined words or phrases affordable, increase(d), and bring down have to be mentioned more than once, it'll be helpful to take advantage of ideational grammatical metaphors. Specifically, the adjective is nominalized (*affordable* → *affordability*), the verb nominalized ((is) *increasing* → an *increase* of), and the verb adjectivized (*bring down* → *falling*), etc. The use of IGM not only avoids repetition but also enriches the diversity of vocabulary.

#### 4.3 Ideational Grammatical Metaphor VS. Grammatical Range and Accuracy

Grammatical Range and Accuracy is a standard that requires candidates to change various grammatical structures while ensuring that they are used accurately. Therefore, when writing an argumentative essay, it's very unfavorable for the writer to use only simple sentences throughout the text. If it can be mixed with appropriate coordinating sentences and complex sentences, the effect will be better. The following excerpts are taken from essays awarded band 7.5 and band 7 respectively. It can be seen that candidates with higher scores can more accurately grasp different sentence patterns including compound sentences and simple ones.

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For many people around the world, the **preferred** method of transportation is high-speed rail. Commuters **traveling** to and from work rely on the **safety and efficiency**, while tourists appreciate the **convenience and novelty** that trains provide. Others believe that highways, buses, and regular trains should be improved before new, high-speed lines are added.

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In addition, people now have more leisure time and disposable incomes. **The combination of** these two variables with **unrelenting** advertising campaigns from travel companies and cruise ship operators arguably **leads to an increase** in the number of people **traveling**, in this case for holiday purposes. Another reason why people travel is going to work. More than ever before, people are traveling greater distances to get to be located outside city areas. This invariably leads to increases in the number of people traveling locally. In conclusion, there are many reasons why more people are traveling both internationally and locally, for business and leisure. What is sure is that this increase is likely to continue until traveling at current rates is no longer economically viable.

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As above, in the first excerpt, *commuters traveling to and from work rely on the safety and efficiency, while tourists appreciate the convenience and novelty that trains provide* is a compound sentence with two clauses, in which the adjectives are nominalized (safe and efficient/convenient and novel → safety and efficiency/convenience and novelty). By use of ideational grammatical metaphor, the depiction gives us a concise contrast of the convenience and comfort provided by the high-speed rail, rather than a tediously long description.

In comparison, the second excerpt adopts more simple sentences in combination with appropriate grammatical metaphors, which can also help the candidate gain a good score since it equally reflects the candidate's great English expression skills. For example, *the combination of these two variables with unrelenting advertising campaigns from travel companies and cruise ship operators in the second paragraph arguably leads to an increase in the number of people traveling, in this case for holiday purposes*, in which a cause and effect relationship is more clearly taken down. The congruent form of this simple sentence is originally a complex one (*these two variables combine with the advertising campaigns which unrelent from travel companies and cruise ship operators; so the number of people traveling has increased*). To ensure the integrity and the coherence of the whole text, it's essential to make use of grammatical metaphors, including verb nominalization (*combine* → *combination*, (has) *increased* → *increase*), verb adjectivization (*unrelent* → *unrelenting*), conjunction verbalization (*so* → *lead to*). Simple sentences here can express the meaning more effectively than complex ones. Therefore, the diversity and accuracy of grammar are both indispensable. To achieve this, ideational grammatical metaphors do help.

## 5. Conclusion



In the IELTS argumentative essay writing, candidates' ability to use ideational grammatical metaphors is directly proportional to their final achievements. The use of ideational grammatical metaphors by high scorers is far more than that of low scorers in terms of quantity and variety. The latter are often only familiar with a certain ideational grammatical metaphor (such as the nominalization of verbs or adjectives), and they are apt to overuse it, which diminishes their academic expression to some extent. From the examiner's point of view, the full score essay uses a variety of ideational grammatical metaphors, which on the one hand responds to the demands of the task well, on the other hand fully realizes the coherence and cohesion of the text and the diversity and accuracy of vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, in English teaching, it's essential to introduce the concept of ideational grammatical metaphor to candidates; what's most important is to let them understand how to achieve textual cohesion and coherence through ideational grammatical metaphor (such as theme-rheme cohesion), which may also help them to enrich their vocabulary thus diversify the range of words in the writing, and to compress clauses complex into sentences with higher lexical density (such as verb nominalization, verb adjectivization, conjunction verbalization, etc.), so that the structure of the writing will be more condensed. Therefore, the academic expression of the candidates will be fundamentally improved.

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