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English for Specific Purposes

Modifiers in BASE and MICASE: A matter of academic cultures or lecturing styles?

Chia-Yen Lin *

Dept. of Applied Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Yuan Ze University, 135 Yuan Tung Rd., Chung Li 32003, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have investigated the occurrence of modifiers in a variety of settings, especially academic research writing and casual spoken contexts. This study extends previous research in two ways: (1) it examines pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs) (Lin, 2010; Nikula, 1996) in lectures in BASE and MICASE in order to reveal their functions specific to the particular genre; (2) it compares and contrasts the frequency and use of PFMs in the corpora and monologic/interactive sub-corpora in an attempt to identify similarities and differences potentially associated with academic cultures and lecturing styles. The results imply that although academic cultures appear to contribute to the distributional patterns of PFMs in the corpora, their functions are primarily dependent on the interplay between generic norms and lecturing styles.

1. Introduction

Over the last several years, linguists have become increasingly interested in the linguistic mechanisms employed by speakers and writers to express tentativeness or conviction toward utterances and the potential effects of their use. Such investigations have been conducted under several different labels, including hedges (Burrough-Boenisch, 2005; Hyland, 1994), boosters (Hyland, 2000), discourse markers (Liao, 2009), stance (Biber, 2006), metadiscourse (Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010) and vagueness (Jucker, Smith, & Ludge, 2003). These investigations of expressions of certainty and uncertainty have been carried out in different contexts, especially casual conversation and academic writing.

More recently, research into the occurrence of these markers in spoken academic discourse has also come to the forefront. Two major projects involving spoken academic corpora in the public domain, the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), have been the most productive efforts to date to describe spoken university registers. They serve as a basis for a few recent studies of modifiers: Lin (2010) considers the functions of intensifying and softening modifiers; Poos and Simpson (2002) describe the uses of *kind of* and *sort of* as hedges; and Swales and Burke (2003) look at the functions of intensifiers. However, these studies primarily base their analyses on either BASE or MICASE; missing in the discussions to date is any cross-cultural investigation of the similarities and differences between the two corpora. Though discrepancies connected with different academic registers; that is, written versus spoken, different disciplines and different speech events; have been identified, the exploration of generic variation linked to different academic cultures seems to be rare.

The present study aims to examine *pragmatic force modifiers* (Lin, 2010; Nikula, 1996) in lectures in both BASE and MICASE. The term *pragmatic force modifier* (henceforth PFM) refers to "linguistic devices such as *actually*, *sort of*, or *you know* that can be used to strengthen or weaken the force with which propositions are expressed while at the same time realising manifold social pragmatic purposes" (Lin, 2010, p. 1173). The various names used by earlier researchers are not appropriate

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* Tel.: +886 928285520.
E-mail address: cylin@saturn.yzu.edu.tw

for this study because they tend to denote specific categories and are easily associated with a single function, such as hedges for softening or boosters for intensifying, hence possibly obscuring the multifunctional quality of the markers under scrutiny. Following Nikula (1996), the term PFM, explicitly depicting the modifying effect of markers and capturing the range of functions they fulfil, is suitable for the purposes of the study in terms of exploring the diverse functions of the most common PFMs in the corpora.

This study begins with an assumption that there is variation in the employment of modifiers associated with lectures delivered in different academic cultures in accordance with a number of scholars' (e.g., Hyland, 1994) viewpoints that rhetorical strategies are culturally bound. BASE lectures are mainly monologic (Thompson, 2005), whereas those in MICASE are classified into monologic, interactive and mixed. This classification led me to consider another important dimension – the influence of lecturing styles.

Lecturing styles can be broadly categorised into non-interactive or monologic and interactive depending on the degree of formality and the number of student interactions (Morell, 2004; Northcott, 2001). Non-interactive lectures are defined by Goffman (1981, p. 165) as "institutionalized extended holdings of the floor in which one speaker imports his views on a subject, these thoughts comprising what can be called a 'text'". Interactive lectures, in Northcott's (2001, pp. 19–20) words, refer to lectures "used to signify a classroom event for a large (more than 20) group of students primarily controlled and led by a lecturer and including subject input from the lecturer but also including varying degrees and types of oral participation by students". Therefore, monologic and interactive lectures can be said to be generically different with respect to participants. Despite these generic differences, previous studies of linguistic items (e.g., Fortanet, 2004; Lessard-Clouston, 2010) tend to focus on teacher-led monologic class sessions (Csomay, 2007). Considerably less attention has been paid to lectures characterised by a high degree of interactivity. This neglect may result in insufficient information being made available about the functional variation of linguistic features.

Drastic differences are observed between lectures appearing at each end of the monologue-interaction continuum in the BASE and MICASE corpora. The floor of highly monologic lectures is monopolised by lecturers; backchannels, prompt replies or laughter from students signal their existence. In contrast, in highly interactive lectures which resemble casual conversations, students are encouraged to express their thoughts and opinions on the subject matter, and may even compete with fellow students for acceptance. Lecturers and students are not on an equal footing, the former being experts in particular fields with higher social status and more institutionally inscribed power, whereas the latter are less informed students. For example, asymmetrical-status users may draw on the same linguistic devices for discrepant purposes. Csomay (2007) indicates that little attention has been given to the characterisation of participants' patterns of language use in university class sessions. Consequently, consideration of the possible impact of students' verbal contributions, which may involve the use of modifiers, becomes essential.

By comparing and contrasting the frequency and employment of PFMs in the corpora and the monologic/interactive subcorpora, this study argues that although academic cultures appear to play a part in distributional patterns, the functions of PFMs are primarily dependent on the interplay between generic norms and lecturing styles. The amount of lecturer–audience interaction serves as a key factor in influencing the pragmatic purposes achieved by PFMs in the specific genre.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data

The datasets for the study consist of 160 and 60 lecture transcripts adopted from BASE[1] and MICASE (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002) respectively. BASE is designed to be a representative corpus of British Academic Spoken discourse. It comprises lectures and seminars equally distributed across the four broad academic divisions: arts and humanities, social sciences, life sciences, and physical sciences. The BASE lecture holdings amount to 1,208,606 words.

MICASE is an on-line corpus representative of academic speech events in a typical large public research university in North America. It contains various speech events, such as large lectures, small lectures, dissertation defences, student presentations and discussion sections. The MICASE lecture samples are fewer in comparison with BASE, amounting to 623,671 words. Unlike the BASE lectures, which are primarily monologic, the MICASE lectures are categorised into several level of interactivity: monologic, mixed and interactive. There are 35 monologic lectures (358,286 words), 15 mixed lectures (147,667 words) and 10 interactive lectures (117,718 words). They provide a locus for examination of the use of PFMs ascribed to lecturing styles.

2.2. Methods of analysis

This study, on the one hand, applied corpus linguistics techniques to find the most salient PFMs and examine their distributional patterns in the corpora, and on the other hand, adopted a discourse analytic approach to analysing their functional uses with reference to relevant contextual characteristics. *Wordsmith Tools* (Scott, 2004) was drawn onto make lists of