Seminars and interactive lectures as a community of knowledge co-construction: The use of modifiers

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ABSTRACT

The present study extends previous research by comparing the use of modifiers in seminars and interactive lectures in BASE and MICASE with a twofold purpose: firstly, to reveal how they constitute essential discourse properties, shedding new light on generic similarities and differences between the two modes of instruction; and secondly, to determine further whether the employment of these linguistic devices is more sensitive to generic norms or to British/North American academic cultures. The results of the study show that the interplay of diverse modifiers in various participatory mechanisms tends to highlight individual contributions with emphatic elements for a stance-securing effect, while at the same time softening contributions to enact a humble knower persona and signal a need for open discussion. The functional homogeneity of modifiers implies that seminars and interactive lectures are exemplars of a genre of knowledge co-construction on the one hand, and on the other, it confirms that the influence of generic norms outweighs that of British/North American academic cultures regarding the functions of these linguistic devices. However, possible generic variation between the exemplars as well as academic cultures contribute to significant statistical discrepancies in particular modifiers between the corpora.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs) refer 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). They have attracted increasing research attention in the past four decades, especially from researchers who are interested in their occurrence in casual conversation and scholarly writing and who contrastively analyse the functions of PFMs associated with cultural and disciplinary contexts (e.g., Del Saz Rubio, 2011; Hu & Cao, 2011; Mur-Dueñas, 2011). These analyses attest to the contextually sensitive and multifunctional attributes of modifiers. More recently, interest has extended to the use of PFMs in spoken academic discourse, largely owing to publicly available corpora such as BASE[1] and MICASE[2] (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002). In her study of intensifying and softening modifiers in

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[1] The recordings and transcriptions used in this study come from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. The corpus was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Paul Thompson. Corpus development was assisted by funding from BALEAP, EURALEX, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council. www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directory/art-design/british-academic-spoken-english-corpus-base/.
[2] Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/.

lectures in BASE, Lin (2010) finds that they perform functions specific to the given genre, such as promoting a feeling of communal intimacy between participants in an asymmetrical relationship and structuring accessible monologues, that are distinct from previous observations on PFMs in informal communicative encounters and academic prose.

In addition, by cross-culturally comparing the frequency and contextual use of PFMs in lectures in BASE and MICASE as well as their monologic/interactive lecture sub-corpora, Lin's (2012) more recent investigation reveals that the functions of PFMs mainly depend on lecturing styles rather than national academic cultures. The amount of lecturer–student interaction informs the pragmatic purposes achieved by PFMs in lectures; this finding in turn reflects crucial generic differences between monologic and interactive lectures. However, the results are not yet conclusive. Her comparative analysis, considering BASE monologic lectures and MICASE monologic and interactive lectures, neglects seminars, which can be seen as generically similar to interactive lectures in terms of the level of interactivity, participatory mechanisms and discourse expectations of the participants. To determine further whether the employment of PFMs is more sensitive to generic norms or British/North American academic cultures, a contrastive investigation into their appearance in seminars in the corpora and in MICASE interactive lectures is needed. One of the primary aims of the study is to address this issue.

Lectures and seminars are regarded as two major modes of instruction in higher education; however, the former are a more extensively examined spoken academic genre. A substantial amount of attention has been paid to the analysis of lecture structures (e.g., Young, 1994) and specific discourse features, such as subjective evaluation (Bamford, 2005), person markers (Fortanet, 2004), definitions (Flowerdew, 1992) and temporal variables (Griffiths & Beretta, 1991), to name but a few. From an interpersonal perspective, empirical studies (Morell, 2004) based on the notion of lectures as a social event stress the benefits of interaction for the creation of an appropriate learning environment. In a similar vein, ethnographic investigations into lecturer and student perceptions (Flowerdew, Miller, & Li, 2000) propose that lecturing style plays a crucial role in lecture comprehension. These findings hint at an inhomogeneity of academic lectures. Compared to the available literature on lectures, much less work has been devoted to the examination of seminars: Basturkmen (1999) considers interactional structures and strategies of discourse; Nakane (2006) looks at silence as a politeness strategy; and Waring (2002) deals with expressions of non-comprehension.

The forms of lectures and seminars may vary in different contexts, hence causing controversies over labelling the two speech events (Northcott, 2001). Brown (1978) considers a lecture to be a medium for conveying knowledge, as distinct from a seminar. A similar viewpoint about the role and purpose of the two teaching forms is expressed by BASE lecturers, who deem a lecture to be an economical way of transmitting large amounts of information to silent, non-participatory students, whereas in a seminar, students typically hold the floor, leading the discussion and presenting their own views or solutions to problems (Nesi, 2001). Nevertheless, Aguilar (2004) sees lectures and seminars as having several similarities since both of them constitute didactic and expository discourse, and the concepts of explanation and understanding are present in the two discourse types. These discrepant comments on the two spoken genres possibly result from the fact that "academic speech is much more variable in structure, function, and style than academic writing" (Swales, 2001, p. 35). For example there seems to be a clear-cut distinction between lectures and seminars in BASE, but it appears that in MICASE individual lecturers can decide whether to present a monologue or invite students to interact seminar-style in their lectures.

Northcott (2001) broadly categorises lecturing styles into interactive and monologic, the former containing subject input from a lecturer and oral participation by students, and the latter only containing subject input from the lecturer. The large amount of student participation characterising MICASE interactive lectures distinguishes them from monologic lectures in BASE and MICASE. In contrast, seminars in both corpora appear to be interactive in the same way as MICASE interactive lectures, and are thus generically similar. Apart from a high degree of interactivity, common features shared by seminars and interactive lectures are the asymmetrical, institutionally inscribed power relations between participants, and the role of relevant verbal contributions to demonstrate the acquisition of some domains of knowledge and explore specific issues. They therefore seem to act as exemplars of a genre of knowledge co-construction.

The above remarks on seminars and interactive lectures primarily focus on the level of didacticism and interactivity; contrastive analysis of linguistic devices in both genres appears to be rare in the literature. As Aguilar (2004) indicates, transmission of clear and relevant information constitutes the main concern in both lectures and seminars, and this makes it likely that participants in these events will resort to certain metadiscourse elements, such as PFMs, in order to ensure comprehension. Metadiscourse elements have been recognised as a "rich feature" (Barton, 1996) and a significant discourse characteristic that "can serve to distinguish one class of discourses from another" (Swales, 2001, p. 35). Though metadiscourse elements, for example PFMs, have been shown to achieve salient functions associated with monologic and interactive lectures, their use in seminars appears to be under-researched. The present study attempts to bridge this knowledge gap by exploring the ways in which PFMs are drawn on strategically to perform various social-pragmatic purposes in BASE and MICASE.

Furthermore, in view of PFMs being capable of distinguishing one class of discourses from another, contrastive analysis of these elements in seminars and interactive lectures can reveal how they act as essential discourse properties, shedding new light on generic similarities and differences between the two modes of instruction. Comparing the frequencies of occurrence of PFMs and their functions cross-culturally in seminars in the corpora with those in MICASE interactive lectures will help us to better understand whether the employment of these linguistic devices is more