Argument or evidence? Disciplinary variation in the use of the Noun *that* pattern in stance construction

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Abstract

This paper uses a corpus approach to investigate disciplinary variation in the construction of stance using nouns which are followed by *that* and a complement clause, e.g. *the argument that the Justices exhibit strategic behaviour...* Two corpora of theses written in English are examined: approximately 190,000 words in politics/international relations and 300,000 words in materials science. The Noun *that* pattern is found to be over three times as frequent in the politics/international relations corpus as in the materials corpus. Analysis by the source of the proposition in the complement clause shows that this difference is due to the fact that many nouns in the politics corpus refer to propositions put forward by political entities (e.g. *British concern that the public statement might lead to a reaction against the West...*), a use which has no equivalent in the materials corpus. Following Francis, Hunston, and Manning (1998), nouns are analysed into semantic groups. Combining analysis by proposition source and by noun group shows that the politics writers primarily use ARGUMENT nouns (e.g. *argument, assertion*) to take a stance towards others' research. By contrast, the writers in materials science tend to use EVIDENCE nouns (e.g. *evidence, observation*) to evaluate their own research. It is argued that this variation is due to interdisciplinary differences in research practices and the construction of knowledge.
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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades within the field of applied linguistics, considerable contrastive work on a number of disciplines and genres has established that academic discourse varies according to discipline. Starting with the ground-breaking work of Bazerman (1988) on research articles, discourse features have been linked to the cultures and epistemologies of the disciplines and the knowledge-building practices of a given disciplinary community have been shown to be embodied in its texts (see for example, Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Hyland, 2000, 2005; Myers, 1990). Disciplinary culture has also been shown to be a key factor determining the way in which stance and evaluation are constructed (e.g. Charles, 2006; Dressen, 2003; Hunston, 1989, 1993; Hyland, 1999; Hyland & Tse, 2005; Stotesbury, 2003; Tucker, 2003). In particular, the role of nouns in the discourse of the disciplines has been examined including work on nominalisation in science and history textbooks (Martin, 1991) and research on grammatical subjects in research articles from psychology, history and literature (MacDonald, 1992).

One group of nouns has attracted considerable attention. Based on the category of 'general nouns' first identified by Halliday and Hasan (1976), these are abstract nouns whose specific meaning must be supplied by the immediate co-text. An example is given in (1)[1], where the specific meaning of the noun *argument* is provided by the information in the complement clause: *the Justices exhibit strategic behaviour in their decision making*.

(1) ...this is entirely consistent with the **argument that** the Justices exhibit strategic behaviour in their decision making. (pol5)[2]

Such nouns have been analysed from several different perspectives using a number of different definitions and terms, including 'unspecific nouns' (Winter, 1982), 'anaphoric nouns' (Francis, 1986), 'labels' (Francis, 1994) and 'carrier nouns' (Ivanič, 1991). Characterising these nouns by their associated lexico-grammatical patterns, Hunston and Francis (1999, p. 185) introduce the term 'shell nouns' and argue that they constitute a possible new word class. However, the most comprehensive treatment to date is that of Schmid (2000), who uses a corpus of 225 million words from the Bank of English in order to identify and describe 'shell nouns' and examines them from both a theoretical and a functional perspective. He distinguishes shell nouns according to three criteria: semantically, they 'characterise' chunks of information of clause length or longer; cognitively, they lead to 'temporary concept formation' by the reader; finally, in terms of text connection, they form a link to the stretch of text they refer to and thereby carry out a discourse-organising function (Schmid, 2000, p. 14).

Two studies have investigated the use of these nouns in English academic discourse. Concentrating on the connective function, Flowerdew (2003) uses the term 'signalling nouns' and provides a systematic account of the way in which they create textual links, both across and within clauses. Charles (2003) focuses on shell nouns that occur in a single lexico-grammatical pattern (*This* N in sentence initial position). She shows how the choice of noun enables writers to incorporate their own evaluations into the text and thus

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[1] All examples come from the corpora described in the following section.
[2] Each example is coded by corpus and thesis. A list of theses and codes is given in the Appendix.