



# On the function of stance-neutral formulations: Apparent neutrality as a powerful stance constructing resource



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the function of expressing external viewpoints with stance-neutral frames in academic writing. While a growing number of studies have established that appropriately evaluating external viewpoints is vital in advanced academic writing, the function of using stance-neutral formulations has long been unexplored despite the fact that many external viewpoints in academic writing are introduced into the discourse with a stance-neutral formulation. This study performs quantitative and qualitative analyses on the introductory chapters of PhD theses in history to explore the functions of these formulations. It finds that because of their absence of an evaluative stance, external propositions expressed without a specific stance flexibly realize various kinds of evaluative processes. Such processes involve taking into account the reader response to a proposition since the blankness in stance plays a role in constructing a discourse that gradually persuades the reader. This paper concludes that each of the neutrally presented viewpoints in the successfully constructed text uniquely forms an important strategic process of gradual value assignment and that stance-neutrality is not a representation of the writer's failure to clarify stance. This paper emphasizes the need to implement the strategic use of stance-neutral formulations in pedagogic settings.

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## 1. Introduction

The role that intertextual links play in constructing academic discourse has increasingly received attention. Extensive research has established that, for an academic text to be successful in its communication, it is crucial that the writer's stance toward cited information be made clear (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Gilbert, 1976; Hewings, Lillis, & Vladimirov, 2010; Hood, 2006, 2010; Hyland, 1999, 2005; Petrić, 2007; Samraj, 2013). Developing the academic skill to interpret and evaluate cited work is considered particularly important for students because positioning one's research in relation to previous literature allows the establishment of a research justification for new study (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Charles, 2006a; Dong, 1996; Hunston, 1993; Tadros, 1989; Thomas & Hawes, 1994; Thompson & Ye, 1991). The relationship between citation and stance taking has been explored mainly through the use of reporting verbs (e.g., Hyland, 1999; Thompson & Ye, 1991). These studies revealed disciplinary variations in stance taking and citation practices, indicating that understanding the target discipline's practices in taking a stance toward external viewpoints is a key to successful academic writing (Charles, 2006a, 2006b; Hyland, 2002; Thomas & Hawes, 1994). They also recognized that for novice writers and non-

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native speakers, learning to cite and evaluate previous literature appropriately is particularly challenging due to the complexity of skillful stance manipulation (Abasi, Akbari, & Graves, 2006; Charles, 2006a, 2006b; Dong, 1996; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Petrić, 2007; Petrić & Harwood, 2013).

However, there is a gap in research concerning the writer's<sup>1</sup> stance taking toward external viewpoints in the category of reporting verb use. For example, consider a sentence like, "X concluded that ... ." When such a sentence is presented in isolation from its context, it is unclear where the writer stands in relation to X's conclusion. On the other hand, in a statement such as "X demonstrated that ...," the writer's positive stance toward the proposition made by the author is clear, and in "X claimed that ...," the writer's detachment from it is suggested. Although it is expected that the writer's stance toward a neutrally presented external viewpoint may be on hold at the time of the statement and will get clarified in other parts of the text (Martin & White, 2005), the complexity causes analytical difficulty in identifying the writer's stance since it cannot be analyzed with lexicogrammatical approaches such as the ones that classify reporting verbs.

While this issue has been left unexplored in EAP studies, the prevalence of stance-neutral formulations in expressing external propositions in advanced academic writing is not at all negligible. This is evident in Hyland's (1999) cross-disciplinary investigation of 80 research articles from leading journals in eight disciplines in which 'evaluation' categories for reporting verbs that classify the writer's commitment to the reported information are proposed (p. 350). The categories distinguish between *factive* (words like "demonstrate" and "establish," used to indicate acceptance); *counter-factive* (words like "fail" and "exaggerate," used to indicate disagreement); and *non-factive* (words that give no clear signal) verbs. The non-factive category has four sub-categories: *positive* ("advocate," "argue," etc.); *neutral* ("address," "cite," etc.); *tentative* ("believe," "suggest," etc.); and *critical* ("attack," "condemn," etc.). The non-factive categories do not identify the writer's stance toward the reported information, in that they contain no stance signaling on the part of the writer but only describe the original author's stance. Hence, the sub-categories for non-factive verbs shift the entity to be analyzed from the writer to the reported author, leaving the writer's stance toward the proposition unanalyzed (cf. the *neutral* category in Thompson and Ye's (1991) taxonomy). The result of Hyland's research showed that as many as 79.4 percent of the total reporting verbs used to refer to external propositions in the corpus were non-factive, while only a small proportion of factive (19.0 percent) and counter-factive (1.6 percent) verbs were used (p. 351). Given that Hyland's corpus comprised research articles from leading journals, it is improbable that the non-factive instances are the result of the article writers failing to interpret the quoted information.

Little, however, is known about the function of non-evaluative expressions for external propositions. Thompson and Ye (1991: 380) mention unsuccessful cases of non-native speakers writing academic papers in which they introduce evaluation in a crude way, describing that one of their "NNS [non-native speaker] students had evolved a simple system: if he disagreed with the quoted author, he generally wrote 'X says/states ...' (or a similar neutral reporting verb), sometimes going on to state explicitly that the reported opinion was incorrect; if, on the other hand, he agreed with the author, he wrote 'X rightly says/states ...'" Although many non-native and novice writers of academic texts struggle to develop appropriate stance-taking strategies, given that it was quantitatively established that non-factive reporting verbs are dominant in successful academic writing (Hyland, 1999), there must be successful cases as well, which are expected to be playing an important role in academic text construction.

It has been recently reported that seemingly non-interpersonal elements, such as conditional clauses in academic writing, are part of a stance-construction process that builds a consensus between writer and reader (Warchai, 2010). A wide range of apparently non-interpersonal elements in text, including neutrality in introducing an external work, may also be a part of stance-building processes that has yet to be revealed. In this study, on the premise that external sources play a crucial role in constructing the research space (e.g., Feak & Swales, 2011), I hypothesize that external propositions expressed using apparently stance-neutral formulations play a role in introductory parts of academic writing, albeit a different role from the one played by the use of value-laden formulations. I also draw on the recent observation that rhetorical functions and citation functions tend to overlap (Martínez, 2008; Samraj, 2013). As rhetorical functions in the introductions of academic writing straightforwardly realize a research space (Swales, 1990), it can be further hypothesized that external propositions expressed neutrally also relate to the realization of a research space by overlapping with the rhetorical functions that justify research.

In this study, I quantitatively investigate this hypothesis by conducting a distributional analysis of stance-neutral formulations across functional units that create a research space. I then search for explanations of the results, by investigating how external propositions that are expressed neutrally eventually get evaluated by the writer, gain a specific position in the text, and contribute to the writer justifying his or her new research.

As shown in the previous investigations of reporting verbs, micro- and lexicogrammatical approaches inevitably fail to pursue the present objective. In this study, I utilize systemic functional linguistics (SFL) approaches in order to conduct a macro-dynamic analysis that does not rely on a specific type of lexicogrammar. SFL was described as a text-oriented approach to academic discourse (Coffin & Donohue, 2012), which views "language as resource—choices among alternatives" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004: 19). According to this view of SFL, a deployment of a stance-neutral formulation can be considered to be the writer's strategic choice made among alternative value-laden formulations. In the analysis, this viewpoint enables me to seek explanations as to why the choice of a stance-neutral formulation has been made and how it serves as a meaning-making

<sup>1</sup> This study adopts the convention of referring to a person citing as the "writer" and a person cited as the "author," as established by Thompson and Ye (1991).

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