



Reflection of stance through *it* bundles in applied linguistics



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This paper looks at a particular structural group of lexical bundles encoding stance expressions.
- The use of *it* bundles is compared in three corpora of research articles, doctoral dissertations, and master theses in the discipline of applied linguistics.
- These bundles are shown to have stance expressions of hedging, marking attitude, stressing emphasis, attributing, and making epistemic meanings.
- The major difference is found to be between students' genres and research articles with the former drawing less on interpersonal meanings.

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ABSTRACT

The study of linguistic devices serving as stance expressions is one of the best means by which the relationship between the writer, the reader and the propositional meaning could be examined. This paper looks at a particular structural group of lexical bundles encoding stance expressions. These are clausal bundles starting with an anticipatory *it* in which subject comes at the end of the clause (e.g. *it is important to, it should be noted that*). The use of these bundles is compared in three corpora of research articles, doctoral dissertations and master theses, all in the discipline of applied linguistics, to explore the possible generic variations and address the potential differences between published and students writing too. Drawing on Hewings and Hewings' [23] functional typology of interpersonal roles of *it* clauses, the study shows that the use of this structural group of bundles in research articles was significantly more than that of the two groups of postgraduate writing. However, there were some *it* bundles used more heavily by one or both groups of postgraduate students. Functional analysis also revealed that these bundles encoded stance expressions of hedging, attitude marking, emphasis, attribution and epistemic meanings. The differences are explained by referring to generic expectations and students' growing disciplinary identity. There are also some implications for the academic writing.

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1. Overview of stance

The linguistic mechanisms employed by speakers or writers to express their personal attitudes have long been of interest to linguists [19,36,20]. In the last four decades or so, much has been done to find the linguistic realizations of stance in a wide variety of registers and genres [34,37]. This has been done through using a plethora of terms including *metadiscourse* [31], *hedges* [12,26], *modality* [47] and *evaluation* [25]. While each paradigm addressing stance has its own focus, overall, the research conducted in this area has added to our understanding of the ways in which speakers and writers express their opinions and evaluations by the language employed to fulfill different communicative purposes [34,20]. So,

the importance of stance features lies in the role they play in negotiating meanings and engaging the interlocutors, with its realization being contingent upon community conventions and the expression of personal preferences [32].

Interestingly, studies have employed a variety of methodologies including analysis of a single piece of text to large-scale corpus-informed studies of different structural patterns across texts in different registers [3]. However, the use of a lexico-grammatical methodological approach employing automatic tools and analyzing the lexical items having specific grammatical structures has been the most dominant method employed to explore particular attitudinal, epistemic and meanings encoding stance [19].

Regarding stance features, a good and useful distinction is often made between meanings that indicate a speaker/writer's personal attitudes, emotions and assessments, and those representing or evaluating the epistemic characterization of an entity or a

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proposition [2,3,8,9]. Biber & Finegan [8,9] for instance, categorized linguistic features according to a distinction between affective and evidential meanings. Accordingly, affect features can refer to positive (e.g. *interestingly, enjoy*) or negative meanings (e.g. *distressed, unhappy*), and evidential meanings could indicate a level of certainty (e.g. *impossible, prove, absolutely, could*) or doubt (e.g. *uncertain, presume, should*). Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan also [10] extended and developed this framework to include more specific meanings, maintaining a distinction between epistemic stance (evidentiality) and attitudinal stance (affect). Epistemic stance refers to meanings of certainty, doubt, actuality, and definiteness, as well as indicators of the source or perspective of knowledge (e.g., attributing an idea to particular reference). Attitudinal stance consists of attitudes and evaluations, as well as personal feelings or emotions [2,3,19].

On the other hand, hedging and boosting in academic writing have also been the focus of much attention (e.g., [26,27]). Hedging refers to markers that withdraw full commitment from a proposition (e.g. *likely, could*), while boosting includes expressions representing a high degree of certainty towards a proposition (e.g., *must, definitely*) [31], also focused on features of interaction, showing how academics shape their texts to reflect the possible accuracy or credibility of a claim, the extent to which they want to commit themselves to it, or the attitude they hold toward an entity, a proposition, or the reader [19].

As one of the important registers, academic research writing has long been regarded as objective, mostly conveying factual information, with no reference to attitudes or feelings [2]. However, it has been revealed by discourse analysts in recent decades that the use of evaluative language expressing a wide range of stance features is quite common and, in fact, conventional in academic discourse [54]. Several researchers (e.g. [11,31]; have shown that persuasion and assessment are, in fact, an integral part of the discursive practices of academic writers; so, this register can hardly be assumed to be objective and depersonalized [32,33].

In this regard, it has been found that there are some grammatical devices commonly used in academic writing, lending themselves as markers of different stance meanings [10,11]. These are usually extraposed complement clauses including stance *that*-clause constructions. [3]; for example, investigated patterns of stance use across university spoken and written registers in a large corpus, showing that such stance features were quite infrequent in textbooks and research articles, while they were commonly employed in other spoken and written university registers.

Most previous studies of stance have been focused on grammatical stance devices. These include complement clause constructions, stance adverbials, modal verbs and stance nouns accompanied by prepositional phrase constructions [10]. These devices can frankly voice an attitude or assessment with respect to some proposition. Therefore, a grammatical stance device has two distinct components, one expressing a personal stance, and the other presenting a proposition framed by that stance [19]. Such clause constructions (usually found as *that*-clauses) can be regarded as a straightforward grammatical stance device expressing the stance relative to the proposition in the complement clause [23].

The purpose of this study is to zoom on the use of those clauses starting with the anticipatory *it* as word combinations or clusters known as lexical bundles [10]. These are word combinations which are structurally incomplete and semantically transparent. More specifically, this paper looks at this particular structural group of lexical bundles which encode different stance expressions. These are clausal bundles starting with an anticipatory *it* in which subject comes at the end of the clause (e.g. *it is important to, it should be noted that*). *It*-clauses have been found to be relatively frequent in academic writing when compared with other registers [2].

[10] have revealed that *it*-clauses followed by extraposed *that*-clauses are moderately common in academic prose and written news reports, while *it*-clauses with an adjective followed by extraposed *to*-clauses are rare in conversation, but very frequent in academic writing. It can be said that they are a feature of academic writing expressing opinions and commenting on and evaluating propositions; this makes it possible for the writer to remain in the background, not directly intervening in the unfolding text [23]. Such strategies add to the objective impersonal status of the propositions made. The pattern, however, causes problems for non-native speakers, such as those in the research reported later, who are required to produce academic prose in high-stakes postgraduate genres in English. As many languages have no counterpart to anticipatory *it*-clauses [35], including Persian, the first language of postgraduate writers addressed in this study, it can be hypothesized that some writers are likely to encounter some problems in using such clusters, especially they are also associated with expressions of stance [37]. Accordingly, the use of these bundles is compared in published and unpublished writing to explore possible generic variations and address the potential differences the groups of writers. However, before, the study is discussed in detail, lexical bundles are introduced in the next section.

1.1. Lexical bundles

Lexical bundles were first introduced and defined by Ref. [10] in their well-known rendering of English grammar. They defined lexical bundles as “recurrent expressions, regardless of their idiomatity, and regardless of their structural status” (p. 990). More importantly, they refer to frequency as the most salient and defining characteristic of bundles. In order for a word combination (e.g. *on the other hand, at the same time, it is necessary to*, etc.) to count as a bundle, it must occur at least ten times in a corpus made of one million words, with the additional requirement that this rate of occurrence be realized in at least five different texts to guard against idiosyncratic or repetitive uses [10]. Lexical bundles are identified empirically on the basis of frequency and breadth of use [14,15]. Fixedness in form (e.g., *on the basis of* not **on a basis of*) and non-idiomatic meaning (e.g., the meaning of a four-word bundle like *in the presence of* is almost easily retrievable from the meaning of its individual parts) are among other properties of bundles. Among other registers, lexical bundles have been found to be an important part of academic discourse [10,32,33,36,37].

Lexical bundles have been classified structurally [2,7,10,36,48] and functionally [4,6,7,13,14,32,33,36,38,39]. The most widely-used structural typology of bundles is that of [10]; where these multi-word sequences are arranged into eight categories (see Table 1). Since 1999, a number of corpus-based and mostly comparative studies have been launched to explore possible differences and/or similarities in the use of bundles in different disciplinary fields [14,15,18,32,33,22,36,38,39], registers, such as conversation, fiction, news, academic prose, classroom teaching and non-conversational speech [4,5,7,10], genres [33,36] and different levels of writing expertise [14,15,37,40,42,48].

Overall, these studies indicate that lexical bundles are strong discipline, genre and register discriminators [10]. This means that apart from some overlaps, each discipline, genre or register draws on its own specific set of bundles to organize its discourse, express stance and refer to different parts of the evolving text or elements outside the text. The findings also show that many lexical bundles favored by experts in a given disciplinary area may not be used by students with varying degrees of language proficiency and disciplinary expertise (see, for example, [15,16]). What is also certain is that as building blocks of coherent discourse, these word clusters can serve such a wide range of discursive functions as organization

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