



# Nominal stance construction in IELTS tests

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## ABSTRACT

Although extensive research has shown that establishing an effective stance is crucial in academic writing, few studies have investigated nominal stance construction in academic texts. Utilizing Jiang and Hyland's (2016) functional classification model, this study explores the use of stance nouns in L2 texts written in response to Writing Task 2 in the Academic Module of the International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) test. The analysis aims to reveal the extent to which particular uses of stance nouns are associated with the proficiency levels of writers as defined by the IELTS band scores. The use of stance nouns in a 90,007-word corpus of 300 scripts retrieved from the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC) was examined across three proficiency levels, "limited user" (level 4), "competent user" (level 6) and "very good user" (level 8). The results show significant differences in the use of stance nouns across the three levels. Level 8 writers employ stance nouns with greater frequency and variety and use the noun-complement structure, cognition nouns and premodifiers more frequently than writers at lower levels. These findings suggest that nominal stance construction is a defining feature of advanced academic writing and have important implications for EAP writing instruction and assessment.

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## 1. Introduction

Extensive research has shown that the ability to establish an appropriate stance is an essential aspect of competent academic writing (Charles, 2003, 2007; Gross & Chesley, 2012; Hyland & Milton, 1997). Previous research has focused on various interpersonal elements, such as hedges and boosters (Hyland & Milton, 1997), metadiscourse (Ädel, 2006; Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Mu, Lawrence, & Ehrich, 2015), and engagement (Mei, 2007). These studies have explored a wide repertoire of linguistic devices used in stance construction, such as adverbs, adjectives, modal verbs (Gabrielatos & McNery, 2005; Gross & Chesley, 2012; Swales & Burke, 2003) and first person pronouns (Hyland, 2002; Işık-Taş, 2018; Lorés-Sanz, 2011).

Previous research (Baratta, 2010; Barton, 1993; Charles, 2003, 2007) has shown that stance expression through nouns is a feature of competent academic writing. These studies have analyzed a variety of academic text types, including coursework (Aull & Lancaster, 2014; Mei, 2007), theses (Baratta, 2010; Charles, 2003, 2007), argumentative essays (Jiang, 2015) and research articles (Jiang & Hyland, 2015; Mu et al., 2015). However, there are no known studies that have investigated the use of stance nouns in scripts produced by writers in a high-stakes test, such as the IELTS test. Writing produced in such settings

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may constitute a different register from other types of academic writing and thus be associated with different linguistic and functional characteristics (Staples, Egbert, Biber, & McClair, 2013).

One of the few studies on stance construction in IELTS scripts was conducted by Kennedy and Thorp (2007). This study investigated “hedging” as one aspect of stance in the IELTS Writing Task 2 and focused on how writers at levels 4, 6 and 8 used modal auxiliary verbs, adjectival/adverbial/nominal modal expressions, modal lexical verbs and *it* clauses in hedging. However, nominal stance construction was not the focus of this study.

The present study addresses the need for further research on how stance is constructed through nouns as a “neglected feature of metadiscourse” (Jiang & Hyland, 2016, p. 1) in test scripts written by L2 writers of different English proficiency levels. I specifically aim to investigate if and to what extent nominal stance construction differentiates highly proficient writing from less proficient writing. To this end, I aim to explore the following question:

What differences, if any, are there in the distribution, form, functions and premodification of stance nouns in scripts at three proficiency levels (4, 6 and 8) in the IELTS test?

In the second section, I will provide a general literature review on stance in academic writing. The third section will focus on the use of nouns in stance expression in academic writing. The third section will present the grammatical patterns, premodification and functions that are explored in this study. The fourth section will focus on the IELTS Writing Task 2. The fifth section will introduce the corpus and the data analysis methods employed in this study and will be followed by the presentation and discussion of the results in the sixth section. In the seventh section, I will conclude with a brief summary of the results and discuss the implications of the findings for EAP writing instruction and assessment.

## 2. Stance in academic writing

The two most frequent terms in studies on stance in academic writing are *evaluation* and *stance*. Thompson and Hunston (2000) use *evaluation* as a “broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (p. 5). Conrad and Biber (2000), on the other hand, prefer to use the term *stance* as a general term corresponding to the expression of personal feelings and assessments. Other terms used in studies of stance include *modality* (Halliday, 1985), *evidentiality* (Chafe & Nichols, 1986), *voice* (Hirvela & Belcher, 2001), *hedging* (Hyland, 1998), *authorial identity* (Ivanič, 1998) and *appraisal* (Martin & White, 2005).

In using stance, writers do not only express their opinions and reflect their value systems but they also construct relationships with their readers and organize their texts (Thompson & Hunston, 2000). For L2 writers, one aspect of difficulty in the acquisition of pragmatic competence is establishing an appropriate stance in academic writing. As evidenced in previous studies (e.g., Hyland & Milton, 1997), L2 writers have difficulty manipulating the linguistic resources to construct a stance in their writing. Studies that investigated epistemic stance in L2 learner production (e.g., Bartley & Hidalgo-Tenorio, 2016; Gabrielatos & McNery, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Kecskes & Kirner-Ludwig, 2017) found that L2 learners had difficulty making epistemic comments, conveying statements with appropriate degrees of doubt and certainty and presenting assertions in acceptable and persuasive ways.

The effective construction of stance increases the quality of argumentation in academic essays (Mei, 2007; Wingate, 2012). Mei (2007) found significant differences in the way engagement resources were employed in high- and low-scoring essays of L2 learners and concluded that these differences “may underline the importance of the appropriate use of such resources to the evaluative quality of arguments” (p. 266). In this respect, to raise L2 writers’ awareness of stance options in academic writing, we need a better understanding of the linguistic resources utilized in stance construction. To this end, nominal stance construction, as an understudied aspect of stance-taking in L2 academic writing, will be the focus of this study.

## 3. Use of nouns in stance expression

Semantically unspecified abstract nouns such as *fact* or *idea* have been extensively studied in previous research. These studies have investigated different qualities of abstract nouns using various labels such as “general nouns” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), “labels” (Francis, 1994), “carrier nouns” (Ivanič, 1991), “shell nouns” (Hunston & Francis, 2000; Schmid, 2000), “signalling nouns” (Flowerdew & Forest, 2015; Flowerdew, 2003), “metadiscursive nouns” (Jiang & Hyland, 2016) and “procedural nouns” (Luzón Marco, 1999). In this study, following Jiang (2015) and Jiang and Hyland (2016), I use the term “stance nouns” particularly to emphasize the potential of these nouns to express authorial perspective and evaluation towards the content in written texts.

Much of the research on the interpersonal functions of nouns in academic writing has concentrated on their interactive features (e.g., Flowerdew, 2006; Gray & Cortes, 2011; Gray, 2010), such as “enclosing and anticipating the meaning of the preceding and succeeding discourse” (Aktas & Cortes, 2008, p. 3). Nevertheless, nouns might also fulfill interactional functions by helping writers guide their readers to interpret the text in a certain way (Flowerdew, 2015) and thus to establish an authorial stance in writing. They are “another key element of metadiscourse, offering writers a way of organizing discourse into a cohesive flow of information and of constructing a stance towards it” (Jiang & Hyland, 2016, p. 1). In EX 1, the writer prefers to use “right” to describe the following action and thus guides the reader to interpret “enjoying all the civic facilities” as a “right” rather than, for instance, a “chance” or a “privilege”.

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