

TAKING A STANCE: EVALUATIVE ADJECTIVES IN A CORPUS OF WRITTEN ECONOMICS LECTURES

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1. *Introduction*

Over the last decade, research in intersubjectivity and interactivity in academic discourse has grown to such a point, that academics are no longer viewed as reporting research and drawing inferences from a series of events without marking their attitudes or committing themselves to their texts. On the contrary, the interactive nature of academic discourse, in which authorial authoritativeness plays an important persuasive role in claiming knowledge, is now fully recognised. Knowledge claims are never simply a matter of fact: they are presented in argumentational form and have to be convincing if they are to be accepted into the knowledge 'database' of the disciplinary community and boost the academic credibility and prestige of the writer (Hyland 2002; Samson 2002; 2004). The acceptance of claims also depends on the writer's familiarity with or rather internalisation of the epistemological assumptions of the discipline, on his/her understanding of the rhetorical moves that characterise the genre, and on the possible reactions on the part of readers. Both textual and interpersonal relationships are therefore essential for a message to have an illocutionary effect (to be understood) and a perlocutionary effect (to be accepted).

However, since data may have more than one interpretation, readers always retain the option of rejecting the writer's message (Hyland 1998). Because of this active role readers have in the construction of texts, writers employ rhetorical metadiscursive devices to avoid disputation and to anticipate possible difficulties of interpretation by taking a stance in their work.

Stance has been defined by Hyland (1999: 101) as 'the way authors project themselves into their texts to communicate their relationship to subject matter and the readers, and the way their persona is socially defined'. Along similar lines, Martin (2000) classifies stance as part of his Appraisal system, and defines it as the ways authors' evaluation, attitude and emotions are expressed and managed interpersonally. Stance is thus usually subsumed under the umbrella term, *evaluation*, which Hunston (2000) defines as 'the expression of the speaker's or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about' (Hunston and Thompson, 2000: 5). In other

words, taking a stance involves exerting personal judgement, indicating – in an appeal to shared norms and values – what is good or bad; it implies an ability on the writer's part to balance objective data with a display of confidence and reliability of knowledge in order to convince the reader.

Recent studies have tried to explain the elusive notion of evaluation which pervades academic discourse from different perspectives, by making reference to the construal of ideology in texts, to the participatory roles that can be mapped onto local grammars, to textual and interpersonal metadiscourse as an element of coherence in discourse organisation (Hyland 1999; Hunston 2000; Sinclair and Hunston 2000; Conrad and Biber 2000; Martin 2000; Barton 1993; Hoey 2000). While various written and spoken academic genres have been investigated – scholarly research articles, textbooks, spoken lectures, to name but a few (Mauranen 2002, 2003; Hyland 1998, 2002; Swales and Burke 2003) – little attention has been bestowed on evaluation in mixed genres, such as written lectures. In such genres, the analysis of evaluative aspects of language becomes even more complex; for example, in written economics lectures (the focus of the present study) writers are engaged on different planes of discourse with different functions: the pedagogical, the academic and the self promotional. The main aim of this paper is to shed further light on how economists/writers exploit evaluative devices – in particular, evaluative adjectives – to point out what they judge important, to persuade readers implicitly or explicitly to accept their views, and to reinforce their academic persona. In the first part of this paper I describe the data and methodology used in this study. Second, I try to define evaluative adjectives. Third, I focus on the most frequent evaluative adjectives in the corpus through a quantitative analysis and propose a typology. Fourth, evaluative adjectives are qualitatively investigated in order to underscore the rhetorical strategies used by economists/writers for their specific purposes.

2. Data and methodology

The data collected consist of 10 written economics lectures by contemporary economists on various topics of macro and micro economics. These specific lectures were chosen for their availability in the library of the Faculty of Economics at the University of Florence, this being an indication of their inclusion in academic curricula. The lectures were also selected on the basis of their authors' prestige: all are renowned contemporary economists.

The lectures were originally presented in their spoken form to audiences at the universities of Oxford or Cambridge and were successively expanded and divided into chapters for publication in written form. Their target readers are graduates with a certain maturity in the field of economics and professionals, as stated in the introduction to each volume.

The lectures were scanned and computerised to form a corpus of approximately 130,000 words which was processed using WordSmith Tools (Scott 1998), a suite of programmes for language analysis. However, since the corpus is relatively small in size, the texts were initially subjected to a close reading in order to form an overall impression of their contents and general rhetorical structures. Subsequently, a Wordlist and a Frequency list were generated in order to identify certain features of interest, which were successively analysed through concordancing to highlight recurring patterns. As McEnery and Wilson (2001) point out, quantitative methodology is considered suitable for frequent phenomena, since it allows us to discover which phenomena are likely to be genuine reflections of the behaviour of a language or variety, and which are merely chance occurrences. To borrow Sinclair's (1991) argument, looking at a single language variety allows one to get a precise picture of the frequency and rarity of particular phenomena, and thus their relative normality or abnormality, their typicality or individuality/uniqueness. However, the picture of the data which emerges from a quantitative analysis may seem less rich than that obtained from a qualitative analysis, because the latter allows several fine distinctions to be drawn due to the fact that it is not necessary to reduce the data to a finite number of classifications. In short, in analysing a small specialised corpus, insights can be gained by integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data.

3. Evaluative adjectives

Evaluative adjectives are a resource employed by writers to express their attitude, their evaluation of propositions, methods, results or points in the texts. They have been classified in the literature in several ways. Vande Kopple (1985) and Hyland (1998; 1999) refer to them as devices that express writers' affective values and their attitude towards the propositional content and/or readers. Crismore et al. (1993: 53) view them as attitude markers that can convey surprise, judgements that something is important, but also concessions, agreement,

disagreement. Chafe (1986) also classifies them as attitude markers in his taxonomy of evidentials to explain the expression of a speaker's attitude toward what is said and his/her evaluation of its reliability. In Martin's Appraisal system (cfr. Martin 2000; www.grammatics.com), evaluative adjectives are included in the sub-system of attitude, comprising those meanings whereby texts attach an inter-subjective value or assessment to participants and processes by reference either to emotional responses or to systems of culturally-determined value systems. In particular, when evaluation is made of products and processes Martin refers to *appreciation* which evaluates positively or negatively texts as well as more abstract constructs.

In academic discourse in general and in written economics lectures in particular, knowledge is progressively constructed through the text and writers engage in a succession of alternative positions by 'acknowledging', 'disclaiming', and 'proclaiming' propositions as part of their rhetorical strategy. This process has been defined by Barton (1993) as *problematization*, i.e., a prevailing assumption, idea, view, or situation is presented as needing re-examination, re-conceptualisation, or re-evaluation of some kind. To disclaim alternative positions and proclaim their own, writers need to state their attitude and opinion toward propositions so as to highlight an opponent's 'lack of knowledge' and/or 'incorrect knowledge' or inconsistency and/or unacceptability of his/her findings. In bringing together corpus linguistics techniques with rhetorical analysis, this study investigates how evaluative adjectives may have multiple functions. They may be both evaluative and/or metadiscursive (textual or interpersonal), since in the process of interpreting and accepting economic knowledge, the writer at the same time attempts to gain more or less solidarity within the disciplinary community.

4. *Corpus analysis*

The analysis of the corpus began by generating a Wordlist and Frequency list to identify the most frequent evaluative adjectives; the results were then compared with those that emerged in Swales and Burke's¹ (2003) contrastive analysis of two corpora: MICASE (Michigan corpus of academic spoken English) and a corpus of research articles. The frequency count, in Table 1, revealed a high number of evaluative adjectives², the type defined by Swales and Burke as 'centralised relevance markers', that is, adjectives/markers occurring in an intermediate position along a continuum which has

negative and positive relevance markers at its polar opposites. I focussed only on the high-frequency adjectives which did not appear in previous findings by other scholars and that reflect the constraints of the discipline.

Table 1: Most frequent centralised evaluative adjectives

Tokens	Frequency (Tokens per 100,000 words)
Different	178
Steady	163
Central	102
Optimal	82
Important	69
Clear	53
Efficient	49
Simple	46
Relevant	30
Inefficient	20
Significant	23
Interesting	18
Indifferent	18
Useful	17
Ambiguous	15
Bad	15
Attractive	12

The adjective *different*, not discussed by Swales and Burke, emerged as the most frequent evaluative adjective in the corpus. The collocational patterning of *different* reflects the way economists/writers discuss theories or processes in their texts by underlining the different approaches that emerge in the creation of hypotheses. This signalling is essential in helping the reader to understand the message. Using *Concordancer* to investigate the collocational patterns, the most frequent 2-word cluster³ with *different* obtained was: *is different from*. The most recurrent pattern was therefore: VERB + ADJ + PREP where the function of the adjective is to give a subjective judgement about something that is considered dissimilar to something else, and evaluation stressed by the preposition *from* that follows, as in example (1):

(1) Like Marshall, Kreps identifies three different models, although his trichotomy is different from Marshall's [...]

Different in the dispersion plot crops up mainly in the middle sections of the texts, where the writer creates hypothetical worlds

in order to discuss, compare, and express an opinion on theories, models, etc.: in using this adjective, the writer projects himself into the text on a referential and attitudinal plane, thereby making evident his position as the primary expert and guide to the reader through the text.

Different collocates with particular features of the cognitive tools of research being discussed (*models, settings, levels*), as in example (2) where its evaluative force is reinforced by the use of modals and by the anaphoric element *This* (3):

(2) This would give **different** benchmark levels of output (Y) in **different** settings, with short recessions...

(3) This approach leads to a very **different** description of movements in GNP.

Hunston (2000) points out that adjectives can have a retrospective evaluative value if they follow a deictic with an anaphoric function in a pattern of the type: THIS + VERB + ADJ, as in the two examples above. *This* encapsulates what has gone before in a single act of reference but it also prospects forward and sets the scene for what follows⁴. As we can see, it is not sufficient for the writer to organize the material into a textual form: he/she must also indicate or signal to the reader the status and/or discourse function of individual parts of the text in order to make propositional material explicit to the reader/student.

Interestingly, none of the occurrences of *different* match the patterns Sinclair and Hunston (2000) suggest for a 'local grammar' of evaluation, some of which are:

IT + LINK VERB + ADJ GRP + CLAUSE

THERE + LINK VERB + SOMETHING/ANYTHING + ADJ GRP

+ IN + NOUN GRP/-ING CLAUSE

LINK VERB + ADJ + TO - INFINITIVE CLAUSE

But this was not the only difference to emerge from the analysis of the corpus. Several of the most common adjectives in Swales's and Burke's study, such as *important, significant, and interesting*, show, on the contrary, a relatively low frequency in this context. These adjectives collocate mainly with tokens such as *part, role, ways, differences, effect, feature, idea, issues, benefits*, which indicate reference to more generic terms which could well belong to other fields than economics, as in examples (4), (5) and (6):

(4) This part identifies some issues that are **important** for understanding equilibrium

(5) I assumed that the entrepreneur obtained **significant** (private) benefits from running a farm, and ...

(6) There are again **interesting** differences across countries here.

Other differences between our findings and those of Swales and Burke regard 'polarised relevance adjectives'. In the corpus of economics lectures only two occur frequently: *marginal* (80 occurrences) and *best* (48). This suggests that the writers do not tend to mark their propositions dramatically, as in the MICASE data, but rather comply with the norms of the disciplinary community that require more balanced forms of expression in written as opposed to oral academic texts. These adjectives seem to be restricted by contextual constraints, as they collocate with tokens such as *sales, return, costs, rates, liquidation, value, product, goods, utility, investment, outcome, price, way, policy, problem, situation*.

The same occurs with evaluative adjectives with a negative meaning such as *inefficient* or *bad* (Swales and Burke classify them as 'assessment adjectives'), which are 'imbued' by their collocates (*mediocre, inefficient, liquidation*), as in examples (7) and (8):

(7) a firm which mostly produces *mediocre* state goods, is clearly **inefficient**

(8) debt is **bad** because it may cause *inefficient liquidation*

The frequency list also reveals a low number of adjectives of the type Swales and Burke categorise as adjectives of 'size', yet the few that occur in the written economics lectures corpus are quite frequent, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Size - Evaluative Adjectives

Tokens	Frequency (Tokens per 100,000 words)
High	119
Small	67
Strong	21

According to Swales and Burke, evaluative adjectives of 'size' are more likely to occur in academic speech than in writing since colloquial, idiomatic and generalised evaluations seem to characterise the former more than the latter. In my lecture corpus adjectives of 'size' may be viewed as a signal of the stance writers take in making assertions (9) or in posing Wh questions (10). These occurrences are both cataphoric and interactive and are a means of enhancing or postponing the discussion of the topic or approaching it from another perspective. In example (11) *small* is also used as a vague quantifier (Channell 1994) since the writer,

instead of providing an exact figure (which would be irrelevant in this specific point of the text), uses an adjective with a vague sense:

- (9) Only government spending matters. This has a **strong** implication.
 (10) Why was the proportion of hirings from employment relatively so **high**?
 (11) Employment is usually slightly positive but often statistically insignificant. There is a **small** but consistent negative correlation ...

What emerged from the overall analysis and in particular from concordancing, was the difficulty in determining which adjectives not only expressed the attitude of the writer towards his proposition but also had a metadiscursive function: adjectives, that is, that highlighted the importance of a specific point or part of the text for the reader. Very often, as in example (2), the two 'planes' that Hunston (2000) distinguishes in written discourse – the autonomous plane which involves evaluation of the content and the interactive plane which refers to the evaluation of a part of the discourse – are not clearly distinguishable. Nevertheless, when the writer explicitly interacts with the reader, metadiscursive devices which are both textual and interpersonal are implemented in the form of discourse deictics, person markers or deictics (I/WÈ), modals, etc.

Written economics lectures thus seem to share some of the features Christie (1997) highlights as typical of pedagogic discourse: in them, two different registers which traditionally characterise textbooks – the regulative and the instructive – are operative. The regulative register refers to language choices which are involved in establishing goals for teaching and learning activities, and in fostering and maintaining the direction of the activities for the achievement of the goals. In written economics lectures this is reflected in the use of different forms of metadiscourse to guide the reader through the text. The instructional register refers instead to language choices in which the knowledge and the associated skills being taught are realised (Bondi 2001: 137). In my lecture corpus this register emerges in the use of specialised lexis which is necessary for the development of economic topics. These two registers are closely intertwined: what is 'said' is reinstated for pedagogic purposes – first, by identifying problem areas; secondly, by representing scientific procedures which play a major role in drawing a map of the discipline; thirdly, by enhancing the value of one's research in the academic world, as in example (12):

- (12) In seeking to explain the interactions among output, employment, and capital accumulation, we shall for the most part take as given the long-term movements in multifactor productivity.

Both the figures and the data we have presented emphasize the most important fact of modern economic history: persistent long-term growth. But, as the large fluctuations in figures 1.1 to 1.4 make clear, this growth is far from steady. [...] Our goal is to know, for example, how long typical recessions or expansions last, whether fluctuations in output are largely transitory or largely permanent [...]

Before making his claim the writer acknowledges the validity of existing explanations concerning movements in productivity. Through the use of figures he emphasises the particular fluctuating nature of growth, to then proceed to a detailed re-examination of the issue according to his declared goals. The evaluative adjective *clear* highlights the superiority of the writer's knowledge. In this instance we see how evaluation pervades long stretches of text and creates a mood or tone with the use of adjectives (*important, far, steady, typical, transitory, permanent*) and metadiscursive devices (*we, shall, but, figures, our*) so that the economist/writer can demonstrate his ability in academic argumentation and make his message understandable to readers.

5. Final remarks

To conclude, the use of evaluative adjectives in written economics lectures appeared to have a twofold function: to interact with readers by stressing the crucial points in the texts, and to promote the economist/writer's findings by asserting that his/hers is a correct interpretation of the topics. What is interesting is the high number of evaluative adjectives present in the data and the variety of syntactic forms they occur in. Evaluative adjectives seem to be present throughout the lectures but with a higher concentration in the middle and concluding sections. Moreover, the written medium seems to influence the choice of the adjectives and their use, in that, compared to the MICASE data, the writers tend to be reserved in their laudatory and disparaging lexis. The lectures are characterised in fact by a choice of the discipline Hyland's (2000) observations along similar lines). Another point to note is the similarity between the rhetorical and lexico-grammatical features used in the written lectures and in research articles, which confirm previous findings (Samson 2002; 2004) in which the lectures appeared to be a mixed genre. It is essential to keep this particular nature of the data in mind in interpreting the choice of evaluative adjectives used to express specific types of attitudes and perspectives on economic concepts in a community that requires moderation in order to be accepted as its member.

Notes

¹ Swales and Burke (2003) investigated evaluative adjectives in a portion of the MICASE corpus and a corpus of academic writing. Their study provided a broad taxonomy of evaluative adjectives that includes: *central, important, main, major, peripheral, relevant, serious, unimportant, marginal, crucial, essential, fundamental, trivial, irrelevant, key*. Their results suggest that adjectival evaluation prevails in spoken register, though not quite as polarised as they had hypothesised.

² I focus on both positive and negative evaluative adjectives, since I consider the latter an important indication of the academic's emphasis on what is seen as an alternative or divergent viewpoint which is nevertheless important.

³ Words that are found repeatedly in its company.

⁴ Francis (1986) states that the reader's interpretation of a text is facilitated when the skeleton of the structural scheme is revealed by signals, in the linear discourse, that function as signposts, enabling him/her to organise the information for himself and to form an intelligible picture in his/her mind of the relationship between any particular idea and the argument as a whole. Anaphoric nouns, in particular, are considered by Francis interactive organisational signals which the writer uses to talk about the ongoing discourse metadiscursively.

⁵ I have avoided a distinction between what Swales and Burke (2003) term 'relevance adjectives' and 'assessment adjectives' since this distinction is based mainly on a subjective categorisation and because of the slippery functions of these adjectives.

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