

Attitude and episteme in economics discourse: Adverbials of stance across written academic genres and languages

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Abstract

“Academic prose texts are typically faceless because they are expected to include all evidence necessary to be persuasive and thus do not need to mark stance” (Biber and Finegan 1988: 31). This statement from Biber and Finegan’s pioneering work in the area of interpersonal meaning suggests that academic discourse is characterized by the relative absence of markers of stance – “the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message” (Biber and Finegan 1989: 93). However, it has been argued in the recent spread of studies on academic writing that written academic genres are not purely objective, impersonal, and informational as had once been believed. In fact, recent research on academic discourse (e.g. Hyland 1999; Bondi 2002) has shown that “the use of stance is an important aspect of professional academic discourse, conveying the field-specific expressive and interpersonal meanings which help readers to evaluate information and writers to gain acceptance for their work” (Hyland 1999: 120).

As Conrad and Biber (2000) note, studies into the ways that speakers and writers mark their personal stance have been carried out from many different perspectives, i.e. from descriptions of a single text type to investigations of large computer-based corpora. Great interest has recently been shown in analysing indicators of stance from a cross-disciplinary perspective (McDonald 1994; Bondi 1999; Hyland 2000), and in exploring how particular lexico-grammatical elements contributing to evaluation function within and across genres (Bondi 2002; Silver 2003, 2004).

The study reported here is concerned with the expression of opinion and stance from a cross-linguistic perspective. Using corpus-based methods, the present analysis attempts to compare the quantitative and qualitative use of stance features in English and Italian academic discourse in the field of economics, i.e. to analyse and compare how English and Italian economists convey their judgments, opinions and degrees of commitment to what they say in their academic publications. While we expect that the consistent use of expressions of personal stance reflects both the characteristics of the academic genre and the role it plays within the scientific community, we try to explore whether there is any variation in the way each language makes use of such features. The issue will be investigated by focusing on the grammar category of stance adverbials – adverbials “commenting on the content or style of a clause or a particular part of a clause” (Biber et al. 1999: 853).

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