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From "Our key finding is that..." to "We have attempted to show that...": The nature of knowledge claims in research articles

The research article is the main vehicle for disseminating new knowledge in most disciplines today. As has been pointed out by e.g. Bazerman (1981), the nature of knowledge varies with the nature of the discipline, so that while within the natural sciences knowledge may be said to represent a shared understanding of the underlying framework and to deal with discrete and observable entities, in the social sciences and the humanities less common ground can be taken for granted, and knowledge is to some extent created in the text through the argumentation process itself. In this paper I will investigate how knowledge is given a textual realisation in economics and linguistics. These two disciplines are often classified as belonging within the social sciences, but while the former to some extent shares features with disciplines belonging within the natural sciences (such as, e.g., mathematics), the latter sometimes seems closer to the humanities.

In a recent, related, study (Dahl, forthcoming) I looked at how knowledge claims are presented in the introduction section of research articles within economics and linguistics. I showed that, somewhat surprisingly, claims in that section in both disciplines were typically unhedged (*we show that* rather than *we attempt to show that*), notably in economics. The claims were in many cases metadiscursively signalled (e.g. *our main contribution is*), a trend which was somewhat more prevalent in economics than in linguistics.

However, knowledge claims are presented and discussed in other sections of the article as well, and the present study will compare the strength of the claims in terms of hedging as well as their textual prominence in terms of overt signalling in the abstract, the introduction and the concluding section of the article. The study is based on a selection of texts from the KIAP Corpus (www.uib.no/kiap/KIAPCorpus.htm), 25 economics articles and 25 linguistics articles, written in English by presumed native speakers. As both the abstract and the introduction have a promotional function, attempting to draw the reader's attention to the newsworthiness of the research contribution (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995), my hypothesis is that the textual presentation of the new knowledge will be in the form of bolder – unhedged – claims in those two parts, while the concluding section will be more likely to present the claims in mitigated (hedged) form, and hence more in line with what is often said to be typical of disciplines outside the natural sciences (cf., eg., Myers, 1992; Bloor & Bloor, 1993). In terms of disciplinary differences, my hypothesis is that there will in general be more mitigation in linguistics than in economics, due to differences in the two disciplines' knowledge base.

As regards metadiscursive signalling of claims posited, the fact that abstracts are typically required to be short may imply that they are less likely to contain overt signalling than introductory sections. As for conclusions, their summing-up function may on the other hand make such signalling a convenient textual device to remind the reader of the research contribution made in the article.

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