

An investigation and Classification of Importance Highlighting Expressions based on Discourse Function and Positioning

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Abstract

Background

Academic lectures play a significant role in academic education. The importance of lectures in academic education has made some scholars believe that comprehending lectures is critical to the students' academic success (e.g., Olsen & Huckin, 1990). Yet, understanding academic lectures is a considerable challenge for students in English-medium classes (Olsen & Huckin, 1990;). Even advanced EFL/ESL learners suffer from this problem. Part of this difficulty is because academic lectures are highly packaged. On the other hand, lectures are full of expressions that structure the discourse. Therefore, it is important to investigate these expressions. Some of these expressions help students distinguish between important and unimportant information which are referred to as relevance markers (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2007; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012; Hunston, 1994) and "selection cues" (Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004).

Thompson (2003) investigated text-structuring metadiscourse in academic lectures. Thompson distinguished text-structuring metadiscourse statements according to the three features of (i) reference to the content, or topic, (ii) reference to the talk, or part of the talk, and (iii) interpersonal reference, or referring to the speaker or the audience. Specifically, some of the statements that refer to the lecturer or the audience are instances of importance marking (e.g., *ok now let me make two points about how nonverbal communication functions*).

Analyzing a small corpus comprising 12 Business Studies lectures delivered by UK, US and NNS lecturers and 10 MICASE lectures from different disciplines, Crawford Camiciottoli (2004, 2007) observes six retrospective and prospective patterns for relevance markers with various combinations of deictics, determiners, relevance adjectives, metalinguistic nouns, and the linking verb "is". The retrospective patterns include "DEIC + IS + ADJ (e.g. This is important), DEIC + IS

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+ ADJ + META N (e.g. That's a key question), DEIC + IS + (-ADJ) + META N (e.g. That's the point), IT + IS+ ADJ + THAT + DEIC (e.g. It's crucial that this is clear), IT + IS + ADJ + TO-INF + DEIC (e.g. It's important to see this) and THERE + IS (-ADJ) + A LOT (e.g. There's a lot to be said about that)" (2004, p. 90). The prospective patterns are "WHAT + IS + ADJ + IS (e.g. What is important is), DET + ADJ + META N + IS (e.g. The main point is), DET (-ADJ) + META N + IS (e.g. The thing is), IT + IS + ADJ + THAT (e.g. It's crucial that), IT + IS + ADJ + TO-INF (e.g. It's important to see) and THERE + IS + (-ADJ) + META N (e.g. There is an issue here about)" (2004, p. 90).

Methodology

The Persian corpus of SOKHAN based the foundation for this research. This corpus was developed at the Science and Technology Park of North Khorasan, Iran under the directorship of Javad Zare and Zahra Keivanlou-Shahrestanaki. Corpus development was assisted by funding from the Technology University of Esfarayen and the Science and Technology Park of North Khorasan. SOKHAN consists of audio and video recordings and the transcripts of 60 Persian academic lectures, totaling 480,526 words. The lectures of SOKHAN were recorded between 2010 and 2015. They were delivered mainly by male native speakers of Persian lecturers. These lectures evenly spread in the four disciplinary groups of engineering (es), humanities (hs), medicine (ms), and base sciences (bs).

A mixed-methods (exploratory) approach and a corpus-driven method were adopted in this study. Importance markers were first derived from the Persian Corpus of SOKHAN by reading the transcripts. A number of 293 concordances of importance marking expressions were retrieved from the corpus and analyzed in terms of positioning –anaphoric, cataphoric– and discourse functions.

Results and Conclusion

Analysis of the importance markers led to some findings that are worth noting. As regards the position of the importance markers, eight patterns were found for anaphoric importance markers. Among these, the patterns "hd (highlighted discourse) + exam points" and "hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ" were more frequent than others. For cataphoric importance markers, ten patterns were found, among which "V + hd" outnumbered others. Generally, cataphoric importance markers were found to be substantially more frequent than anaphoric importance markers. Moreover, as regards the discourse functions of the expressions that signal importance of points, five discourse functions were found. These include discourse organization, audience engagement, subject status, topic treatment, and relating to exam. Importance markers dealing with audience engagement were found to be the most frequently used expressions. On the whole, the findings suggest that lecturers tend to function interpersonally in Persian academic contexts when it comes to signaling importance.

Keywords: Corpus, Importance marker, Metadiscourse, Academic lecture