

Authorial Stance Markers in Cross-Disciplinary Academic Discourse: A Case Study of the Conclusion Parts of English Doctoral Dissertations

Wenyuan Jing

UCL Psychology of Education, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This study, drawing upon Hyland's system of stance in particular, coupled with Brown and Levinson's face theory, analyzes the use of stance markers in the conclusion parts of English doctoral dissertations from four disciplines, namely physics, anthropology, psychology and education. Adopting both qualitative and quantitative methods, this thesis makes a cross-disciplinary study of the classification, function and distribution characteristics of authorial stance markers in academic discourse.

KEYWORDS

authorial stance markers; system of stance; face theory

1 Theoretical Framework

1.1 System of Stance

Hedges allow authors to present assertions as viewpoints rather than definitive facts, conveying uncertainty when they hesitate to fully endorse a proposition. According to Hyland's stance framework, hedges are classified into reader-oriented and content-oriented, with the latter divided into author-focused and accuracy-focused hedges.

Reader-oriented hedges engage readers and strengthen discourse connection. Content-oriented hedges blur the line between reality and propositions. Author-focused hedges minimize authors' responsibility by downplaying personal opinions, shielding them from criticism. Accuracy-focused hedges refine precision by expressing a proposition's truth and the authors' cognition.

Boosters, such as modal auxiliaries, judgmental verbs, and emphatic adjectives/adverbs, reflect authors' conviction and commitment while acknowledging alternative claims.

Attitude markers vividly express emotions like surprise, interest, support, or opposition through attitude verbs, sentence adverbs, and adjectives. In academic discourse, they align authors with readers, protect readers' face, and enhance persuasion.^[1]

This thesis adopts Hyland's model of academic interaction to compare ASM usage across disciplines, with adjustments based on Hyland (2008), Wu (2010), and He (2012). Reader-oriented hedges are excluded, focusing solely on writer-oriented stance. Due to ambiguity between writer-oriented and accuracy-oriented hedges, *commitment hedges* replace writer-oriented hedges. Hedges are categorized into accuracy-oriented hedges, which express uncertainty using words like "some" and "mainly," and commitment hedges, which reduce full commitment with words like "possible" and "may." Boosters are divided into fact-stating boosters, which assert facts using nouns like "fact" and factive verbs like "prove"; viewpoint-guiding boosters, which indicate authors' beliefs through verbs like "deem" and "think"; and certainty-indicating boosters, which show conviction using modal verbs like "must" and adverbials like "definitely." Attitude markers are further classified into judgmental markers, which evaluate claims with words like "important" and "useful," and emotive markers, which express emotions via verbs like "expect" and adverbs like "surprisingly." Self-mention includes first-person self-mention, covering singular and reader-exclusive plural, as well as specific nouns like "the researcher," "the author," and "this thesis."

1.2 Brown and Levinson's Face Theory

When people communicate their words and deeds will definitely be affected by some factors, whether conscious or unconscious, and all of the factors can help communicators to better choose language skills in the process of communication, so as to achieve the ideal communicative purpose. Regarding these factors, Goffman (1955) calls them "face". In 1978, Brown and Levinson published their book *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* on the basis of Goffman's study and proposed a maturer face theory. In 1950s, Goffman first proposed the word "face" from the perspective of sociology.^[2] This concept was further developed into "the public self-image people want to claim for themselves" (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Later in 1987, Brown and Levinson revised their face theory. Dividing face into positive face and negative face, they give specific explanations of these two concepts.

Positive face reflects an individual's aspiration to be acknowledged, esteemed, and cherished by others. Negative face refers to the liberty to act independently without feeling demeaned by catering to others. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), despite varying cultural impacts on the content of face, both positive and negative face prevail, necessitating speakers' awareness of the importance of safeguarding others' dignity.

2 Results and Discussion

2.1 Results

Quantitative analysis reveals that hedges and boosters dominate ASM usage across all four disciplines, with attitude markers and self-mention used less frequently. Certainty-indicating boosters and judgmental markers are especially prevalent, highlighting an academic preference for establishing credibility through confident yet cautious assertions.

Among disciplines, psychology employs the most ASMs, followed by physics, education, and anthropology. Hard fields (psychology, physics) use ASMs more frequently than soft fields (education, anthropology), and applied fields (psychology, education) more than pure fields (physics, anthropology). Hard fields favor commitment hedges and plural first-person pronouns, while soft fields prefer accuracy hedges and singular pronouns.

Discipline-specific trends include: physics using more hedges and plural self-mention; anthropology using more attitude markers than self-mention; psychology using the most boosters; and education showing the least use of attitude markers. These patterns suggest that rhetorical conventions are deeply tied to the epistemological traditions of each discipline.

Furthermore, the frequency of ASM usage in psychology, a hard-applied field, may be attributed to the dual pressures of empirical rigor and real-world relevance. This necessitates both assertion and caution. Conversely, anthropology, as a soft-pure discipline, allows for more interpretative freedom, reducing the need for highly assertive ASMs. The variation in ASM types not only reflects disciplinary traditions but also highlights how authors manage voice, authority, and interpersonal positioning in their respective academic communities.

2.2 Discussion

ASMs play a critical role in balancing persuasion with politeness in academic writing. Hedges and boosters help authors express certainty or caution, maintaining objectivity while protecting against criticism.^[2] Attitude markers and self-mention, although less frequent, serve to engage readers and reflect authorship, contributing to a more interactive and humanized discourse.

The frequent use of certainty-indicating boosters and judgmental markers suggests an academic preference for clear, evaluative stance over emotional or factual emphasis. Differences in ASM usage across disciplines reflect their epistemological norms: hard fields rely on empirical rigor and quantification, prompting more cautious and assertive stance-taking; soft fields prioritize interpretive analysis, resulting in more nuanced and less categorical claims.

Similarly, applied fields, which are more connected to real-world implications, use more boosters and self-mention to defend claims and personalize the discourse. Pure fields, more theoretical in nature, use emotive markers to draw interest and engage readers in more abstract argumentation.

The choice between singular and plural self-mention also reflects rhetorical strategies. In hard fields, plural pronouns ("we") imply collaboration and objectivity, enhancing credibility. In soft fields, singular self-mention ("I") often signals ownership of interpretation and fosters an individualized voice.

In addition, the functional load of ASMs is not limited to stance alone but overlaps with broader concerns of reader engagement and disciplinary identity. For example, the use of judgmental markers in psychology and education may function to reinforce the relevance and urgency of findings, whereas in physics, commitment hedges help convey probabilistic interpretations without overstating claims. Authors in anthropology may prefer emotive or evaluative terms to humanize or contextualize findings, reflecting the discipline's qualitative traditions.

These disciplinary and field-based differences highlight the interactive and strategic nature of stance-taking in academic writing. ASMs are not only tools for conveying information but also instruments for managing the author-reader relationship. Their use is shaped by both the communicative purpose and the cultural expectations of academic communities. Recognizing these patterns can help academic writers better align their rhetorical choices with disciplinary conventions and communicative goals. In the final part of this section, the significant differences between four disciplines will be discussed. In physics (hard-pure field), hedges and plural first-person self-mention occur more frequently than boosters and singular self-mention, contrasting sharply with other disciplines. This may stem from physics' focus on theorizing through data and experiments, necessitating hedges to balance assertion with caution while respecting opposing views. Frequent plural self-mention suggests efforts to reinforce disciplinary credibility and facilitate claim acceptance. Both features help preserve readers' negative face by showing respect for differing perspectives and protect

authors' positive face by easing claim approval.

In anthropology (soft-pure field), attitude markers are used more than self-mention, unlike other disciplines. Since anthropology is less familiar to the public, authors employ emotive markers to engage readers and highlight its relevance, ensuring readers feel respected rather than focusing on asserting authority.

In psychology (hard-applied field), the highest ASM frequency confirms that hard-applied disciplines use ASM more than soft-pure fields. Boosters appear nearly twice as often as in other disciplines, emphasizing psychology's need to apply data-based, criticism-prone findings to real-life contexts. This enhances credibility, strengthens persuasion, and maintains face for both authors and readers.

In education (soft-applied field), while ASM frequency is not the lowest, attitude markers are used least. Since educational discourse presents subjective stances for practical application, it must temper subjectivity with other ASM types to uphold academic objectivity. This balance enhances credibility while ensuring readers' face is not threatened.

About the Author

Wenyuan Jing, female, born in April 2002, native of Jinan, Shandong Province. Graduated from Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics in 2024, Currently studying at UCL Psychology of Education, London, UK.

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