



A Life in Style

In Honour of Donna R. Miller

edited by ANTONELLA LUPORINI, MARINA MANFREDI,
MONICA TURCI, JANE HELEN JOHNSON,
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Evaluative and speaker-positioning function bundles in spoken academic English

English as a Medium of Instruction at UNIBO

Jane Helen Johnson

1. Introduction

This paper is inspired by the work that Professor Donna Miller and I did together when I was at the beginning of my academic career. At the time we were looking at parliamentary debate in the congressional discourse of the U.S. House of Representatives for the year 2003, examining the discourses around the Iraq war through a combination of SFL and corpus linguistics (Miller, Johnson 2009a, 2009b, 2013, 2014). Our aim was to continue investigating the hypothesis that there were certain communal choices in ways of saying/meaning, in other words that there were register-idiosyncratic features of evaluation and stance in congressional debate (cf. Miller 2007b, Miller, Johnson 2009a). We began by extracting lexical bundles, also known as “function bundles” (Halliday 1985, p. 262), “the most frequent recurring lexical sequences in a register” (Biber *et al.* 1999, Chapter 13) from our corpus of congressional discourse, noting that lexical bundles such as “we must”, “it is time” and “it + v-link + adj (+ that/to...)” were particularly frequent. This last pattern in particular stood out as being more frequent in the argumentative register of parliamentary proceedings than in other general reference corpora (Miller, Johnson 2009a). For this reason, further exploration was conducted in order to compare the frequency of such bundles with other genres and see to what extent voice and value position distinctions depend on who was doing the appraising and/or who or what was being appraised. We focused initially on the adjectives in the pattern “it + v-link + adj”, with the most frequent adjective being “important” and its synonyms, though variations were found according to political orientation, gender, “idiolecticity” and other contextual variables (Miller, Johnson 2009b).

Also known as introductory or anticipatory “it”, this pattern often indicates the speaker’s position, his or her stance, opinion or affective attitude towards a particular proposition, for example the likelihood that something will take place, noting its importance or its necessity (Biber *et al.* 2004, Biber, Barbieri 2007). The pattern has been described as a semi-preconstructed phrase constituting a single choice (Sinclair 1991, p. 110), acting as structural “frame” to orient the listener and prepare for the “new” information that follows (Biber *et al.* 2004, p. 399, Kaltenböck 2005, p. 146). Considerable research has investigated this pattern in written discourse (e.g., Lemke 1998) and specifically in the context of written academic prose (e.g., Biber *et al.* 1998, p. 75, Hewings, Hewings 2002). It has in fact been described as particularly salient in academic English (Groom 2005, p. 259), being diagnostic of evaluative meaning (Hunston, Sinclair 2000) and adding objectivity and authority to the utterance (Kaltenböck 2005, p. 137). It is in the context of academic English that this present study is placed, shifting to a different domain with respect to my initial work with Professor Miller as described above.

Mastery of lexical bundles has been recognised as essential for fluent speech in academic English (Hyland 2012, Molino 2019). The frequency of lexical bundles has been compared in spoken and written academic registers (Biber *et al.* 2004, Biber, Barbieri 2007), being particularly frequent in academic lectures, which deliver “value-laden discourse” where lecturers present information to the audience, organise it, and express their attitudes and evaluation (Lee 2009, p. 43). While most work has focused on production and reception by Native Speakers (NS), Nesi and Basturkmen (2006) found that certain frequent lexical bundles used by NS lecturers have a discourse-signaling function which may not be immediately understood by Non-Native English-Speaking (NNS) students. Molino (2019) looked at NNS lecturers delivering their lecture in English (English Mediated Instruction: EMI) and found a greater proportion of idiosyncratic usage of lexical bundles when compared with the frequency of lexical bundles used by NS lecturers. The formulaicity of the NS lectures made them easier to follow.

While the pattern “it + v-link + adj (+ to/that + clause)” may not be particularly frequent in spoken academic discourse – Nesi and Basturkmen (2006) found only 1% of NS lectures in BASE¹ contained this phrase, compared with 9% of academic prose – appropriate use of lexical bundles in

1. The BASE corpus is a collection of academic speech events under development at the Universities of Warwick and Reading with funding from BALEAP, EURALEX, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Board. Available at <https://www.sketchengine.eu/>.

general is an essential component of fluent spoken and written academic production, distinguishing the expert user from the novice (Nesi, Basturkmen 2006, Hyland 2012).

This study explores the pattern “it + v-link + adj (+ to/that + clause)” in two sub-genres of academic spoken English: the discourse of lectures and that of office hours, in the context of EMI in two different macro areas. EMI has only recently become widespread in the Italian university context, and the task of NNS lecturers is not an easy one, with lectures required to convey the same amount and quality of content as the courses taught in Italian. Lecturers need to be especially clear as regards the evaluation of the content and their positioning or stance towards it for students from very different language backgrounds. Lecturers must also hold office hours, a one-to-one situation involving not only local students, who often enrol on international courses due to their perceived prestige, but also international students. While in the former case, the lecturer may switch to their shared Italian L₁, this is not possible in the case of international students. While the lecturer may be able to pre-prepare the lecture event to some degree, the sheer range of potential topics in office hours may be a source of potential language problems. The degree of interactivity may also affect usage of such a pattern, since phrases such as “it is important to” might be replaced by “you must” for example. Hence we would expect a difference in frequency of this pattern between office hours and lectures, with the latter being typically monologic² and more likely to include the pattern. The macro area might also determine frequency of usage, because of the denser informational content of Physical Science (PS) subjects, and the more dialogic material in Social Sciences (SS), which might lead to a smaller interpersonal distance between lecturer and student in which alternative forms such as “you must” and adverbials such as “clearly” and “obviously” are preferred to “it is important/clear/obvious”.

Past research into the pattern has focused on the semantic and functional meanings of the adjectives or evaluators. Lemke (1998) noted that his classifications of the evaluative attributes of propositions and proposals originating from his study of newspaper editorials overlapped to a great extent those of other researchers, suggesting that the evaluative attributes all seem to fall into a small number of semantic classes. Miller and Johnson (2009a) applied Lemke’s classifications to the adjectives in parliamentary

2. Degree of interaction may be calculated according to words per speaker turn. While the average number of words per speaker turn is <100 for three of our four subcorpora (Office Hours in both PS and SS, and SS lectures), it is 202 across PS lectures, suggesting they are much less interactive than any of the others.

discourse, finding that most fell into the “importance/significance” category. Research articles by native speakers were instead examined by Groom (2005, p. 260), who classified adjectives in the pattern into “adequacy”, “desirability”, “difficulty”, “expectation”, “importance” and “validity”.

Anticipatory “it” phrases have been found to cause problems for non-native speakers in written academic discourse (Hewings, Hewings 2002, p. 368). The speakers in this study are NNS and Italian lecturers’ English competence is often weak (Campagna, Pulcini 2014, p. 180). Thus I hope to find out whether similar problems are encountered in non-native spoken academic discourse. My research questions are therefore:

1. How does the relative frequency of the pattern “it + v-link + adj (+ to/that)” compare in the sub-genres office hours and lectures in an NNS context?
2. How does the relative frequency of the pattern compare across macro area? Is this pattern more typical of SS or the denser informational content of PS?
3. What categories of adjectives (Groom 2005) are more represented in the various sub-groups? Which individual adjectives are more frequent within the separate categories?
4. Is there any difference between usage according to gender and/or idiolecticity?

2. Methodology

The discourse of lectures and office hours was examined in two specialised corpora. The corpora and query procedure is described below.

2.1. *Description of the corpora*

The EmiBO corpus (Johnson, Picciuolo 2022) contains 40 hours of university lecture discourse in English given by Italian native-speaking lecturers teaching on international second-cycle degree courses in Social Sciences and Physical Sciences. A small corpus consisting of 5 hours of office hour sessions (OH) from both macro areas was also compiled. Speaker turns were annotated to distinguish lecturer and student turns. Details of duration, number and gender of lecturers, and number of words according to subgenre and macro disciplinary area are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Duration, number of words, and numbers of lecturers and lecturer words in PS and SS lectures and office hours.

Corpora		Physical Sciences	Social Sciences	Totals
Lectures (EmiBO)	Duration in mins	1877	352	2229
	No. M lecturers	10	3	17
	No. F lecturers	4	0	
	Total words	180,758	22,400	203,158
	Lecturer (M) words	140,948	17,486	158,434
	Lecturer (F) words	36,030	0	36,030
Office hours (OH)	Duration in mins	120	187	307
	No. M lecturers	4	6	11
	No. F lecturers	0	1	
	Tot. words	10,891	24,540	35,431
	Lecturer (M) words	9344	16,088	25,432
	Lecturer (F) words	0	1086	1086

2.2. Querying the corpora

The corpora were queried using SketchEngine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2004) to extract concordances featuring the pattern “it + v-link + adj” across sub-genres and macrodisciplinary areas. This phraseological unit consists of a dummy subject pronoun “it” followed by the link verb “be”, an adjective, and generally a finite or non-finite that-clause or to-clause. Concordances were examined to eliminate irrelevant instances, such as where “it” is not an introductory subject, or referring “it” (e.g., “it can be important here”). A qualitative reading of concordances also highlighted non-standard uses, such as “it + v-link + adj + -ing”, as in example (1).

1. so of course, it is important having a European, place, a European things. [EMIBO LE PS]

Such non-standard examples were also included. The pattern queried was therefore “it + v-link + adj + X + clause”, where X stands for to/that or non-standard -ing. Adjectives in the pattern were quantified and classified according to Groom (2005), and their relative frequency per thousand

words was compared over corpus subsections. Findings were also compared with the NS lecture discourse in BASE. Academic discipline and speech types were selected in line with this present study as far as possible³.

3. Findings

3.1. *Relative frequency of pattern according to sub-genre*

The pattern is relatively more frequent in (monologic) lectures in EmiBO, occurring 0.58 per thousand words (ptw), slightly more than in the more dialogic office hours (OH) corpus (0.49 ptw).

3.2. *Relative frequency of pattern according to macro area*

The pattern is relatively more frequent in EmiBO SS (0.86 ptw) than in PS (0.55). This is borne out in BASE, with a greater relative frequency in SS lectures (0.48 ptw) than PS (0.37 ptw).

3.3. *Adjectives and categories of adjectives*

Adjectives in the pattern were divided into semantic categories (Groom 2005). Results are shown in Table 2.

Some examples of adjectives in EmiBO and OH appearing in the classifications are as follows:

adequacy: enough, sufficient;
 expectation: frequent, interesting;
 importance: important;
 validity: clear, likely, intuitive, obvious, true, possible (that);
 desirability: convenient, fine, necessary, useful;
 difficulty: complicated, difficult, possible (to), easy, simple.

Most adjectives appearing in the pattern in lectures were classified as “difficulty” (47% in SS lectures; 37% in PS lectures). While most ad-

3. It was not possible in SketchEngine to restrict the search in BASE to Academic Discipline, Speech Type and Speaker Type at the same time, so these comparative results can only be indicative. Nor was it possible to compare sub-genre across NS and NNS, since there is no office hours component in BASE.

Table 2. Semantic groups of adjectives appearing in the pattern across sub-genres and areas in *EmiBO* and *OH*.

Classification of adjective	Office hours		Lectures	
	PS	SS	PS	SS
Adequacy	0	0	4	0
Expectation	1	0	9	0
Importance	0	1	15	0
Validity	1	0	21	2
Desirability	2	4	12	6
Difficulty	2	2	36	7
Totals	6	7	97	15

jectives in Miller and Johnson's (2009b) parliamentary exploration were classified as "importance/significance", only 15% of the adjectives in the pattern in PS lectures could be classified as "importance", and none appeared in SS lectures. This is possibly because "it is important to/that" has a major function in persuasive discourse such as parliamentary proceedings, whereas the discourse of lectures does not aim to persuade but instruct.

Most adjectives in SS Office Hours fell into the "desirability" group, as in example (2), where the lecturer evaluates the student's behaviour positively ("it's good that"):

2. Student: Ok, that's not a problem.

Lecturer: You know what I mean? That's not a problem at all, cause, I mean [Laugh] it's good that you started by something you made up by just thinking [Laugh] No, what you need to do, and that's why I wrote my first comment. [OH SS]

The phrase in example (2) – "it's good that" – may be described as part of the regulative register (Christie 2000) of the language of schooling (Schleppegrell 2004), concerning classroom management rather than teaching content. Instead, example (3), where the lecturer comments on the best way to work through an example, is better described as part of the instructional register:

3. then you when the exponential goes to the other side you put them together so you have P of J H and then you have E S minus E N but it is more convenient to do this E N minus E S ok? and this is an angular frequency so you may call it omega N S ok? [OH PS]

The choice of “convenient” in example (3) is rather non-standard, never appearing in similar texts in BASE, and is most likely a calque of the Italian “*conviene*”, usually translated as “it is better to”. Indeed this latter more standard rendering appears in BASE (example 4) but never in EmiBO:

4. why sometimes it's useful to use a hierarchy of models it's good to use not if you're going to use a model it's better to use a couple of models rather than just one all the time it's a bit like a map. [BASE LE PS]

Similarly non-standard was the use of the adjective “intuitive” as in example (5), classed as “validity”:

5. so you have conservative before conservative after perturbation in between, ok? It is intuitive that if there is a perturbation you don't expect to find a state of the particle after the perturbation the same as the state before, you may expect that some, ok? [OH PS]

“Intuitive” never occurs in this pattern in BASE. It could be a non-standard usage or an example of idiolecticity, since two out of three times it is used by the same speaker.

Differences according to discipline were found in choice of adjective in the pattern. For example, “easy”/“easier” (“difficulty”), “clear” (“validity”), and “important” (the only adjective in the “importance” group) are by far the most frequent choices in EmiBO PS lectures, as may be seen in Table 3.

“It is important” is a directive (Hyland 2007) which is possibly more frequent in the hard sciences due to the “highly standardised code” resulting from the more linear and problem-oriented approach to knowledge construction typical of these sciences (*ibid.*, p. 105). They are also more typical of the hard sciences due to the greater importance placed on expressing meanings of necessity, acquiring facts, principles and concepts. “It is necessary” is also a directive, but while this adjective appears in 33% of occurrences in SS lectures in EmiBO, it is mainly used in the negative form (4 out of 6) as in example (6):

Table 3. The most frequent adjectives appearing in the pattern in EmiBO lecture.

Adjective	PS	SS
clear	10	
complicated	1	
convenient	5	
difficult	5	
easier/easy	20	
enough	1	
fine	1	
frequent	1	
im/possible	9	7
important	15	
interesting	8	
intuitive	2	
likely	6	
necessary	4	5
obvious	1	
simple	1	
sufficient	3	
true	2	2
useful	2	1
total	97	15

6. urm you will have a, an overview of all the reforms, so it's not necessary to collect all these [] papers and [] they are on the, []. And on [] so lots of information you have in the []. [EMIBO LE SS]

Example (6) contains an evaluation not of lecture content but of classroom behaviour and, as such, an example of the regulative register. It is probably a literal calque of the Italian “*non è necessario*”. Instead in a NS context we might expect to find this rendered as “you don’t have to”, more typical of this register.

The most frequent adjectives in EmiBO SS lectures are “im/possible” (all classed as “difficulty”) and “necessary” (“desirability”). Hyland (2007) notes that “Writers in the soft fields cannot therefore report their research with the same confidence of shared assumptions. They must rely far more on focusing readers on the claim-making negotiations of the discourse community, the arguments themselves, rather than relatively unmediated real-world phenomena” (*ibid.*, p. 100). Our findings show that this also applies to spoken lecture discourse in SS lectures, with information being expressed more tentatively through the use of “possible”/“impossible”.

Comparison with NS lecture discourse in BASE showed that “difficulty” (“difficult”, “easy”, “hard”, “im/possible”) was the largest group, followed by “desirability” (“necessary”, “better”, “fair”, “useful”) for both SS and PS. This corresponds with our NNS findings for SS, but not for PS, where “validity” (“clear”, “likely”, “intuitive”, “obvious”, “true”) rather than “desirability” was the second largest group.

While “possible”/“necessary” were more typical of SS lectures, these 2 adjectives were used in both SS and PS office hours. However, with just 13 instances (Table 4), the sample in the OH corpus is too small to make any generalisations.

Table 4. *Adjectives appearing in the pattern in OH.*

Adjective	PS	SS
convenient	1	
difficult		1
early		1
good		1
im/possible	2	1
important		1
intuitive	1	
necessary	1	1
reasonable	1	
useful		1
total	6	7

3.4. Differences according to gender and/or idiolecticity

The four female lecturers in EmiBO PS contributed 20% of the lecturer words, but only 4 instances of the pattern (4% of the total) so we cannot claim that the pattern is more typical of women. Examples of idiolecticity were instead found, with “it is important” and “it is clear” (10 occurrences each) almost always used by one particular PS lecturer, who produced 35% of the words in the corpus but no less than 64% of the patterns overall. Moreover, the instances of “it is (not) necessary”, are almost always used by one SS lecturer. Choices such as the non-standard “it is convenient” and “it is intuitive” could be examples of personal preference and/or “borrowings” from the original Italian.

4. Conclusion

This small study was inspired by Miller and Johnson’s (2009a, 2009b) investigation into certain lexical bundles typical of the discourse of congressional proceedings. The material for analysis here however was spoken academic discourse, particularly that of non-native English speaking lecturers teaching in English at an Italian university in two different contexts: lectures and office hours. Compared with NS lecture discourse, the pattern “it + v link + adj” was used relatively more frequently in NNS. Similarly to NS lecture discourse, it was more typical of SS than PS lectures. The pattern was slightly more relatively frequent in NNS lectures than office hours. “Difficulty” was the most frequent semantic class of adjectives in both NS and NNS lectures, whereas “desirability” was the most frequent in SS Office Hours. Though numbers are very small, adjectives in PS Office Hours were equally distributed into “desirability” and “difficulty”.

Unlike Miller and Johnson’s (2009b) findings in the parliamentary discourse we examined, the pattern does not appear to be more typical of female than male lecturers. In line instead with Miller and Johnson’s findings (*ibid.*), idiolecticity is also an issue in spoken academic discourse, while L1 interference is also found.

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