

© 2002 Anna Mauranen

"One Thing I'd Like to Clarify...". Observations of Academic Speaking

Anna Mauranen

A good deal of research into academic discourses has seen itself as a branch of Applied Linguistics, that is, the main motivation has been with a practical application in mind. This is perhaps one of the reasons why it has almost exclusively concerned itself with the study of the written text, and focussed specifically on the research article and the textbook. These are the genres that millions of students all over the world will have to grapple with in English, irrespective of their mother tongues. Less practical research like the historical study of academic texts has for other but quite obvious reasons also dealt with the written text, and it is only quite recently that the research community has begun to take an interest in the spoken language. This is not without conceivable applications either, for example with international student mobility growing, and the constantly increasing international conferences based on oral presentations.

The relationship between speaking and writing in the academic world can be likened to the distinction made by Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) between on the one hand formal, official, polished-up, accounts of research, following as it were from the very nature of the objects of research, the scientists' "empiricist repertoire", and on the other hand the "contingent" repertoire, which refers to scientists' ways of describing professional actions and beliefs as if resulting from individuals acting on the basis of their particular social positions, personal inclinations, interests, etc. Gilbert & Mulkay's scientists resorted to their contingent repertoire when engaging in informal discourses about their work, but it seems that speaking in a university context will quite routinely have to deal with various kinds of backstage phenomena that we normally do not write about.

In the present paper I take a look into academic speaking in one of the functions which are traditionally assigned to the institutional purposes of the academia, that is, expressing criticism. In face-to-face conversation we know that there is a general tendency to avoid direct criticism, but one might assume that this tendency is overridden by the institutional conventions.

1. Background and data

The data I am using in this paper is drawn from the *Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English*, or MICASE for short (Simpson et al. 1999). The MICASE is one of the two simultaneously but independently started corpora of academic speech in the US in the late nineties, the other being the T2K-SWAL (Biber et al. 2001). Interestingly, both were primarily motivated by the practical need to develop appropriate language tests for foreign students and teaching assistants in American universities. The MICASE is based on a wide variety of speech genres (or, more accurately, event types) that characterise a university environment. So, in addition to the most obvious genres like lectures and seminars, the corpus covers thesis defences, student presentations, group discussions, meetings and consultation hours etc. It has also sought to distinguish between primarily monologic and dialogic event types, and strike a balance between the two. The version the present data is

extracted from is not the final one, which is currently being completed and will contain slightly more than 1.5 million words in all, but one which has one million words.

One of the questions the MICASE project wanted to ask at the outset was “is academic speaking more like conversation than like academic writing?” It is now beginning to look like the basic answer is going to be: much more like speaking (see, for example Lindemann & Mauranen 2001, Swales & Burke 2001). Recently this view was also supported in Douglas Biber’s presentation on the Arizona corpus (Biber 2001). The question may now arise whether this is at all surprising, and should we not have expected this from the start. But at the outset, it was very hard to know which way the balance would tip, since there are many good reasons for thinking that genres are shaped by their situational determinants, and although the communicative mode is a strong influence on language use, it is notoriously difficult to predict linguistic features before getting a glimpse of the data. In any case, the overall answer is only a beginning: it is to be expected that a number of features in academic speech distinguish it from, say, casual conversation, and that these features are likely to resemble academic writing, but at this stage we are mostly dealing with overall differences, and the studies on individual expressions on the data (see, e.g. Lindemann & Mauranen 2001, Poos & Simpson 1999, Swales & Malczewski 2001) are not sufficient to draw out the full profile yet.

But it is also genuinely difficult to be aware of the discourses that we are well socialised into and participate in all the time. So for instance, we do not seem to pay much conscious attention to the situational management talk which inevitably accompanies even quite formal events like large lectures, or thesis defences. So although especially the beginnings and ends of such events are linguistically quite different from that which counts as “the lecture itself”, this talk appears to be filtered out not only from public accounts of such events but also from most linguist’s representation of a lecture, and the kind of linguistic realisation that goes with it. So for instance examples like 1 to 3 below tend not to be part of the representation of the genres thesis defence (1) or seminar (2 and 3). Example 3 also reminds us of the intrusion of the non-participant observer in the situation, despite their best efforts to be unobtrusive.

- (1) A: mhm. Galtung in the course of his essay, there’s this wonderful essay, i don’t know if i told you about it by Galtung, about uh Saxon Nipponic uh uh Gallic and Teuton- and Teutonic uh, styles of intellectual argument. it’s it’s just it’s wonderful [it’s just,][B: oh that] would be (fun) it’s delicious uh, now what was i going to say about before oh <LAUGH> there’s, i was gonna say before the Galtung um, the point that was just, on the table which is what?...
- C: <LAUGH"> apropos of aging
- D: <LAUGH> but you’re getting worse [don’t worry]
- E: [if you can’t] remember we’ll go on to the next (other) example
- D: <LAUGH>
- A: uh uh about uh thing but oh yes right no that that the uh that he starts his example, with the example of um of the, American professor
- (2) A: am i the only one who read?
- B: [i don’t know if anyone (xx)]
- A: [so what exactly] would you like us to discuss? (C: hm?) what exactly should we be discussing?
- C: um like, just to go through the the...

- (3) A: ...okay, so um, i guess we should, fill out these forms. yeah, i don't know if, i'm assuming that they will be here but
B: corpus of academic spoken English
A: i don't know.
B: look at that. (PAUSE :06)
A: oh i actually have to put my real name on here huh? on the pink form?
C: mhm

One of the questions concerning potential similarities and differences in respect of writing and conversation that I found particularly intriguing was to what extent academic speaking would be combative. Academic writing is usually described with expressions evoking competition, and various battlefield metaphors (e.g. Hyland 2000, Myers 1989, Swales 1990). This inherent competitiveness and conflict presumably is what for example motivates the abundant use of hedges in academic texts. In contrast, descriptions of conversation usually emphasise the cooperative and consensual nature of face-to-face interactions (e.g. Aijmer 1996, Egging & Slade 1997). The question therefore arose as to how academic speech stands on this.

2. Criticism and disagreement

Looking at evaluative expressions, I found earlier (2000) that positive evaluations abound in the data, while negative evaluations were very hard to find. As an illustration, the adjectives modifying the word *question* are predominantly positive, as can be seen from this list of the evaluative adjectives that repeatedly occurred in this position:

Good	31
Interesting	11
Great	4
Important	3
Difficult	2
Minor	2
Big	2

This finding was supported in recent research by Swales & Burke (2001), who explored evaluative adjectives on a wide front in the MICASE corpus. Thus, an interesting consensus-orientedness appears to prevail in the repertoire most in use in the academic forum.

One might assume that in academic contexts expressions like *agree* and *disagree* would be used (even though they are not very frequent in ordinary conversation) – but this is not really the case. *Agree* appeared over a hundred times in a million words, but mostly in expressions where everybody agreed. Consensus again. *I don't agree* occurred only six times, and *I disagree* only four times in a million words. The somewhat more interesting case was the qualified or partial agreement *I agree that X but...*, of which there were twelve in the data.

Since criticism and disagreement appeared rather elusive, it seemed a better strategy to focus in on events where they might be prominent. Thus, in search for criticism, disagreement and conflict I turned to transcripts of event types where criticism would appear to be most

obviously inbuilt, that is, thesis defences. In the transcripts, three major types of expression seemed to co-occur with critical intent and in the context of conflicting views:

1. cognitive verbs: *it seems to me*, *what puzzles me*, *I was wondering* or similar expressions (*to me A is like B...*),
2. reflexive discourse *say (what I'm saying, trying to say, you're saying)*, *argue*, *point*,...
3. others: *but*, *why*...

I shall explore each of these types a little below. For this phase, I used the whole corpus at first for an overview, checking the use of the target items per 1000 words for all files. I then selected the top twenty event files for closer analysis, thus focusing on the speech events where the expressions were used most consistently.

2.1. Cognitive verbs

A number of cognitive verbs were used for criticism, but for lack of space I here focus on the most commonly occurring expression, which was (*it seems*) *to me* (or just *to me*). After excluding expressions like *come and talk to me*, 74 instances were left, of which only three appeared to signal simply uncertainty or a speculative attitude without an evaluative stance. Easily more than half of the time (41/74) *it seems to me* was involved in criticism, quite typically preceding explicit criticism of the previous speaker (as in 4) – or otherwise the most obvious target (like the candidate in a thesis defence or the presenter in a seminar).

- (4) (Thesis defence. A is the candidate's advisor, B is a committee member)
A: uh this may be related to a conversation that, uh XX and i have had, um, periodically. i mean he /.../n (they're) very very different way of accounting for these phenomena and i i don't i don't know
[where you] stand on [that]
B: [well wouldn't] [wouldn't,] yeah but i mean **it seem- it seems to me**, i mean i i i see that ambiguity i mean is there is there i mean are there complex theories that somehow (are this) kind of thing, and hence i mean no matter what outcome, there is i mean you always find some (sequent) of the theory that fits.(A: right) or is there no theory at all? and all i do is is basically (A: right) reasoning in hindsight when i see that and ...
A mere *to me* + BE is used in a very similar way (5):
- (5) (thesis defence, A is the candidate, B a committee member)
A: ... the argument is the same [the] the, the numerals are different
[B: mhm]
B: yeah. well, uh, uh, right, but i mean it's like a world of difference [**to me**] right? when somebody says two-five-one
[A: mhm]
and i'm hearing, five-one-four [it's really different] so i think if you really do hear it that way i mean
[A: okay, right]
i i i'd be willing to let you hear it that way, that's fine, (A: LAUGH) but i think, the indication of something, i mean even to say in here something about the you know the the (A: yeah) Lydian A-flat ...

Basically *it seems to me* signals a stance, and already by asserting a view the speaker inevitably sets up an opposition between that viewpoint and its actual or potential opposites. So in (6), indicating the speaker's view makes the question a challenge rather than just an inquiry or a prompt for the panel team to say something.

(6) (JG sem 340; A JF B JG student)

A: ... uh, does the audience have any questions they want to ask either of the teams? yeah, B?

B: um, i guess i would address this mostly to the jail group. um, and reflecting of what uh, XX said about this being part of a a wider political situation. Why is the universe of things that you could address as a social policy issue, in order to get at crime, would you target crack? i read a statistic that eighty percent of the people who commit crimes are under the influence of alcohol, by the legal standard. um, **it seems to me that** there's there's a lot behind the fact that crack is singled out as something to be addressed, that has to do with demonizing poor minorities. so, could you react to that?

Marking stance and being polemical or critical are not fundamentally very different from one another, even though it is obviously always the co-text or the situational context that ultimately determines the evaluative colouring. Although there were one or two positive cases, *it seems to me* appears strongly inclined towards negative evaluation or challenge. Despite the generally recognised hedging effect of *seem*, in the context of *to me* it works in a different and highly specific manner – it would be stretching the interpretation implausibly far to see the conflictual stance marking as included in hedging. Once more, we are reminded how specific meanings of a given lemma are distinguished by the particular forms or combinations that the lemma enters into.

2.2. Metadiscourse

The next type of critical signal that could be discerned in the defence transcripts was metadiscourse. Example 7 illustrates a number of metadiscursive items in use.

(7) (seminar)

A: ... affirming, the proposition of a red spherical ball, which doesn't seem to include, the phenomenal character of what in fact is going on and what i'm imagining.

B: okay i i i i hear that **claim**. (A: uhuh) um, uh i i um i understand that it's not that it doesn't seem to include, phenomena **i have to argue** and did a little bit last week (A: right right) and would have a little bit today **argued** that this explains, um phenomenality. but you don't yet have a reason to deny this **claim**. [A: (yeah but i wi- i wi-)]**[if all you've said all you're saying]** now is that that this is not _ e- even if you're right i don't think you are from what you're suspecting but even if you're right, this **claim** is, not um all your your **complaint** is that this **claim** is not the whole truth about the universe fine. i just wanna know whether it's true...

Metadiscourse plays an important role in secondary socialisation. It can be seen as involving all three Hallidayan metafunctions (even if Halliday does not recognise metadiscourse as one of his categories). Organising ongoing discourse as it unfolds (textual function) metadiscourse imposes the speaker's order on the discourse situation, and in this sense acts out power relations (interpersonal function). These functions emerge particularly clearly in

evaluative modifications of metadiscursive expressions (*that's a very interesting remark/ good observation/ a really important point*), which also serve as strong socialisers of students into the discourse community.

At the same time, such labels categorise referential content, the 'knowledge', in the utterances they attach themselves to, into 'arguments', 'claims', 'points', etc, in this way setting up conceptual and content hierarchies, imparting value systems and making them explicit (*a very important issue, here's a flawed argument, that's not a criticism*). In Hallidayan terms, this then involves the ideational component.

Very frequent metadiscursive items that occurred with criticism were *claim* and *argue*, of the latter particularly the nominal form *argument*. These seem to play a powerful role in secondary socialisation. Here, *argument* is used for a kind of demonstrative function in a lecture, and its subsequent assessment as 'flawed' leaves the students in no doubt about the attitude they are expected to adopt towards it:

- (8) and, taken to its extreme form, that can be seen as a form of biological materialism that what our bodies need therefore determines what our culture will produce for us, or what we do. and so that's that's **that's it, the argument** in its extreme form. **it's flawed**, because it reduces the complexity of human thought and action, to one single factor.

The socialising effect can also be detected on a developmental scale by looking at different groups of users: both *claim* and *argue* are used most often by senior faculty, followed closely by senior graduates – both of these groups are proportionally overrepresented in using these items as compared to their average proportion of talking (Mauranen 2001).

An even more common, inconspicuous but frequently occurring vehicle of negotiating disagreement and misunderstanding, was *say*. It has often been described as the most neutral reporting verb, but whether neutral or not, it is certainly involved in a lot of emotionally charged argumentation. The most characteristic form in which *say* appears in conflictual situations was *saying*, typically in the context of the pronouns *I* and *you*. The semi-fixed expression *you / I + BE saying* has another, more cooperative function, which I want to get out of the way first (9):

- (9) (seminar)
A: are you s- suggesting a, a link between the narrator and the street? is that what i'm, hearing or am i just?
B: a link between the narrator and,
A: the street, like, the conflicted, -ness of the narrator's (merged) the half of this_ half rubble. **are you_ were you saying that** or am i just hearing you, differently?
B: **i'm saying** that he is feeling conflict based on, what he sees in the street
A: oh okay.

However, the more interesting (and more frequent) uses for the present purpose are those where *you / I + BE saying* is used in argumentation and criticism or disagreement.

The 'critical' use implies disagreement (10 and 11), not simply comparing or exchanging points of view in search of agreement.

(10) (seminar)

A: right, but but tha- uh [B: ah but then how][**what i'm trying to say**]

B: but how do i know that reading this? **if you're if you're saying**, look at the way, Jarrett's actual realization of the piece contrast with the way the piece was composed (A: okay) that's fine (A: yeah) but, that needs to be said [A: yeah][really] overtly because there's so many places where these chords symbols [A: don't jive][disagree] with the [music]

(11) (advisory session)

S1: ... i think that there's a, um, that a lot of their, success and attention, has been pretty well deserved. i mean when they they

S2: yeah but think of all those groups, okay but think of all those gazillion groups, that don't sell records

S1: right but not, **what i'm saying** is not [everyone gets the]

S2: **[are you saying** they don't deserve] success?

S1: no. **what i'm saying** is is that not everyone gets the, the Video Vanguard Award.

In (11), we also get a few *but*s from both speakers – they were assigned here to the ‘other’ category, and are, of course, together with other adversative connectors, well known for their role in polite disagreement. Finally, the argumentative *say* also includes attempts to reach consensus, as in (12), although the critical use was more than three times as common as the consensual use.

(12) (seminar):

A: okay i don't know what you're_ if that's your conclusion we we_ if that if that really is your conclusion we don't disagree, because **all i'm saying is**, <LAUGH> **all i'm saying** so far there is, when you imagine when you visually ...

Both speakers in (12) also make good use of *but*. The frequent employment of *say* in argument has also been recognised by Craig & Sanusi (2000), who identified the use of *I'm just saying* and similar expressions as pragmatic devices which speakers use to claim that they have held a consistent argumentative standpoint all along. While such consistency throughout a sustained argument is better discernible in qualitative research with a detailed analysis of entire individual data samples, the corpus approach was equally capable of independently detecting this argumentative use, and moreover ascertaining its typicality in different speech event types in broadly academic, debative settings. Interestingly, both approaches supported the observation that a seemingly neutral metadiscursive item like *say* participates in an important way in negotiating disagreement and viewpoint differences. Clearly metadiscourse, or reflexive discourse, plays an crucial role in negotiating what it is we are talking about and what we mean even outside those written genres where it is particularly frequent and has been much studied.

2.3. Why

The last type I found recurring on the transcripts was the category ‘other’, which included signals like *but* and *why*. Since the use of the adversative conjunction is very well known, I found the innocent-looking interrogative pronoun more intriguing. However, *why*, unlike the other critical markers that I have been discussing here, was very much confined to a single

type of context of situation that was markedly critical – its main critical use was in the thesis defences (examples 13 and 14).

- (13) i i'm still curious **why**, um, you wanted to do the, thing you brought up just at the end about uh making, different cultures look, equally good since it didn't have anything to do with your thesis. i mean as far as i can tell. i i don't understand the connection, uh there and **i wondered why** <LAUGH> you wanted to, um do that.
- (14) A: okay, here's another thing about keys. page seventy-two... uh, this piece... uh, seems to have practically no B naturals in it... (B: mhm) right?
B: right
A: now **why** is_ **why** didn't you just notate this with on E-flat then? is this is this, do you_ is this somehow a, a, a Lydian F or a Dorian D or something it doesn't sound anything like it to me

In defences, *why* seems to be used in rather strong, even devastating criticism, dealing with basic questions like selecting methods, or choosing to deal with certain issues at all. This critical *why* was used much more sporadically in other speech event types, although some instances were found in for example seminars.

3. Conclusion

Academic speaking seems to be less clear and explicit about conflictual discourse, or direct disargements than one might expect, given the reputation of academic writing as a battleground of viewpoints. Criticism and negative evaluation were not readily apparent, although they did exist.

Although markers of conflictual discourse were hard to find, their recurrent expressions lent themselves to corpus-based scrutiny very well after initial clues from reading transcripts of whole events. The difficulty in detecting them derives from at least two factors: first, the markers of criticism tend to be so banal as to escape notice – like *it seems to me* or *what you're saying*. This is in stark opposition to expressions of praise (*good, great, nice*), which present themselves readily without the researcher's having to go deeper than looking at wordlists. Secondly, these markers rarely constitute the criticism itself, but are simply indicators of where it is likely to follow or be implied. Criticism and negative evaluation appear to be highly specific and context-dependent for their interpretation – you criticise someone for making “a big leap”, or “a pretty big extrapolation”, or hearing or interpreting something “differently”. Allwood (1993: 27) made a similar observation in his analysis of an academic seminar: the interpretation an utterance as conflictual or cooperative depends on its relation to context. The recurrent conflictual indicators discussed here constitute scaffolding for criticism, even if they might look non-critical and inconspicuous in themselves.

Of course, the emphasis found here on explicit positiveness may at least in part be a culture-specific American feature. As some social scientists put it on one of the transcripts: “the standard of politeness (in America) is such that you don't (present) direct criticism ... anything less than enthusiasm is critical”. Interestingly, the same tapescript included a discussion of research showing that Americans were very weak at understanding indirect criticism, and appeared to take positive evaluations at their face value. The topic clearly has not been exhausted.

I have not seen much reason to change my earlier view that consensus is more foregrounded than conflict in academic speaking. It seems, though, that they operate simultaneously but at different levels. The surface consensus appears to work much as it has been described in many standard descriptions of face-to-face conversation, whereas conflict lies deeper. A good proportion of the apparent conflict is built into the institutional structures. Criticism is institutionally ascribed to certain roles in the university system, as a corollary to the basic ideology of scientific progress. But underlying the institutional conflict lies another layer of institutional action: a co-operative enterprise where we participate to keep the system running. Keeping the system going involves, among other things, maintaining the tradition of criticism. Thus, the complex interplay of conflict and consensus emerges from a multilayered whole of different kinds of structures – some of which are more permanent and solid, such as the institutional structures and ideologies, and others faster-changing, like ongoing spoken interaction.

E-mail: anna.mauranen@helsinki.fi [updated 10 March 2011]

REFERENCES

- Aijmer, Karin (1996) *Conversational Routines in Spoken Discourse*. London: Longman.
- Allwood, Jens (1993) "The academic seminar as an arena of conflict and conflict resolution." *Gothenburg Papers in Theoretical Linguistics* 67.
- Biber, Douglas (2001) "Dimension of variation among university registers: An analysis based on the T2K-SWAL Corpus." Paper given at the Third North American Symposium on Corpus Linguistics and Language Teaching, Boston, March 23 –25, 2001.
- Biber, Douglas, Randi Reppen, V. Clark & J. Walter (2001) "Representing spoken language in university settings: The design and construction of the spoken component of the T2K-SWAL Corpus." In Simpson, R. C. & J. M. Swales (eds) *Corpus Linguistics in North America*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 48-57.
- Craig, R. T. & A.L. Sanusi (2000) "'I'm just saying...': Discourse markers of standpoint continuity." *Argumentation* 14. 425-445.
- Eggs, Suzanne & Diana Slade (1997) *Analysing Casual Conversation*. London: Cassell.
- Gilbert, G. Nigel & Michael Mulkay (1984) *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientific Discourse*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Hyland, Ken (2000) *Disciplinary Discourses*. London: Pearson.
- Lindemann, S. & Anna Mauranen (2001) "'It's just real messy': The occurrence and function of *just* in a corpus of academic speech." *English for Specific Purposes* 2001:1. 459-476.
- Mauranen, Anna (2000) "'A good question'. Expressing evaluation in academic speech." Paper presented at ESSE 5 – 2000. The Fifth Conference of the European Society for the Study of English, Helsinki, 25-29 August 2000.
- (2001) "'But here's a flawed argument.' Socialisation into and through metadiscourse." Paper given at the Third North American Symposium on Corpus Linguistics and Language Teaching, Boston, March 23-25, 2001.
- Myers, G. (1989) "The pragmatics of politeness in scientific articles." *Applied Linguistics* 10:1. 1-35.
- Poos, D. and Simpson, R. C. 1999. "A question of gender? Hedging in academic spoken discourse." Paper presented at AAAL, Vancouver.

- Simpson, R. C, S. L. Briggs, J. Ovens, & J. M. Swales (1999) *The Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English*. Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan.
- Swales, John (1990) *Genre Analysis. English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Swales, John & A. Burke (2001) “ ‘It’s really fascinating work’: Differences in evaluative adjectives across academic registers.” Paper given at the Third North American Symposium on Corpus Linguistics and Language Teaching, Boston, March 23-25, 2001.
- Swales, John & B. Malczewski (2001) “Discourse management and new-episode flags in MICASE.” In Simpson, R. C. & J. M. Swales (eds) *Corpus Linguistics in North America*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 145 -164.