

# Interpersonal Functions of Engagement Markers in Interaction Phase of Lectures from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory: A Case Study of an Online Lecture

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**Abstract**—Classroom discourse has been widely discussed for decades, while little attention has been paid to academic lectures. This study focuses on the interaction phase of an online lecture and investigates the occurrence of engagement markers as well as their interpersonal functions from the perspective of appraisal theory. The results show that both dialogic contraction and expansion occurred in the interaction phase. Enlightened by appraisal theory, it can be concluded that with engagement markers lecturers can establish authority and adjust negotiation space with their audience to disseminate academic knowledge.

**Index Terms**—Engagement markers, interpersonal function, academic lectures

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, stupendous research has been conducted upon teachers' discourse or classroom discourse [1] whereas scant attention has been concentrated on academic lectures. With increasingly frequent international academic exchanges and cooperation, massive academic lectures, online and offline, are held. As a pivotal branch of academic discourse, academic lectures should manifest objectivity and achieve effective interactions to persuade listeners into accepting the core viewpoints [2].

In the interaction phase of a lecture different from other phases such as direction phase, example phase and conclusion phase, audience can put forward questions confusing or appealing them, and lecturers can directly communicate with their audience. In this phase, the speaker can actively invite audience to participate in their academic discourse and more importantly shorten the distance between them through engagement markers [3].

Appraisal Theory (henceforth AT) first proposed by Martin and White (2000) is an explanatory system based on Halliday's systematic functional grammar [4]. It is a scientific framework for exploring, describing and explaining the way how language is used to evaluate, to adopt stances, to construct textual personas and to manage interpersonal meanings. Thompson and Hunston [5] believed that the interpersonal functions of AT lie in: 1) Expressing the viewpoint of the speaker and reflecting the value system of the society 2) Establishing and maintaining the relationship between two sides; 3) Constructing Discourse.

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In this regard, there are three subsystems in AT: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation, each of which has subcategories [6]. Among them, engagement is a remarkable subsystem, since as long as interaction occurs in discourse, there will be engagement [7]. Through the engagement system, the speaker can carry on a conversation with the audience to back up the stance.

Currently, as the Internet advances rapidly and pandemic swept the globe, a rising number of academic lectures are given online. Wilson and Peterson [8] argued that the Internet is a cultural product. It is both produced by a group with certain characteristics based on cultural goals and constructed by the way it is used [9]. Thus the social and cultural characteristics of the Internet have established the fundamental reasons and basic conditions for ethnographic research. Kozinet [10] has defined netnography as network observation, a qualitative method for studying information exchange among members in certain communities. This is a method that takes the virtual network as the main research background and utilizes interactive tools of the Internet to collect information, so as to explore and explain socio-cultural phenomena related to the Internet [11]. The methodology in this study is inspired by netnography.

Therefore, by conducting a case study in an online lecture, this study intends to probe into interpersonal functions of engagement markers in interaction phase of academic lectures from the perspective of AT. The current research can help readers have a deep understanding upon interaction between lecturers and audience. Also, it will promote the dissemination of academic knowledge.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Martin and White, what Engagement concerns is how writers evaluate the outer voice and what kinds of attitude they hold towards the cited voice [12]. Broadly speaking, Engagement is a system concerned with potential voices for choice, providing the writer with various evaluation sources, for example, by quoting or reporting, denying, countering, affirming, acknowledging a possibility and so Bakhtin's heteroglossic perspective is concerned with whether or not and how speakers or writers accept various alternative propositions to their own [13], grounded on which, Engagement System can be divided into monoglossia and heteroglossia. Martin and White maintain that heteroglossia is now a widely influential notion, under which all written and spoken communication is dialogic. The reason why all communication is dialogic is that to write or speak something is always to uncover the influence of what has been written

or said before [14]. Monoglossia is concerned with those utterances which do not refer to the outer voice or alternative propositions overtly. Instead, it concerns those utterances which are fixed and unable to contact with other voices. In other words, it is only a bald statement of a proposition and it invokes or allows for dialogic alternatives. Heterglossia, as mentioned above, allows for other dialogic voices being projected into the current text, as a result, mingling outer voices with the writers' own. When borrowing the outer voice into the current text, writers remain different dialogic space for these propositions-contrastive or expansive.

The current research adopts Martin and White's updated framework of engagement in 2005 (Fig. 1). Engagement involves dialogic contraction and expansion. The former one includes disclaim signifying raising an objection or negation while the later one means that the speaker proposes a certain stance.

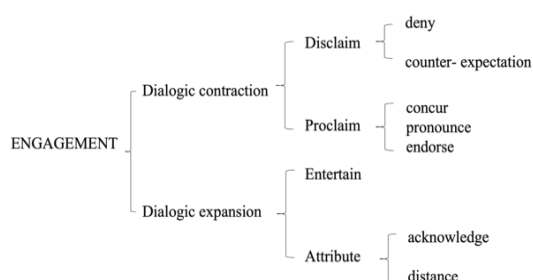


Fig. 1. Framework of engagement system [7] (Martin & White, 2005).

Dialogic contraction is concerned with those utterances which act to challenge, fend off or restrict the dialogically alternative positions and voices. writer can position him/herself as opposite to or rejecting some contrary propositions, thus raising objection or negation; *deny* (or *negation*) and *counter* are its sub-categories. *Proclaim* is a contractive Engagement resource by which the writer can set him/herself against, suppresses or rules out alternative positions, thus making his/her own proposition highly warrantable and at the same time, closing down space for other alternative positions and voices. Under this term, there are *concur*, *pronounce* and *endorse*. *Concur* refers to propositions well known by all people; *pronounce* indicates the speaker/writer stresses his/her own viewpoint or make it precise; *endorse* refers to the citation of other voices and approval of them. Dialogic expansion concerns those utterances which “make allowance for dialogically alternative positions and voices” and it includes two sub-categories: *entertain* and *attribute*. *Entertain* is concerned with “those wordings by which the authorial voice indicates that its position is but one of a number of possible positions”. *Attribute* can be sub-divided into *acknowledge* and *distance*. *Acknowledge* means that the writer just represents the cited information briefly but remains neutral about this proposition. *Distance* allows for the maximum dialogic expansion by which the writer can separate him/herself completely from the cited proposition, thus opening up space for various alternative positions.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Questions

The foregoing literature review has revealed that scant research has investigated engagement markers in academic lectures. This research explores the interpersonal functions of engagement markers in interaction phase of academic lectures from the perspective of AT by online observation.

This research aims to address the following questions:

- (1) What engagement markers are used in interaction phase of academic lectures?
- (2) What are the interpersonal functions of engagement markers in interaction phase of academic lectures?

#### B. Research Context and Participants

We conducted an observation in an online workshop organized by Shanghai English Education and Teaching Research Base for language learning teachers and researchers. One lecture delivered by Professor Rod Ellis, whose topic was “Providing support for listening: A case study research”, was selected as the focal case. There were 133 participants in his lecture. This lecture lasted for two hours and involved interaction phase. It reported a study of the effects of different listening conditions on Chinese university students' performance of two listening information-transfer tasks that provided built-in measures of their comprehension. In interaction phase, the audience can raise questions, spoken or written, for Pro. Ellis and he may answer the questions directly. I also acted as a participant and an observant to observe their conversations, written questions and made notes upon engagement markers.



Fig. 2. Rod Ellis' online lecture.

#### C. Research Procedures

The method of netnography mainly resorts to online interview, focus group and social network. Some classic “fields” for netnography include chatting room, Wikipedia, blogs and forum. Thus, the current research followed three major procedures:

- (1) Online observation: The author attended the lecture and observed the whole interaction phase from the beginning to the end.
- (2) Data collection: The written conversations or the messages in chat box as well as direct oral questions were recorded and special attention was paid to engagement markers.

(3) Data analysis: After collecting the engagement markers utilized in the lecture, the interpersonal functions of these engagements markers were analyzed by specific examples.

#### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### A. The Occurrence of Engagement Markers

Based on observation, it can be noted that engagement markers in Table I including “deny”, “pronounce”, “endorse”, “entertain”, “acknowledge” are utilized in interaction phase of academic lecture. Some typical expressions of “deny” contain “you will not”, “do not”, “I think”, “I suggest” and “to my mind” are patterns involving “pronounce.” “Endorse” involves some expressions such as “do learn”, “many studies have clearly shown that”. Featuring uncertainty upon preposition, “entertain” is expressed by modals like “perhaps”, “would” and “might.” Also, “acknowledge” tends to show the source of information and the source is responsible for the accuracy of information, with typical ways like quotation and “refer to.” In short, both dialogic contraction and expansion happened in the discourse.

TABLE I: ENGAGEMENT MARKERS

Engagement markers		Frequency
Contraction	Disclaim	Deny
	Proclaim	Pronounce
	Endorse	
Expansion	Entertain	
	Attribute	Acknowledge

##### B. The Interpersonal Functions of Engagement Markers

In terms of interpersonal functions of these engagement markers, two major functions, namely establishing authority and adjusting negotiation space, can be summarized referring to the context and the AT.

###### 1) Establishing authority

In interaction phases, the lecturer should answer audience’s questions. It is common that the audience may suspect the deliberativeness of their research. Under such circumstance, the lecturers tend to use “deny” in AT to directly reject or correct some opinions. Instead, they can underscore their own stance to reveal their expertise in academic fields. This result accords with Li & Zou’s opinion (2003) that academic lectures deliver professional and individual academic achievements. To achieve this effect, from the perspective of lexical-grammatical level, lecturers may utilize “not,” as shown in Example 1:

Example 1:

Q1: My question is about the selection of participants. Why the participants are undergraduates?

Rod Ellis: Yep. The reason is simply group size. There are more undergraduates and far few postgraduates. You can get a large group size if you use undergraduates, otherwise, your group size will go down considerably. And **you’ll not** have the statistic power as you do have by using undergraduates. (**deny**)

When an audience raised doubts about the composition of participants in the research, Ellis used “deny” resource to underline that the current research obtained a large group size

and held the statistic power to prove the authority of his research.

###### 2) Adjusting negotiation space

To enable the viewpoints to be more easily accepted by the audience, the lecturers may use “pronounce” resource to show full responsibility for their standpoint as well as “entertain” and “endorse” to form alliance with audience.

Example 2

Q2: In regards to listening task assignments to improve learners’ acquisition, would you recommend a daily listening exposure?

Rod Ellis: One thing **I have suggested** is that the amount of language learning that take place from performing a single task or even two tasks is limited. (**pronounce**)

**We do learn** from listening **but** the amount is very limited. Many studies have **clearly shown** this. (**endorse**)

You cannot simply rely on the vocabulary learning that take place from performing listening tasks. **I think** you **would** also need to have supporting vocabulary. (**pronounce**)

I think what the study I have shared with you shows that topic preparation, fluency training **don’t** help that much. (**deny**)

What helps is task repetition. **Perhaps** what we need is direct teaching or instructions of target items as well. (**entertain**)

**To my mind**, they should occur after they have performed the tasks **not** before. In other words, the direct instruction should take the form of a post-task activity not a pre-task activity. (**pronounce, deny**)

Q3: When can we begin to start the influence training?

Good question! If you look back at the slides you can see that I did **refer to** some early studies. If you want to find out more about the pedagogic influence training, then you **might refer to** Paul Nation’s book in 2001, where he talks about influence training and he also shows the results of research that investigates influence training for reading rather than for listening. (**acknowledge**)



Fig. 3. Screenshot of the lecture.

As is shown in Example 2 and Example 3, various resources of AT were figured out in the discourse observed in

the lecture. Ellis endorsed that we could learn vocabulary through listening tasks, but he suggested his own stance at the same time by using “I think” to stress explicit subjectivity. Through these engagement markers, the negotiation space between him and listeners can be adjusted. Hence, the audience were more likely to accept his own view. In Example 3, Ellis employed “acknowledge” resource to expand the dialogue between audience and himself. He recommended that the questioner should read Paul Nation’s book to further clarify the connection between fluence training and reading.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with the guidance of netnography, a careful observation was conducted in an online lecture for language teachers and researchers. Engagement markers were investigated in interaction phase when audience and the lecturer had an effective and direct communication. The results shows that both dialogic contraction and expansion happened in the discourse. On the basis of AT, it can be concluded that lecturers can establish authority and adjust negotiation space with audience to enhance the acceptance of their academic achievements by utilizing various engagement markers.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Bao Yue analyzed the data and wrote the paper. Zhang Yi provided suggestions for the editing of this paper.

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