

## **Reference in importance markers**

### **Case study: English academic lectures<sup>1</sup>**

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Received: 2016/12/24

Accepted: 2018/02/05

#### **Background**

Comprehending English academic lectures is difficult for students whose mother tongue is not English. This difficulty is mostly due to the ephemeral nature of lectures and information overload. An understanding of how importance is signified in lectures might benefit lecture comprehension; to this end, this paper studies English academic lectures as a case study of reference in importance markers.

Expressions that help students distinguish between important and unimportant information are referred to as ‘relevance markers’ (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2007; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a; Hunston, 1994), ‘importance cues’ (Kiewra, 2002), ‘emphasizers’ (Siepmann, 2005), ‘selection cues’ (Titsworth & Kiewra, 2004), and ‘focusers’ (Simpson, 2004).

According to Hunston (1994), relevance markers have four distinguishing features. First, they may be retrospective or prospective (p.199); this feature is related to the placement of the important information, no matter whether it is placed before or after the importance marker. Second, relevance markers overtly mark the relevance of preceding, or subsequent stretches of text (p.199); this feature is related to the use of evaluative language (e.g., important, unimportant) to mark importance. Third, relevance markers evaluate the discourse itself and are thus metadiscoursal (p. 199). Finally, they play an important role in organizing discourse (p. 199).

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<sup>1</sup> . (DOI): [10.22051/JLR.2018.12606.1227](https://doi.org/10.22051/JLR.2018.12606.1227)

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Deroey (2015) has derived importance markers from 160 lectures of the BASE corpus and classified them in terms of participants' orientation and discourse. Deroey observed that importance markers pertaining to content, listener, speaker, or joint orientation followed the patterns of 'MN v-link', 'V n/closure', '1s pers pron V n/closure', and '1p pers pron V n/closure', respectively. Additionally, importance markers with prospective, retrospective, or combined orientation to highlighted discourse had the patterns of ['V n/closure' and 'MN v-link'], ['deic v-link ADJ', 'deic v-link MN', and 'deic v-link adj MN'], and ['1s pers pron V n/closure' and 'deic v-link adj MN'], respectively. Deroey also found most markers to be directed towards either the content (e.g. the point is) or the listeners (e.g. you should remember). Few importance markers were observed to be oriented towards the speaker (e.g. I should stress) or the speaker and listeners jointly (e.g. I want you to notice). Moreover, Deroey found many content-oriented markers with secondary listener orientation (e.g., these are the things to take home).

Partington (2014) examined importance marking at local and macro levels in TED talks. The corpus Partington based his study on comprised transcripts of 27 TED talks gathered in 2007- 2012 and was downloadable from the TED website. Generally, Partington found importance marking in TED talks to be of two types: endophoric and exophoric. Endophoric importance marking indicates that what the speaker is about to say (cataphoric marking)– or has just said (anaphoric marking)– is a key point in the development of his/her talk. Exophoric importance marking or 'real-world oriented' importance marking (Thompson & Hunston, 2000, p. 24) stresses how the topic the speaker is expounding on, or the work he/she is describing, has importance in real, extra-textual world (Thompson & Hunston, 2000). Partington found exophoric importance marking or 'reference to real-world considerations' to be the most common type of importance marking (p. 149).

## **Methodology**

The analytical procedure of this study was a combination of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. A corpus-driven approach was

followed to retrieve importance markers and a discourse analytic approach was followed to investigate their reference.

The corpus used in this investigation to derive importance markers was British Academic Spoken English (BASE) Corpus. The BASE corpus was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading in England under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Paul Thompson. BASE comprises the audio and video recordings, and the transcripts of 160 English lectures and 39 seminars, totaling 1,644,942 words. The lecture section which is the basis for the analysis of this paper contains 1,186,290 words; they were recorded between 1998 and 2005. Lectures are equally distributed across four broad disciplinary groups, i.e. arts and humanities (ah), life and medical sciences (ls), physical sciences (ps), and social studies (ss).

The transcripts of 160 English academic lectures of the BASE corpus, delivered by male and female lecturers, were investigated. 1,350 concordances of importance markers were extracted and analyzed in terms of reference—anaphoric, cataphoric, and shared.

### **Results and conclusion**

The results showed that (1) both male and female lecturers tend to give cataphoric reference to importance markers in organizing discourse and subject status, than anaphoric one; (2) male and female lecturers use anaphoric and cataphoric importance marking equally in topic treatment markers of importance; (3) exam-related issue is necessarily done through anaphoric importance marking by both male and female lecturers; and (4) audience engagement markers are more cataphoric than anaphoric. By and large, the results showed that most importance markers are cataphoric in reference.

**Keywords:** academic lecture, reference, anaphoric, cataphoric, corpus

Quarterly Journal of Research in Linguistics, Al-ZahraUniversity  
VOL. 10,NO. 29, 2018-2019  
<http://jlr.alzahra.ac.ir>