Introduction to stance language

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Abstract – This paper presents a brief overview of stance language and the numerous linguistic phenomena included in the notion of stance. The paper also comments on the relation of corpus linguistics (CL) methodology and the study of stance devices in discourse. Although some of the drawbacks of this methodology are identified, the view in this study is very positive because CL allows the unparalleled analysis, interrogation and indexing of large amounts of texts only achievable through computing means. This introductory paper concerning the description of stance language and CL seeks to give context for the four articles contained in this special issue of *Research in Corpus Linguistics*. These contributions come to demonstrate the validity of CL methodology for the study of hedging, evaluation, style, and modality in different registers and specialised domains.

Keywords – stance, evaluation, corpus linguistics, modality, opinion

This introduction succinctly describes the concept of 'stance' and the use of Corpus Linguistics (CL) methodology for its study. This description is context for the introduction of the four papers contained in the present issue of *Research in Corpus Linguistics*, which present some aspects of authorial stance in different texts and field domains. Stance is, indeed, a complex concept that includes a large variety of linguistic devices indicating the author's point of view with respect to a given proposition. To my knowledge, there is not, however, a single inventory of stance features and collocation rules, most likely because lexical and morphological features entailing stance are pragmatically defined. This pragmatic component is of interest for the study of variation and change in a language, as I explain below.

The term *stance* has been defined in the following terms:

a. Stance relates to the expression of the speakers and writers' "personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments, or assessments" (Biber et al. 1999: 966).

b. Stance "can be seen as an attitudinal dimension and includes features which refer to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments. It is the ways that writers intrude to stamp their personal authority onto their arguments or step back and disguise their involvement" (Hyland 2005a: 176).

c. "a public act by social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field" (Du Bois 2007: 163).

d. "Stance is generally understood to have to do with the methods, linguistic and other, by which interactants create and signal relationships with the propositions they utter and the people they interact with" (Johnstone 2009: 30–31).

e. "the writer's identity as well as the writer's expression of attitudes, feelings, or judgments" (Dzung Pho 2013: 3).

There are common aspects in these definitions of stance. All of them agree in identifying the evaluative dimension of stance. Essentially, stance is the way in which speakers appraise people, objects, and ideas, but it also covers self-evaluation. Evaluation is indeed a twin term for stance, as used by Hunston (1994) and Hunston and Thompson (2000). The latter define evaluation as follows:

evaluation is the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values. When appropriate, we refer specifically to modality as a sub-category of evaluation (Hunston and Thompson 2000: 5).

This notion of evaluation leads us to consider a number of linguistic phenomena, also included under the umbrella of stance, as already pointed out in the quotations listed above. Thus, both stance and evaluation are concerned with social values and social interaction (see Biber et al. 1999; Du Bois 2007; Johnstone 2009) with special attention to self-presentation and positioning (see Hyland 2005a; Dzung Pho 2013). From here the concept of stance follows other related notions, namely epistemic stance (Biber and Finegan 1989), commitment (Caffi 1999 and 2007; Del Lungo Camiccioti 2008), mitigation (Martín Martín 2008), reinforcement or strengthening (Brown 2011), intensification (González 2015), authority, involvement and hedging (Hyland 1998, 2005b), assessment (Goodwin 2006), modality and evidentiality (Chafe 1986; Palmer 2001; Fairclough 2003; Goodwin 2006; Marín Arrese 2009; Carrió Pastor 2012; Pic and Furmaniak 2012), affect (Martin 2000; Martin and White 2005), and vagueness in language (Cutting 2007). These represent some of the many ways in which stance is methodologically looked at. The terminological inventory is large and sometimes obtrusive to the extent that some subclasses of stance language show functional overlapping, e.g. modality and evidentiality (see Cornillie 2009). For some scholars, evidentials refer to the epistemic validity concerning the realization of the event described.

In my view, evidentiary qualification suggests perspectivisation of knowledge rather than evaluation as to the likeliness of a particular event to be true. The notion of truthfulness may be, however, a truth-value reading of the evidential depending on certain contextual variables, but it does not seem to be semantically encoded in the configuration of evidentials as much as epistemic modals do. While the latter have a scope over the proposition, it is unclear whether this is the case of evidentials, as shown in (1) and (2):

(1)   *I think* that these results are wrong.

(2)   These results *may* be wrong.

In (1), the device *I think* is indexical to the role of the speaker in the formulation of the proposition. Whether this should be taken as an indication of factuality concerning the likelihood of the proposition framed by this device to be true is a secondary reading not semantically encoded. The use of *may* in (2), however, positively entails some degree of probability concerning the information given.

The expression of stance is believed to be the motivation behind some linguistic processes of variation and change in the evolution of languages, as pointed out in Méndez-Naya (2008), and in the evolution of their textual genres. One case in point is scientific rhetorics. The search for objectivity in scientific discourse at the expense of interpersonal strategies is claimed to account for the significant presence of passive voice structures in the register (Oldireva Gustafsson 2006: 133). Following Dixon (2005: 353ff), Alonso Almeida and Mulligan (forthcoming) disagree in this respect, as scientific prose is normally authored and the subject of conception can be, therefore, safely retrieved from context, even if the conceptualiser in the formulation of predication is opaque. Moore and Snell (2011: 108) have also found that evaluation is the motivation for the common use of right dislocated tags, as evinced in their corpus of primary and high school interaction data among children. They conclude that, contrary to the categorisation of right dislocated tags as "'quirks' of informal discourse", these are, in fact, "complex discourse features which may undertake identity-related social work in interaction" (2011: 108). Similarly, Defour's (2008) study on the pragmatic meanings of *now* as a discourse marker based on historical evidence reveals that one of its functions is to indicate the speaker's subjective stance towards the proposition manifested.

(Inter)subjective reasoning is strongly related to the evidentiary information concerning the truth of a proposition. For many, this relationship between evidentiary knowledge and (inter)subjectivity refers to an epistemic dimension of a particular stance device, namely modals and evidentials. For Cornillie and Delbecque (2008), the (inter)subjective dimension in the case of evidentials exclusively concerns the role of the conceptualiser in the formulation of the predication. Marín Arrese (2011: 794) states that, while subjective claims indicate personal responsibility concerning the information presented, intersubjective claims refer to shared responsibility. There are three possible ways, Marín Arrese points out, in which the conceptualiser may appear in the formulation of the predication, namely implicit, explicit, and opaque. Kärkkäinen (2006) claims that the categorisation of discourse language units in (inter)subjective terms often relies heavily on their formal aspects rather than on their roles in a specific communicative exchange. This means that signalling mental states with first person marking, for instance, should not immediately be categorised as a subjective claim (eg. *I think* as a discourse device). For her, subjectivity is "a dynamic concept constructed in the course of some action; i.e. subjectivity is an integral part of the interaction between conversational coparticipant" (2006: 706).

As seen in this brief account of stance, the term refers to many other linguistic realities. The study of stance is important given the fact that it seems to be the motivation for variation and change in language from both a sociolinguistic and a diachronic perspective. CL is a good tool to assess and index stance language across time and registers. The possibility of carrying out research on large amounts of corpora allows researchers to have accurate raw numbers from which statistics may be obtained to assess the frequency of given stance phenomena. This is especially useful at a lexical level, since laden-value words can be easily identified from computerised word lists, which may return concordances depending on the computer software used. CL methodology is also convenient for the examination of particular contextual meanings of words, e.g. modals. We may also check our intuition as to the meaning and frequency

of some language strings. The combination of CL methodology and contrastive analysis also yields excellent results, as shown in the work by Johansson (2007) on the verb *seem* and its counterparts in Norwegian, for instance.

The major drawback in the use of CL and stance lies in the pragmatic nature of this phenomenon, since the identification of some stance patterns requires careful visual inspection before computer processing. For this reason, studies dealing with hedging matrices, for instance, need a previous tagging of the corpus for their formal and functional identification. The application of CL tools will later be useful for statistical reasons. More problematic is research being carried out on large corpora without inspecting contextual variables, since such research lacks a thorough scrutiny of the context where these variables appear to discard those tokens, which despite being formally identical report on different semantic and pragmatic motivations. Conducting this type of research involves explicit indication of the methodological steps followed to guarantee reliability of results and findings.

The papers in this volume of *Research in Corpus Linguistics* deal with different aspects of stance language: stylistics, self-repair, hedging, and modality. All of them provide analyses based on small corpora and they very much represent fine contributions to the study of stance in specialised discourse. The first paper, 'Words which are 'very much her own' – a corpus stylistic analysis of *The bloody chamber* by A. Carter', by Anna Pasolini, seeks to demonstrate the validity of CL methodology for the study of literary texts with a focus on mapping power relationships through particular uses of linguistic variables in the aforementioned text by Angela Carter. Pasolini also compares the results of her computer enquiries on Carter's text with Perrault's *Blue beard*, allegedly Carter's source for *The bloody chamber*. The author develops her analysis from the study of wordlists from these and other texts to answer her research questions, namely (a) "to show that Carter succeeds in challenging and amending the gender politics underlying Perrault's text through the use of language", and (b) to explore how "Carter manages to criticise women's compliance with patriarchy in their subordination, and to offer empowering alternatives through intertextual and intratextual references" from a CL perspective. Although her research cannot afford general conclusions concerning Angela Carter's style, as Pasolini herself concludes, it does indeed show how computerised analysis of literary texts provides new perspectives of seemingly over-studied texts.

Anja Hennemann's article, 'On self-repair in Spanish', pays attention to the ways in which self-repair is manifested in interaction. Data are retrieved from CORLEC, *Corpus oral de referencia de la lengua española contemporánea*, compiled at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. The author claims that there is an enormous gap in the study of self-repair in native Spanish interactive contexts to the extent that hers is the first research attempt to date. Hennemann resolves that the identification of forms of repair is more straightforward than that of speech errors because the influences of neighbouring segments are not always clear in the case of speech errors. Other reasons are also offered to account for this phenomenon in this article.

Holly Vass's paper, 'Analysing hedging in legal discourse using small-scale and large-scale corpora', offers an analysis of hedging in two written legal genres used by post-graduate law students: law review articles and Supreme Court decisions. An understanding of these devices in these texts may benefit non-native speakers of English. The use of hedging devices depends largely on culture, so much so that in some cultures categorical expressions are felt to be more persuasive than hedging. Her conclusions also deal with the size of corpora for the analysis of hedging devices. Vass finds that large corpora over millions of tokens are not suitable and she therefore suggests that these devices can be safely studied in one-million word corpora.

Finally, Tianshuang Ge's article, 'The use of modal verbs to express hedging in student academic writing', focuses on what he calls "three hedging modal verbs: *would*, *should*, and *may*" in a corpus of assignments by native English speaking students and another of non-native English speaking students. Ge's methodology combines CL and discourse analysis (move analysis). Results exhibit different patterns of use of these three modals showing different communicative intentions. This article also signals differences and similarities concerning the use of these modal verbs with a hedging function by native and non-native speakers of the language.

These four contributions will surely benefit current research on the analysis of stance using CL methodology. In many respects, these articles represent new insights regarding stance language, and they also touch upon old ghosts concerning CL methodology. In all cases, CL alone has proven insufficient for interpretative reasons, but essential when offering quantitative evidence for making general claims.

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