Signalling the relationship between ideas in academic speaking: From language description to pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Academic speaking tends to involve long turns comprising a number of ideas and pieces of information. Speakers can leave implicit the relationships between these ideas and pieces of information or they can overtly signal the relationships using various devices. Linking words or phrases is one such device. Instruction to learners about linking words and phrases has tended to focus on how these markers are used in written discourse. In recent years, corpus-based studies have revealed some insights into how linking words or markers are used in academic spoken discourse. This article reviews this literature and suggests ways teachers can focus on linking words in academic speaking.

Introduction

The aims of this article are three-fold. First, the article argues that turns at talk in academic speaking often present complex ideas and pieces of information and involve the use of devices to signal relationships between them. This feature of academic speaking is demonstrated with data taken from an academic speaking event and is discussed in relation to literature on planned and unplanned language use. Second, the article reviews literature describing how ideas and information are related in texts and how devices used to link them in academic speaking have been categorised. This review draws mainly on emerging literature in the field of corpus analysis, including results from a recent study in which the author participated (Nesi and Basturkmen 2006). Corpus linguistic studies have begun to reveal which devices are used in academic speaking and how they are used, and offer a description of potential value to teachers of academic speaking. The third aim of the paper is to argue the case for focusing on this area in teaching academic speaking and to offer suggestions for some activities teachers can use to draw attention to the use of such signalling devices.

Turns at talk in academic events often entail a multiplicity of ideas and pieces of information. Such a multiplicity can be seen in Excerpt 1. The excerpt, taken from Basturkmen (1995), shows a turn in discussion following
a presentation by a guest speaker on a Masters in Business Administration programme. In this excerpt, the presenter responds to a question from a student in the audience. Although relatively short, the presenter's turn involves complex and interrelated ideas and information.

EXCERPT 1

That is an option and if two managements can work together then there is no reason why that shouldn't take place. The thing about an acquisition is, if it's a hostile acquisition, then the two managements know from the beginning that they are going to fall out. So one side says we're going to be in charge and you're going to be cut out. If it's a merger they'll reach a friendly solution. But the problem with the joint venture is structuring it. You bring the two parties together. But somebody's got to lead it. And then you get the articulation between one side and the other saying well we're in this as deep as you are. Why should you make the decisions? And you get into this scenario of nobody will allow the other to actually take the lead. In theory it's a very sensible approach joint venture. But in practice a lot of them don't work because of the lack of trust from one side to another.

The response in this excerpt involves a number of related ideas. In places, the speaker draws on various words and phrases to make explicit the relationship between the ideas and information he is conveying using coordinators such as *and*, *so* and *but*, and lexical phrases such as *in theory*, *in practice* and *the problem is*. In other places, the relationship between propositions is left implicit; for example, the relationship between propositions is left implicit; for example, the relationship between *you get the articulation between one side and the other saying well we're in this as deep as you are* and *Why should you make the decisions?* The excerpt shows that a speaker may mark the nature of the relationship explicitly or leave the relationship between the ideas and information implicit, but when implicit the listener needs to infer it.

Some writers have considered how planning may influence the ways in which speakers and writers signal the relationship between the ideas they wish to convey. Johnstone (2002: 184) reports that in relatively unplanned discourse speakers tend to rely more on the immediate context to express the relationship between ideas, whereas in relatively planned discourse they tend to make the relationship between ideas explicit by using vocabulary, formal cohesive devices and topic sentences. Hatch compares unplanned talk and planned written discourse in this way:

In unplanned talk phrases are often produced one after another, and it is this 'nextness' that shows that they are related. In written discourse, syntactic structures and explicit cohesive ties can mark these relationships … planned, written versions are more explicit in drawing connections between the clauses.
Academic speaking can be anywhere on a continuum from relatively planned to unplanned. Lectures and presentations, which can be seen as very long turns, are often relatively planned, although they may include segments that are relatively unplanned. Asking and responding to questions in discussion are generally relatively unplanned, but, as Excerpt 1 demonstrates, this does not necessarily mean that the connections between clauses or ideas are left implicit.

Description
A number of writers have considered how ideas and information are related in texts. Winter (1994) argues that we interpret one utterance, sentence, clause or longer unit in relation to another in two main ways: matching relations and logical relations. Matching relations comprise associations of comparison, contrast and hypothetical-real. Logical-sequence relations comprise associations of cause–consequence and instrument–achievement. In Excerpt 1, the lexical phrases in theory and in practice mark a hypothetical-real association.

DeCarrico and Nattinger (1988) investigated macro-markers in lectures. The term ‘macro-marker’ refers to signals that give the direction of the discourse and relations within it. From their study of lecture discourse, they derived a seven-fold categorisation of macro-markers: topic-shifters, summarisers, exemplifiers, relators, evaluators, qualifiers and aside markers. DeCarrico and Nattinger (1988: 97) found, for example, that the phrase same way here signalled similarity between a previous topic and the present topic, and the phrase but look at signalled a contrast of important information. Both these phrases were in the relator category.

In recent years a number of large-scale corpus-based descriptions and categorisations have emerged. Biber et al (1999) provide a six-fold categorisation of linking adverbials:

- enumeration and addition – devices that list and add ideas
- summation – devices that conclude discourse
- apposition – devices signalling equivalence or inclusion
- result/inference – devices signalling consequence
- contrast/concession – devices indicating dissimilar comparison
- transition – devices signalling asides and lack of continuity with preceding discourse.

Their corpus-based work, The Longman grammar of spoken and written English, reports differing patterns of cohesion in four registers: conversation,
Academic prose, fiction and news reports. Biber et al found that linking adverbials occur more often in conversation and academic prose than in fiction and news and explain why in this way:

A very important aspect of academic prose is presenting and supporting arguments. The higher frequency of linking adverbials in academic prose not only reflects this communicative need but also the characteristic choice of this register to mark the links between ideas overtly, as these arguments are developed. Biber et al (1999: 880)

However, they did not report on academic spoken discourse and thus we do not know to what extent it might be similar to academic prose in this respect.

Although most corpus-based analyses of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have been based on written rather than spoken corpuses (Flowerdew 2002), some studies of spoken academic corpuses have emerged in recent years. Two of these have included a focus on linking words and phrases. A study by Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2004: 371) compared the occurrence of ‘lexical bundles’ in one spoken and one written academic register: classroom teaching and textbooks. Lexical bundles were defined as four-word frequently occurring sequences that have a discourse function but are not complete grammatical structures or idiomatic expressions, such as you know this is, I want you to and what I want to. They found that classroom teaching used a large range of different lexical bundles, four times greater than textbook discourse. One of the main functions served by the bundles is that of discourse organisers, which ‘reflect the relationships between prior and coming discourse’ (Biber, Conrad and Cortes 2004: 384). Within this category, two subcategories were identified: topic introduction/focus and topic elaboration/clarification. Examples of bundles related to elaboration/clarification that were found to occur frequently in classroom teaching were has to do with, to do with the, I mean you know, you know I mean and nothing to do with.

A study by Nesi and Basturkmen (2006) investigated lexical bundles in a corpus of spoken academic English and asked whether some of these bundles could function as signals of cohesive relations. The corpus comprised lectures taken from the British Academic Spoken English Corpus and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English, and included lectures from a range of disciplines. Amongst the most frequent four-word bundles identified were the end of the, at the end of, if you look at, to be able to, if you want to, one of the things, in terms of the, and you can see, to do with the and a lot of the. Study of the discourse around these bundles showed how sometimes the bundles appeared to function to signal the nature of the relationship between ideas and information. Here are three examples from the study.
EXAMPLE 1

What we've done is we've included within their utility function the idea of everything that gives them satisfaction and hence at the end of the day they must allocate all of their incomes to those things that give them satisfaction including major saving.

EXAMPLE 2

It's not easy to see how these societies are gonna cope with the consequences of this infection yeah these are very large numbers and nobody really knows actually are going to be the social consequences and you can see that they're bound to be profound but in the end no one is sure exactly what they will be.

EXAMPLE 3

You know we heard more about the Inuit because it became an anthropological issue but I suspect that probably uh goes beyond that population good question I'll have to email one of the authors of this article because if you look at like Appalachian communities which are very isolated and backward um you'd like that I mean they would need healthcare too you can't really compare what the Canadian Government would do with the Inuit in the Arctic with what the American Government would do with people in Appalachias.

In Example 1, at the end of appears to signal a cause–result relationship. In Example 2, and you can see appears to signal the beginning of a summary. Sometimes the bundles in our data appeared alongside devices conventionally recognised as cohesive signals, possibly to reinforce the meaning. In Example 1, the end of the in the expression the end of the day is used alongside hence. In Example 3, if you look at is used alongside because. Whereas in written academic prose the use of two or more markers to signal the same relationship would probably be seen as inappropriate, in spoken academic discourse it appears as a possibility. You can see, in Example 2, was also identified by DeCarrico and Nattinger (1988) as a macro-marker functioning as a summariser.

Pedagogy

There are a number of reasons why teachers of EAP may wish to focus on signals of relationships between ideas. First, academic spoken discourse characteristically involves the communication of complex ideas and information and, at times, the use of overt markers to signal the relationship between them. Although EAP students and teachers are often aware of which words and phrases are used in academic writing, they are less likely to be aware of the sometimes distinctive words and phrases used in academic speaking.
Second, research (Field and Yip 1992; Field 1994; Green, Christopher and Mei 2000) has shown that the written discourse of non-native speakers may differ from native speakers in the use of markers, such as the signals of how ideas and information are related, and that these differences can negatively affect the coherence of the text. We might expect that the spoken discourse of non-native speakers may also differ from native speakers in this respect. Finally, encouraging learners to consider how the ideas and information they wish to express are related is one way to help them develop what Yule (1997: 14) refers to as ‘referential speaking ability’, speaking that is concerned primarily with the exchange of information and which is:

clearly tied to institutional demands, beginning in school, for decontextualised language use, where the participants are not depending on substantially shared experiences or common knowledge. It requires decentering, or the recognition that others do not already know or see what the self obviously does. It is, in spoken language, the necessary transition type of communicative language use that leads to literacy and the ability to cope with written communication.

Yule (1997: 14)

Tarone (2005) relates referential speaking to the development of cognitive academic language proficiency.

Some of the activities suggested in this paper involve listening, but it is not suggested that instruction that highlights signals of the relationship between ideas will necessarily lead to improvements in listening comprehension. An experimental study (Chaudron and Richards 1986) found that learners were better able to comprehend texts that included macro-level markers (that is, markers indicating relationships between text parts and information at a global text level) and texts that did not include markers than texts that included micro-level markers (that is, markers indicating relationships between ideas at a local text level). On the whole, research findings on whether texts that include such discourse signals lead to higher levels of listening comprehension have been mixed (Dunkel and Davis 1994).

There is a need to provide pedagogical descriptions showing how relationships between ideas and information are signalled in spoken academic discourse. Teachers may wish to consult the corpus-based studies of:

- Biber, Conrad and Cortes (2004) for the description of discourse functions of lexical bundles in classroom teaching, such as those signalling how topics are introduced, elaborated or clarified (for example, has to do with, I mean you know and nothing to do with)
- Nesi and Basturkmen (2006) for their recommendations that pedagogical descriptions include:
specification of lexical bundles, phrases and words functioning to signal text relations (for example, *the end of the*, *at the end of*, *if you look at*, *to be able to*, *if you want to*, *one of the things*, *in terms of the*, *and you can see*, *to do with the* and *a lot of the*)

examples of the use of such bundles, phrases and words in conjunction with words and expressions conventionally recognised as functioning to signal relations (for example, *at the end of the day* in conjunction with *hence*, and *if you look at* in conjunction with *because*).

EAP teachers could conduct their own investigations of speaking events in their individual contexts. Teachers might, for example, attend lectures, seminars or presentations in the subject areas of their EAP students in order to investigate the signals of organisation used. Their findings could be used to supplement descriptions currently provided in published or in-house course materials, and the results of the corpus-based studies described above.

Teaching could usefully aim to have learners notice and gain conscious awareness of the use of linking words in spoken academic discourse. Rutherford (1987), amongst other researchers, has suggested that instruction should involve opportunities for the learner to focus on and consciously notice features of the second language system. It is generally acknowledged that attention and conscious awareness play important roles in changing second language input to intake (White 1998). According to Pica (2005), researchers in second language acquisition have in recent years increasingly come to believe that learning is a more conscious experience than was believed. It can be assumed that many non-native speakers of English will be unfamiliar with ways to mark relationships between ideas and the devices used in spoken discourse, as only some have been highlighted in pedagogical texts to date. Native speakers may also not have explicit knowledge of some of these devices, but for them it is unlikely to impede comprehension or production, as implicit knowledge can be assumed.

**Activities**

The activities proposed below aim to encourage learners to notice how ideas and information can be linked in spoken academic discourse and to consider when they might use such signals in their own speaking.

**Noticing signals and predicting**

This activity aims to help learners recognise signals and to practise using them to aid prediction. In advance of the lesson, the teacher makes or selects a recording of a lecture, and chooses a section or some sections where
words and phrases are used to make explicit how ideas and information are linked. In class, the teacher plays the recording and stops it when an explicit marker is used in the targeted section. The teacher encourages the class to predict what kind of information will follow (for example, a contrast, a consequence, a summary). The students then check their predictions by listening to the following segment of discourse in the lecture.

**Focusing on ways ideas and information are related in text**

The aim is to encourage learners to consider how ideas and information can be related and to notice words and phrases signalling this. In advance, the teacher makes or selects a recording of a lecture and chooses one or more short sections to focus on in class. In class, the learners listen to the whole lecture and then the teacher leads the class in discussing each targeted section. The class tries to recall what information/ideas were provided in the section and how they were related. The class listens again to the recording of the section to check if they were right about how the information/ideas were related and if explicit signals were used.

**Noticing the extent to which a speaker uses explicit signals**

The aim of this activity is to encourage learners to notice the extent to which particular lecturers tend to use explicit signals to mark the nature of the relationship between ideas/information and whether they appear to draw on a particular set of words or phrases to do so. Ask a lecturer or teacher to give a short talk with approximately five main points or subtopics. Students are arranged in five or so groups and each group makes a recording of the lecture. After the lecture, each group takes a different main point or subtopic to work on. The group examines the language data (that is, the recording of this point or subtopic) and notes down the ideas/information given, whether explicit markers were used to signal the nature of the relationship between them and, if so, which words or phrases were used. Each group presents its findings to the whole class and the class discusses the extent to which this particular speaker appears to use explicit signals and to favour certain linguistic choices. As a follow-on task, if the students attend lectures in their subject areas, they could note which words/phrases are used by the subject lecturers.

**Considering the use of explicit signals in planned speaking**

This activity involves relatively planned speaking. The class is organised into groups and each group prepares a short talk focusing on a particular topic to be developed mainly in one of the following ways: exemplification, contrast,
cause/effect or time sequence. The group decides whether to use explicit markers in the main to mark the relationship between ideas or not, and then practises the talk. Each member of the group presents the short talk to a member of another group. The speaker then quizzes the hearer on the ideas and information involved and the relationships between them. The whole class comes together to discuss which talks appeared easier to follow and why.

**Seeking clarification about the relationship between ideas and information**

This activity involves relatively spontaneous speaking through a discussion following a presentation. Class members individually prepare short talks on topics about which they are knowledgeable, preferably subjects from their disciplines. Presentations could describe events, processes or descriptions of one or more entities. Following each presentation, class members ask clarification/elaboration questions about points and the relationships between points that they found difficult to follow.

The teacher could provide examples of the types of question they might ask:

- *You said X caused Y but I couldn't really understand this. Could you explain further?*
- *You talked about X. Later you talked about Y. Could you say more about how these are related?*
- *You mentioned two stages in this process – but it was not altogether clear they are related."

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that corpus-based enquiry into how relations between ideas can be signalled in academic spoken discourse may be of interest to teachers of EAP. The description of phrases and bundles that has been offered is very partial and somewhat fragmented, and probably many more bundles and phrases wait to be revealed through further corpus-based studies. It is clear that a few samples of possible phrases and bundles do not constitute a ready-made package reflecting the copious lists of expressions for linking ideas in written texts presented in traditional textbooks. It is, however, a starting point. In a discussion of how the findings from corpus-based linguistic theory can be applied to English-language teaching, Mahlberg says:
In contrast to more traditional approaches, the corpus linguistic focus on communication does not stop at fixed phrases or cohesive devices described by clear-cut categories. Because of the variability that is allowed in a corpus theoretical approach, it cannot as yet produce as systematic or as comprehensive textbooks as traditional approaches, but it suggests simple ideas as a starting point.

Mahlberg (2006: 245)

REFERENCES


