Epistemic and inferential expressions in linguistic research articles: A contrastive (English-Finnish) corpus-based analysis

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This presentation discusses how English and Finnish epistemic and inferential expressions are used in linguistic research articles, published in internet journals. The main focus is put on epistemic modals and adverbs and inferential modals and adverbs. My theoretical framework is cognitive-functional, and as a background study, I refer to the results of my typological study of epistemic modality and inferentiality, based on the sample of 130 languages. In addition, I draw on studies in academic discourse, corpus linguistics, and politeness. Both the English and Finnish epistemic modals and adverbs prototypically express degrees of the speaker's certainty, while the inferential modals and adverbs in these languages prototypically express various inferential properties as well as degrees of the speaker's certainty. Several epistemic and inferential expressions have often been discussed as belonging to hedging strategies, and hedges have been considered the most significant aspect of interpersonal discourse in various academic genres in a number of disciplines (e.g. Hyland 1998). Hedges have been shown to frequently express several meanings simultaneously. Writers may use them to distinguish fact from opinion, to offer a credible representation of themselves and their work, and to give polite defrence to colleagues' views.

In this presentation, the main questions addressed are: What kind of uses of the selected expressions can be distinguished in English and Finnish linguistic research articles? Are there differences in the usage of these expressions in these two types of articles? How can the possible differences be explained? To answer these questions, an electronic corpus of 60 linguistic research articles, published between 2014 and 2016, was compiled. 30 English articles were taken from three international internet journals, and 30 Finnish articles were taken from three internet journals of local impact. A detailed contextual analysis of utterances containing the selected expressions shows that these expressions are used, firstly, to convey prototypical epistemic or prototypical inferential meanings in both the English and Finnish articles. Secondly, the expressions are used to indicate similar, multifunctional uses in both types of articles. Some of the latter are predominantly epistemic or predominantly inferential. Other uses of the latter type are predominantly polite, interpersonal uses. Different types of uses are understood as hedges in this presentation, and they can be described by means of cognitive domains and meaning potentials. Individual differences between writers are also discernible in both types of articles. Recently, the importance of considering individual differences between language users has been emphasized in several studies of academic discourse (e.g. Hyland 2015, Suomela-Salmi & Dervin 2009) as well as in Cognitive linguistics (e.g. Barlow 2013, Divjak et al. 2016).

However, important differences between the two types of articles were also found. Especially, the English articles include a greater amount of various predominantly reader-oriented, polite uses of the expressions. This does not necessarily mean that Finnish research articles are less polite than English research articles, because, for example, other types of hedges and implicitness may also be considered from the perspective of politeness. I will argue that the explanation for the divergences found should be sought not so much in the different linguistic background as in the culture of the disciplinary community the scholar belongs to.

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