Using a Corpus to Explore Argument in Academic Discourse: How Far Can We Go?

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Abstract

Many key functions of academic writing are performed over stretches of discourse longer than the sentence, e.g. the construction of stance or of argumentation. However, because corpus tools retrieve individual search words or phrases, corpus studies of academic writing have typically concentrated on investigating the individual items (Hyland, 1999, 2005) or patterns (Charles, 2006; Groom, 2005) that contribute to the construction of such rhetorical functions. Little attention has been paid to the way in which individual items operate in combination.

This study draws on two native-speaker corpora of theses: 190,000 words in politics/international relations and 300,000 words in materials science. It reports on the identification and analysis of arguments, as signalled by the combination of two high frequency linking adverbials: *however* and *thus*. For this purpose, the study uses the context feature in the concordancer of WordSmith Tools (Scott, 1999), which retrieves all instances of a search term that occur together with another search term within a span of 25 words to the left and right.

The initial hypothesis was that *thus* would tend to occur after *however*, since *thus* was expected to signal the claim at the close of the argument. Counter to expectation, though, in materials there is a clear tendency for *thus* to occur **before** *however*:

> *In cubic crystals there are 24 crystallographically equivalent ways of describing the orientation of a given grain.* **Thus** *there are twenty four equivalent descriptions of the misorientation matrix M.* **However,** *since these are equivalent, only the one with the smallest rotation angle is selected.*

This paper explains and comments on the types of argument revealed by the use of the context feature and concludes by discussing the extent to which corpus tools can be helpful in researching aspects of discourse above the sentence level.

References

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