The Effect of (In) formality on Hedges and Boosters in Spoken American English: A Corpus-Based Study(*)

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the numerous studies conducted on stance-taking, the focus has been on the written discourse, particularly on academic writing. Little attention was paid to the phenomenon of stance in the spoken discourse, especially in casual conversations. This paper aimed at comparing the frequency of occurrence of (un)certainty as two main epistemic stance functions in two casual conversation registers of different levels of formality to investigate the influence of formality on stance functions. The research triangulation approach was used to analyze stance functions in two sub-corpora of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA); TV/Movies, less formal, and the Spoken, more formal. The study showed a higher frequency of hedges and boosters in the Spoken sub-corpus. This finding demonstrated an influence of the level of formality on stance functions.

Key word: *Stance-Taking, Formality, Boosters, Hedges*

الملخص:

تناول عديد من الدراسات موضوع العبارات الدالة على نسبة التأكد من صحة الأطرحات في اللغة المكتوبة بدرجة أكبر من لغة التحدث؛ ولذلك فإن هذا البحث يهدف إلى مقارنة نسبة تكرار التعبيرات الدالة على اليقين والشك في نوعين للمحادثة يختلفان في درجة رسميتهما، وذلك لقياس مدى تأثير رسمية الخطاب على نسبة تكرارهما، ويعتمد البحث على

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التحليل اللغوي لمخزون لغوي يخص لغة التليفيزيون والسينيما، أقل رسمية، لمقارنته بمخزون لغوي آخر يسمى المخزون اللغوي للغة الحديث، ويشتمل جزء كبير منه على لغة عرض الأخبار ونقدها، وبالمقارنة ظهر اختلاف كبير بين نسبة تكرار المواقف اللغوية في كلا المخزونين، مما يدل على التأثير الملحوظ لرسمية لغة الخطاب على نسبة تكرار التعبيرات الدالة على درجة التاكد من صدق اطروحة معينة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اتخاذ موقف لغوي – رسمية الخطاب – العبارات الدالة على اليقين والشك

No human interaction is void of taking stances (Jiang, 2017). Speakers tend to show their viewpoints towards certain propositions, and to what extent they are (un)certain about them. They endeavor through the stances they take to produce an efficacious and persuasive discourse (Jiang, 2017). A great deal of research was conducted on stance, defined for the sake of this paper as the degree of commitment towards the truthfulness of given information. Nevertheless, stancewas more extensively investigated in the written discourse than in the spoken.

Research on stance in the written discourse focused on academic writing, particularly on how stance is expressed differently according to register variations, labeled also as discipline variations (Hyland, 2005). Notably, academic writing, as a general register, encompasses different registers among which are *research articles(RAs)*, *essays*, and *dissertations.* Of all the academic disciplines RAs stand out for the huge amount of research they attract in this area of stance(e.g. Hyland, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2008, Jiang 2017). Cross-register variations in the area of stance in RAs were investigated extensively in the last two decades (Haddington, 2004).

With regard to the spoken register, it has begun to attract the attention of few researchers in the area of stance, yet until now stance is under-researched in the spoken discourse. The little research on stance conducted in the spoken genre focused mostly on the academic spoken registers with very little concentration on casual conversations. As a result, the current study attempted to bridge this gap through examining stance in casual conversations. It attempted to investigate the influence of

the formality level of registers on the functions of stance; an issue totally neglected in the literature.

The two registers of different levels of formality investigated in the present study are represented in the two spoken cub-corpora of COCA. On a cline of formality, the TV/Movies sub-corpus represents a more informal register mostly including everyday language, with very little formal language. On the other hand, the Spoken sub-corpus, compared to the TV/Movies, represents a more formal register as it mostly includes news-based programs although it also comprises talk shows discussing different issues both formal and informal.

Two functions of stance were examined in these two registers for comparison, namely, *hedges* and *boosters* (Hyland, 2005). *Hedges* are lexical or grammatical language devices that show less certainty, more tentativeness about a proposition, such as *seemingly*, and *may*. Boosters, on the other hand, show full commitment to the writer's proposition, such as *doubtless* and *unquestionably*. Through quantitative linguistic analysis, a comparison was made between the frequencies of occurrence of each of these functions in the two registers of different levels of comparison. The study attempted in this way to answer two research questions not paid attention to in the literature: (1) *To what extent does formality level of spoken registers affect hedges in American English?* (2) *To what extent does formality level of spoken registers affect boosters in American English?*

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a review of the previous studies on stance functions. In Section 3, the methodology the researcher adopted in order to answer the research questions was introduced. Section 4 presentedthe results of the analysis. These results were discussed in Section 5.

2- Literature Review

As mentioned before, stance-taking in the written discourse has attracted a great deal of research with more focus on academic writing. The investigation of stance in spoken discourse has not been given equal

consideration. The little research conducted on stance taking focused mostly on academic spoken registers leaving a gap in the study of stance in casual conversations. This section reviews the study of stance in academic writing, precisely in RAs. Further, stance in the spoken discourse is discussed.

2.1. Stance in Academic Writing

With regard to the written discourse, academic writing, characterized by a high level of formality, was the genre that has attracted much attention in the area of stance-taking (Aull, Bandarage, Miller, 2017). Academic writing is privileged over less formal registers by a higher level of cautiousness and accuracy. This feature seems to be attributed to the existence of an opportunity to edit what is written in academic research, and the inevitability of the existence of criticism on the academic works on the part of other researchers (Hyland, 2005). In addition, Tas (2010) pointed out that academic writing has had a social and political role to play, and it is no longer confined to the limits of a mere linguistic process. Academic writing now requires writers to endeavor to interact with readers through adopting a certain stance from their topic and from the literature they review. Several studies have been conducted to analyzing stance-taking in academic writing(McGrath &Kuteeva, 2012; Adams & Quintana-Toledo, 2013; Jiang, 2017; Mina and Biria, 2017). Therefore,a great amount of research was conducted to investigate certain grammatical and lexical stance markers in different disciplines.

Various models have been developed to thoroughly explore the issue of stance-taking, aiming at reaching an in-depth understanding of such a phenomenon. Three of these models stand out since they exhibit great cogency and effectiveness for the process of persuasion: Du Bois (2007) in the study of stance in speaking (See Section 2.2), Hyland (2005) in academic writing, and Biber (2006) in both writing and speaking. Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse, the most cited in the area of stance-taking in academic writing, is centered around the

proposition that the success of any academic text hinges on establishing a writer-reader effective interaction. It, therefore, comprises two main aspects: Stance and engagement. Stance reflects “writer-oriented" features which help writers express (un)certainty, their attitudes, and their presence in the written text (Hyland, 2017). Regarding engagement, it refers to “reader-oriented" features that engage readers in the text and guarantee their presence, such as reader pronouns, and questions as pointed out by Hyland (2008).

Stance, the focus of the present study, has four categories in Hyland's (2005) model: Hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention. *Hedging*, labeled also as *claim making*, is a strategy used to “withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact” (Hyland, 2005, p. 178). In other words, they are lexical or grammatical language devices that show less certainty such as *seemingly*, and *may*. Boosters, on the other hand, according to Hyland (2005) are linguistic devices which allow “writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience” (p. 179). This definition clearly shows full commitment to propositions (e.g. doubtless and unquestionably).The third category, *attitude markers*, convey “surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment” (Hyland, 2005, p. 180). To put it another way, attitude markers show the writer or speaker’s feelings towards a proposition, such as *significant* and *importantly*.

Self-mention, the forth category in the model, refers to expressing self-presence. The first person pronouns, *I*, and *we* are examples par excellence of self-mention (Hyland, 2008). Hyland (2005) showed writers’ purposes of expressing their self-presence: “the use of the first person is closely related to the desire to both strongly identify oneself with a particular argument and to gain credit for an individual perspective” (p. 181).It is worth mentioning that Jiang (2017) broadened the scope of investigation of self-mention through classifying stance sources into four categories: “Overt averred” (e.g. my, our assumption),

"other human" (e.g. Mollin's assertion), "concealed" (e.g. the claim that), and "abstract entity" (e.g. the government's suggestion).

Hyland's (2005) model has one limitation, namely the limited number of stance markers under each category, which makes it more efficacious for a limited number of texts where researchers can explore these categories. However, it is not appropriate to be used in analyzing corpora of huge number of texts where there is impossibility to read all the text and explore the four categories as pointed out by Yantandu, 2017. In such a case, there is a need for a more comprehensive framework including a good number of examples under each category to be identified in corpora. Biber's (2006) framework of lexico-grammatical stance devices is an example by excellence.

Biber's (2006) framework introduced five grammatical stance-conveying devices, namely modal and semi-modal verbs, adverbs, complement clauses controlled by nouns, verbs and adjectives. Under each of these categories, Biber (2006) listed a number of stance markers and classified them according to their functions, or meanings using Biber's (2006) terminology. Biber (2006) selected the most frequently occurring stance markers in Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus. The data were not restricted to one dialect as it included British and American texts.

Using these main frameworks and others, researchers explored the phenomenon of stance. The area that had the lion's share is cross-register variations related to stance in RAs (Haddington, 2004). It seems that Becher's (1989) distinctions between four principal registers of research articles affected a great deal of research. Two of these registers are *pure*, *i.e.*, more theoretical than applied:*hard pure* (natural sciences), *soft pure* (social and human sciences), and two are applied, *hard applied* (science-based applied research), *soft applied* (social and human applied research). Based on this classification, some studies compare stance in different disciplines (Abdi, 2002; Silver, 2003; Hyland, 2005, 2011; Vold, 2006; Auria, 2008; pho, 2008; Abdollahzaheh, 2011; Hyland, 2011).

There seems to be a consensus that soft sciences attracts more

stance functions, either epistemic, attitudinal or self-mention than hard sciences. Hyland (2011), for instance, investigated the phenomenon of stance in a corpus of 240 research articles. These articles belonged two four hard fields, namely, *molecular biology, mechanical engineering, electronic engineering, magnetic physics*, and three soft fields:*sociology, philosophy, marketing, applied linguistics.*All stance functionswere usedmore extensively in soft disciplines particularly humanities and social sciences due to, according to Hyland's (2011) interpretation, the suggestion that soft fields are "more interpretative" than hard sciences. On the other hand, hard sciences tend to use factual language, which seems to be void of (un)certainty, attitude, self-mention markers. Hyland found similar results in other research (Hyland, 1998, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2008).

Another example is Jiang (2017), who relying on Hyland's (2005) model explored stance in a corpus of 60 journal articles extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC). Jiang (2017) explored noun-*that* constructions (e.g. the fact that). He found that the frequency and functions of stance nounswere influenced by the discipline where they occur. They were usedless frequently in hard fields than in soft ones. Jiang (2017) also supplemented Hyland's (2005) model in relation to self-mention. The focus of his study was not only the pronouns *I,* and *we*, or possessive adjectives *my,*and *our*.The results showed four ways writers use to express the source of stance: (1) "Overt averred", where writers explicitly express their own stance, (2) "other human", where they depend on referring to others' stances in order to persuade their listeners (e.g. the president is not sure that), (3) "concealed" where the speaker does not prefer to mention themselves or others as stance takers (e.g. it is certain that), and (4) "abstract entity" where stance is taken by an abstract identity such as a country, or an organization.

2.2 Stance in the Spoken Discourse

Having discussed stance in writing, let us discuss the spoken discourse. Speech is characterized by a higher level of spontaneity, since

it lacks any chance for edition. Unlike writers, speakers spontaneously express their opinions with no opportunity to return back to their thoughts and language to edit them (Biber, & Finegan, 1988). It is Du Boi's (2007) model, labeled as the "stance triangle", that has given impetus to research on speaker stance as an interpersonal act. The three sides of stance triangle are *evaluation, position, alignment*. These are three processes done by any a stance taker, labeled as a "subject" inDu Bois' (2007) theory. Interlocutors first *evaluate* an "object", i.e., anyone, anything, or a proposition. Thus, both interlocutors *position* themselves in relation to that object. If both agree*alignment*occurs.

Although it is a comprehensive model, it is not used as extensively as the above-mentioned models since it looks at stance from a sociolinguistic intersubjective perspective. It seems that sociolinguists focus on other topics such as politeness, and neglect stance taking. The little research on stance taking in the spoken discourse focused on academic spoken English (e.g. Poos& Simpson, 2002; Yang, 2014; Biber& Finnegan 1988; Biber 2006; Larsson 2019). Biber& Finnegan (1988);Biber (2006), and Larsson (2019) compared the phenomenon of stance in the written vs. spoken discourse.

Biber& Finnegan (1988) examined all adverbials in Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (LOB), and London-Lund corpora. They then classified stance adverbials into these categories: (1) *honestly,* i.e., manner of speaking e.g. "*strictly speaking",* (2) *generally,* referring to generalization e.g. "*generally",* (3) *surely* e.g. "*of course",* (4) *actually,* expressing emphasis e.g. *"in fact",* (5) *maybe* e.g. "*apparently",* (6) *amazingly,* expressing affection e.g. "*fortunately"*. Biber& Finnegan (1988) found that Face-to-face and telephoneconversations had the greatest frequency of*actually* adverbials. With regard to*press texts*, *official documents*, *academic prose* and *essays*, they included few stance adverbials.*Maybe* adverbials were extensively used in *academic prose* and *essays*. Overall, the findings yielded demonstrated that stance is register-restricted.

One downfall of Biber& Finnegan (1988) is that they depended

only on one grammatical device that expresses stance as pointed out by Yantandu, 2017. Biber (2006), instead, used a wide-range of lexico-grammatical markers creating a framework of five grammatical stance devices: Modals and semi-modals, adverbs, complement clauses controlled by adjectives, verbs, and nouns.Biber (2006) compared all the stance markers in his framework in different registers:Two spoken register, namely, classroom teaching, class management, and two written, namely, written course management, and textbooks. A corpus ofuniversity language, TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language (T2K-SWAL) (2.7 million words) was the data investigated. The results demonstrated that speech attracted different grammatical devices than writing. Grammatical devices were found to be of a higher frequency in the spoken registers.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no studies focused on the comparison between two spoken registers with the exception of Poosand Simpson (2002), and Yang (2014). Poos& Simpson (2002) noticed a gap in the literature in the area of hedging in the academic spoken discourse. As a result, they analyzed the frequencies of hedging in two different sub-corpora of Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE).The two selected sub-corpora were of *physical sciences*, an example of hard sciences versus *humanities*, an instance of soft sciences. Two "prototypical" instances of hedging markers, namely *kind of*, and *sort of*were selected for the analysis, which is why their frequency of occurrence in the two different academic registers were identified.

The results yielded revealed, as is the case in academic writing research, a lower frequency of hedges in hard sciences than in soft sciences. Poos& Simpson's (2002) interpretation of this lower frequency of hedges in soft sciences was that soft knowledge is by nature open to a variety of explanations and interpretations, whereas hard sciences rely more on observation and facts. As far as I am concerned, Poos& Simpson's (2002) could have used more stance markers in order for their results to be more reliable.

Yang (2014) depended on the corpus of British Academic Spoken English (BASE). He compared*boosters* and *hedges* in soft and hard registers. The soft sciences sub-corpora are *Arts and humanity*, and *social studies*, and the hard sciences sub-corpora are *medical* and *physical sciences*. Surprisingly, little differencewas foundin the frequencies of epistemic stances between the soft and hard sciences. It seems that this unexpected similarity is attributed to spontaneity in the spoken discourse, which opportunities of editing.

In conclusion, stance did not attract much attention in the spoken discourse compared to the written discourse. The little research on stance in the spoken discourse focused on academic registers, which is why examining it in non-academic registers is still a gap in the literature. This paper attempted to bridge this gap by investigating the influence of formality level on stance functions, a notion never addressed in the literature. The identification of the frequency of occurrence of stance categories in the TV/Movies sub-corpusto be comparedto that in the Spoken sub-corpus, a more formal one, showed whether formality has an influence of stance functions. Next section presents the methodology adopted to make this comparison.

3- Methodology

The primary purpose of the present paper was to explore the influence of the level of formality on the function of stance in spoken American English. Thus, it employed the research triangulation approach, employing more than one form approach (Cicourel, 1969), via utilizing a mixed methods design. A combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis yielded the results of the current study. The quantitative analysis was conducted by exploring the frequency of occurrence of stance markers that express each of the two stance functions; *boosters,* and *hedges*in two sub-corpora of different formality levels. For more elaboration, stance markers such as *certainly*, *unquestionable, no doubt* reflect a certain function, namely *certainty*, or *booster* using Hyland's (2005) terminology. The frequencies of booster-

reflecting markers wereidentified and compared in the two sub-corpora with the purpose of measuring to what extent *boosters*are affected by the level of formality.

A qualitative context-based analysis was further carried out with the objective of checking whether stance markers in context express the functions assigned for them. For instance, examining the context would determine whether *possible*is a stance marker serving the function of *hedging*or not. The number of examples where *possible*denoted any other functions, false hits in other words,was excluded from the total frequency of occurrence of this stance marker. This qualitative method, consequently, provided in-depth analysis, which, in turn, excluded any instances that would call the quantitative analysis into question.

COCA was the only tool and source of data analysis. It was created by Mark Davies (2015), a professor at the department of linguistics at Brigham Young University (BYU), USA. The rationale for choosing COCA to address the influence of the level of formality on stance functions is the huge amount of data it includes, more than one billion words, as well as the existence of two diversified spoken sub-corpora therein. TheTV/Movies sub-corpus (128 million words) is representative of very informal language as retrieved from https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/. The Spoken sub-corpus amounts to 127 million words. It is compiled from more than 150 television as well as radio programs. A formula was used to measure the formality levels of both sub-corpora as will be clear below. However, a short-time watch of the Spoken sub-corpus sources such as CNN and Newshour programs on TV or You tube shows that mostly the language is more formal as they depend on news broadcasting to a great extent.

Analyzing the two selected corpora, Spoken and TV/Movies, to explore whether they show different levels of formality relied on Dewaele and Heylighen's (1999) formula. Dewaele and Heylighen (1999) built their formula on a basic notion, namely, the classification of the lexicon into two categories: Building “more context-dependent”, or “more context-independent” speech. Regarding the lexicon building

more context-dependent speech, it is a category that includes deictic words that rely on context to be comprehensible such as the pronoun *him* which does not give any sense outside the context. These words are labeled "Deixis". Examples of deictic language, context-dependent, are words referring to people (e.g. *"him", "we"*), places (e.g. *"here", "upstairs"*), time (e.g. *"now", "yesterday"*) (Levelt, 1989). It is noteworthy that deictic language tends to have a correlation with informality. The higher their frequency is in a text, the less formal this text appears to be.

On the other hand, "non-deictic" words, context-independent, such as nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and articles are expected to increase in more formal texts. Undoubtedly, the deictic word categoriesare used also in formal texts but in a lesser frequency than non-deictic ones. Therefore, the formula relies on adding all the non-deictic word classes in a text and subtract from them all the deictic ones as follows: *F = (noun freq + adjective freq. + preposition freq. + article freq.– pronoun freq. – verb freq. – adverb freq. – interjection freq. + 100)/2*. According to this formula, the more formal language is, the higher value F, formality level has.As a result the frequencies of all word classes in the Spoken and TV/Movies corpora were identified with the purpose of measuring the formality level of each sub-corpus through the formula.

The second step was selecting a targeted structure. Biber's (2006) framework of lexico-grammatical stance devices was adopted in the current study only for selecting one grammatical device to be targeted in the investigated sub-corpora. To elaborate more, adverbs (e.g. *certainly*), as well as complement clauses controlled by adjectives (e.g. *sure that*, *important to*), nouns (*the fact that*, *the agreement to*), and verbs (e.g. *believe that, agree to*), which convey a stance, were identified in the most frequent 100 hits of each in COCA. The grammatical device that attracted the most frequent stance markers was chosen, and the stance markers under it were targeted in the data.The stance markers under the selected construction were classified into two categories*hedges,* and *boosters*. The frequency of occurrence of all the stance markers under

each category was compared in the two respective sub-corpora. Notably, the data were cleaned up by excluding all false hits, which according to the context do not express the functions assigned; *hedge,* and *booster*.

Results

In order to investigate the influence of formality level on stance functions establishing that the two sub-corpora under investigation are of different levels of formality was necessary to build the analysis on sound foundations.Dewaele and Heylighen (1999)'s formula was used to measure the formality of each sub-corpora. In order to do the formula, the frequency of occurrence of the word classes included in each sub-corpuswas identified. The results yielded are shown in Table 1.

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Frequencies of word classes in the spoken registers of COCA

Context-(in)dependent	Word Class	Frequency in Spoken Register	Frequency in TV/Movies register
Context-independent (formal)	Nouns	21,854,680	18,133,660
	Adjective	6,776,173	6,032,610
	Preposition	11,331,332	7,966,454
	Article	8,922,729	6,723,404
	Total	48,884,914	38,856,128
Context-dependent (informal)	Adverb	9,496,349	11,133,163
	Pronoun	12,055,646	18,975,596
	Verbs	26,500,116	32,134,561
	Interjection	677,829	2,828,386
	Total	48,729,940	65,071,706

The value of *F*,representing the formality level, in the Spoken register is (155,24), and in the TV/Movies is (-262,155,28). These results show that the general Spoken register is more formal than the TV/Movies

register.

Having established the issue of formality, the targeted structure was selected. The frequencies of adverbs, complement clauses controlled by nouns, verbs and adjectives conveying stance in the first 100 hits of each in COCA were compared to select the most frequent.Figure 1 demonstrates the number of stance markers under each stance-conveying device.

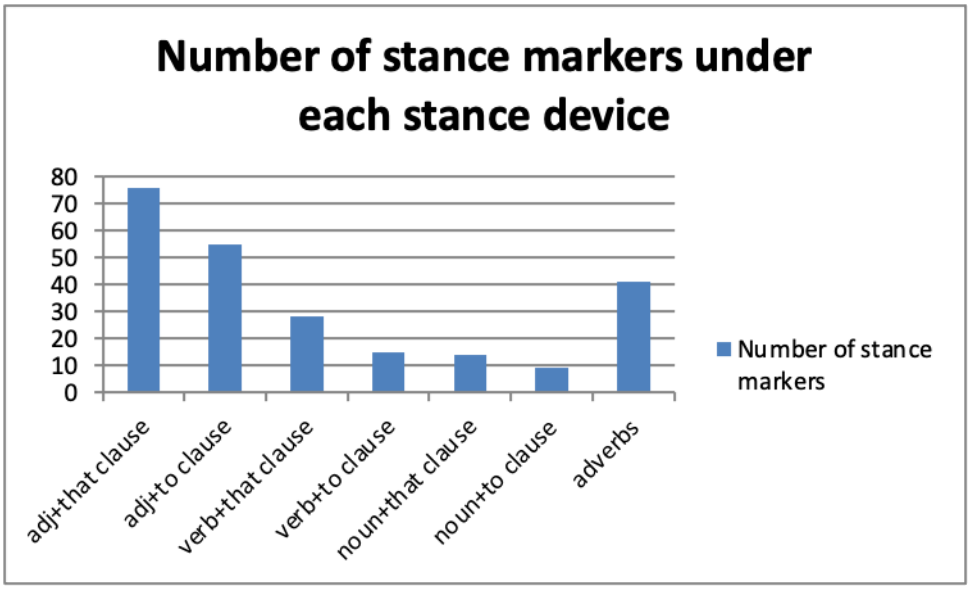

Figure 1 Numbers of stance devices in 100 hits of each device in COCA

As is evident, the number of stance *adverbs* and *verbs* is considerably high, 41, and 38 out of the first 100 hits of each in COCA respectively. However, the number of stance complement clauses controlled by adjectives and linked by *that* was found to be the greatest, namely 78. Therefore, *adjective that-clause* construction was chosen to be the grammatical structure to be targeted for the analysis so as to examine the influence of formality level on stance functions.

Seventy eight *adjective that-clause* constructions were classified under the three main headings representing the functions of stance, viz. *Boosters, hedges, attitude Markers* as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Stance adjective+that clauses classified under stance functions

Stance Functions	Stance *Adjectives + that clause*
Hedge	*possible, likely, doubtful, probable, skeptical, plausible, unlikely* (7)
Booster	*sure, clear, true, certain, obvious, evident, inevitable, impossible, assured* (9)
Attitude	*important, concerned, confident, afraid, glad, surprised, good, interesting, surprising, happy, sorry, worried, bad, apparent, sad, great, grateful, hopeful, disappointing, ironic, angry, unfortunate, funny, odd, amazing, imperative, strange, lucky, proud, thankful, pleased, essential, optimistic, amazed, hard, rare, critical, correct, nice, natural, significant, fortunate, conceivable, fair, positive, weird, scared, wrong, adamant, excited, necessary, satisfied, mad, understandable, right, remarkable, fearful, noteworthy, vital, wonderful, crucial* (61)

Calculating the frequencies of occurrence of all *hedg*e markers in each of the two registers of different formality levels, TV/Movies and the general Spoken revealed whether *hedges* as a stance function is influenced by the level of formality. The same was applied to *boosters.*

With respect to hedges, the total frequency of *adj+ that clauses* that express uncertainty in the general Spoken register differed sharply from that in the TV/Movies. The percentage of hedges, in the Spoken register was found to be 73% of all the hedges in the sample, whereas that in the TV/Movies register was found to be only 27% of all the hedges in the sample. Importantly, as COCA contains only two spoken registers: TV/Movies and the Spoken sub-corpora, it can be said

that hedges in the Spoken register represents 73% of the whole spoken discourse in COCA, and TV/Movies represents 27% of it. This sharp difference shows a great influence of the level of formality.

With regards to boosters, generally speaking the results yielded show that there is a remarkable difference between the usage of boosters in the TV/Movies and the Spoken sub-corpora. In the Spoken register, 65% of all boosters in the sample occurred with a frequency of 8,685 while in the TV/Movies 35% of all the boosters occurred with a frequency of 4,647. The results show also that each stance marker expressing certainty has a higher frequency in the Spoken register than the TV/Movies. In conclusion, The frequencies of occurrence of all stance categories were found to be of a greater frequency in the Spoken sub-corpus than in the TV-Movies. Next section attempts to interpret and discuss this finding.

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study investigated the influence of formality level and topic of conversation on stance functions. As mentioned above, all the three stance functions examined, namely *hedges* and *boosters* showed a higher frequency in the Spoken sub-corpus than in the TV/Movies. As for hedges, the results yielded showed a denser use of *hedges* in the Spoken sub-corpus than in the TV/Movies one. This finding is not surprising as being mostly news-based, the Spoken sub-corpus addresses topics and issues apparently more serious than those discussed in the TV/Movies sub-corpus. It is hypothesized that the more speakers are cautious due to the importance and seriousness of their message, the more hedges they use (Biber&Fingane, 1988). This explains why hedges are used more frequently in the Spoken sub-corpus.

To elaborate more, speakers tackling mostly serious topics are cautious enough to use hedges as a defensive method against any potential criticism. The following hypothesized example would make the idea clear. If a speaker says, "*Trump hates and underestimates Muslims*," they might be attacked by multiple pro-Trump voices. Should the same

proposition be expressed as a hedge using a hedge marker as in the following hypothesized instance: *it seems that Trump hates and underestimates Muslims,* opposing voices would not find a vast space of criticism. The reason is that the speaker presented no full commitment to the truthfulness of the proposition.

In addition, speakers having certain affiliations, or belonging to certain political parties, religious sects, financial or economic schools of thought etc., when interviewed on air, would be cautious enough to get their message to the audience as accurate and persuasive as possible. This degree of cautiousness and accuracy necessitates the use of hedges when there is not complete commitment to the truthfulness of the propositions. This extent of cautiousness does not seem to exist in casual conversations between family members or friends, for instance, discussing everyday topics. Speakers in these informal situations tend to express their stances as factual without resorting to any epistemic marker. Examples from the two sub-corpora make this interpretation of the finding more apparent.

The following is an example from the Spoken sub-corpus in COCA:

Right now, the markets are pricing at about a 90 percent of chance of a March rate hike. But it's looking more ***likely*** ***that*** *there will be four hikes this year instead of three. And that's got people concerned.*

Nightly Business Report is an economic program. It reported, in this instance, market status, which is a serious topic that requires cautiousness and accuracy. Therefore, the speaker, expecting the existence of four hikes did not present that as a factual proposition. The use of *likely that* here lessened the speaker's commitment to the truthfulness of the expectation. If the four hikes, expected, did not come about, the speaker would not be criticized or blamed. Had the speaker said: *there will be four hikes this year instead of three* without the hedge marker; criticism would, no doubt, have been directed to them if the four hikes had not been achieved.

On the other hand, Miss Sloane, a character in a Drama called Miss

Sloane, part of the TV/Movies sub-corpus, expressed her opinions about issuing new medical rules saying:

*Next! Uh, the new rules **will** **increase** wait times by two weeks. Welcome to America, where you'll wait six months for an X-ray.*

In this instance, even if the topic is, to a degree, serious, the context where she expresses her viewpoint, speaking with a friend, is informal. She expected that new rules would increase the waiting time. She even pinpointed the exact time patients would have to wait to have an X-ray. Her presentation of that proposition was, thus, factual using no hedges. Obviously, She as well as the listener realize that she does not mean the exact six months patients will have to wait for an X-ray. Therefore, there is no need to use a hedge to express less commitment to her proposition. In other words, no one would criticize her if the waiting time did not increase up to six months due to the non-serious platform she speaks through.

This finding seems to go partially in line with Biber and Fingane (1988) as they found that both hedges and boosters were nearly absent in the spoken register, the least formal in their data. The current study found low proportions of hedges in everyday casual conversations, yet it goes against Biber and Fingane (1988) in that more formal spoken registers were found in this study to use a great proportion of hedges. It should be noticed that Biber and Fingane (1988) labeled opinion expression, void of any epistemic stance markers as a *"faceless stance"*, and clarified that it has various functions. In academic writing it functions as an expression of the factualness of propositions. In other words, writers present their findings as facts that depend on strong solid evidence, which is why they refrain from using any hedges or even boosters. Even using boosters or certainty markers would deprive a text of its factual nature as pointed out by Biber and Fingane (1988). However, this function of faceless stance seems to appear more in solid rather than soft sciences.

According to Biber and Fingane (1988) faceless stances have a totally different function in the spoken context. It functions as a sign of

little, or lack of cautiousness in the spoken context. The current study calls this finding in question and considers it problematic due to over-generalization. The spoken register as a general one includes different registers of different levels of formality. This study supports Biber and Fingane (1988) in that hedges are used due to lack of cautiousness in only casual informal conversations, where speakers are not often sure or do not care of the exactness of numbers, events, propositions, etc. Nevertheless, in more formal spoken registers the usage of hedges is attributed to cautiousness that makes speakers unwilling to present their propositions as facts not to be subject to criticism.

In nutshell, the spoken register according to the current study includes contexts where cautiousness and accuracy necessitate the usage of hedges such as news-based programs. It also includes other situations where light topics are discussed with little cautiousness, which is why little hedging is used. The findings of the current study also goes in line with Biber and Fingane (1989) in that reportage of current events, which is part and parcel of the Spoken sub-corpus in COCA, showed preference of hedging.

With regard to boosters, the current study shows that the Spoken sub-corpus includes more boosters than the TV/Movies. It seems that viewpoints in everyday casual conversations are often expressed using faceless stances without much reliance on certainty markers. This tendency might be attributed to the less serious topics usually addressed in TV/Movies sub-corpus such as love affairs, food etc. When a conversation participant says in the TV/Movies corpus:

*Fine. I **love you**, but I'm not ready to get married"*

S/he expresses his emotion to only one person. Therefore, the possibility of having opposing voices is very low if compared to a speaker such as a political figure speaking to a great number of audiences about a serious issue such as presidential elections. This low possibility of having opposing voices might be the reason why the casual conversation participant in this example does not need to use an emphatic

booster marker in order to halt any possible objection to the proposal *I love you*.

On the other hand, most of the topics in the Spoken sub-corpus are more formal and serious (e.g. news broadcasting, commenting on news and current events, or arguing about political, social, economic, or financial topics). This, in addition to the fact that speakers in the Spoken sub-corpus, address a considerably good number of audience, seems to be the reason why speakers hypothesize that there would be non-persuaded audience, therefore they emphasize the truthfulness of their propositions.

Trump spoke to a CNN program labeled Erin Burnett OutFront on 19th January 2019 emphasizing that his Intel chiefs were misquoted:

> *"Well, that's not what they said.* ***I am sure that*** *that's not what they said."*

The speaker's proposition in this example is *that's not what they said.* Being aware that the topic is very important, and a lot of audience would oppose to this proposition. Consequently, a certainty marker was used to emphasize the proposition. In sum, expecting opposing views is more prevalent in the Spoken register, for the greater number of listeners, and the more serious nature of topics, than in the TV/Movies one. Consequently, more boosters are used in the Spoken sub-corpus to emphasize propositions.

The results of the current study are, in part, in line with Biber and Finegan (1988). They found that in the spoken discourse speakers tend to use "actually adverbs" to invite the listeners to affirm with major assertions. This creates a sense of solidarity. However, this study went deeper as it investigated whether within the spoken discourse various registers of different levels of formality would yield different results. As mentioned above, the TV/Movies sub-corpus showed less preference to use boosters than the Spoken sub-corpus.

Study Limitations and Suggestions

The present study showed a great influence of the level of

formality on stance functions. However, the limited number of stance markers of hedges and boosters investigated is one of the limitations of the study that can call its validity to question. It is, therefore, suggested for further research that the number of stance markers investigated increases. The influence of formality levels on attitude markers is also suggested. Another limitation of the current study is the usage of solely one grammatical structure, namely *adjective-that* clause construction. The other four structures in Biber's (2006) framework; modal and semi-modal verbs, complement clauses controlled by verbs and nouns, can be used in further research to investigate the influence of formality on stance functions.

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