

**“It is more than true that television reproduces life”:
The effect of Greek rhetorical conventions on
Greek learners’ academic writing in English**

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Abstract: This paper proposes a framework for analysing stance in argumentative essays written by Greek advanced learners of English. The essays are included in the Greek Corpus of Learner English (GRICLE). Their analysis showed that Greek learners point to their attitude mainly by using lexical chunks such as *it is true that*, *it is a fact that*, *it is obvious that*. Using such chunks allows students to defer commitment to the stated proposition, thereby presenting it as a commonly accepted fact. This technique is considered to be culturally induced as it is a typical rhetorical convention commonly followed in L1 writing.

Key words: learner corpora, argumentative writing, foreign language writing, stance, rhetorical conventions.

1. Introduction

Academic literacy, namely, the ability to comprehend and produce the academic register, presupposes knowledge of (a) the rhetorical conventions of the academic community in which students participate and (b) the techniques by means of which writers organise their texts in order to present ideational and interpersonal content (cf. Halliday 1994). This paper focuses on exploring how Greek advanced learners of English structure their discourse and position themselves towards the content and audience of their texts.

2. Organisation of discourse

Researchers have deployed various terms to refer to the ways through which writers convey ideas as well as assessments. The organisation of discourse has recently been termed *metadiscourse*, a concept that allows us to collect under one heading a gamut of devices that writers use “to organise their texts, engage readers and signal their attitudes to both their material and their audience” (Hyland & Tse 2004: 156). Moreover, metadiscourse facilitates communication, supports a writer’s position and builds a relationship with an audience (ibid: 159)¹.

Other terms used for signalling an attitude are *evaluation* and *appraisal*. According to Thompson and Hunston (2000: 6), evaluation serves the following three functions: “(a) to express the writer’s opinion, and in doing so to reflect the value system of that person and their community, (b) to construct and maintain relations between the writer and reader, and (c) to organise the discourse”. Connecting the expression of authorial opinion with the three systems of emotions, judgments, and valuations, Martin (2000: 145) uses the term *appraisal* to refer to the semantic resources that negotiate those systems. Along similar lines, Conrad and Biber (2000: 57) deploy *stance* as a term for considering expression of authorial attitude, and distinguish among the following three

¹For alternative definitions of *metadiscourse*, see Vande Kopple (1985) and Williams (1981).

domains: (a) *epistemic stance*, which, in general, comments on how certain or reliable a proposition is, (b) *attitudinal stance*, which points to the speaker's attitudes, feelings or value judgments, and (c) *style stance*, which describes how information is being presented.

Drawing on the research above, this study will use *stance* to refer to the choices authors make in order to organise discourse, project their attitude towards the topic and engage in communication with their readers. Stance seems to be a term that adequately serves the purpose of this research as it can encompass several categories of attitude indicators.

3. Research on connective devices

Previous research has referred to those choices as adverbial connectors, otherwise called linking devices, connectives, etc. The use of adverbial connectors in learner English has often been shown to be problematic; as a result, comprehensibility of texts is negatively affected (McCarthy 1991; Mauranen 1993; Granger & Petch-Tyson 1996; Altenberg & Tapper 1998; Tankó 2004; Hatzitheodorou & Mattheoudakis in print, a.o.). However, researchers agree that the correct use of connectors is important as connectors indicate attitudes and serve rhetorical purposes (McCarthy & Carter 1994, a.o.).

4. Aims and research questions

This paper has a two-fold aim: firstly, it will provide information about the size of our corpus and its design; secondly, it will focus on coherence and projection of stance in the essays of Greek advanced learners of English and will present relevant data from the corpus. More particularly, the following research questions will be addressed:

- (a) how do Greek advanced learners of English structure their arguments?
- (b) how do they indicate their stance?
- (c) when and how do they adopt an assertive or a self-effacing attitude?
- (d) to what extent are they influenced by Greek rhetorical conventions when writing in English?

5. Methodology: subjects and materials

The participants in this study were 201 Greek native speakers who were at the 3rd and 4th year of their university studies at the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece. The data used were drawn from the Greek Corpus of Learner English (henceforth GRICLE), which we compiled following the guidelines of the International Corpus of Learner English (henceforth ICLE). GRICLE is the Greek written component of ICLE, a corpus of electronic texts written by learners of different L1 backgrounds designed by the University of Louvain (Granger et al. 2002). The current size of our corpus is roughly 204,000 words. Each student was required to produce two argumentative essays of at least 500 words each on a given set of topics (cf. Appendix). The procedure was timed and students were allowed to have access to reference tools (dictionaries, grammars, etc.).

Two other corpora were used in this study as control of the native writer's norm: (a) the American collection of LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays) and (b) the American collection of the PELCRA project (Polish and English Language Corpora for Research and Applications). The former was compiled at the University of Louvain (size of corpus: 149,580 words) and includes essays written by American students on similar topics and in similar conditions with those of GRICLE. The latter is a corpus compiled by Leńko-Szymańska (Leńko-Szymańska 2006) (size of corpus: 25,467 words); this includes argumentative essays written by Polish and American first-

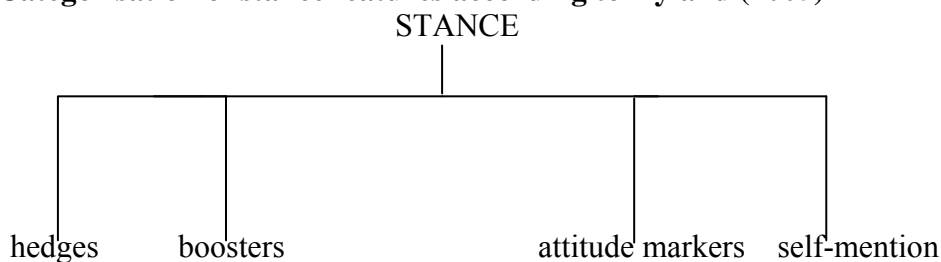
and second-year students; the essays were timed and written in class on a particular topic.

6. Theoretical framework

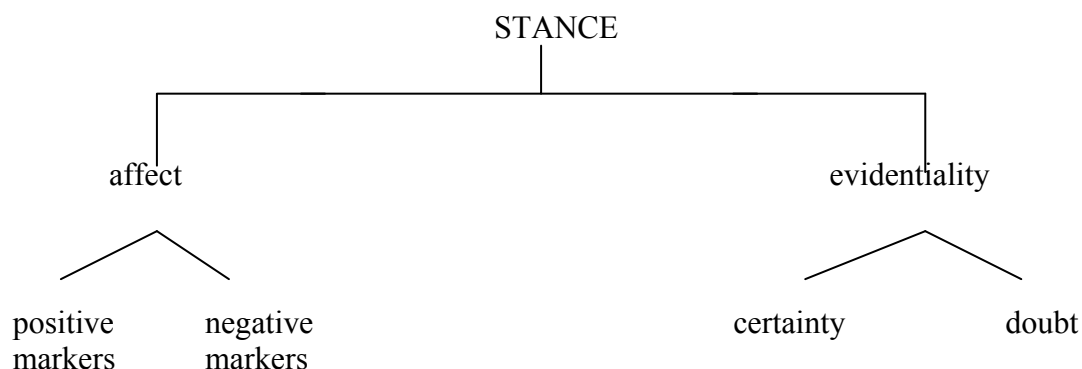
The present study examines how Greek learners of English organise their texts and present their attitude. Our analysis draws on Hyland's (2005) model of interaction in academic discourse as well as Biber and Finegan's (1989) categories of stance.

According to Hyland (2005: 176-77), interaction is achieved by means of *stance* and *engagement*; stance expresses textual voice, while engagement aims to focus the reader's attention on the writer's argument. Stance comprises four main elements: (a) hedges, (b) boosters, (c) attitude markers, and (d) self-mention (Figure 1). According to Hyland and Tse (2004: 169) and Hyland (2005: 178-180), hedges are expressions writers employ in order to withhold full commitment to a proposition, e.g., *might*, *perhaps*, *suggest*; boosters are used to emphasise the force or writer's certainty in the proposition, as well as signal "involvement with the topic and solidarity with the audience", e.g., *in fact*, *definitely*, *it is clear that*, *clearly*, *obviously*. Attitude markers express the writer's affective attitude – rather than commitment – to the proposition. They also convey surprise, agreement, frustration, e.g., *unfortunately*, *I agree*, *surprisingly*. Attitude markers are often used to pull readers into agreement so that it can be difficult to dispute writers' statements (Hyland 2005: 180). Finally, self-mention is used to make explicit reference to author(s), e.g., *I*, *we*, *my*, *our*.

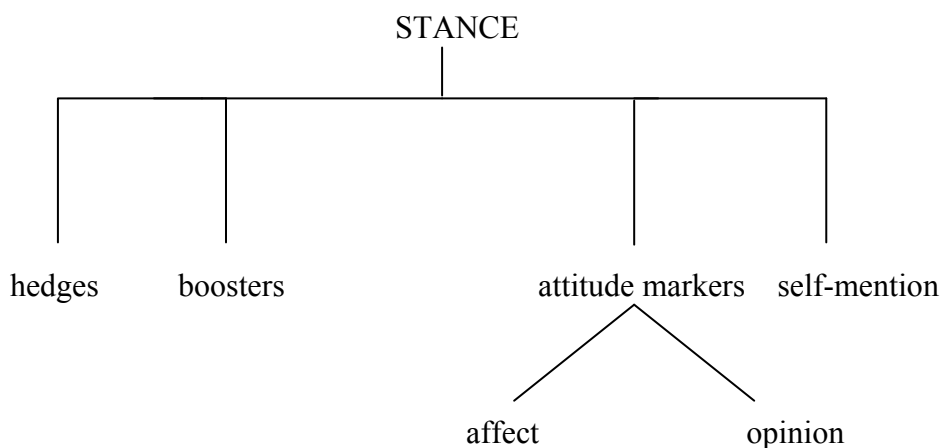
Figure 1. Categorisation of stance features according to Hyland (2005)



As we aim to account for instances of attitudinal stance that do not normally occur in academic discourse, we wish to enrich Hyland's framework with elements taken from Biber and Finegan's model (1989: 98). In the latter, stance features are divided into two pragmatic functions, namely, *affect* and *evidentiality*. By affect, Biber and Finegan refer to both positive and negative markers which include adjectives, verbs, and adverbs expressing the author's personal feelings and attitude (cf. Ochs 1989). On the other hand, evidentiality covers grammatical categories that express the author's certainty or doubt (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Categorisation of stance features according to Biber and Finegan (1989)

For the purposes of our study, we propose an alternative categorisation of stance features; this follows Hyland's categorisation (i.e., hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention) but further subdivides attitude markers into two distinct features: *affect* and *opinion*. We chose to make use of Biber's affect category as this will allow us to account for expressions frequently found in our corpus; such expressions do not normally occur in academic discourse, which is the focus of Hyland's model (e.g., *it is amazing that*, *it is shocking that*, etc.). With regard to Biber's evidentiality, we believe that it does not need to be included in our model, as its features are covered by Hyland's categories of hedges and boosters. Within attitude markers, we also decided to create a new sub-category, that of opinion; this includes lexical items which introduce the writer's cognitive attitude to the proposition stated (e.g. verbs such as *I think*, *I agree*) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Categorisation of stance features according to the model proposed in this study

The following are examples of stance features as presented in our model:

Hedges: may, might, possible, suggest, etc.

Boosters: it is evident that, it is clear that, it is a fact that, it is true that, it is obvious that, clearly, evidently, obviously, definitely, certainly, truly, etc.

Attitude markers – affect: I feel, I hope, it amazes me, it surprises me, it is shocking, it is (un)fortunate, (un)fortunately, happily, luckily, conveniently, hopefully, etc.

Attitude markers – opinion: I think, I agree, I believe, I consider, I gather, I conclude, in my opinion, in my view, according to me, etc.

Self-mention: I, we, my, our.

This study will focus on the frequency and functions only of boosters and attitude markers evidenced in the Greek learner corpus, as these present more interest in the light of contrastive rhetoric.

7. Procedure

In order to answer the research questions presented in section four above, we compared the writings of Greek and American students. In particular, we focused on boosters and attitude markers in GRICLE (the Greek written component of ICLE), LOCNESS (American collection) and PELCRA (American collection). Firstly, we carried out frequency counts of specific boosters and attitude markers expected to be found in argumentative writing. Secondly, we explored the grammatical accuracy and the rhetorical functions these expressions perform. In our analysis, we included

- under boosters: (a) lexical chunks and (b) adverbs;
- under attitude markers-affect: (a) lexical chunks, (b) verbs, and (c) adverbs;
- under attitude markers-opinion: (a) verbs and (b) prepositional phrases.

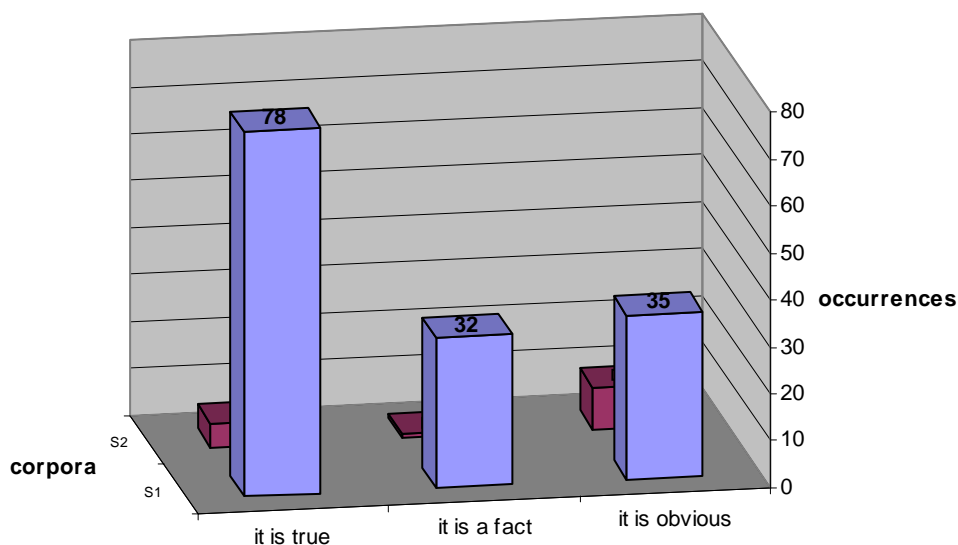
8. Results

8.1 Quantitative analysis

Regarding the use of boosters, the results indicate that Greek advanced learners of English tend to use lexical chunks as boosters much more frequently than native speakers (160 occurrences in GRICLE vs 24 occurrences in the native corpora). In some cases (e.g., *it is true*, *it is a fact*, *it is obvious*) the difference in occurrence frequency is most striking (Figure 4). By contrast, with respect to the adverbs used as boosters, we notice that native speakers use them more frequently than Greek learners (with the exception of *certainly*) (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative results regarding the frequency of boosters

<i>Boosters</i>	<i>GRICLE</i> <i>Size of corpus</i> <i>204,000</i>	<i>LOCNESS and</i> <i>PELCRA</i> <i>Size of corpora</i> <i>175,047</i>
It is true	78	5
It is a fact	32	1
It is clear	6	8
It is obvious	35	9
It is evident	9	1
Clearly	9	27
Evidently	1	1
Obviously	20	21
Definitely	16	26
Certainly	44	22
Truly	15	24

Figure 4. Frequency of three boosters in GRICLE and the native corpora

S1=GRICLE, S2=Native corpora

Regarding the use of attitude markers indicating affect, the results demonstrate that overall the occurrence frequency of those markers is very similar in GRICLE and in the native corpora. Differences are observed in the frequency of the verb *I feel* and the adverb *hopefully*, which feature more prominently in the native corpora, as well as in the frequency of the adverb *unfortunately*, which is more often used by our Greek learners (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative results regarding the frequency of attitude markers-affect

<i>Attitude markers-affect</i>	<i>GRICLE Size of corpus 204,000</i>	<i>LOCNESS and PELCRA Size of corpora 175,047</i>
I feel	9	49
I hope	4	5
It amazes me	0	0
It surprises me	0	0
It is shocking	1	0
It is fortunate	0	0
Happily	0	3
Luckily	1	2
Hopefully	5	13
Fortunately	8	2
Unfortunately	92	26

For the use of attitude markers expressing opinion, differences between Greek learners and native speakers are observed in the frequency of *I believe*, *in my opinion*, and *to conclude*, which feature more frequently in GRICLE. By contrast, *according to*

me is more frequently used in the native corpora. For the rest of those markers, frequency differences are quite low in the corpora (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparative results regarding the frequency of attitude markers-opinion

<i>Attitude markers-opinion</i>	<i>GRICLE Size of corpus 204,000</i>	<i>LOCNESS and PELCRA Size of corpora 175,047</i>
I think	60	65
I agree	13	7
I believe	95	37
I consider	2	1
I gather	0	0
I conclude	0	0
To conclude/ one can conclude	32	10
In my opinion	62	10
In my view	0	1
According to me	0	10

The results presented in the three tables above suggest that quantitative differences in the use of stance features between native speakers and Greek learners of English are mainly observed in their respective use of boosters (Table 1). In particular, Greek learners overuse lexical chunks but underuse adverbs. Another finding of our analysis points to the complete absence of specific stance indicators in the writings of Greek learners. As can be seen from Table 3 above, certain stance features are never chosen (e.g., *I conclude*, *according to me*, *in my view*, etc.) Finally, since the occurrence frequency of attitude markers in both GRICLE and native corpora is quite similar, the following section will focus exclusively on boosters as these perform a variety of functions in the Greek learner corpus.

8.2 Qualitative analysis

The analysis of boosters in GRICLE indicated the following: boosters are in general grammatically correct in the Greek learner corpus; however, rhetorically they often perform functions that diverge from conventional writing. As already mentioned above, boosters are commonly used to express the writer's certainty in the proposition (cf. Hyland 2005). Besides this function, boosters in the Greek learner corpus are also used to perform the following²:

(a) state commonly accepted ideas, e.g.

"Some people say that the greatest school for life is life itself: and *this is partly true*, too. But then again no one knows what lies ahead in one's life".

The booster *this is partly true* is used in this context to present an idea which, because it is generally accepted, has become almost a stereotypical assertion (Appendix, topic 2).

(b) project a personal opinion as an objective truth, e.g.

"*It is a fact that* television nowadays is one of the most "powerful" objects in our life".

In such cases, lexical chunks are used to hide the writer's voice. Opinion is not expressed explicitly but is rather validated, as the writer probably believes, when presented as a fact or a truth that cannot be refuted (Appendix, topic 1).

(c) introduce the topic, e.g.

² Students' extracts are presented in this paper with no corrections made to them.

“*It is an indisputable fact that* television has replaced religion in our century and if we take into consideration this replacement then, Marx's famous phrase that "religion is the opium of the masses" will change into: "television is the opium of the masses" by successfully depicting the current reality of our culture”.

This is the opening paragraph of the essay and the student chooses to rephrase the prompt (Appendix, topic 1) in order to introduce the topic.

(d) provide emphasis, e.g.

“*It is clear and obvious that* today's society would be different from its foundations if television had not existed. It is the tool of modern life and a part of our everyday subconscious needs”.

The use of two boosters together aims to emphasise the student's exaggerated argument that television is an indispensable part of modern life (Appendix, topic 1).

Moreover, there are cases where the use of boosters can be considered redundant, e.g.

“*It is a fact,* that nowadays more and more people are getting educated, by giving exams and entering in a good university”.

Once again, this is the opening sentence of the essay and the use of *it is a fact* performs no particular function and could easily be omitted (Appendix, topic 2).

A booster that warrants further discussion is the lexical chunk *it is true that*. Normally, this is used in order to present an argument that the author aims to refute by offering his/her own as more viable. According to this convention, the chunk would normally have the form *it is true that ... but*. However, Greek learners do not use this lexical chunk to perform the function that it is traditionally associated with. Instead, *it is true that* is used to perform one or a combination of the functions presented above. Along those lines, in the example below we notice that the particular lexical chunk is used to introduce the topic and provide agreement with the prompt (Appendix, topic 4): “Some people say that in our modern world, dominated by science technology and industrialisation, there is no longer a place for dreaming and imagination. *It is true that* nowadays the capitalistic and industrialised system marginalises the individual since there is not nature, there is not a place for freedom and soul relief”.

A further instance of the particular chunk is the excerpt presented below. It is worth noting that, irrespective of the highly problematic content, the use of the lexical chunk *it is true that* together with the contrastive *though* is rhetorically correct and follows the convention described above. Regarding functions, the lexical chunk is emphatic as it reinforces the claim made by the writer (Appendix, topic 1):

“In this way, step-by-step the appliance of television acquired a huge value for all human beings; just because it represented life situations in a "fancy" way that it really never happened. *It is more than true* that television reproduces life. It is of great significance, though, to consider the fact that when real life is under processions of trying to impress people and attract their interest it stops being real life and it becomes a faithful replica of it”.

In an attempt to account for the differences observed between the corpora, we explored the factors that may influence the use of boosters by Greek learners. Such factors include: (a) the use of boosters in learners' L1, and (b) L2 instruction in argumentative writing.

9. Factors influencing the use of boosters

In order to examine the possible influence of L1 on Greek learners' use of boosters, we looked at argumentative writing by Greek skilled writers in the Hellenic National Corpus (henceforth HNC), a collection of Greek texts compiled by the Institute for

Language and Speech Processing. As there does not exist a native corpus of student essays, we selected the subcorpus of commentaries from Greek newspapers so as to ensure comparability of register, i.e., argumentation (total size: 1,725,214 words).

The boosters examined in the HNC are the translation equivalents of the lexical chunks *it is true that, it is a fact that, it is obvious that*. Our analysis indicated that those chunks are used in Greek to (a) make generalisations, (b) introduce the topic, (c) provide personal opinion, and (d) provide emphasis. Quite often the use of those chunks seems to be redundant. On the whole, their function in Greek discourse is twofold: (a) to establish solidarity with the audience and (b) to express opinion. By means of the second function, writers defer commitment to the stated proposition and present it as a commonly accepted fact. Such a pre-emptive act aims to minimise disagreement on the part of the audience. This technique is a typical rhetorical convention commonly followed in Greek writing.

The rhetorical choices of Greek skilled writers in argumentative discourse are quite similar to the ones made by Greek learners of English when writing in L2. As our findings have suggested, Greek learners express their attitude not only by deploying attitude markers such as *I think, I believe, I agree*, but also by using lexical chunks such as *it is true that, it is a fact that, it is obvious that*. These choices seem to be culturally induced and, therefore, it is possible that learners may be misled into believing that they can transfer Greek rhetorical conventions to L2 writing. Such tendencies may be reinforced when instruction of rhetorical conventions in English writing is not explicit; insufficient feedback may lead to further infelicitous use.

With respect to the use of adverbs in the HNC, we examined the translation equivalents of the following: *clearly, obviously, definitely*. Those adverbs in Greek normally do not encode stance but function as adverbs of manner, often modifying adjectives or forming part of collocations; moreover, they do not usually appear in sentence-initial position as they do in English. Such differences probably account for the fact that Greek learners of English do not use them extensively.

10. Pedagogical implications

In light of the findings of this study, we suggest that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) instruction in Greece should be informed by the principles of contrastive rhetoric. Applying such principles in the L2 instructional context can help us raise both teachers' and learners' awareness of differences between L1 and L2 rhetorical conventions. With regard to teachers, our future objective will be to explore EFL teachers' written feedback to their students' choices that establish coherence and project stance. Such research may demonstrate the need to train teachers in recognising similarities and differences in the ways stance is projected by L1 and L2 writers. With regard to students, future research should aim to raise their awareness of the use and functions of stance indicators so as to help them become rhetorically literate. In this sense, academic literacy is a goal that can be attained.

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Appendix: Topics for the argumentative essays of GRICLE

Write two essays of at least 500 words. You may choose from the following topics.

1. Marx once said that religion was the opium of the masses. If he was alive at the beginning of the 21st century, he would replace religion with television.
2. Most university degrees are theoretical and do not prepare students for the real world. They are therefore of very little value.
3. Feminists have done more harm to the cause of women than good.
4. In the 19th century, Victor Hugo said: "How sad it is to think that nature is calling out but humanity refuses to pay heed." Do you think it is still true nowadays?
5. Some people say that in our modern world, dominated by science, technology and industrialisation, there is no longer a place for dreaming and imagination. What is your opinion?