

Discourse organising nouns in American and Greek university students' argumentative essays: A contrastive study

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Abstract: This paper investigates how argumentation is constructed through nouns in argumentative essays. Data are drawn from the Greek Corpus of Learner English (GRICLE) and two native corpora (LOCNESS and PELCRA). The study focuses on illocutionary, language activity and mental process nouns (cf. Francis 1994). Native speakers use more discourse organising nouns than Greek students and incorporate them effectively in their argumentation. These nouns have a clear cohesive function, can be modified by adjectives or a reference can be made to them. Greek students use those nouns mostly to refer to the prompt of the essay and provide agreement or disagreement with the topic.

Key words: learner corpora, GRICLE, lexical cohesion, discourse organising nouns, stance

1. Introduction

Cohesion is a term commonly used to describe how sentences in texts connect to one another; its main function is to promote clarity and thus facilitate comprehension of texts. Halliday and Hasan (1976: 4) maintain that “texture or cohesion exists in a text when the interpretation of one element depends on another element” and they identify five distinct categories of cohesive ties that provide cohesion in discourse: (a) reference, (b) substitution, (c) ellipsis, (d) conjunction, and (e) lexical cohesion.

Lexical cohesion, in particular, is a well-attested mode of textuality, and comes about through the selection of lexical items that are connected to those that have appeared before them in the text in ways that involve: (a) repetition of the same lexical item, (b) synonymy, and (c) collocation (the tendency of certain items to occur together) (Halliday & Hasan 1976: 288). More recently, Hoey (1991, 2001) explained how lexical items, by means of repetition and paraphrase, link sentences together. According to Hoey (1991: 161), sentences that contain links form bonds and finding out which sentences share bonds helps readers interpret the original text's intention as readers “unearth intelligibility in bonded pairs”. Consequently, bonding the sentences that contain these two items identifies how sentences are related; in its turn, this interrelation can reflect how the particular text is organised. Within the broad area of lexical cohesion, this paper attempts to explore how lexis forms text (Hoey 1991: 7) and in particular, how discourse organising nouns are used by apprentice writers, native and non-native speakers of English.

2. Discourse organising nouns

The main function of these nouns is to organise discourse and project stance. Researchers have provided various terms for this category of nouns: Halliday and Hasan (1976) called them *general nouns*, McCarthy (1991) referred to them as *discourse organising words*, Francis (1994) proposed the term *metalinguistic labels*, Hatzitheodorou (2000), drawing on Francis's work, distinguished between *neutral* and

evaluative labels, and J. Flowerdew (2006) used the term *signalling nouns*. For the purposes of this study, the term *discourse organising nouns* will be used. Discourse organising nouns have been studied with respect to both their positions and functions in texts.

According to Francis (1994), nominal phrases can be used as labels to talk about a stretch of discourse labelling it as an argument, a point, etc. Appearing before their intra-textual lexicalised reference, labels can function as a cohesive device cataphorically (forwards), can promote what will follow, and can also act prospectively as a frame for what is to be said. In this case, they are called, using Francis's term, *advance labels*, or using Hatzitheodorou's (2000) term, *prospective labels*. When they appear after their intra-textual lexicalised reference, labels can function anaphorically (backwards) or retrospectively in order to summarise, amplify, reject or ideologise, in general, what has been said or implicated. In this case they are called *retrospective labels* (cf. Charles 2003) or *encapsulating nouns* (Sinclair 2004). Retrospective labels both indicate the forward movement of argumentation and also function as a bridging link between its different stages (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Prospective and retrospective labels

ADVANCE OR PROSPECTIVE LABEL

Connects forwards

Nominal phrase → Intra-textual lexicalised reference

RETROSPECTIVE LABEL

Connects backwards

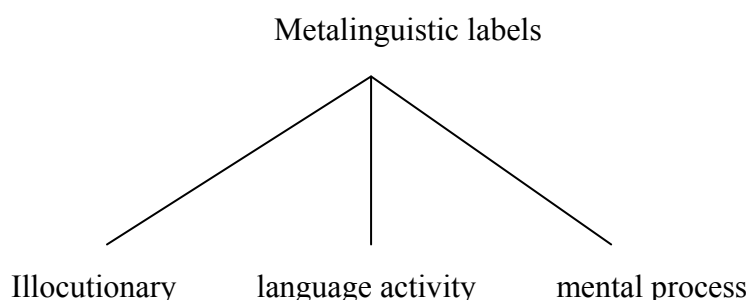
Intra-textual lexicalised reference ← Nominal phrase

Besides their categorisation according to their textual position, discourse organising nouns can also be categorised according to their functions (Francis 1994). In particular:

- (a) illocutionary nouns are nominalisations of verbal processes, e.g., argument, statement, point,
- (b) language activity nouns refer to some kind of language activity, e.g., dispute, debate, controversy, and
- (c) mental process nouns refer to cognitive states and processes, e.g., idea, view, opinion.

Figure 2 illustrates Francis's categorisation presented above:

Figure 2. The functions of metalinguistic labels



In summary, discourse organising nouns have a clear cohesive function; they have thus been researched and studied with respect to both their textual position as well as their function. As regards their position, when they appear before their lexicalised reference, they have been termed *advance* or prospective labels; when they appear after their lexicalised reference, they are called *retrospective labels* or *encapsulating nouns*. With respect to their function, discourse organising nouns have been categorised into three types, namely, *illocutionary*, *language activity*, and *mental process* nouns. In this paper, we focus on the categorisation of nouns in relation to their function in the text and deal with how they weave discourse and project authorial attitude.

3. The present study

The aim of this study is to explore and compare the frequency and use of discourse organising nouns by two groups of students: native speakers of English and advanced Greek learners of English. The participants in this study were 176 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, which is a corpus of electronic texts written by learners of different L1 backgrounds designed by the University of Louvain-la-Neuve (Granger, Dagneaux & Meunier 2002). The size of the corpus used for this study is 177,500 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-la-Neuve (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 subcorpus compiled by Leńko-Szymańska (Leńko-Szymańska 2006) and includes argumentative essays written by American first- and second-year students; the essays were timed and written in class on a particular topic (size of the American subcorpus: 25,467 words).

We ran frequency counts in both native and learner corpora of specific illocutionary, language activity and mental process nouns and examined and compared every single use of those nouns in the respective corpora. What distinguishes our study from previous ones (e.g., Francis 1994; Charles 2003) is that we do not limit our investigation to the structure 'sentence initial deictic *this* + noun' but include all structures that contain those nouns and perform an organising function. Uses such as in the following example have been excluded as they do not provide connectedness with previous discourse:

- (1) "Television ... creates illusions and distorted views" (GRICLE)

In this sentence, the word 'views' has a general sense and does not serve an organising function.

4. Results

Our data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

4.1 Quantitative results

The following table indicates the frequency counts of the most preferred illocutionary nouns evidenced in the native and non-native corpora. As can become evident, the noun ‘argument’ has the highest occurrence frequency in the native corpora, while its occurrences in GRICLE are significantly fewer. The noun ‘statement’ has a similar occurrence frequency in both corpora and finally the frequency of the illocutionary noun ‘point’ is more than double in the native corpora than in GRICLE (see Table 1).

Table 1. Illocutionary nouns in native corpora and GRICLE

Illocutionary nouns	Native corpora	GRICLE
argument	253	19
statement	49	43
point	46	19

Out of all language activity nouns in native corpora, we notice that ‘debate’ is by far the one most frequently used; ‘dispute’ and ‘controversy’ have a much lower frequency. It is worth noting that language activity nouns are practically non-existent in GRICLE; the only exception being the two occurrences of the noun ‘debate’ (see Table 2).

Table 2. Language activity nouns in native corpora and GRICLE

Language activity nouns	Native corpora	GRICLE
debate	46	2
controversy	10	0
dispute	2	0

Regarding mental process nouns, ‘idea’ is the one most frequently used in both corpora; however, it is twice as frequent in the native corpora as in GRICLE. The frequency of ‘view’ is quite similar in both corpora, while ‘opinion’ is the only discourse organising noun of those examined that is used more often in GRICLE than in the native corpora (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mental process nouns in native corpora and GRICLE

Mental process nouns	Native corpora	GRICLE
idea	72	33
view	37	26
opinion	16	27

Overall, non-native speakers tend to underuse all discourse organising nouns examined. With respect to specific categories, native speakers mostly use illocutionary nouns (e.g., ‘argument’), whereas non-native students prefer mostly mental process nouns (e.g., ‘statement’, ‘opinion’). Language activity nouns (e.g., ‘debate’) rank last in the preferences of both groups (see Table 4).

Table 4. Mental process nouns in native corpora and GRICLE

Nouns	Native corpora	GRICLE
illocutionary	348	81
mental process	150	91
language activity	58	2

4.2 Qualitative results

Illocutionary nouns in both corpora are used to perform two basic functions: (a) to refer to the essay prompt and thus express agreement or disagreement with the topic, e.g., “Money has been said to be the root of all evil. I feel this *statement* is personally true” (native corpora); (b) connect stretches of discourse, e.g., “The above *statement* however does not intend to underestimate the power of television” (GRICLE). It is worth noting that the nouns mainly preferred by native speakers to provide cohesion are ‘statement’ and ‘point’. An interesting difference between the two corpora is that native speakers modify illocutionary nouns more extensively than Greek learners; in this way, they project stance and adopt a more critical attitude towards the issues raised in their essays: e.g., “While these are *valid arguments*, they do not stand up to the ethical argument against the death penalty”. Other adjectives used to modify illocutionary nouns are: ‘weak’, ‘strong’, ‘false statements’; ‘strong’, ‘valid’, ‘worth considering points’; ‘convincing’, ‘weak’, ‘strong’, ‘predominant’, ‘valid’, ‘(in)effective’, ‘decisive’, ‘believable’, ‘substantial’, ‘specific’, ‘realistic’, ‘moot arguments’.

Regarding mental process nouns, a large number of them are used in both corpora in the plural in order to denote the general sense of those words; in these cases, they do not function as discourse organising nouns: e.g., “People with different *opinions* and *views* have to be freely permitted to expose their *ideas* and inform the world objectively” (GRICLE); “We don't have to let society coerce their *opinions* of beauty onto us” (native corpora). When they are used as discourse organising nouns, they usually have a cohesive role. Additionally, mental process nouns may be used to project stance; in these cases, they are usually modified by adjectives and appear in the introductory paragraph of the text to indicate agreement or disagreement with the topic, e.g., “*This idea* is completely erroneous” (native corpora). Modification of these nouns by adjectives is less often used when the line of argumentation is developed in the text: e.g., “We have the *unrealistic idea* that...” (native corpora), “There is the *pessimistic view* that there is no longer place for all these” (GRICLE).

Language activity nouns, in general, are rarely used in both corpora. The only exception is ‘debate’, which mainly has a cataphoric reference and is found in patterns such as ‘debate over whether’, ‘debate as to whether’, etc. Native speakers also use it to introduce the topic and modify it with adjectives such as ‘fiery’ or ‘heated’ to project stance, “It is a shame that such young children can be the center of such a *heated debate*”, “Mercy killing is a complex issue which has ignited a *fiery debate* in the medical profession as well as others concerned with ethic and human rights”.

5. Discussion

As the results presented above clearly demonstrate, there is noticeable underuse of discourse organising nouns in GRICLE as compared to their use in native corpora. Such a finding comes in contrast with Greek learners' tendency to overuse other cohesive devices, such as adverbials, when they produce argumentation. The use of adverbials by L2 learners has been extensively explored in previous research (e.g., McCarthy 1991;

Mauranen 1993; Granger & Petch-Tyson 1996; Altenberg & Tapper 1998; Tankó 2004, a.o).

Hatzitheodorou and Mattheoudakis (in print), in particular, showed that the major exponent of connectivity in Greek advanced learners' argumentative writing is adverbials (e.g., 'furthermore', 'however', etc.). Their overuse was attributed by the authors to the fact that instructors of English as an L2 in Greece explicitly teach and emphasise the use of such devices in L2 writing. By contrast, the teaching of lexical cohesion for the production of argumentation is largely neglected and discourse organising nouns are rarely discussed by EFL teachers or coursebook writers. Such neglect may be related to the fact that lexis cannot be neatly presented in categories that students can easily use as reference when writing (cf. Mahlberg 2006: 368). Adverbials, however, tend to be grouped in clusters according to their function (e.g., addition, concession, contrast, etc.) in EFL textbooks, and are, therefore, more amenable to immediate use by teachers and learners. Providing lists of cohesive devices may be more systematic; however, exposure to stretches of discourse, where specific textual patterns become apparent, has been shown to enhance learners' awareness of natural texts (Mahlberg 2006: 380). Another factor that accounts for learners' avoidance of lexical cohesion is that referring backwards or forwards to a proposition and labelling it in a certain way by means of a discourse organising noun, e.g., 'statement', 'debate', requires increased cognitive processing. In other words, learners have to both recognise the function of a proposition and be able to provide the appropriate label for it.

Our search into popular EFL textbooks currently used in Greece pointed at certain tendencies. While lexical cohesion is not explicitly or systematically taught, in some coursebooks certain nouns are highlighted (e.g., 'statement', 'idea'). This may account for the relatively high frequency of those nouns in GRICLE (see Tables 1 and 3 above). By contrast, language activity nouns ('dispute', 'debate', 'controversy') are almost non-existent when argumentation is discussed in coursebooks; that may partly explain their limited use in GRICLE.

Another interesting finding that seems to be worthy of discussion is related to the writers' tendency to agree or disagree with experts' opinions. Greek learners, in their majority, express agreement with the topic of their essays, especially when these topics include statements by well-known thinkers, such as Victor Hugo and Karl Marx (Appendix, topics 1 and 4). Conversely, American students do not hesitate to disagree with the topics and challenge experts' opinions. These findings may be explained by resorting to Hofstede's cultural model (1980). According to Hofstede, there are four dimensions on which cultures differ: (a) power distance, (b) uncertainty avoidance, (c) individualism-collectivism, and (d) masculinity-femininity. Only the first dimension of Hofstede's model will be considered to explain Greek writers' use of discourse organising nouns. Power distance refers to the extent to which a culture accepts unequal distribution of power and either challenges or accepts decisions of power holders (Hofstede 1986). Hofstede maintains that Greek culture is high power distance, and, therefore, Greeks refrain from challenging an authority and tend to express agreement with power holders; Anglo-Saxon cultures are low power distance and therefore, native speakers tend to question authority.

Related to the findings above is modification of discourse organising nouns. As already shown in the results section, native speakers extensively choose to modify them, e.g., arguments are usually characterised as 'strong', 'weak', 'legitimate', 'unfounded', etc., while debates can be 'heated' or 'fiery'. Such collocations, however, are not commonly found in GRICLE; non-native speakers usually agree with an

argument but rarely label it. They do this by employing particular verbs but they refrain from characterising the opposing argument as, for instance, 'convincing', 'valid', '(in)effective', 'believable', in the way that native speakers do.

The above observations point towards the need to look at data in the light of contrastive rhetoric as such an approach takes into consideration social aspects of writing (cf. Connor 2004), and in particular, how national culture influences the rhetorical choices made by particular national or ethnic groups (cf. Holliday 1999). Such influence may explain the rhetorical strategies Greek learners employ in their writings (cf. Granger & Petch-Tyson 1996; Hinkel 1997; Hyland & Milton 1997; Leńko-Szymańska 2006).

6. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

In light of the results of this study, there seems to be an urgent need to raise Greek learners' awareness of the multiplicity of functions that discourse organising nouns perform. To this aim, corpus-based coursebooks that are also informed by genre theory should expose learners to the functions of lexical items and their association with different types of text. For example, nouns such as 'argument' and 'statement' are more frequent in argumentation than in narration and learners should be attuned to such genre-dependent choices. This awareness can assist students in recognising rhetorical patterns of argumentation. Similarly, learners' exposure to longer stretches of discourse, rather than presentation of groups of connective devices, is expected to sensitise them to how discourse is weaved.

Connectedness in writing can be effected by means of various lexical and syntactic choices. Research thus far has shown that students' mostly preferred exponents of connectivity are linking words, such as adverbials. Indeed, EFL instructors have often pointed to this 'obsession' with adverbials which often leads to quite problematic uses. To remedy the situation, EFL writing instruction should aim at expanding learners' repertoire of connectivity devices to include discourse organising nouns that both organise text and project authorial attitude. The appropriate use of these nouns can render students' writing more varied and effective and is a characteristic of skilled writers' texts.

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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?