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Impersonalising stance: a study of anticipatory 'it' in student and published academic writing

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1 Introduction

Language allows speakers and writers to communicate information and equally importantly to express opinions and attitudes. Traditionally, however, academic writing has been seen as presenting information in an objective way which avoids the intrusion of personal opinion and focuses on the research activity being reported. Use of passives in scientific writing is a frequently quoted example of this type of language use. This view of academic language ignores the on-going debates between researchers and the importance of persuading other members of the academic community of the importance of research findings or views on the subject (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Bazerman, 1988; Swales, 1990). It downplays the writer's stance towards the research that s/he is discussing. To avoid such oversimplification, we can consider academic writing as composed of both the information or content matter under discussion and as reflection on that content. The latter, involves markers of stance such as adverbials, complement clauses, modals and semi-modals (Biber, *et al* 1999). These grammatical devices allow writers to express attitudes, assessments and judgements on the propositional content that they are writing about. Through such expressions, the writer influences how the reader interprets and evaluates the content matter.

In this paper we focus on one particular grammatical device for the expression of stance: clauses in which the subject is placed at the end of the clause and *it* inserted in the normal subject position. The terms *anticipatory 'it'* and *extraposed subject* are used here to refer to these two elements (Biber, *et al* 1999) although 'preparatory *it*' or 'dummy *it*' are used elsewhere (e.g. Jespersen, 1933; Hasselgård, Johansson & Lysvåg, 1998). To illustrate, compare the following pairs of sentences, one with and the other without extraposed subjects:

- ai* That these results are provisional must be emphasized.
- and *aii* *It must be emphasised* that these results are provisional.
- bi* To acknowledge the differences is important.
- and *bii* *It is important* to acknowledge the differences.

For convenience, the term *it*-clause will be used below to refer to the type of anticipatory *it*-clause exemplified in (*aii*) and (*bii*) which are followed by extraposed subjects. Both non-rhetorical and rhetorical motivations for the choice of *it*-clauses over nonextraposed variants, where they exist, can be identified. A *non-rhetorical* motivation rests on the assumption that longer subjects are more commonly located at the end of the clause. Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1392) claim that "for clausal subjects the postponed position is more usual than the canonical position before the verb", while Bloor & Bloor (1995: 167) observe that "other things being equal, the longer and more complicated the clause, the more likely it is to be extraposed". Hasselgård *et al.* (1998) argue that the use of anticipatory *it* accords with their 'information principle' - the tendency in English to present information within a sentence in the order 'given' to 'new' - and their principle of 'end weight' - the tendency to place relatively long and heavy elements, typically carrying a high information load, towards the end of the sentence. A. Hewings (1999) has argued, however, that non-rhetorical

motivations are rarely sufficient to account for the selection of an *it*-clause in any particular case.

A number of *rhetorical* motivations for the selection of *it*-clauses have also been observed. First, Quirk *et al.* (1985: 1114) note the use of comment clauses - including *it*-clauses such as *It is said, It is reported, It has been claimed* - as hedging devices which "express the speaker's tentativeness over the truth of the matrix clause". The *it*-clause itself distances the writer from the content expressed in the following *that*-clause and choice of the reporting verb allows great freedom in accepting, rejecting or remaining neutral about the proposition expressed (Thompson, 1994). Second, *it*-clauses with adjective complementation (e.g. *It is surprising, It is important*) allow the writer to encode an evaluation which then influences how the subsequent *that*-, *to*-infinitive, or *wh*- clause is to be interpreted (Francis, 1993; Hunston & Sinclair, 2000). Third, the choice of *it*-clauses over a construction with a personal pronoun (e.g. *It is proposed*, rather than *I propose*) can also allow the writer to depersonalise opinions. In this way, the writer presents an opinion as objective, distanced from the writer, and thus less open to negotiation (Martin, Matthiessen & Painter, 1997).

It-clauses have been found to be relatively frequent in academic writing when compared with other registers. Biber, *et al* (1999), for example, observe that *it*-clauses followed by extraposed *that*-clauses (as in (a*ii*) above) are moderately common in academic prose and written news reports, but rare in fiction and conversation, while *it*-clauses with an adjective followed by extraposed *to*-clauses (as in (b*ii*) above) are rare in conversation, moderately common in fiction and written news reports, but common in academic writing. The adjectives preceding the *to*-

clauses often express the stance of the writer with regard to possibility, necessity/importance and personal or other evaluations (Biber, *et al* 1999: 985). We argue that they are a feature of academic writing which functions to express opinions, and to comment on and evaluate propositions while allowing the writer to remain in the background. Such strategies add to the impression of the presentation of objective, impersonal knowledge.

It-clauses, while being rhetorically useful, causes problems for non-native speakers, such as those in the research reported below, who are required to produce academic prose in English. As many languages have no counterpart to anticipatory *it*-clauses (Jacobs, 1995), this is perhaps not surprising. Problems include both grammatical errors and errors of appropriacy. It is appropriacy, choosing when and how to use *it*-clauses, that we focus on here. The paper compares the use of *it*-clauses in a corpus of student dissertations written as part of the Masters in Business Administration programme at the University of Birmingham with *it*-clauses in a corpus of published academic texts taken from the field of Business Administration. We begin by specifying more precisely what we take to be within the bounds of this investigation, and present a classification of anticipatory *it*-clauses based on their rhetorical function. Using this classification, we go on to present a quantitative and qualitative comparison of *it*-clauses in the two corpora. Although lexico-grammatical errors are noted in passing, our primary focus is on the *choice* of *it*-clauses and what an examination of this can tell us about the process of interaction between writer and reader in academic text beyond the transfer of content information.

2 The investigation

2.1 Data

The investigation examines *it*-clauses in two computerised corpora of text. Although corpus analysis is now well-established in applied linguistics research, comparative studies of learner and native speaker language are more recent. Perhaps the largest scale work is by Granger and her associates on the International Corpus of Learners' English, a collection of comparable corpora of English texts written by different native speaker groups (e.g. Granger & Tyson 1996; Granger 1997; and various papers in Granger 1998). Smaller-scale research has also been conducted with corpora of English texts produced by learners. Flowerdew (1998) compares the use of markers of cause and effect in essays written by Chinese speakers on the topic of environmental pollution with those in a published text on global warming. Also working with Chinese speakers, Green, Christopher & Mei (2000) compare topic-fronted devices and logical connectors in sentence-initial position in a corpus of students' academic writing with texts written by native speakers from the LOB and BROWN corpora. The particular strength of corpus analyses such as these is that it makes feasible the examination of large quantities of text. Thus, it is possible to generalise from findings with greater confidence than when a relatively small sample of texts is examined.

The two corpora used in this analysis are referred to below as *Jourcorp* (Journals corpus) and *Discorp* (Dissertations corpus). *Jourcorp* comprises 28 papers from three journals from the early 1990s: *The Journal of General Management* ('gm' after the extracts below - 10 papers), *The Journal of Business Research* ('br' - 9 papers) and *International Marketing Review* ('mr' - 9 papers). *Discorp* comprises 15 dissertations written during the 1990s by non-native speakers as the last component of their MBA programmes at the University of Birmingham. Details are given in Table 1. The

material was scanned into a computer and the two corpora accessed using concordancing software in *WordSmith Tools* (Scott, 1996).

Corpus	No. of texts	Length of texts: range (in words)	Average length of texts (in words)	Total size of corpus (in words)
<i>Jourcorp</i>	28 papers	from 1,834 to 8,620	4,415	123,633
<i>Discorp</i>	15 dissertations	from 9,235 to 24,102	13,559	203,389

Table 1 Details of *Jourcorp* and *Discorp*

A corpus of academic journal articles was selected for comparative purposes, rather than another genre such as textbooks, on the basis that it represents the model of writing style that the students concerned are most commonly urged to aspire to in their dissertations. This occurs both in English language classes, where extracts from published articles are a frequent source of model illustrative material, and explicitly in the advice given to students at the beginning of the course from the Birmingham Business School. Clearly, however, the two genres are not identical with respect to content, organisation, and readership, and this needs to be borne in mind in making comparisons. The three particular journals were selected because articles from them occur frequently on the reading lists given to MBA students.

Discorp differs from many other corpora of learner English in that it comprises texts that may have gone through a number of drafts and are likely to have had input in one form or another, both on content and language, from fellow students and tutors, who may be native speakers. However, our focus of attention is not primarily the errors that students make and how these can inform a better understanding of second language acquisition. Rather, we are concerned with the finished products of the

writing process, here in the form of submitted dissertations and published journal papers, and the distinctions that remain between them.

2.2 *Methods*

Clearly, clause-initial *it* can perform a wide variety of grammatical functions. Here we exclude from consideration clauses in which initial *it* functions as pronoun, in cleft sentences (e.g. It was on examination of the corpus that differences were observed), and as dummy or prop *it* (e.g. It's raining). We also exclude cases in which *it* anticipates a following object clause where there is an intervening necessary clause element (Biber *et al.*, 1999) (e.g. I put it to you that the argument is incorrect) as in such cases there is no alternative to extraposition. However, we include constructions such as 'It seems' and 'It appears' which, while they "have all the appearance of clausal extraposition" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 1392) have no nonextraposed variant unless some expansion is added such as 'seems reasonable' or 'appears certain'.

A number of stages were gone through to arrive at the classification of anticipatory *it*-clauses presented below. First, we isolated all such clauses in the two corpora using concordancing software and each of us independently produced a preliminary classification of a sample of these clauses. At this stage we excluded from consideration *it*-clauses that presented propositional content; that is, with a predominantly ideational function (see Halliday, 1994). For example:

- (5) Through the examination of Tables 4 to 8, *it is possible* to discover the underlying driving forces that account for the differences between high- and low- performing exporters. (*br9*)
- (6) *It emerged* from the various responses that the dominating sectors include the electronics industries, household products ... (*gm5*)

We also excluded the relatively few instances in which *it*-clauses had a text-organising purpose, referring to other parts of the text, as in:

- (7) *It was pointed out in chapter one that Kenya has a mixed economy in which the public and private sectors complement each other. (dis11)*

We were left with those *it*-clauses which had an interpersonal function; for example, commenting on, evaluating, or hedging the following clause. We compared our classifications, and negotiated a new framework which combined features of both. While we did not refer during this process directly to other classifications of stance-like functions by Vande Kopple (1985), Crismore *et al.* (1993) and Hyland (1999), we were familiar with these, and similarities between their classifications and ours are evident, with some of their terminology being adopted. Using this framework, we went on to classify the whole of the data independently, reaching agreement on around 85% of cases and agreement on the remainder after discussion. Further minor modifications were made to the framework, resulting in that presented in the next section.

2.3 *A classification of anticipatory it-clauses as indicators of writer stance*

Interpersonal functions of <i>it</i>-clauses	Subcategories	Example realisations
1 hedges	1a likelihood/ possibility/ certainty; importance/ value/ necessity etc.	it is likely, it seems improbable, it would certainly appear
	1b what a writer thinks/assumes to be/will be/ was the case	it could be argued, it seems reasonable to assume, it was felt
2 attitude markers	2a the writer feels that something is worthy of note	it is of interest to note; it is worth pointing out; it is noteworthy
	2b the writer's evaluation	it is important; it was interesting; it is surprising
3 emphatics	3a the writer indicates that a	it follows; it is evident; it is

	conclusion/ deduction should be reached; that a proposition is true	apparent
	3b the writer strongly draws the reader's attention to a point	it is important to stress; it should be noted; it must be recognised; it is essential to understand
	3c the writer expresses a strong conviction of what is possible/ important/ necessary, etc.	it is clear; it is impossible; it is safe to assume; it would be strongly desirable
4 attribution	4a specific attribution (with a reference to the literature)	it has been proposed (+ reference)
	4b general attribution (no referencing)	it is estimated (+ no reference)

Table 2 **Classification of *it*-clauses**

Hedges withhold the writer's full commitment to the content of the extraposed subject. (For a more general discussion of hedging see, for example, Lakoff, 1973; Hyland, 1994, 1998; Crompton, 1997; Varttala, 1999.) In the first category (1*a*) we include hedges in which the writer gives an indication of the degree of probability, value or necessity of the content. In the second (1*b*), writers indicate the non-factual status of a proposition by marking it as being their suggestion, contention, argument, assumption, and so on.

Attitude markers express the writer's attitude towards the content of the extraposed subject. We distinguish between those (2*a*) in which the writer identifies information as worthy of particular attention and those (2*b*) which express an evaluation, indicate a value judgement or provide an assessment of how the content compares with expectations.

Emphatics emphasise the force or the writer's certainty in the content of the extraposed subject. We distinguish three subcategories of emphatics. The writer may

(3a) indicate that a conclusion or inference should be drawn, without mitigating this through hedging. Effectively, the reader is told that s/he, too, must reach this conclusion from the evidence provided. We make a distinction between items in 2b in which the writer simply identifies material as noteworthy and those in 3b in which the reader's attention is forcefully drawn to some point. We group items in which the writer expresses a strong conviction of what is possible, important, or necessary in category 3c.

Attributions are used to lead the reader to accept the writer's judgements as being soundly based. A distinction is made between **specific attributions** (4a) which have references to literature attached to them, and **general attributions** (4b) which have no such references.

While we found the classification reasonably easy to apply, it is worth noting one consistent area of difficulty in order to assist researchers who may wish to adopt the framework in their own investigations. Although we found it useful in general to distinguish between category **2b Attitude markers: the writer's evaluation** and **3c Emphatics: the writer expresses a strong conviction of what is possible/ important/ necessary, etc.**, placing particular instances in one or other group was occasionally problematic. We have taken adjectives such as *clear*, *impossible*, and *necessary* as indicative of a 'strong conviction' and therefore in 3c, while adjectives such as *important*, *interesting* and *surprising* do not indicate such strength of conviction and are therefore in 2b. Clearly, the precise boundary between them is subjective.

3 Findings

Table 3 presents the number of occurrences of *it*-clauses in the two corpora in each category. Two sets of figures are given: the number of occurrences and, in brackets, the number per thousand words, allowing direct comparison.

		<i>Jourcorp</i> No. (No. per 1000 words)	<i>Discorp</i> No. (No. per 1000 words)
1 hedges	1a	20 (0.16)	17 (0.08)
	1b	31 (0.25)	53 (0.26)
	Total	51 (0.41)	70 (0.34)
2 attitude markers	2a	9 (0.07)	14 (0.07)
	2b	39 (0.32)	87 (0.43)
	Total	48 (0.39)	101 (0.5)
3 emphatics	3a	7 (0.06)	31 (0.15)
	3b	15 (0.12)	34 (0.17)
	3c	18 (0.15)	59 (0.29)
	Total	40 (0.32)	124 (0.61)
4 attribution	4a	18 (0.15)	13 (0.06)
	4b	1 (0.01)	53 (0.26)
	Total	19 (0.15)	66 (0.32)
Total	118 (0.95)	361 (1.77)	

Table 3 Frequency of occurrence of *it*-clauses in the two corpora

Overall, the student writers make more frequent use of *it*-clauses (86% more based on the figures per thousand words) than published writers. However, this greater use is not consistent across the four functional categories. While student writers make greater use of *it*-clauses in indicating attitude (28% more), emphatics (91% more) and attribution (113% more), they make less use of *it*-clauses in hedging (17% less). To explore these differences in more detail, we will now look at each of the four categories in turn.

3.1 Hedges

Hedges in category 1a are similar in *Discorp* and *Jourcorp* both in terms of frequency and form. In both corpora, the predominant patterns are *it is + adjective* and *it may be + adjective* as in:

- (8) *It is likely* that in collectivist societies, professionals, as they are, will not see themselves as distinct from managers. (*gm8*)
- (9) *It may be practical* to balance this kind of trade item so that the company may maintain an 'evidence account' of all transactions. (*dis9*)

Differences are, however, more apparent in category 1b. The majority of these hedges can be placed into one of three groups: those which include *appears* or *seems* (e.g. *it appears*), those which include a modal verb (e.g. *it can be argued*), and those in which hedging is marked through another verb (e.g. *it is argued*, *it is contended*). The numbers within each group in the two corpora are given in Table 4 below:

Corpus	it + appears/ seems	it + modal + main verb	it + main verb
<i>Jourcorp</i>	12	4	11
<i>Discorp</i>	12	14	26

Table 4 Classification of category 1b items

In the first group, the main pattern in *Jourcorp* is *it + appears*, with 8 of the 12 occurrences, as in

- (10) *It appears* that the services currently performed well by export intermediaries are not perceived as germane or helpful to small firms who do (or desire to) export their products to foreign markets. (*mr7*)

In the remaining 4, *it seems* is followed by one of the adjectives *clear*, *likely* or *reasonable* (2 occurrences):

- (11) That is, *it seems clear* that as insider holding proportions increase, capitalization ratios decrease. (*br4*)

Of the 12 occurrences in *Discorp*, only 3 use *it + appears*, and a further 3 use *it seems + adjective*. The remaining 6, half of the total, include a pattern not found in *Jourcorp* - *it seems that*:

- (12) In terms of training by multinationals, *it seems that* different studies have shown different results. (*dis2*)
- (13) In terms of employing local staff, *it seems that* this phenomenon is getting better nowadays because multinationals have begun to employ a very significant proportion of local staff in managerial grades... (*dis2*)

The effect of this is to suggest indecision about the statement made in the *that*-clause. In (12), for example, while we might reasonably expect the writer to be able to form a view on whether 'different studies have shown different results' or not, the inclusion of 'it seems that' suggests a reluctance or inability to do so.

Of the small number (4) of examples in *Jourcorp* of *it*-clauses with modal verbs, 3 include *can* (*it can be argued/ anticipated/ expected*) and the other includes *could* (*it could be anticipated*). In contrast, the majority (9) of the 14 examples of this type in *Discorp* include *may* as in:

- (14) All having been said, *it may be concluded* that the role SMEs play in both the social and economic development of Third World countries should be given prominence in those developing countries where it is lagging behind... (*dis12*)
- (15) *It may be said* that its biggest handicap in terms of expansion is lack of expertise and lack of trained personnel. (*dis5*)

This use of *it may* certainly does occur in academic writing. However, it is interesting to note its absence in *Jourcorp* - and, indeed, its rarity in our examination of a larger corpus of academic writing not reported here - and contrast it with its relative frequency in *Discorp*. We suggest that its relative infrequency in published writing is a consequence of its ambiguity. In such contexts, 'may' might imply 'can' (it can be concluded; it can be said), suggesting the writer's support for the following

proposition, or it might imply 'may or may not', suggesting that the writer at least has reservations about the validity of the proposition. 'It can', however, has no such ambiguity.

The most significant difference between *Discorp* and *Jourcorp* in the third group (*it + main verb*) is in the use of the verb *argue*. Of the 26 instances of this pattern in *Discorp*, *argue* is found 17 times, yet there are no occurrences in *Jourcorp*. Examples from *Discorp* include the following:

- (16) *It is argued* that such involvement in the development of the nation gives the trade unions better bargaining power with the employers and government. (*dis15*)
- (17) *It is reasonable to argue* that governments perceive that the firms in which local nationals hold a significant equity interest are more subject to their control than those which are entirely foreign. (*dis3*)

It should be remembered that in these and all similar examples, it is the *writer's* argument that is being presented, so that the highlighted sections in the examples above might be glossed as 'I argue', and 'It is reasonable for me to argue'. If we look more widely at the use of the verb *argue* in *Jourcorp*, of the 18 occurrences (including *argue*, *argues* and *argued*) 15 have a subject other than the author, as in 'academics continue to argue', 'Futures proponents argue', and 'As Ferguson (1981) argues'. In only 3 cases is the writer the subject, and in two of these a contrast is presented between what the writer argues and what others have argued:

- (18) We would argue, however, that only conglomerates organized on classical hierarchical lines are approaching the ends of their useful lives... (*gm7*)

This suggests that in *Jourcorp* there is a tendency to use *argue* to report the views of others rather than those of the writer. The exception is when the writer's view is presented which is in some way counter to the views of others, previously reported. In

contrast, the student writers display a tendency to use *argue* to introduce their own views and claims in a neutral rather than contrastive way.

3.2 Attitude markers

Items in category 2a are similar in *Discorp* and *Jourcorp* both in terms of frequency and realisation. Most include one or more of the words *worth(y)*, *note* or *interest*:

- (19) *It is interesting to note* that Western State of Nigeria (1972, pg. viii) identify the following as the seven characteristics that small-scale industries, whether household, craft or factory, possess. (*dis12*)
- (20) *It is worth noting* that a number of interviewees alluded to the lack of trust between industry participants. (*mr6*)

In *Discorp*, the two most frequent means of using *it*-clauses in marking something of note, both occurring 3 times, are *it is observed* (meaning 'I observe') and *it is noted* (meaning 'I note'):

- (21) *It is observed* that in practice there is a strong link between national culture and organisational culture. (*dis4*)
- (22) *It is noted* that Matsushita does not fire people, it regularly rotates those in trouble into other jobs. (*dis4*)

While neither of these is found in *Jourcorp*, the corpus may simply be too small to include instances of them.

Attitude markers in category 2b are primarily of the form *be/ become + adjective*, often with some modification of the adjective, as in *it is relatively easy* or *it is very important*. Modal verbs are sometimes used, as in *it would be desirable* or *it should not be surprising*. To compare attitude markers, we begin by listing those adjectives used in this way more than once in each corpus, together with their frequency of occurrence:

Discorp	Jourcorp
difficult (19)	difficult (11)
important (18)	surprising (5)
easy (12)	easy (4)
surprising (7)	important (4)
desirable (3)	unrealistic (2)
wise (3)	useful (2)
appropriate (2)	
pointless (2)	
useful (2)	

Interestingly, then, the student writers and their published counterparts show similarity in their choice of adjectives in this pattern, with the four most frequent adjectives being the same, although not quite in the same order of frequency, in the two corpora. However, some of the adjectives used less frequently by the students seem somewhat incongruous in academic text, as in:

- (23) *It is amazing* that Yamazaki has built four such plants when most of the world's machine tool producers have not even planned, much less built, their first. (*dis7*)
- (24) *It is strange* that at times 'smallness' and 'outmoded techniques' are often treated as inseparable. (*dis12*)
- (25) *It is pointless* to install a just-in-time inventory system if the suppliers cannot deliver the inventory at the specified time and in the specified volume. (*dis7*)
- (26) *It is wise* to allow plenty of time and to make use of all possible sources of information. (*dis13*)

Differences in the modification of adjectives are hard to detect with any degree of conviction, given the small number of occurrences. In *Jourcorp* there are only 7 types of adjective modification, none of which occur more than once: *more (difficult)*, *increasingly (important)*, *very (difficult)*, *all too (easy)*, *relatively (easy)*, *seldom (practical)* and *somewhat (surprising)*. In *Discorp* there are 14 occurrences but only 6

types, with the most frequent modification with *very* and *rather* (*very (important, difficult, etc.) (6), rather (difficult) (3)*).

The general impression, then, is that differences in the use of *it*-clauses as attitude markers are largely quantitative rather than qualitative. Both student and published writers employ them for similar communicative purposes, but students employ them significantly more frequently.

3.3 *Emphatics*

Not only is there a much greater number of *it*-clause emphatics in *Discorp* relative to *Jourcorp*, but on numerous occasions the student writers appear to overstate the validity of their claims in such clauses.

For example, from category 3a there are 7 instances of 'it is true that' and 5 instances of 'it is a fact that' as in:

- (27) *It is true* that exploitation eventually will lead to increases in the explicit factors effecting the domestic industry adversely. (*dis14*)
- (28) *It is a fact* that MNEs concentrate their activities in particular developing countries and hence the same case apply for their employment, in relatively few countries. (*dis2*)

Other similarly strident phrases from *Discorp* include: *it can correctly be stated that*, *it is a certain thing that*, and *it is undisputed that*. *It*-clauses in the same category in *Jourcorp* are, by comparison, understated:

- (29) On the whole, *it can be concluded* that the transaction cost approach is successful in explaining percent foreign ownership in a joint venture partnership with China. (*br3*)
- (30) ...*it can be shown* that those American and British companies which do invest substantially have been at a significant advantage in terms of cost of capital in relation to their counterparts in West Germany and Japan. (*gm2*)

Other items in this category fall into two main patterns: *it is important to + verb* (2 in *Discorp* and 4 in *Jourcorp*) and *it + modal + passive verb* (14 in *Discorp* and 10 in *Jourcorp*). The first pattern, then, is relatively infrequent in the student dissertations while the second is relatively frequent. Of particular note here is the choice of modal verb in the second pattern. In *Jourcorp*, 9 out of 10 include *should*, and 7 of these are *it should be noted* as in:

- (31) *It should be noted*, however, that these strategy classifications do not necessarily suggest which strategies and programmes might be most productive under any given set of circumstances. (*mr2*)

The exception is the use of *must* in drawing attention to a limitation of the analysis presented:

- (32) However, *it must be recognized* that most industries in the analysis experienced low or average inflation rates during the test period (1975-1977). (*br5*)

In *Discorp*, however, while *should* is again the most frequent modal in this pattern, occurring 9 times, there are 3 examples of *must* and 2 of *have to*, as in:

- (33) *It must be emphasized* that investment of human resources by providing training is today a top management priority. (*dis9*)
- (34) *It has to be realised* that one of the more important changes that have taken place in the thinking of development economists in the last few years has been the shift in the analysis of the effects of foreign investments on Developing Countries. (*dis2*)

The strategic purpose of these and similar cases in *Discorp* would seem to be to convince the reader that they must also accept the validity of the statement that follows. However, in neither of these examples - and they are representative of the other cases - would it seem vital to the writer's argument that the statements should be accepted, or indeed that any reasonably knowledgeable reader would question their

validity in the first place. The student writers appear, then, to draw particular attention to points where no such strategy is needed.

It is perhaps in category 3c, where this overstatement becomes most pronounced. To demonstrate this, it will be useful to begin by listing the adjectives, together with their frequencies, used here in the pattern *it + is/become + adjective*.

<i>Discorp</i>	<i>Jourcorp</i>
necessary (10)	clear (6)
obvious (10)	essential (2)
clear (9)	inevitable (2)
essential (5)	necessary (1)
impossible (6 (includes 1 not possible))	not possible (1)
crucial (2)	possible (1)
vital (2)	evident (1)
inevitable (1)	unrealistic (1)
critical (1)	vital (1)
difficult (1)	
imperative (1)	
unacceptable (1)	
undeniable (1)	

In *Discorp*, the predominant use of this pattern in this category is to present the implications for business practitioners of what students have observed in their dissertation projects. The following are typical:

- (35) ...British companies should not have the dream that there are a billion Chinese out there and what a huge market this could be for any individual product. *It is necessary* to have a more realistic appreciation of dimensions of the Chinese market, the market constraints and problems. (*dis13*)
- (36) *It is crucial* that management of multinational banks has centralised access to vital information on all bank activities in relation to customers that require centralised data processing. (*dis9*)
- (37) Therefore, *it is essential* to try to minimize the adverse effects of dealing with foreign markets and on the other hand to gain maximum benefit from comparative advantages. (*dis14*)

While a similar purpose is found in a small number of examples in *Jourcorp*, as in:

- (38) ...given the critical role that strategy plays in forming corporate impression of him, *it is essential* that the CEO take an active and central role on the strategic planning group. (*gm4*)

its main use is in labelling some feature of a present situation as 'clear', 'evident', etc.

or indicating some consequence of a change or development:

- (39) As governments become more pragmatic and remain less ideology-driven, *it is inevitable* that many of the traditional beliefs about the role of the economy and private enterprises will change. (*mr5*)

The primary use of this pattern in the student dissertations, therefore, seems to be as a component of impressing upon the reader the value of their research, claiming that their findings have significant consequences for the establishment of good business practice.

3.4 Attribution

The most notable difference in attribution using *it*-clauses is that in *Discorp* there is far greater use of general attribution, without reference to sources, than in *Jourcorp*.

The following examples are illustrative of what student writers do:

- (40) With referring to the speeches of these leaders of British industries *it is generally agreed* that there are a lot of inherent problems concerning the marketing strategy and organisation of many British companies in developing competitive overseas markets, such as China. (*dis13*)
- (41) *It has been argued* that industrialisation can only take place if manufactured products can find an export market. (*dis5*)

While both *it is generally agreed* and *it has been argued* also occur in *Jourcorp*

(twice and once respectively), in all cases sources are cited to support the claim. For

example, in (42) references are given using the author-date system and in (43)

references are provided in an endnote:

- (42) *It also is generally agreed* that a consumer's perception of quality of a store's merchandise is related to the patronage of that store (Jacoby and Mazursky, 1985; Olshavsky, 1985). (*br8*)

- (43) *It has been argued*, for example, that the once limited regulation of private industry in Britain had resulted from normative social control provided by a trust in the self-regulating nature of the professions [23]. (*gm8*)

5 Conclusion

One of the main impressions created when reading the dissertations is that the student writers make a much greater and more overt effort to persuade readers of the truth of their statements than do the published writers. The analysis of *it*-clauses presented here is suggestive of how this comes about. *It*-clause emphatics and attitude markers in *Discorp* are much more frequent compared with *Jourcorp*. These emphatics in particular suggest that the students tend to state propositions more forcefully than is appropriate. As evidence for this we have noted the use of phrases such as 'It is true that...' and 'It is a fact that...'; the use of 'must' and 'have to' as in 'It must be emphasized...' and 'It has to be realised...'; and the selection of adjectives such as 'necessary', 'crucial', 'essential' when suggesting the implications of findings. While *it*-clause attitude markers display this tendency less clearly, overstatement is also indicated in choice of adjectives in, for example, 'It is amazing...' and 'It is pointless...'. The relative infrequency of *it*-clauses in hedging may be part of the same phenomenon: if statements are hedged less, then this suggests that students are making stronger claims for their validity.

It should be remembered, of course, that *it*-clauses are only one of the mechanisms, albeit an important one, by which hedging, emphasis and attitude are realised in these texts. (For a more detailed account of these other mechanisms see, for example, Hyland, 1999.) If, however, our findings are indicative of a more general tendency for student dissertation writers to try harder to persuade readers than do the writers of

journal articles, it is interesting to speculate on why this should be. The three journals investigated here explicitly state their intended readership as including 'academics', 'students', 'policy makers', 'top managers' and 'senior executives'. For MBA students writing dissertations, the readership is rather more complex (M. Hewings, 1999). They are also generally required to analyse some business context in order to make policy recommendations to some hypothetical practitioner at company, industry, sector, or governmental level. At the same time, however, they are producing an academic document which is to be assessed by their supervisor and, perhaps, the external examiner of the course. Given this, students may well feel themselves obliged to convince this real and hypothetical readership that they are making a significant contribution through their dissertation in the (probably mistaken) belief that the more significant the contribution, the more their work will be valued, and that the more forcefully their contribution is presented, the more likely the readership is to be persuaded that it is significant. Clearly, further work needs to be undertaken to provide additional support for this suggestion.

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