Interpersonal metadiscourse in university lectures in English and Italian: A corpus-based comparative study

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Abstract

It is commonly assumed that, in university lectures, it is the subject matter that is important, and the relationships between the participants are only secondary (Rounds 1987). Even though this may be true for most lectures, it does not mean that these relationships do not exist or that the subject matter is presented from a purely objective point of view. Recent research shows that university lecturers very often express an attitude towards the topic explained or discussed (Fortanet-Gómez 2004; Biber 2006). This expected activity of the lecturer is emphasised by Biber's (2006: 87) claim:

> Lecturers in university registers seem more concerned with the expression of stance than with the communications of facts. […] Instructors take advantage of their positions of power to convey their own opinions and attitudes. Thus, in addition to simply conveying information, teachers shape the ways that students approach knowledge, helping them to assess how statements are to be interpreted (e.g. whether they should be adopted as fact, criticized, or understood from a particular perspective).

In such a genre language use is inherently dialogic and the lecturer accomplishes an exchange of meaning through a strategic manipulation of rhetorical and interactive elements (Bamford 2000, 2005) and through the organization of the lecture into meaningful patterns, in order to be understood by his/her students.

This paper presents the preliminary results of a comparative analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by lecturers in their negotiation of knowledge with students in university lectures in English and Italian. Using corpus-based methods, the present analysis attempts to compare the quantitative and qualitative use of interpersonal metadiscursive devices across the two languages. Quantitative-qualitative evidence collected from the corpora in each language is analysed and discussed with special attention for divergences indicative of language-dependent variables within a generic framework reflecting the national culture.

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