Is there a prosody of stance?

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Over the last three decades, several studies have applied corpus-analytical techniques to investigate the ways in which 'stance' is expressed in spoken and written discourse. English is interesting in this regard because it has an extensive inventory of lexico-grammatical resources available for the expression of stance (including modal verbs, stance adverbial, and complement clause constructions controlled by nouns, adjectives, and verbs); these lexico-grammatical features express a wide range of epistemic and attitudinal meanings.

Further, corpus research has shown that there are strong differences among registers in their reliance on the different types of stance expressions. In general, spoken registers express stance to a much greater extent than written registers, although there are also systematic patterns of variation among spoken registers (and among written registers).

Surprisingly, research has shown that the expression of stance is especially important in university discourse. For example, stance features are important on all four 'dimensions' of linguistic variation in a multi-dimensional (MD) analysis of university spoken and written registers (Biber 2006). Similarly, stance functions are crucially important in explaining the use of 'lexical bundles' in university discourse (e.g., Biber, Conrad, Cortes 2004; Biber 2006).

The present talk begins by surveying previous research on the lexico-grammatical expression of stance, and its place in the description of register variation in the university context. The 2006 MD analysis of university registers is briefly presented, with an emphasis on the varying roles of stance features in spoken registers, across all four dimensions of variation. The talk then briefly summarizes the 2004/2006 research on lexical bundles in university discourse, which even more strongly shows the central role of stance expressions in spoken university registers. These studies did not set out to show the prevalence of these features in spoken discourse, in contrast to their relative absence in written discourse; however, that pattern of variation has consistently emerged in all studies of this type.

Both of these lines of research have focused on lexico-grammatical expressions of stance. However, given the central role of stance in spoken discourse, it is natural to ask what role prosody plays in expressing stance functions. In particular, we are interested in investigating the extent to which prosodic prominence is used to mark stance expressions as pragmatically foregrounded, in contrast to the grammatical perspective, which suggests that stance is pragmatically backgrounded. That is, stance expressions are typically analyzed as presenting an attitudinal/epistemic frame for the new/important propositional information in an utterance. However, stance expressions are sometimes marked with prosodic prominence, indicating that the stance information is more important than the 'new' propositional information that it frames.

Based on a sample of utterances from spoken university discourse, the present talk explores some of the ways in which prosody interacts with lexico-grammatical structure in the expression of stance. Three major types of stance devices are explored: verb+complement clause constructions, stance adverbials, and stance lexical bundles.

The analysis will focus on the extent to which these stance devices are marked with prosodic prominence (shown by pitch, length, and amplitude) in comparison to other propositional information in the same utterance. These findings will be interpreted relative to two overall goals:

1. to investigate the ways in which prosodic patterns vary across the different types and functions of stance expressions, and
2. to explore the possibility of a general 'prosody of stance' in English.