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*Negative Evaluation in Academic Discourse.
A Comparison of English and Italian Research Articles*

Partendo da un corpus di 20 articoli pubblicati in riviste scientifiche anglosassoni e italiane del medesimo ambito disciplinare, il presente articolo prende in esame i tratti linguistici e pragmatici sottesi ai giudizi critici, più o meno espliciti, mossi agli autori di altri studi e alle loro argomentazioni. Particolare attenzione viene riservata alle strategie retoriche che veicolano tali giudizi, le cui realizzazioni sono riconducibili sia al genere testuale impiegato sia alla diversa sensibilità interpersonale delle comunità scientifiche interessate. I risultati dell'indagine evidenziano significative convergenze/divergenze tra le due parti del corpus e all'interno del repertorio retorico-linguistico utilizzato da studiosi di area anglofona piuttosto che italiana.

1. *Introduction*

The textualisation of academic discourse, whether in its written or spoken form, reinforces the principle of knowledge construction as a collaborative, cumulative process reliant upon disciplinary networks held together by common textual practices and a shared epistemology (Gilbert / Mulkay 1984; Hyland 2000; Swales 2004a). In line with this orientation, the rhetoric of scientific research is markedly impersonal and unassertive, with authors engaged in a dialogue that steers clear of confrontation and understates individual achievement. In sociopragmatic terms, academic discourse reflects the pervasiveness of the Politeness Principle posited by Leech (1983; 2002), whereby each interactant min-

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imises praise, agreement and sympathy for himself but maximises the same values when applied to his interlocutor. The related notion of positive/negative face (Brown / Levinson 1987; Watts *et al.* 1992) is equally useful for the investigation of mitigating devices employed by researchers to encode their claims without causing offence to other members of the scientific community.

The collaborative rhetoric embedded in academic genres does not entirely exclude, however, the more agonistic dimension of science (Hunston 1993; Badger 2004), with intense competition for tenure and funding but also confrontation between diverging or even opposing knowledge claims, methodologies and theoretical frameworks. Though criticised for its waste of human capital (Tannen 2002), the competitive dimension of research has a considerable bearing on the way new findings are presented and published contributions acknowledged. As noted by Hyland, this duality has been a feature of scientific discourse for centuries and is unlikely to be superseded, at least in the short term:

Competitiveness, and its kinship with conflict and rivalry, may initially seem inimical to the scientific spirit of communal and disinterested inquiry, but competition has been a feature of academic life at least since the Greeks and was common in the medieval universities of Europe. In recent times the competition for professional recognition has been a central impetus of academic science and has become inseparable from the process by which discoveries are assessed. It is a forceful incentive to both individual discovery and collective criticism. (Hyland 1997: 27)

The degree of explicit confrontation regarded as appropriate within a given scientific community varies not only across disciplines but also between languages, cultures and ideologies (cf. Ventola / Mauranen 1996). This is particularly noticeable in the wording of evaluative speech acts, whether negative or positive, that target competing claims or research results. In recent years, numerous studies at the interface between contrastive rhetoric and interactional pragmatics have investigated the use of evaluation in written and spoken academic genres (Bondi / Mauranen 2003; Anderson / Bamford 2004; Del Lungo Camiciotti / Tognini Bonelli 2004). While the theoretical mapping of evaluative language remains controversial and tends to overlap with the related notions of stance and appraisal (cf. Hunston / Thompson 2000; Macken-

Horarik / Martin 2003), textual analysis in this area has yielded new insights into the way scholars claim and negotiate disciplinary authority, especially in lectures (Mauranen 2002b; Bamford 2004; Swales 2004b) and peer reviews (Gosden 2001; Giannoni 2002; Salager-Meyer / Alcaraz Ariza 2004; Shaw 2004). Building on such knowledge, the present article seeks to extend our understanding of the intercultural dimension of evaluation through a cross-linguistic analysis of disagreement and contrasting claims in a corpus of English and Italian research articles.

2. *Balancing praise and criticism*

The textualisation of agreement and disagreement is a key function of academic discourse, whose scientific impact depends on continuity with, but also divergence from, previously published research. The mere appearance in print of a new piece of research constitutes a 'knowledge claim' (Myers 1989: 5) which challenges, or at least threatens, the validity of earlier claims. In an early study of disagreement in academic discourse, Hunston (1993) investigated 6 research articles in biochemistry, sociolinguistics and history for evidence of conflict between proposed/opposed claims, identifying two types of device: items pointing to inconsistency in current knowledge; and items signalling the author's commitment to fill a gap in current knowledge or the need for further research. The degree of semantic explicitness and deference or justification was found to vary significantly across disciplinary fields and between authors. Disagreement was often expressed by attaching contingency to opposed claims (e.g. *McGhee et al found*) but not to proposed claims (e.g. *Our experiments showed*). Attitudinal verbs, adverbial modification and appeals for consensus were also employed to strengthen the author's view over competing knowledge-claims.

Studies of expressions encoding criticism in spoken discourse (cf. Mauranen 2000, 2002a) have shown that academic English contains few negative evaluations, as indicated for instance by the far higher frequency of *agree* (100+ per million words) compared to *don't agree* (6 per million). Critical expressions were encoded chiefly by cognitive verbs, reflexive discourse markers and other items. There are, however, pragmatically ambiguous cases where "marking stance and being

polemical or critical are not fundamentally very different”, as “academic speaking seems to be less clear and explicit about conflictual discourse or direct disagreements than one might expect” (Mauranen 2002a: §2-3). Ambiguity arises from the fuzziness and context-dependency of criticism markers, in contrast to the greater transparency of expressions of praise – an imbalance that may partly be attributed to Anglo-American sociopragmatic conventions rather than academic discourse *per se*.

Diachronic studies by Salager-Meyer / Zambrano (2001a; 2001b) have targeted rhetorical developments in English and French medical articles published between 1810 and 1995. Conflicting knowledge claims were divided into two categories: direct conflict (straightforward, overt) and indirect conflict (cover, subdued, polite). Direct conflict in English articles has declined from 95% to the present 58%, switching in the 1930s “from a personalized, harsh and at times merciless tone to a more gentle, neutral, dispassionate, matter of fact and, apparently, indifferent tone of voice” (2001a: 160). Indirect conflict, on the other hand, relies increasingly on such mitigating devices as hedges, modals, probability adjectives and avoidance of human agents in the wording of conflict¹. A similar trend, from severe to medium-weak negative evaluations, has been identified in Swedish medical articles (Gunnarsson 2001).

Working on a corpus of peer reviews in different disciplines, Hyland (2000) found a tendency to praise general features and criticise more specific points. Around 65% of critical expressions were mitigated by polar comments, hedging, indirectness, other attribution, metadiscourse bracketing and assumption of personal responsibility. Interestingly, reviews in applied linguistics contained the second highest rate of overt evaluation. Giannoni (2002: 344) identified a number of rhetorical strategies associated with expressions of praise and criticism in English software reviews. Though mostly downtoners, seven of these served to make negative evaluation more poignant: criticism enhancers, stigmatising fault, first-person responsibility, emotive language, stressing incompleteness, stacking and irony. Negative evaluation may be less

¹ The evaluative function of bibliographical references in RAs was first investigated diachronically by Salager-Meyer (1999).

frequent but it is clearly more interpersonally sensitive than positive or neutral claims: its verbalisations are well-worth considering, not only in different disciplines but also (as attempted below) in different language settings.

3. *Research article discussions*

Research articles (RAs) are complex artefacts, where each section may be seen as a separate genre, with its own macrostructure, rationale and communicative purpose. For analytical purposes it is more useful to compare single sections than entire texts, as recommended in Swales's well-known approach to the genre (1990). Accordingly, the present study will target the Discussion section due to its highly evaluative rhetorical orientation (Lindeberg 1994): this is where authors interpret and assert the value of their own findings in relation to other publications and is the most heavily hedged RA section across disciplines (Varttala 2001). Its investigation can help "clarify in more detail the status of references to previous research in academic writing and also the possible rhetorical differences in expression of these references between different languages and cultures" (Sarjala 1998: 86).

Awareness of the crucial argumentative-speculative role of Discussions is not limited to linguists, of course. In a note to the *British Medical Journal*, the editor of the *Lancet* recently complained that "it is this section of a paper that most obviously seeks to cajole and convince", because "the time in science when an observation could be held to speak for itself has long past [...] scientists now deal less with demonstrable facts than with probabilities" (Horton 1995: 985-986). The conclusion is that what is needed is a 'clinical hermeneutic approach' capable of separating fact from 'linguistic spin'.

Similar fears were voiced in an article arguing that "the discussion is often the weakest part of the paper, where careful explanation gives way to polemic [...] we see many papers where the job of the discussion seems to be to 'sell' the paper" (Docherty / Smith 1999: 1224). The debate continued with a survey of Discussion sections in *BMJ* and the recognition that "a central aim of discussions is to reinterpret the significant as relevant – and that requires subjective interpretation of data"

(Skelton / Edwards 2000: 1269). The controversial notion of authorial subjectivity is therefore inextricably linked to the language of positive/negative evaluation in written as well as spoken academic discourse.

4. *Corpus construction*

Articles in a single disciplinary area were singled out for analysis. In line with the author's field of research, the choice fell on journals in linguistics and applied linguistics, available online and/or in digital format. Journals were selected at random among those available and research articles from recent issues inspected for evidence of Discussion sections. Ten English and 10 Italian articles were retrieved among those whose (main) author could be classified as a native speaker of the language. A list of titles and source journals is provided in the Appendix.

	English	Italian	[normalised]
Corpus size	19,472	29,089	
– text body	19,185	25,764	[17,246]
– footnotes	287	3,325	[2,226]
Av. text length	1,947	2,909	
Range	1,461 - 3,349	1,158 - 5,298	

Table 1. Quantitative data (No. words)

The relative data for each sub-corpus, summarised above, shows two main differences: the greater length and range of Italian Discussions²; and their extensive use of footnotes, which accounted for over 10% of text length. Interestingly, the texts were labelled and organised in ways that break away from the traditional RA structure observed in the hard sciences. Among the English texts, 4 contained separate discussions of single experiments followed by a General Discussion and only 4 had a Conclusion(s) section after the Discussion. For Italian the picture was

² Normalised figures are also provided in this table and the following, with the Italian data proportionally adjusted to be superimposable to the English corpus.

more complex, with only 2 sections labelled *Discussione*. In the remaining 8 articles, Results and Discussion formed a single section with topical headings (5 articles) or no heading at all (3). This tendency to hybridisation – a feature observed by Bhatia (1997) also in RA Introductions – may partly account for the size of Italian texts, which were on average around 33% longer than their English counterpart. The extensive use of footnotes in Italian discussions is also worth noting, as this undervalued appendage is crucial to the intertextuality of academic writing, making articles “not monologues but conversations, in which modern scholars, their predecessors, and their subjects all take part” (Grafton 1997: 234).

5. Results

The analytical approach taken here concentrates on the functional-linguistic elements of criticism – whether entirely explicit or variably implicit – that lie embedded within academic discussions. As recognised by several authors (cf. Shaw 2004), it is sometimes arduous to define what constitutes negative evaluation in academic writing. Many linguistic items are polysemic and semantically unstable, which means that their polarity along the good-bad axis depends on contextual knowledge available only to the insider. Sometimes the choice of wording is deliberately vague, in order to avoid offence and eventually shift the responsibility from the author to the reader. Another source of potential controversy are so-called ‘black boxes’ (Latour 1987), whereby a scientific hypothesis or observation is presented as a self-evident fact: a straightforward phrase like *the science of discourse analysis*, for example, takes for granted that discourse analysis is a science, rather than a method of enquiry or analytical toolbox. Finally, there are instances where terminology is such a sensitive issue that a single word is sufficient to signal allegiance to a given theoretical slant or school of thought: e.g. the well-known conundrum *language for special / specific purposes*. Mauranen observes that “evaluation is a slippery notion for linguistic research” and “appears to be particularly elusive in academic contexts, where openly attitudinal and emotive language is supposedly avoided in favour of objective and factual discourse” (2002b: 118).

In the light of such considerations, the 20 RA texts described above were scanned for evidence of acts encoding negative evaluation of previous research. These in turn relied on a range of rhetorical devices and linguistic resources which communicate – more or less overtly – authorial criticism of existing knowledge claims in the field³.

5.1. *Diffuse/targeted criticism*

In academic writing, criticism is communicated through critical speech acts (cf. Salager-Meyer 2001; Stotesbury 2002) that signal faults or inconsistencies observed in earlier research in the field. A crucial choice made in such cases is (metaphorically speaking) either to mention the sin but not the sinner, or both the sin and the sinner. In the first instance the fault is not attributed to any author or section of the scientific community, while in the second instance it is. Applying this distinction, the critical acts in each text were identified and classified as *diffuse* (without attribution) or *targeted* (with attribution). The breakdown by type, language and number of words is given in Table 2 below.

	English		Italian [normalised]	
	Acts	Words	Acts	Words
Diffuse	52	1,738	26 [17]	1,113 [745]
%	67%	63%	65%	64%
Av. words/act	33	–	43	–
Targeted	26	1,002	14 [9]	623 [590]
%	33%	37%	35%	36%
Av. words/act	39	–	44	–
Total	78	2,740	40 [27]	1,736 [1,335]

Table 2. Diffuse vs. targeted criticism in English/Italian discussions

In terms of choice between diffuse and targeted criticism, the results show a remarkable similarity between English and Italian texts. The for-

³ The following analysis is limited to negative evaluation of other authors and/or their claims, i.e. to exophoric criticism. However, critical speech acts may also be used for endophoric reasons, as a metadiscoursal resource in academic argument (cf. Hyland 1998).

mer category accounts for two thirds of acts in both languages (67% and 65%) and the percentage is comparable – albeit somewhat lower – also in terms of number of words employed (63% and 64%). It is also worth noting that the former was present in all of the RA discussions, while the latter was completely missing in some texts (2 English and 4 Italian discussions). The four samples below illustrate the distinction between diffuse (1-2) and targeted (3-4) criticism, with the relevant acts emphasised in italics:

- (1) In short, this experiment confirms Weist's previous finding that children understand tense markings in the auxiliary system as conveying tense. *It therefore casts doubt on the Aspect First Hypothesis* to the extent it shows that children understand tense in an adult-like fashion, at least in these experimental conditions. CL1
- (2) Nuovi arabismi furono usati in lingua franca all'epoca della colonizzazione francese: ma in quel periodo la lingua franca entrò in una fase di continuum post-pidgin alquanto instabile, *per cui non mi pare lecito considerare i vocaboli attestati in questo periodo allo stesso modo di quelli testimoniati nel periodo precedente*. IL2
- (3) *These findings contradict the findings in the Reid (1987) study*, which included Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Spanish, Thai, and Indonesian ESL students, as well as English speakers or nine language backgrounds, but no Russian students. S1
- (4) Già *Schuchardt aveva osservato* che gli arabismi in lingua franca non sono molto numerosi né particolarmente rilevanti: *ma se ne possono trovare alcuni che lui non aveva notato* o non aveva classificato in questo modo. IL2

This distribution pattern suggests that both communities equally tend to avoid direct attribution of faults to their members by favouring diffuse responsibility, without explicit links to specific authors or publications. The frequency and length of such realisations, however, are clearly divergent in the two languages. In absolute terms, Italian texts contain around half the number of critical acts found in English (40 vs. 78) and taking into account normalised data the figure falls to almost one third (26 vs. 78). Moreover, the number of words encoding critical speech acts is 14% of the English corpus (2,767 out of 19,472) but only 6% of its Italian equivalent (1,748 out of 29,089).

If we turn to the average length of such acts, however, Italian is found to employ more words for both diffuse (43 vs. 33) and targeted criticism (44 vs. 39). Such data indicates that Italian academics are less likely to express criticism of either type when discussing their research – a finding consistent with the more competitive environment observed among Anglo-American scholars (cf. Duszak 1997a) – and when they do, textualisations are generally more diluted and embedded within surrounding discourse than those found in English.

5.2. *Direct/overt strategies*

At this point the aforesaid acts were carefully inspected for evidence of different rhetorical strategies present within verbalisations that imply criticism, i.e. negative evaluation of previous research. The first distinction made is whether a given strategy is associated with implicit or explicit critical speech acts: this distinction highlights which rhetorical devices are preferred for conveying disagreement implicitly (more indirect) rather than explicitly (more overt). In response to the fact that these two classes reflect a continuum rather than two clear-cut alternatives, the eleven strategies listed below are arranged progressively, ranging from the most indirect to the most overt.

	English	Italian [norm.]
more indirect	1. Hypothetical criticism	–
		7%
	2. Take a sceptical stance	4
		18%
	3. Offer interpretations	3
		36%
	4. Logically implicit criticism	2
		32%
	5. Make recommendations	1
		7%
	Number of indirect acts	28
	36%	25%

more overt	6. Signal or fill a gap	3 6%	4 13%
	7. Displace existing claims	3 6%	3 10%
	8. Comparative evaluation	12 24%	–
	9. Identify points of conflict	13 26%	11 37%
	10. Describe specific faults or failures	15 30%	6 20%
	11. General objections	4 8%	6 20%
	Number of overt acts	50 64%	30 [20] 75%

Table 3. Rhetorical strategies encoding criticism

The most noticeable quantitative findings illustrated in Table 3 may be described in the following terms:

- Overt criticism is prevalent in both languages, but more so in Italian than in English (75% vs. 64% of all acts). The first choice for Italian is Strategy 9 (*Identify points of conflict*), while for English it is Strategy 10 (*Describe specific faults or failures*).
- Accordingly, indirect criticism is more frequent in English than in Italian. Strategy 3 (*Offer interpretations*) is the first choice for the former, while for the latter it is Strategy 2 (*Take a sceptical stance*).
- The texts in hand also indicate that Italian relies on a slightly smaller range of options, lacking as it does one indirect and one overt option (Strategies 1 and 8, respectively).
- Both languages show a preference for the ‘mainstream’ strategies in each half of the table, while central and extreme options are less favoured.

A detailed analysis of each strategy – from the more indirect to the more overt – is given in Paragraphs 5.2.1 to 5.2.11. Their respective linguistic features and rhetorical functions are illustrated with topical samples from each section of the corpus.

5.2.1. Hypothetical criticism

This highly-ambivalent strategy allows the writer to make a negative comment, while simultaneously reversing or denying that selfsame claim. Criticism is expressed ‘off record’, i.e. in such an ambiguous way that “it is up to the addressee to decide how to interpret it” (Brown / Levinson 1987: 211). Only 2 occurrences were found, both in English (my italics here and in all subsequent examples):

- (5) *Experiment 1 cast doubt* on the Aspect First Hypothesis by showing that children as young as 2 could understand the past, present and future tenses in an adult-like way. *That experiment, however, did not control* for the kind of information from the world (temporal order vs. relative completion) the children might be using to make their judgments. CL1
- (6) *Unlike the subjects in Kern’s (1994) study*, who had been studying their L2 (French) for three semesters as a foreign language, *both the advanced and intermediate ESL students in this study had in fact higher levels of L2 proficiency*, having studied English as part of their secondary education for several years. SL2

In (5) the author’s experiment is at first said to *cast doubt* on the validity of a theory but the following sentence admits that the experiment is not entirely reliable, as it *did not control* for certain types of information. The second instance (6) is even more subtle. After observing that the paper’s results coincide with those in *Kern (1994)*, it points out that the different subjects involved now have *higher levels of L2 proficiency*. Having extracted the same information from different subjects is a finding that questions the validity of Kern’s findings or, alternatively, of the present study. Again, the decision on who to blame is left to the reader.

5.2.2. Take a sceptical stance

Both languages employ this strategy, which conveys negative evaluation indirectly by raising doubts as to earlier claims or findings. The stance taken is one of scepticism and, like hedging, it can be interpreted along a continuum ranging from caution to uncertainty, from mere disbelief to criticism:

- (7) As word association distributions *supposedly* represent conceptual similarity, *it is assumed that* the underlying representations for antonyms are conceptual in nature. Such associations of antonyms *are also believed* to result from the substitutability of antonyms in linguistic contexts (Ervin, 1961; Juteson & Katz, 1989). AP1
- (8) *Secondo l'ipotesi tradizionale* in aat. la vocale originatasi a seguito della metafonìa palatale di germ. */a/, indicata solitamente con il grafema <e>, *sarebbe stata* una vocale anteriore più alta. LF2

Like other indirect options, the interpretation of this strategy depends largely on co-textual information. Other markers found in the English corpus are: *ostensibly responsible for / It is puzzling that the... mechanism would / it is difficult to see how... could / These hypotheses are attractive*. It appears also in two Italian texts, as shown in (8) by initial framing and the conditional *sarebbe*; in the second instance, it is signalled by *In base al principio secondo cui la lingua verrebbe processata... l'acquisizione sarebbe*.

5.2.3. Offer interpretations

This is the favourite strategy employed for indirect criticism in English. In the light of new evidence in the field, the author provides an interpretation that was lacking. This is offered not alternatively to or in contrast with extant knowledge but merely as a further contribution to ongoing research. No direct reference is made to less adequate studies or authors. Its realisations can be hedged or concealed by variously tentative wordings, but indirectly convey criticism of previous interpretations (or their absence).

- (9) *An account of* the paradoxical interaction between target language and language change in terms of cross-language lexical competition and the selected language bias *might run as follows*. B1
- (10) *Accettando l'ipotesi* dell'esistenza di una o più liste di glosse bilingui, originate nel contesto della tradizione di studio e insegnamento del latino sviluppatasi con la riforma monastica nella scuola di Æthelwold, *è plausibile ritenere che* sia il compilatore del Glossario anonimo, sia Ælfric ne fossero a conoscenza. LF1

Other markers associated with this strategy in English are: *We suggest that / It is therefore opportune to / As such, connectionist models provide a flexible and powerful alternative / the results force us to a complex view in which we must consider / If... were ... then ... should have*. Though fewer, the Italian occurrences contained very similar wordings: *ritengo che l'unica spiegazione sia / L'attribuzione... a un tipo piuttosto che a un altro si deve perciò basare su più criteri*. It is evident here that the use of first-person constructions⁴ and more or less intensely deontic verbs are typical features of this option in both languages.

5.2.4. Logically implicit criticism

This strategy embraces a number of devices which, while avoiding overt reference to negative features, signal areas for improvement – the implication being that there is something amiss in current knowledge. The most frequent way of doing this in both languages is to compare current and earlier results/approaches:

- (11) *The sluggish rate of change between the middle and far similarities and co-occurrences found in Rubenstein and Goodenough is replaced by a more dynamic rate of change or a strong linear relation between meanings and d-primes across the entire continuum.* AP1
- (12) È ormai ampiamente riconosciuto che gran parte dei lemmi dei due glossari in esame trovano un riscontro non casuale nelle *Ety-mologiae* di Isidoro; *tuttavia nel Glossario di A-L questa tendenza appare molto più accentuata*, al punto che in molti casi le glosse ricorrono nel medesimo ordine del testo di Isidoro. LF1

Other wordings found in the English discussions are often deictic, as they contrast the host article with other knowledge claims: *This therefore provides a new line of evidence for / These results, therefore, provide limited support for / However, the results... are too strong to allow*

⁴ Vassileva's (2000) investigation of first-person pronouns in linguistics RAs showed that in English academic discourse, *I* is much more frequent than in any other language and editorial *we* is more frequent than in German and French.

for a complete endorsement of / Our point of departure in this study was / They also extend the findings of / previous studies... had pointed very strongly to / Surprisingly / the... contributes to the limited support for. The other Italian realisation of this strategy contains a rhetorically self-contradictory denial of disagreement followed by hedged criticism: *non voglio certo disconoscere l'apporto antico, su cui insisteva ad esempio X, ma è probabile che.*

5.2.5. *Make recommendations*

Telling one's peers what course of action is advisable constitutes a rather strong knowledge claim, suggesting that the author 'knows better' or is in a position to offer directions – which might explain why this is altogether the second least frequent strategy identified in the corpus. At the same time, recommendations are a form of indirect criticism, working on the assumption that earlier authors have lacked the appropriate information or insights. This is illustrated clearly in the English and, more tentatively, in the Italian sample:

- (13) In view of the evidence that speaking rates can influence listeners' judgments, *researchers should be cautious* in interpreting rating data and should consider using speaking rate as a covariate in statistical analyses to remove its potential confounding effects. SL1
- (14) *Sarebbe ora oltremodo interessante estendere l'analisi* all'uso delle forme pronominali di genere femminile, ossia la distribuzione delle varianti *ella/lei* nel contesto della prova d'esame (per es. in riassunti di articoli redatti da giornaliste o scrittrici note). LF5

The only other occurrence of this option conveys advice negatively, with first-person involvement:

- (15) However, because these effects were significant, *we do not believe they can be ignored* in studies using rating scale data. SL1

5.2.6. *Signal or fill a gap*

This strategy partly coincides with one of the steps identified in RA introductions, namely *Indicating a gap*, whereby authors rhetorically es-

establish a niche or ‘research space’ to be filled by their contribution (Swales 1990). In our case, negative evaluation is conveyed either by describing an area of insufficient/inadequate knowledge – which may or may not be filled by the host article – or by claiming new knowledge not available to other authors:

- (16) The relationship between L2 proficiency and the supportive cognitive use of the L1 illustrated in Figure 2 *would explain why the use of the L1 by students in Kern’s (1994) study, who had relatively low L2 proficiency, was not highly associated with accurate comprehension*, whereas the cognitive use of the L1 by students in this study, who had a much higher L2 proficiency level, was highly associated with accurate comprehension. SL2
- (17) *Non è stata notata un’altra peculiarità: nel vedico -ya- non forma derivati da media tantum. Nessuno dei media tantum citati da Delbrück (1888: 233 ss.) o di quelli della prima classe citati da T. Gotō (1987: 50 ss.) alterna con un derivato in -ya-¹¹. Ciò è ovvio: i media tantum segnalano valori mediali inerenti al lessema verbale, -ya- segnala i medesimi valori prodotti da conversione grammaticale.* IL1

Whereas in (16) new findings suggest how to fill a gap in *Kern’s (1994) study*, the other two English realisations of this strategy merely signal lack of knowledge in a given area: *in the many studies that have used... it is improbable that the outcomes could be explained by... alone / methods for... deserve further consideration.*

This is one of the few strategies with more occurrences in Italian discussions. Like the English sample, (17) signals a gap and subsequently provides the required interpretation, stigmatised by the phrase *Ciò è ovvio*. Other realisations tend to signal the tension between given/new information also lexically: *Ma se ne possono trovare alcuni che lui non aveva notato / Non è stata notata un’altra peculiarità / è necessario fare riferimento non solo a conoscenze, ma / non riguarda soltanto... ma anche.*

5.2.7. Displace existing claims

As criticism becomes increasingly overt, new claims can be presented not only as something that occupies an empty niche but, more antag-

onistically, as knowledge that displaces claims made by other scholars. Competition for academic credibility and exposure is reflected to an extreme degree in this option, which also includes references to the indicted authors/publications. Though not very frequent, it occurred in both sections of the corpus:

- (18) *Instead of the presumption* of “extreme disembedding” (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 4) between, say, educationally oriented CMC activities and F2F interaction, or the position which suggests that CMC and F2F communicative interaction achieves similar results save for differences in rate of transfer (e.g., social processing theory discussed earlier), *we might benefit from assuming* that most forms of internet-mediated educational activity are embedded in and functionally disassociable from other habituated and everyday communicative contexts. LT2
- (19) *all’inizio del secolo XX si tendeva a considerare* arabismo la parola che avesse l’origine prima nell’arabo, e così ad esempio harem, parola nota da tempo alle lingue europee e che *nel Dictionnaire compare* nella forma europea (in arabo suonerebbe h’aram o h’ram, e con significato alquanto differente) sarebbe arabismo, mentre *saboun* “sapone”, che con ogni probabilità riproduce l’arabo s’abun, sarebbe voce europea. *Invece la nostra scelta è stata* di classificare come arabismo solo la parola la cui origine immediata sia araba. IL2

Alternative claims are often hedged and signalled by items encoding positive evaluation: *we might benefit from* / *perciò appare più fondata l’ipotesi che*. They may also be introduced by adversative adverbials *Instead* / *invece*. Finally, the language used to report opposed viewpoints can be lexically connotated, as the nominalised form *presumption* in (18).

5.2.8. Comparative evaluation

This strategy takes negative evaluation a step further, comparing the relative merits of new insights and earlier studies; the former are invariably judged to be better than the latter. Albeit relatively frequent, it occurs only in English:

- (20) This measure of contextual similarity based on substitutability *provides a better estimate of semantic similarity than* does a measure of contextual similarity based on co-occurrence (Rubenstein & Goodenough, 1965). API

The rhetorical function is signalled in most cases by adversative discourse markers and comparative evaluative adjectives: *In contrast to... empirically anchored ratings... are more consistent / Compared to... the scaling... yielded verbal anchors... that were more consistent / a test based on... would provide a greater resolution... than / allows a more motivated and straightforward account.*

The absence of this strategy in Italian discussions is particularly interesting, as it may suggest that academics perceive comparative evaluation as being too direct and potentially offensive.

5.2.9. Identify points of conflict

With 11 occurrences, this is by far the preferred option for negative evaluation in Italian. It identifies weaknesses in the literature by drawing attention to tensions/inconsistencies between different studies or with new research in the field. For the sake of scientific advancement – which relies on consensus – the reader is expected to decide where the truth lies. Responsibility for such statements is shifted from the author to his findings and, more generally, to the literature:

- (21) The asymmetrical substitutability of contexts of direct synonyms in the present study and of synonymous adjectives in Miller and Charles (1989) as well as contexts of adjectival direct antonyms in Charles and Miller (1989) and of antonymous noun emotions in Charles (2000) *represent a contradiction to conceptual arguments of antonymy.* API
- (22) È emerso che non esistono differenze né per quanto riguarda la capacità di definire, né per quel che concerne lo stile attributivo. Questo dimostra che queste capacità hanno raggiunto in soggetti adulti un livello di maturazione che è indipendente dall'età dei bambini o dei ragazzi cui la modalità di riflettere sui propri risultati e sul linguaggio potrebbe adeguarsi. *Diverso è il dato in letteratura*, per cui lo stile attributivo differisce a seconda della cultura di

riferimento e si uniforma, all'interno della stessa cultura, fra insegnanti e ragazzi (Carr, Kurtz, Schneider, Turner e Borkowski, 1989). *Questo indica* l'influsso culturale sul sistema attributivo e si applica nel confronto fra modi diversi di concepire l'insegnamento e di ragionare sulle cause dei propri risultati, *ma non* all'interno di uno stesso sistema culturale. *Emerge, invece, che* i termini attributivi sono più difficili da definire di quelli cognitivi. PA2

Here and elsewhere the tension between right/wrong research routes is signalled mainly through the verb *contradict*, various nominalisations (*contradiction, contrast, reinterpretation*) and conjunctives (*however, though*). Italian realisations favour evaluative adjectives (*diverso, opposta*), negated verbs (*non ha confermato, non viene confermata*) and adverbials (*in realtà, invece, ma, tuttavia*).

5.2.10. *Describe specific faults or failures*

This strategy was the most frequent in English discussions, where it accounts for 30% of overt negative evaluations. It reflects the need to highlight the respective strengths and weaknesses of research, in the light of current knowledge and of the host article's findings; in this respect, it resembles the kind of criticism found also in book reviews:

- (23) *Pressley and Afflerbach's (1995) rubric only lists strategies that L1 readers have been shown to use. There is no indication that readers will use any particular strategy and there is no discussion about relative frequency of use; certainly none of the studies reviewed examined nonnative speakers of English. SL2*
- (24) *In verità il modello ricostruttivo tradizionale si limita a dare la descrizione del definitivo assestamento fonologico di un processo, a mio avviso, originariamente più articolato, ma già quasi compiuto all'epoca dei primi monumenti letterari dell'antico alto tedesco. LF2*

English wordings in this category stress the notion of incompleteness (*does not incorporate, no indication, no sign, none, not fully, only, small*), failure (*fails to, succumbs to*) and fault (*confusion, disadvantage, dissociation, overestimated, problematic, unspecific*). Italian au-

thors, on the other hand, are less willing to indicate specific faults in existing data or theories and when they do the strategy is usually hedged (*apparente, qualche, ritengo*), as in the following examples: *ma rimane ugualmente da spiegare un'apparente contraddizione di questo modello ricostruttivo / Ritengo immetodica la doppia integrazione / I dati ottenuti.. hanno offerto qualche dato a sostegno di questa ipotesi... ma non per quanto concerne.*

5.2.11. General objections

The most overt strategy in our texts targets the general orientation rather than specific flaws of previous research. It is therefore the strongest form of criticism, which challenges the scholarly value of other peer contributions. Proportionally, this option occurs twice as often in Italian discussions:

- (25) However, when there is no independent evidence to support separate representations – as is the case for light and heavy verbs – *the modular account is on shaky ground*. CS1
- (26) *Non persuade l'obiezione di A. Lubotsky (1989: 108 ss.) che così non si spiega la ridondanza dei numerosi casi in cui a un derivato in -aya- si affianca un verbo attivo con l'identico significato: vardhayati / vardhati "accresce": vardhate "cresce". IL1*

The English realisations reflect two versions of this strategy: objections (*X is a reading strategy that L2 readers do fall back on*) and negative remarks (*X is inordinately enhanced / X has not been controlled*). Only the first of these is found in Italian, signalled by *ma* (*X attribuisce... Ma in taluni casi... difficilmente è ammissibile / X parla del... ma ricordiamo che l'atonìa è secondaria / X segnala che... ma in Tunisia questo nome sembra ignoto*) or by first-person constructions (*non mi pare lecito considerare / Mi sembra invece di potere escludere*).

6. Discussion and conclusions

Albeit traditionally regarded as humanistic, the disciplinary area represented in this corpus is notable for its combination of hard/soft features and is known to adopt reporting patterns conventionally associated with the hard sciences (Stotesbury 2003). Compared to biology and history, for instance, sociolinguistics RAs tend to contain more oppositional argumentation (cf. Hunston 1993); some analysts have concluded that “Linguists are polemic writers who involve several other researchers in the text, often to refute their points of view” (Breivega *et al.* 2002: 232).

Twenty RA discussions from English/Italian journals were scanned for evidence of speech acts encoding negative evaluation (whether explicit or implicit) of existing contributions in the field. The results (see Table 2) indicate a clear prevalence of diffuse criticism, which accounts for two thirds of acts in both languages so that direct reference to criticised peers appears to be justified only in a minority of cases. On the other hand, the amount of negative evaluation is almost three times greater in English discussions: in normalised terms 78 vs. 27 acts. Italian discussions, however, employ on average more words for each act.

This indicates that Italian academics are far less likely to express criticism – be it targeted or diffuse – and when they do its realisations are more diluted, almost embedded within surrounding discourse. The low rate of criticism observed by Hyland (2000) in applied linguistics and other soft disciplines appears here to vary also across languages, falling to even lower rates in Italian. This finding confirms the tendency of smaller academic languages (cf. Čmejrková / Daneš 1997) to reflect tight social networks and a less assertive stance, with an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition. For Duszak, Anglophone scholars often view texts as a “marketable product”, while smaller academic communities enjoy a relatively “peaceful and harmonious existence” (1997b: 35). On the other hand, tight networks may stigmatise criticism because of the intense personalisation of academic discussions and the difficulty to spread responsibility when there are only few scholars working in the field.

The distribution of rhetorical strategies used to express criticism across the corpus reveals a complex picture (Table 3), with Italian scholars employing a higher proportion of overt strategies (75% of total) than

their Anglophone colleagues (64%); while less willing – quantitatively speaking – to express criticism, Italian linguists are more likely to opt for an overt strategy. Although the matter deserves further investigation, this suggests that criticism in Italian RAs is withheld for less serious misgivings and reserved for major objections. It is also consistent with contrastive data from Salager-Meyer / Zambrano (2001b) showing that French RAs hedge criticism more sparingly and express academic disagreement in a more direct, personal way compared to English.

As for the range and frequency of such realisations, both languages make limited use of extreme and central options, while they differ in terms of preferred choice. For indirect criticism, English favours Strategy 3 (*Offer interpretations*) and Italian Strategy 2 (*Take a sceptical stance*). The most frequent overt strategies are 10 (*Describe specific faults or failures*) and 9 (*Identify points of conflict*) respectively. Finally, Italian discussions lack Strategies 1 (*Hypothetical criticism*) and 8 (*Comparative evaluation*).

These results demonstrate that written academic discussions deploy a considerable range of linguistic devices when expressing contrast and conflict with peers – from the most indirect, semantically opaque strategy to the most explicit and confrontational. Their use and distribution reflects the values inherent in a discipline's epistemology as well as in national-linguistic communities. Ongoing research in this direction will be needed to account for the different textual practices of academics working in English and other languages. Though indicative of different national/cultural proclivities (Swales 2004a), the pattern cannot be generalised without recourse to a larger, more representative corpus.

An understanding of evaluative speech acts is necessary also for pedagogic purposes, bearing in mind the importance of critical speech patterns in disciplinary gatekeeping (Kiely 2004) and the fact that RAs in a given language “share the same values as well as similar lexical realizations of those values” (Thetela 1997: 114). The rapid internationalisation of academic networks poses a serious challenge not only to smaller languages but also to non-native “peripheral scholars” working in English as lingua franca (Flowerdew 2000). Parallel studies in other disciplinary areas and consideration of such parameters as authorial gender, tenure and academic impact could shed more light on this highly strategic dimension of EAP communication.

APPENDIX: Source texts⁵

English articles

- [AP1] Charles, W.G., 2000, "Contextual correlates of meaning". *Applied Psycholinguistics* 21: 505-524.
- [B1] Lee, M.-W. / Williams, J.N., 2001, "Lexical access in spoken word production by bilinguals: evidence from the semantic competitor priming paradigm". *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 4/3: 233-248.
- [BL1] Libben, G. / Gibson, M. et al., 2003, "Compound fracture: the role of semantic transparency and morphological headedness". *Brain and Language* 84: 50-64.
- [CS1] Gordon, J.K. / Dell, G.S., 2003, "Learning to divide the labor: an account of deficits in light and heavy verb production". *Cognitive Science* 27: 1-40.
- [CL1] Wagner, L., 2001, "Aspectual influences on early tense comprehension". *Journal of Child Language* 28: 661-681.
- [LT1] Kramsch, C. / A'Ness, F. / Lam, W.S., 2000, "Authenticity and authorship in the computer-mediated acquisition of L2 literacy". *Language Learning and Technology* 4/2: 78-104.
- [LT2] Thorne, S.L., 2003, "Artifacts and cultures-of-use in intercultural communication". *Language Learning and Technology* 7/2: 38-67.
- [S1] Wintergerst, A.C. / DeCapua, A. / Verna, M.A., 2003, "Conceptualizing learning style modalities for ESL/EFL students. *System* 31: 85-106.
- [SL1] Munro, M.J. / Derwing, T.M., 2001, "Modeling perceptions of the accentedness and comprehensibility of L2 speech". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 23: 451-468.
- [SL2] Upton, T.A. / Lee-Thompson, L.-C., 2001, "The role of the first language in second language reading". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 23: 469-495.

⁵ Each title is identified by a code in square brackets. This is recalled wherever a corpus item is cited within the present article.

Italian articles

- [PA1] Lerna, A. / Massagli, A. et al., 2002, “Imparare a parlare con il format narrativo: prima applicazione nella riabilitazione del linguaggio nei bambini con sindrome di Down”. *Rivista di psicolinguistica applicata* 2/3: 39-55.
- [PA2] Benelli, B. / Moè, A., 2002, “Capacità di definire e stile attributivo: aspetti metacognitivi e metacomunicativi”. *Rivista di psicolinguistica applicata* 2/3: 91-106.
- [IL1] Lazzeroni, R., 2002, “Transitivi, causativi e incoativi nel sistema verbale vedico”. *Incontri Linguistici* 25: 105-122.
- [IL2] Cifoletti, G., 2002, “Coincidenze lessicali tra la lingua franca e l’arabo tunisino”. *Incontri Linguistici* 25: 125-150.
- [IL3] Prosdocimi, A.L., 2002, “Il genitivo singolare dei temi in -o- nelle varietà italiche (osco, sannita, umbro, sudpiceno, etc.). *Incontri Linguistici* 25: 66-76.
- [LF1] Lazzari, L., 2003, “Il Glossario latino-inglese nel manoscritto di Anversa e Londra ed il Glossario di Ælfric: dipendenza diretta o derivazione comune?”. *Linguistica e Filologia* 16: 159-190.
- [LF2] Panieri, L., 2003, “Una nuova ipotesi fonetica sull’Umlaut primario di germ. */a/ in antico alto tedesco”. *Linguistica e Filologia* 17: 7-23.
- [LF3] Dal Negro, S., 2002, “Dal Pizzo Lareccio (CO) a Pioppino (MN): un viaggio tra i fitotoponimi lombardi”. *Linguistica e Filologia* 14: 81-102.
- [LF4] Bozzone Costa, R., 2002, “Rassegna degli errori lessicali in testi scritti di apprendenti elementari, intermedi ed avanzati di italiano L2 (ed implicazioni didattiche)”. *Linguistica e Filologia* 14: 37-67.
- [LF5] Valentini, A., 2002, “Tratti neostandard (e substandard) nell’italiano scritto di studenti universitari”. *Linguistica e Filologia* 14: 303-322.

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