English for Specific Purposes 58 (2020) 30–42

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

English for Specific Purposes

journal homepage: http://ees.elsevier.com/esp/default.asp

Pragmatic force modifiers in English-medium master's thesis defenses in Taiwan universities

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 26 December 2019

ABSTRACT

This corpus-based study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs) in seven English-medium Master's thesis defenses from four Taiwan universities. The study reveals a broad distribution of modifiers in the defense corpus, which adds to the research on the commonality of linguistic features in various academic genres and implies that academic discourse norms play a greater role than linguistic/cultural conventions in their widespread prevalence. Striking similarities in the type and frequency of the modifiers of the committee and candidate sub-corpora suggest their functions as effective rhetorical elements, and that they are used by both groups to co-structure institutionally accredited defense discourses, secure original contributions to disciplinary knowledge, and denote the acculturation of new members to the academic community. However, significant differences occur, which can be attributed to the influence of institutional duties, dynamic roles, and communicative aims in distinct interaction patterns. Role fluidity is largely a manifestation of the enhanced resourcefulness of committees in helping candidates succeed in the high-stakes event. These findings have considerable significance for awareness-raising and linguistic training activities designed to prepare students for English-medium oral defenses.

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1. Introduction

Universities in many Asian countries, such as Taiwan and South Korea, actively advocate the globalization of higher education to enhance competitiveness and attract more international and local students. To achieve this goal, a shift to the use of English as the medium of instruction has become a common approach, thus generating some interesting phenomena and research. For instance, studies have examined institutional policies and practices (Lau & Lin, 2017), curriculum development (Huang, 2017), challenges of English-medium instruction (Hu & Lei, 2014), and academic assessment.

Many empirical studies of postgraduate level academic assessment have focused on theses and dissertations, which constitute the primary written research output that partially fulfills the requirements of degree programs. The interest of researchers in this particular genre appears to be motivated by both the significant theoretical implications and the practical applications of the analysis results. For instance, rhetorical structures (Swales, 2004) and specific discoursal properties of theses, such as metadiscourse (Kawase, 2015), reporting verbs (Manan & Noor, 2014), citation patterns (Samraj, 2008), and evaluative resources (Xie, 2016) have been discussed within a single language and discipline or cross-disciplinarily/-linguistically. These research findings have made valuable contributions to pedagogy and to important frameworks, such

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2019.12.004
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as Swales's CARS model. Other studies (Kumar & Stracke, 2011; Starfield et al., 2015) have focused on examiner's reports on theses.

Unlike these written genres, which have been extensively investigated, oral forms of assessment, such as dissertation defenses, have largely been underexplored, mainly due to their occluded nature and the challenges involved in collecting oral data. Dissertation defenses, alternatively known as oral examinations or vivas, have been recognized as a well-established, gate-keeping academic spoken genre, which in many universities worldwide can accompany dissertation evaluation before higher degrees are awarded. Although it is generally agreed that the primary functions of the defenses are to authenticate authorship, examine the originality of a thesis (Phillips & Pugh, 2010), and provide "an opportunity for an important academic conversation that operates to certify the candidate's membership in his or her chosen specialization" (Swales, 2004, p.169), the genre differs in "name, structure, length of time, degree of formality and the amount of critical discussion expected" (Lin, 2017, p.14). By analyzing the generic structure of American oral defenses in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), Swales (2004) identified four main stages: "preliminaries," "the defense proper," "in-camera session," and "closing segment." The first and final stages involve personal introduction and the announcement of the defense results (usually a pass with major or minor revisions), respectively. In the second stage, "the defense proper," candidates are expected to give an oral presentation based on their research in the presence of committees and an audience, which is followed by rounds of questions and answers. Committees evaluate candidates' written work and oral performance in the 'in-camera' session in a closed room. The structural organization of doctoral or master's oral defenses in the research context of Taiwan universities generally matches Swales' four-stage procedure, and takes the form of open oral examinations, although no explicit protocol is applied. Thus, it seems that the committees follow unwritten regulations, which are possibly influenced by the American mainstream. These similarities aside, defense procedures in other countries, such as "disputas" in Norway, differ notably. These require the candidate to present two formal lectures before the actual defense, and separate question-answer sessions are arranged for different examiners (Swales, 2004). In the U.K., the entire event takes place behind closed doors.

In addition to the differences in generic structure and in the level of secrecy, variations in discoursal features and the degree of formality have been identified. Prevalent informal characteristics, such as humor, laughter, and vocatives juxtaposed with formal phraseology and technical jargon have been identified in MICASE defenses, resulting in a "mixed variety" style (Mežek & Swales, 2016, p.362). In spite of formal institutional constraints and the seriousness of the high-stake event, Mežek and Swales (2016, p.363) view the defense as an opportunity for participating academics to perform in their appropriate academic personae, and these academics are "on show as careful and thoughtful human beings; who are repositories of expertise and yet are capable of humor; and who are able to wear their scholarship sufficiently lightly so as not to alienate the other participants." The interpersonal aspects of oral defense have been highlighted in recent studies, such as Recski's (2005) analysis, in which a correlation between candidates' use of modal (un)certainty and attitudes to arguments was found. Grounded on the notion of face as an interactional phenomenon that is conjointly co-constituted by participants, Don and Izadi (2011) identify culturally specific methods of achieving relational connection and separation in Iranian dissertation defenses. Mežek's (2018) research reveals the important functions of laughter episodes in Swedish PhD defenses, especially in mitigating face threats, relieving tension, and creating a non-adversarial atmosphere.

These studies have improved our understanding of PhD defenses, but they mainly draw on data collected in Anglophone or European settings. Few studies have paid attention to oral defenses conducted in Asian academic contexts, despite the commonality of the speech event in tertiary education, and even fewer have examined master's thesis defenses. The statistics released by the Ministry of Education in Taiwan in 2018 show that master's graduates have outnumbered doctoral graduates by approximately 15 to 1 annually for the last ten years (see Appendix A), which calls for further research on master's thesis defenses and investigation into how far the findings of studies of PhD defenses can be extrapolated to master's thesis defenses. The present study aims to address this underexplored area by analyzing seven English-medium master's thesis defenses conducted at four universities in Taiwan, with a specific focus on the use of *pragmatic force modifiers* (PFMs) by committees and candidates in question-answer sessions. PFMs have been broadly recognized as significant linguistic devices contributing to the construction of appropriate interpersonal relationships and orchestration of coherent discourse in both academic and non-academic contexts (see the review of PFMs below).

The participants in Taiwanese master's defenses include candidates, advisers, and examiners internal and external to the candidate's university. However, unlike previous research, the present study does not assume that the roles of these participants are fixed or pre-assigned. Rather their roles are seen as fluid roles and their relationships as dynamic. These changing roles and relationships can be constructed through the use of various PFMs in distinctive interactional patterns. This focus is important because when specific linguistic elements in utterances produced by individual participants are treated separately, an incomplete view of the discoursal properties can emerge, as illustrated by the following extract.

Adviser: *Yeah **maybe** it's like this. Yeah it's like if you have these two levels of coding system, so in your data analysis and discussion you **actually** find out for example in Ally's accounts … if you **just** use manifest level **probably** couldn't find out a lot of traces of her particular faces of identity. Yeah **probably** she **just** gave you very short accounts. Yeah, but if you use both levels, and you are able to trace or you are able to find out more contextual clues and in that case it helps you understand more about her identity construction somehow.*

Internal examiner: *Yeah something like that*

External examiner: *Yeah or to me **just** merge*

Adviser: *Or you **probably just** merge*

The extract, taken from a Taiwanese master's defense, shows the committee using multiple intensifying and softening modifiers, namely *maybe*, *actually*, *just* (four times), and *probably* (three times), to mark their statements and proposed solution to the problematic two-level coding system used by the candidate, who has difficulty understanding the committee's question in the preceding exchange. The adviser serves as an active mediator between the candidate and examiners, defending the candidate's dichotomous approach before approving the external examiner's suggestion for merging. To better understand the complexity of the roles and interactions of defense participants, this study uses a role-dependent method of data analysis, based on observations of individual stance and role fluidity as co-constructed by attending parties in different interaction patterns, taking a specific look at multifunctional PFMs.

1.1. Pragmatic force modifiers

Pragmatic force modifiers (PFMs), a term coined by Nikula (1996), are defined as "linguistic devices, such as *actually*, *sort of*, or *you know* that can be used to strengthen or weaken the force with which propositions are expressed while at the same time realizing manifold social pragmatic purposes" (Lin, 2010, p. 1173). PFMs have received considerable attention in both academic and non-academic settings, and have been termed metadiscourse, discourse markers, hedges, or intensifiers, depending on the specific research contexts, including naturally occurring conversation (Schiffrin, 1987), email communication (Chejnová, 2014), newspaper articles (Yeganeh, Heravia, & Sawaria, 2015), academic spoken discourse, e.g., dissertation defenses (Recski, 2005), seminars (Liao, 2009) or lectures (Lin, 2012), academic prose, e.g., research articles (Yang, 2013), book reviews (Itakura, 2013), textbooks (Hyland, 1994), or dissertations (Kawase, 2015). These studies attest to the extensive and multifunctional nature of PFMs when associated with different genres. Their genre-bound functions are further influenced by different languages, cultures, and disciplines, as evidenced by many cross-linguistic, -cultural, and -disciplinary comparisons (Del Saz Rubio, 2011; Hu & Cao, 2011; Mur-Dueñas, 2011).

The functions of PFMs have been generally classified into two broad categories, textual and interpersonal, based on the Hallidayan functional theory of language. The textual functions express structural correlations between discourse stretches and guide readers/speakers in the presentation of additive, adversative, and conclusive arguments; the interpersonal functions express individual stance, full/weak commitment to statements, and establish rapport (Hyland, 2005). Their intensifying and weakening meanings have been associated with achieving positive and negative politeness in casual conversation, as put forward by Brown and Levinson (1987), and with academic prose and workplace discourse. Although PFMs are common and relevant to a wide variety of genres, few studies have addressed these linguistic elements in oral defenses, except Lin's (2017) recent study of them in American PhD defenses in MICASE. Given this lack of research, comparatively little is known about how PFMs are strategically used to negotiate interactional meanings, maintain interpersonal relationships, and organize discourse in English-medium master's thesis defenses in a non-English-speaking academic context. The study attempts to address this research gap and answer the following research questions.

1. How common are PFMs in English-medium master's thesis defenses in Taiwan universities? Are there any differences in the type and frequency of PFMs between committees and candidates?
2. What functions do PFMs performs in thesis defenses, and what are the contributing factors to their use?
3. How do the distribution patterns and functions of PFMs associated with Taiwanese thesis defenses contribute to our understanding of the genre?

2. Data and methodology

To answer the research questions, a Taiwanese corpus of successful master's thesis defenses (hereafter TCTD) was compiled. The TCTD consists of seven transcriptions of question-answer sessions of master's thesis defenses conducted in the departments of English and Applied Linguistics at four research-oriented universities in northern and central Taiwan between 2015 and mid-2017. These two departments were selected because English-medium oral defenses at both the master and the doctorate level are scarce in other departments, even though the internationalization of higher education has been encouraged, and subsequently the use of English has increased in many institutions in Taiwan. One advantage of using discipline-specific master's defenses is that they can reveal generic features associated with the particular academic discourse context with minimum disciplinary or level-dependent interference. These seven question and answer sessions, ranging between 40 min and one and a half hours, constitute the focus of the study. They involve candidates and committees of different nationalities, comprising Taiwan, the U.S., Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan, and Gambia (see Table 1 for participant demographics). These participants consented to have their interactions recorded for the study and have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The recorded data were consistently transcribed following the MICASE transcription conventions, which are beneficial to quantitative and qualitative analyses of PFMs. The corpus amounts to 34,662 words.

Lin's (2015) analytical categories of PFMs were generated from an investigation into their use in lectures in the British Academic Spoken English Corpus, as shown in Table 2 below, and served as a basis for the identification of modifiers in the TCTD.

In accordance with Lin's selection criteria, intensifying or softening modifiers used to achieve manifold functions subsumed under the interpersonal and textual domains are categorized as PFMs. The *Wordlist* function of the *Wordsmith Tools 7*

Table 1
Participant demographics.

Defenses	Candidates	Advisers	Internal examiners	External examiners
1	Male	Female	Female	Male
	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan	Hong Kong
2	Female	Male	Female	Male
	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan
3	Male	Female	Male	Male
	United States	Taiwan	Taiwan	Hong Kong
4	Female	Male	Male	Female
	Taiwan	Taiwan	United States	Taiwan
5	Male	Female	Male	Male
	Gambia	Taiwan	Japan	Hong Kong
6	Female	Female	Male	Female
	Indonesia	Taiwan	Japan	Taiwan
7	Male	Female	Male	Female
	Indonesia	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan

Table 2
Taxonomy of PFMs.

One-word PFMs	Two-word PFMs
can, just, would, actually, really, could, might, may, should, probably, obviously, perhaps, simply, maybe, certainly, exactly, clearly, seem(s)	sort of/sorta, you know, I think, kind of/kinda, of course, I mean, in fact, you see

was used to generate one-word and two-word lists in frequency order. Among the top-500 most frequent words and two-word expressions, 20 modifiers were identified and are presented in Table 3 below, along with their ranking and frequency of occurrence, and constitute the foci of the study. The frequency excludes cases of literal use, such as *you know* and *I mean* in "Do you know what I mean?" or *kind of* in "that kind of information" by manual examination of concordance lines and the removal of non-modifying uses of PFMs. The most frequent PFMs in the TCTD were examined to reveal common attributes that contribute to the construction of the defense genre. For instance,

Example 1. External examiner: *But you use such a big term language transfer I wonder whether is necessary or is* ***just*** ***really*** *a matter of translation or equivalent whether* ***I mean*** *to me language transfer is an older term used in SLA.* ***I think*** *yes, I'm* ***just*** *wondering whether you* ***really*** *need that term to explain.*
(Defense 3)

Example 1 shows the external examiner's query regarding the appropriateness of the term *language transfer* in the thesis, which is marked by diverse high frequency modifiers, namely emphatic *just* and *really,* to draw attention to the critical

Table 3
Frequency of PFMs in question-response sessions in TCTD.

One-word PFMs	Ranking	No. of occurrences	Freq./10,000 words
just	25	261	75.29
can	31	235	67.79
actually	56	114	32.88
may	80	81	23.36
maybe	82	78	22.50
would	91	73	21.06
really	97	68	19.61
should	98	66	19.04
could	126	48	13.84
probably	133	46	13.27
might	239	23	6.63
seem(s)	412	17	4.90
perhaps	444	6	1.73
Two-word PFMs	**Ranking**	**No. of occurrences**	**Freq./10,000 words**
I think	1	214	61.73
I mean	9	80	23.08
kind of	22	25	7.21
you know	54	22	6.34
of course	112	14	4.03
I believe	388	9	2.59
I guess	390	9	2.59

evaluation, whereas *I mean* and *I think* soften the personally oriented perception and supplementary explanation. The intensifying and softening meanings projected in different message types achieve a textual function, as they signal a correlation between the foregrounded doubt and the hedged supporting elaboration. From an interpersonal perspective, these meanings attenuate criticisms of the research work, and thus address the candidate's and the adviser's negative sides, who could be regarded as thesis co-authors in certain fields.

To compare the types and frequencies of PFMs used by candidates and committees, which are characterized by opposing stances and power inequality, candidate and committee sub-corpora were compiled by separating utterances produced by the two groups of speakers. The same corpus techniques and weed-out process were used to generate wordlists and frequency results, as shown in Table 4. Log-likelihood values of 3.82 or higher point to significant difference in statistical results between the two groups, and are also given in Table 4. The quantitative findings provide an important backdrop for a qualitative discussion.

The most frequent PFMs identified in the TCTD were then examined in interactions between committees and candidates or between committee members themselves, such as internal and external examiners working in coalition to challenge candidates' notions or advisers defending theses against examiners on behalf of candidates. The textual and interpersonal functions of the PFMs were analyzed by considering essential contextual characteristics, particularly the practice of the thesis defense in Taiwan universities, institutional constraints, disciplinary norms, and the relationships between attending academics. Attention was also paid to specific discourse properties, such as the cumulative effects of the interplay of diverse intensifying and softening modifiers in different message types in the question-answer exchanges, rhetorical strategies, and the speakers' intended communicative purposes, such as solicitation for clarification or requests for revision. Various interaction patterns involving distinctive types of participants, e.g., independent/coalition examiners versus submissive/assertive candidates, enacted by the occurrence of PFMs were discussed. Contextual features and discoursal properties facilitated the interpretation of the functions of PFMs, as they can reveal the occluded genre in the current setting.

3. Quantitative results

Table 3 presents the most common PFMs in the TCTD, which are similar to those identified in other academic speech events, including lectures (Lin, 2010), seminars (Liao, 2009), and PhD dissertation defenses (Recski, 2005) in the U.K. and U.S., thus suggesting the importance of these linguistic devices in spoken academic genres in tertiary education. The homogeneity of these occurrences can confirm similar use of PFMs in Anglophone and the present academic communities, and imply a greater influence of academic discourse norms than linguistic/cultural conventions on their widespread usage.

Table 4 shows the word counts, inventories, and frequencies of PFMs in the candidate and committee sub-corpora and reveals several interesting phenomena. First, contrary to our expectation, overall the committee members speak more than twice as much as the candidates, contradicting the intuitive presupposition that the defense consists of examiners'

Table 4
Frequency of PFMs in the candidate (10,828 words) and committee (23,834 words) sub-corpora in TCTD.

One-word PFMs	Candidates		Committees		Log-likelihood
	Ranking	Freq./10,000	Ranking	Freq./10,000	
just	30	66.49	22	79.29	1.66
actually	41	44.32	63	27.69	5.59
can	44	48.02	27	76.78	9.68
may	59	33.24	99	18.88	6.19
really	70	27.70	113	15.94	4.59
should	71	26.78	114	15.52	4.68
maybe	90	20.31	80	23.49	0.34
would	109	18.47	84	22.23	0.51
could	121	14.77	130	13.42	0.10
perhaps	373	4.61	N/A	2.51	0.97
probably	N/A	0.92	102	18.88	26.40
might	N/A	2.77	193	8.39	4.15
seem(s)	N/A	4.61	371	5.03	0.03
exactly	N/A	0	487	2.51	4.49
Two-word PFMs	Ranking	Freq./10,000	Ranking	Freq./10,000	Log-likelihood
I think	7	30.47	1	75.94	28.36
kind of	52	5.54	20	7.97	0.64
I believe	132	6.46	N/A	0.83	8.25
I mean	136	6.46	7	30.62	23.50
of course	290	1.84	94	5.03	2.16
you know	N/A	0	34	9.23	16.48
I guess	N/A	0.92	278	3.35	2.04

*N/A refers to PFMs not appearing within the top-500 word and two-word expression lists.

relatively shorter questions followed by candidates' lengthy justification and defending statements. This outcome may be attributable to the efforts of the TCTD committees to ensure a successful defense, which can be a challenge since students, by comparison, have rather limited knowledge of discipline-specific subject matter, as described in the qualitative investigation below.

The inventories of PFMs in the sub-corpora are generally similar, though the committee sub-corpus has a slightly wider diversity of PFMs, i.e., 19 items, compared with the 15 items in the candidate sub-corpus. With reference to the log-likelihood values, approximately half of the items, particularly *maybe*, *would*, *could*, *perhaps*, *seem*(s) and *kind of*, are used to a similar extent. Significantly higher frequencies of *actually*, *may*, *really*, *should,* and *I believe* are found in the candidate sub-corpus compared to *can*, *probably*, *might*, *I think*, *I mean*, *I guess,* and *you know* in the committee sub-corpus. In general, both intensifiers and softeners are employed by candidates and committees to organize coherent discourse and perform interpersonal functions in TCTD. However, *actually* is particularly favored by the candidates to preface opposing opinions, and the emphatic *actually*, *really* and *I believe* highlight their strong convictions and opposing stances, positioning themselves as defenders. Examiners, however, prefer I + predicate combinations *I think*, *I mean,* and *I guess* to introduce subjective, intrusive evaluations of the thesis, contributing to the enactment of appropriate academic personae and portraying them as "careful and thoughtful human beings" (Mežek & Swales, 2016, p.363). Additionally, the committee sub-corpus contains a significantly high incidence of *you know* and *of course* with their literal meanings that imply shared knowledge (Holmes, 1988; Schiffrin, 1987). This signal of common knowledge may serve to align the committee members in the rhetorical encounter, or it can be seen as a gesture by the committee members, who have institutional power, to "wear their scholarship sufficiently lightly so as not to alienate the other participants" (Mežek & Swales, 2016, p.363). Taken together, the observed similarities and disparities in the PFM distribution in the TCTD and the sub-corpora appear to be a consequence of the interplay of several factors, including academic norms, institutional duties, dynamic roles, rhetorical strategies, and communicative purposes in different interaction patterns.

4. Functions of PFMs

Analyzing PFMs in committee and candidate interactions provides insights into the generic properties of oral examinations and the functions of the linguistic elements in shaping the defense discourse, as well as the dynamic roles, and maintaining proper interpersonal relationships in the tense, face-threatening speech event. The defense discourse varies among the different events, but there are some clear common features. One notable feature is the absence of humor and sidetrack discussion in the corpus, which creates a rather serious and formal atmosphere. Although the four Taiwan universities under investigation have no explicit protocol for how defenses should proceed, a general consensus exists concerning the institutional duties of examiners, who in all cases operate using a straight-to-business mode of communication at the outset of the question-answer sessions. The examiners' critical evaluations of candidates' theses and oral presentations immediately take a disaffiliative, opposing stance toward the defending candidates. However, examiners and advisers appear to take up additional responsibilities in response to the demands of the current context, particularly in terms of the examiners being supportive troubleshooters, and the advisers often acting as thesis defenders or mediators. Their considerably broad roles appear to reflect the committees' high level of awareness and acceptance of the candidates' junior status in terms their knowledge of discipline-specific discourse. This can be seen when the examiners elaborate at length on problems, examples, or their proposed solutions. Further evidence that candidates' junior status is taken into account can be seen in the advisers' active attempts to summarize examiners' queries, give clear-cut instructions to candidates for thesis improvement based on the examiners' comments and defend theses on behalf of candidates. This work, which reveals the roles of senior participants and dynamic relationships among them, is, in part, carried out by multifunctional PFMs.

The contextual analysis also advances our understanding of how candidates respond to comments, requests and criticisms, which can be classified as submissive, assertive, or intermediate. Two of the seven candidates provided rather submissive responses in which they are highly agreeable to requests for further revision, as shown in their immediate, grateful acceptance of suggestions accompanying an agreement with examiners' critiques (e.g., *Yes Prof. Thank you for your suggestions*). Only one candidate, whose responses were very assertive, strongly defended controversial issues in the thesis, maintaining a firm stance and confronting examiners head-on when challenged. The majority of the candidate responses fall into the intermediate type, in which the question-answer rounds are seen as opportunities to justify original rationales on the spot and provide clarification, before accepting examiners' requests for change. In all types of response PFMs are critical in the construction of questioning-defending mechanisms and interactional dynamics. These are discussed in the following sections

4.1. Dutiful candidates and examiners

The most prominent interaction dynamics in the TCTD involve candidates' defending their theses, striving to stand their ground when challenged by examiners, as shown in Example 2. This example and those that follow are presented in truncated form to reveal multi-party discussion on specific issues. Participants are designated as candidates (C), advisers (A), and internal (IE) and external examiners (EE).

Example 2.

1	EE:	*… my question to you is why don't you use other frameworks?*
2	C:	***I believe*** *what is in both writing and speaking what matters is language*
3		*and communication, so if a certain framework is used to analyze written*
4		*discourse it* ***can*** *also be used on equal footings to analyze spoken*
5		*discourse …*
6	EE:	*…* ***of course*** *their framework is very influential but why why their*
7		*framework and not others'?*
8	C:	*… I used Hyland and Tse Hyland and Tse's model primarily because it*
9		*is more recent and more robust and since it is used in written dis written*
10		*academic discourse* ***I believe*** *that it* ***can*** *also be used in spoken academic*
11		*discourse. And one of my references I don't remember which one but one*
12		*of the references I studied had* ***in fact*** *used Hyland and Tse's framework*
13		*to analyze spoken academic discourse.*

(Defense 5)

The thesis investigates metadiscourse in lectures, drawing on Hyland and Tse's theoretical framework, which the external examiner considered unsuitable for the analysis of spoken discourse. To counter this direct challenge, *I believe* strengthens the candidate's conviction, while the softening *can* marks the reasonable rationale behind the choice in lines 2–5. The first rebuttal fails to satisfy the examiner, who initiates the second round of exchange (lines 6–7), in which his intensified praise of the framework "of course their framework is very influential" is followed by the same query. A similar counter-attack tactic is utilized by the candidate; the clustering of intensifying *I believe*, *in fact,* and the softening *can* balance the strong original belief with tentativeness and establishes a reasonably confident defense stance (lines 8–13). By pushing back, the candidate reveals an academic persona consistent with the norms of being a "disciplinary servant and persuasive originator" (Hyland, 2001) in the community. A close resemblance in the strategic use of intensifying and softening modifiers to fulfill rhetorical and interpersonal purposes between the candidates and committees in TCTD, as further illustrated in the following examples and discussion, points to the new member's acculturation to the discourse of the discipline.

4.2. Cooperative alliances between candidates and advisers versus examiners as helpful troubleshooters

While fulfilling their most prominent institutional obligations, candidates occasionally receive assistance from their advisers, as shown in the following interaction involving examiners, who act as helpful troubleshooters, versus candidates aligned with advisers, who collaborate to defend the work in a thesis.

Example 3.

1	IE:	*… but what you were using are all Spoken Singapore English corpora,*
2		*however there are no audios? No spoken files it* ***seems*** *bizarre.*
3	C:	*I understand.* ***I think*** *the corpus's data are adapted from spoken data but*
4		*not for the speaker's side.* ***Actually*** *I had asked one of the coordinator of*
5		*ICE-SIN about the audio file issue, but I received the response from him*
6		*that there are no audio clips regarding to it, which is* ***really*** *a pity that I*
7		*cannot listen to it right at the moment. Therefore I designed my reading*
8		*demonstration and semi-structured interview to solve this problem. I have*
9		*invited my participants to read the demonstration list for me.*
10	IE:	*I would love to know does the data from your corpora have tone on the*
11		*written form?*
12	C:	*Thank you for your suggestions. Here's one example for you, I remember*
13		*in GlowbE "Good for you lor (sour tone)". At that time I* ***may*** *know that*
14		*the speaker is* ***really*** *sarcastic. But I do not have real audio clips to know*
15		*the actual situation. That's why I invite my participants to read for me.*
16	IE:	***I think*** *if your research have tones on it will make the corpora more*
17		*valuable.*
18	A:	***I think*** *that's why Vera asked her participants to demonstrate for them.*

(Defense 4)

The internal examiner in Example 3 explicitly disapproves of the research, which investigates pitch variation in the discourse final particles of Singapore English, but is not based on original audio files (lines 1–2 and 10–11). The PFM *seems* softens the negative evaluation. The rebuttal from the candidate includes a rigorous explanation of her attempts to address the problem, particularly reading demonstrations and semi-structured interviews, in lines 3–9 and 12–15. Intensifying and softening modifiers *I think*, *actually*, *really,* and *may* intertwine to foreground the candidate's endeavors and justification, while she carefully words her two responses turns. The persistent examiner expresses dissatisfaction with her compensatory

approaches (lines 16–17), which prompts the adviser to step in; “I think that's why Vera asked her participants to demonstrate for them.” This firm assertion in favor of the candidate effectively ends this round of question–answer exchange targeting audio files.

Example 3 showcases the strong stance an adviser takes in rejecting the examiners' suggestions head on. This stands in contrast to Example 4, in which an adviser expresses weak agreement to an examiners request to amend the thesis.

Example 4.

1	IE:	*We have no idea how many IOU students are there in Taiwan, so we don't*
2		*have the idea how how big is 20. Let's say there's only like 100 students,*
3		*then 20 is a big size. If there are 20,000 then it's small size. We don't know*
4		*right? So **probably** give us some idea about this. And then I know 20, this*
5		*is volunteer students, so **probably** you are using convenient sampling*
6		***probably** is for convenient visibility … but **I think** their background is*
7		*quite important … so you **can** make a table. There's only 20 students, not*
8		*that many. And then you **can** list like their like **probably** their job, their*
9		*age, the year has been in Taiwan, like this one **just** want to show us the*
10		*combination of your participants …*
11	A:	*Uh it is defense. He **actually** did that but I asked him to remove that*
12		*originally.*
13	IE:	*because?*
14	A:	*This is not **actually** a case study so **I thought** it **could** be a general sorry*
15		*general population not for like specific case study that's the original*
16		*intention but you're your suggestion **maybe** you **can** add at the back and*
17		*also the 20 the volunteer students here …*
18	C:	*Because they are my students in my class …*
19	IE:	*Then you have to be careful because you are the teacher, and you say they*
20		*volunteered.*
21	C:	*Because most of them **actually** they don't want to be a volunteer. They are*
22		*so busy. They are so busy **actually**. And I called them, and then I said*
23		*please, and then they want prof.*
24	IE:	*So you beg them?*
25	C:	*No **actually** prof. I **just** please them prof.*
26	EE:	*It's convenient sampling*
27	IE:	*Yeah I know I know I know*
28	EE:	***Maybe** you **just** change **I mean** don't try to volunteer them because we*
29		*assume you are the teacher but we are not sure **kind of** guessing beg and*
30		*force. So you **just** write it down they are my students and*
31	IE:	*For convenient sampling purpose I invite them to participate and then they*
32		*agree*
33	EE:	***Exactly** yeah yeah*

(Defense 7)

In Example 4, the internal examiner raises concerns regarding the sample size and participant demographics. The examiner's questioning techniques comprise initial statements indicating the weaknesses in the thesis (lines 1–2), followed by detailed explanations (lines 2–6) and finally suggestions for improvement (lines 7–10), hedged by *probably*, *can*, and *I think*. Examples, such as “Let's say there's only like 100 students … ” in lines 2–3, are used to support the initial criticism that the thesis contains insufficient information about the total population of IOU students in Taiwan and help the candidate understand the insistence on supplementing the message so that readers have a more complete picture of the research context. Unmodified exemplifications clarify the foremost, abstract criticisms and provide direct instructions for revising the thesis, as signaled by softening modifiers, shown in “so you can make a table … ” (lines 7–10). The softeners *probably* and *can* minimize the insistence on change by attenuating the face-threatening directives, thus contributing to the maintenance of good interpersonal relationships.

In response to the internal examiner's challenge, the adviser defends the thesis on the candidate's behalf in her two turns (lines 11–12 and 14–17). The presence of *actually* (twice) appears to play a dual role. This typical marker of unexpectedness (Aijmer, 2002) prefaces contradictory remarks, whereas its emphatic meaning cooperates with *I thought*, where the I + predicator combination is an indicator of opposing opinions (Scheibman, 2002) to foreground her original rationale and opposing attitude toward the necessity of listing the participant demographics, as they can be treated as general population. In contrast to her intensified subjective conviction, the following toned-down recognition of the internal examiner's proposal for revision with *maybe* and *can* in “but you're your suggestion maybe you can add at the back” implies a weaker personal commitment, thus satisfying the examiner's request.

To address the internal examiner's next query, the candidate elaborates on his recruitment method in lines 21–23 and clarifies parts that are unclear (“No actually Prof. I just please them”) in line 25. The functions of *actually* to signal contradiction and to call attention to reality have also been drawn on repeatedly by the candidate to defend his research approach; the multifunctionality of *actually* as a vehicle of negotiating disagreement and enhancing persuasiveness may explain the significantly higher frequency of the particular modifier in the candidate sub-corpus. The analysis also suggests that

candidates' strategic employment of PFMs resembles that of their advisers when the advisors shift their role to that of thesis defender. Although both the external and internal examiners approve of the sampling approach, they want the description of it to be reworded. They troubleshoot the problem as allies collaborating to create a proper description, as is illustrated in the external examiner's verbal contribution marked by a diversity of modifiers *maybe*, *just*, *I mean,* and *kind of* in lines 28–30. This unfinished utterance is completed by the internal examiner; "For convenient sampling purpose I invite them to participate and then they agree," denoting the sharing of common ground and an alliance relationship, which is affirmed by the external examiner's final assertion of "exactly yeah yeah."

To summarize, Examples 3 and 4 show a cooperative alliance relationship between candidates and advisers in opposition to examiners acting as helpful troubleshooters. Co-occurrences of intensifiers, particularly *actually* and *really,* and softeners that orchestrate conflicting opinions while balancing subjective conviction with reasonable caution as a preferential counter-attack strategy, may contribute to a comparatively much higher incidence of particular PFMs in the candidate sub-corpus. The same tactic is utilized by advisers when they shift their role to that of a thesis defender. However, a wider diversity of softeners is used to mitigate examiners' criticisms and minimize imposition, to achieve negative politeness. These findings attest to the role fluidity and role-related use of the types and functions of PFMs.

4.3. Independent examiners

In two of the seven defenses, examiners rotated and asked questions in turn, which is a variation on the more typical interaction pattern in which examiners interleave their queries with others, as shown in Example 4. Example 5 below illustrates the external examiner's offering a series of critiques without interruption.

Example 5.

1	EE:	*Okay actually I think when you are actually making the presentation, you*
2		*have to pay attention to the link of the transition. So whenever you talk*
3		*about one slide and then you move to another slide, you have to* ***just***
4		***actually*** *bring us to the next topic about the (unclear) okay so although we*
5		*understand the motivation of something. Another issue which is also very*
6		*important I want you to to know and this is that so that* ***actually*** *when the*
7		*listener when the audience* ***really*** *listening to you, they* ***can really*** *follow*
8		*your* ***you know*** *your idea* ***or something****, so this is one thing you have to*
9		*know. And* ***of course*** *another thing is whenever you are presenting right?*
10		*You have to be very, very clear and then about whatever you say.* ***Of course***
11		*you did make some* ***you know*** *grammatical mistakes or some pronunciation*
12		*mistakes, and that's okay. Basically this is* ***kind of*** *learning process. It's*
13		*okay. So* ***you know*** *this is something something you have to know okay.*
14		*And the* ***I think*** *let me* ***just*** *ask you one thing … But* ***I think*** *you you also*
15		*need to talk a little bit about the differences between the experimental field*
16		*and the control group, okay? So that we know whether act-* ***actually*** *both of*
17		*them will improved. However we do not* ***really*** *know the the difference*
18		*between the improvement of the two groups okay. Control group and*
19		*experimental group, so* ***maybe*** *you have to add that part so we* ***can*** *know*
20		*well* ***you know*** *both of them, they are improving, however I don't* ***really*** *see*
21		*any significant difference. So in that case,* ***maybe*** *the positive psychology*
22		*education is not going to work that way* ***or something*** *or* ***maybe*** *that's*
23		*another limitation or problem or* ***maybe*** *we need to* ***just*** *emphasize that*
24		*part okay?*
25	C:	*Okay. Thank you. Thank you for your suggestion.*

(Defense 2)

In Example 5, the examiner's lengthy monologic evaluation identifies several weaknesses in the candidate's oral presentation and thesis, including fuzzy transitions between topics, grammatical/pronunciation errors that interfere with the effectiveness of the presentation, and a missing comparative analysis between the experimental and control groups in the research. The repeated use of intensifiers *actually* (five times), *really* (four times), *just* (three times) and *of course* (twice) performs a textual function by orchestrating the interconnected main points. For example, the intensified opening statement about unclear transitions in lines 1–2 is supported by the subsequent emphatic remarks in lines 3–8: "you have to just actually bring us to the next topic … " The accumulative assertive tone of voice projected by the wide distribution of the intensifiers *actually*, *just*, and *really*, in combination with the utterance-initial *I think* (appearing three times in the extract), which achieves a "starting-point function" (Kärkkäinen, 2003, p. 120), indicates a subjective intrusion of the examiner's personally oriented perspective. The presence of common ground markers *you know* (four times) and *of course* (three times) may contribute to the interpersonal domain by affectively engaging the candidate in the subject matters and establishing in-group closeness. In sharp contrast with the strengthened inter-supported main points, the examiner's sensible reasoning about the control and experimental groups in lines 18–24 is toned down by *maybe* (four times), *can*, and the referent-final tag *or something* (Aijmer, 2002). PFMs serve as important text-organizing devices in the monologue-oriented evaluation by intensifying and softening various types of information to achieve the speaker's intended communicative aims.

4.4. Advisers as expert mediators

Another interesting interaction pattern in TCTD occurs when advisers take on the added responsibility of mediating in response to problems, possibly in light of examiners' not-immediately-transparent criticisms or candidates' difficulties in comprehending and responding to examiners' queries under the pressure of on-line production.

Example 6.

1	IE:	*I understand that they move toward the future, but I just wonder what*
2		*about the past? Is it like a continuum like future present past?*
3	C:	*Oh the past? …*
4	A:	*So **maybe** you **can** add **I mean I don't know** if you **should** add you **can***
5		***probably** add **just** a few description saying that when a member or when a*
6		*learner participates in a particular CoP, he or she also brings some*
7		*resources from the past.* [C: *yeah yeah yeah*] *Yeah so with their learning*
8		*experiences in the past, so they **may** have some beliefs or some*
9		*experiences.* [C: *yeah*] *But when they particula, particularly participate in*
10		*a specific CoP **I mean** those experiences **may** get re-contextualized right*
11		***may** get re-contextualized, but they they **actually** focus more on the*
12		*engagement in the BEC course. **I think** that's your focus.*
13	EE:	***I think maybe** the the word future misleads okay the theme because **I***
14		***think** what we are trying to say is that imagined community …*
15	A:	***Maybe** it's better, it's a better idea to change it to be imagined community*
16		*… because it's **actually** from your description. You said drawing upon*
17		*Norton's notions of imagined community. So if we put imagined*
18		*community it **actually** captures what you have described.*

(Defense 1)

Example 6 is from the oral examination of a thesis investigating EFL low-achievers' learner identity (re)construction through narrative-based activities. In this excerpt the internal examiner's question is framed, prefaced by "I just wonder," about the potential impact of learners' past experience on learning when participating in a different community of practice (CoP). In the TCTD, common expressions of doubt and their variations include "I (just) wonder" (appearing 12 times in total), "I am thinking" (8 times), "I am curious" (8 times), and "I am/we are not sure" (8 times), which are different from "it seems to me" in American defenses (Mauranen, 2002). The candidate's obviously confused response, "oh the past?" triggers a careful interpretation of the examiner's critical challenge in plain terms from his adviser, who attempts to mediate between the under-addressed issue and the focus of the thesis. Her interpretation is marked by the softeners *maybe*, *can*, *I mean*, *I don't know*, *should*, *probably* and *just* in lines 4–11, which facilitate understanding of the problem, as confirmed by the candidate's affirmations. Her heavily hedged interpretation appears to contrast the boosted statement of the main theme of the thesis "but they they actually focus more on the engagement in the BEC course. I think that's your focus" (lines 11–12). The emphatic overtone emphasizes the strength of the research work, overshadowing the problem under discussion.

The external examiner continues the topic by pointing out the problematic use of the word *future*, which, in his view, should be replaced by a more appropriate substitute *imagined*. A similar mediation technique is used by the adviser, who first agrees with the external examiner's proposal for substitution; "Maybe it's better, it's a better idea to change it to be imagined community" and then connects the proposed notion with the thesis in lines 16–18, highlighted by the intensifier *actually* (twice). PFMs featuring opposite forces organize mediation discourse by foregrounding and downplaying different message types; the embedded overtones of certainty and uncertainty convey a sense of involvement and detachment, respectively, and appear to denote an alliance and adversarial relationship between the adviser/candidate and the opposing examiners.

The next example shows an authoritative adviser mediating in response to a problem by giving explicit revision instructions based on the examiners' somewhat implicit evaluations.

Example 7.

1	IE:	*you have students from you know younger 22 years old versus 40 years*
2		*old **I think** there's a quite difference and so you didn't analyze about that?*
3	C:	*No I analyze about their age prof.*
4	IE:	*Yeah **just maybe** I'm just thinking I I I **could** it be the same or **could** it be*
5		*the opposite? … We don't speak English here in Taiwan. So it **could** be*
6		*that for older IOU students still learning English is not for instrumental*
7		*because they are quite old. They volunteer for a job not too busy, and then*
8		*they **just you know** for travelling, trips or like you say status their self-*
9		*fulfillment they want to grow they want to be a better person something*
10		*like that. So i'm **just** guessing.*
11	C:	*Okay thank you*
12	A:	***Maybe** Adam **could** check Wong's study and make sure the age mention*

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

1	IE:	*you have students from you know younger 22 years old versus 40 years*
13		*here. You say older migrant Chinese students right? [C: Okay prof.] So*
14		*how does did Wong define older?* ***Could*** *go back and check the reference*
15		*again and see the age definition. And do whatever Dr. Li just suggested so*
16		*you* ***can*** *tell whether the age is important or crucial factors that influence*
17		*their motivation types.*
18	C:	*Yes prof.*

(Defense 7)

The internal examiner in Example 7 is curious about whether age could be a factor in students' motivations for learning English in the Taiwanese context, as shown in his lead–in remark in lines 1–2. Following the candidate's quick refutation "No I analyze about their age prof.," the examiner's subsequent in-depth explanation continues to cast doubt on the matter. Numerous uses of the softeners *just*, *maybe*, *could,* and *you know* modify his explanatory description and exemplification in lines 4–10. The encoded tentativeness and uncertainty enact a less all-knowing expert persona, and may decrease any authoritative threat. The candidate's brief acceptance of comments, "okay thank you," does not demonstrate his full understanding of the examiner's query and actions required for improvement, so his adviser acts as a mediator, giving specific instructions for amending the thesis in lines 12–17. She also clearly spells out the revision objective; "so you can tell whether the age is important or crucial factors that influence their motivation types." The repeated occurrence of the softeners *maybe*, *could* and *can* in her face-threatening commands results in the adviser's bald-on-record acts provide clear-cut guidelines to the candidate as a remedial move, to settle the examiner's less categorical statements of problems. This bridging role of advisers is crucial in the defense context involving English-speaking candidates, as the examiners' criticisms appear to be indirect and implicitly vague. This observation is consistent with Mauranen's (2002) claim of infrequent direct negative evaluations in Anglophone dissertation defenses. The mediating role of advisors constructed by the heightened use of PFMs illustrates their enhanced resourcefulness in securing the candidates' understanding in the TCTD.

5. Conclusion

This corpus-based study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze PFMs in English-medium thesis defenses that took place at Taiwan universities. It has yielded important findings pertaining to the use of these linguistic devices and the intriguing properties of the genre. A wide distribution of PFMs in the TCTD adds to the research that reveals the commonality of modifiers in various academic genres, attests to similarities of use in defenses in Anglophone countries and in the Taiwanese academic context, and implies a greater influence of academic discourse norms on their prevalence than linguistic/cultural conventions. The striking similarities in the type and frequency of PFMs between the committee and candidate sub-corpora indicate that their genre-bound textual and interpersonal functions can be effective rhetorical elements. PFMs are used by both groups to co-structure coherent, institutionally appropriate defense discourse. They are also used to signal original contributions to disciplinary knowledge. The noteworthy differences in PFMs can be ascribed to the specific influence of institutional duties, dynamic roles, and communicative aims.

PFMs facilitate individuals' ability to fulfill their institutional duties and their intended rhetorical and communicative purposes in an academically proper fashion. For instance, diverse softeners can be used as face-protection strategies that mitigate examiners' critical evaluations of theses and oral presentations, while intensifiers foreground their main points and problems. A significantly higher incidence of PFMs that mark common ground (e.g., *you know* and *of course*) in the committee sub-corpus appears to minimize the authoritative threats caused by the imbalance of institutional power and can help establish a good rapport among the differently positioned participants in the consensus-seeking process. Intensifiers, such as *actually*, in particular, and softeners tend to highlight conflicting opinions and mark reasonable justification in the candidates' rebuttals. The cumulative effects resulting from the interplay of modifiers characterized by opposite forces establish examiner-defender positions via balancing subjective conviction with cautious tentativeness, which constitutes a preferential mechanism for negotiating disagreement in the rhetorical encounter. The striking resemblance in how PFMs are tactically used to achieve the disciplinary community expectation that candidates and more senior committee members are humble contributors to disciplinary knowledge indicates that the new junior members are able to use the language typical of those who have been in the field. In addition, generic constraints are found to be discoursally managed by all of the attending, qualified participants.

In addition to their use to meet institutional expectations, PFMs contribute to the construction of dynamic roles in different interaction patterns, as illustrated by the advisers' utilization of counter-attack techniques when shifting role to a thesis defender in which they appear to form a cooperative alliance with candidates in order to oppose examiners. Advisors use PFMs to organize their mediation efforts and examiners use them in their detailed explanations and proposed solutions to problems to support candidates, who often have difficulty comprehending the critical issues raised. The relationship between multifunctional PFMs and role fluidity along with the extra responsibilities observed in the TCTD may be manifestations of committees' enhanced resourcefulness in their attempts to help candidates understand. Variations in discourse properties, such as interaction-/monologue-oriented assessments, provided by coalition/independent examiners, committees' dynamic

roles, and extra missions, illustrate how the defense genre can be differently "generated, sustained, reproduced and changed" (Grimshaw & Burke, 1994, p.445) in the given academic context.

This study is based on a small, discipline-specific corpus, so future research incorporating data from other academic domains would yield more generalizable results and offer new insights into disciplinary norms of defenses. Additionally, an investigation into committees' and candidates' perceptions of their own use of PFMs would offer considerable legitimacy to the interpretation of their functions. Despite these limitations, this research provides important practical and pedagogical implications for the oral skills required in thesis defenses. Given the significance of PFMs in the defense genre, the results of this study based on authentic samples can be used to increase the awareness of novice academics PFM use in actual practice and to create instructional materials aimed at the specific needs of non-native English-speaking candidates who will have an oral defense. Although the use of PFMs does not seem to be connected with defense results, their crucial interpersonal and textual functions play an essential role in the construction of academically appropriate discourse, as summarized in first three paragraphs of the conclusion. Particularly, oral defenses contain discourse features potentially threatening for academics; PFMs operate as essential face-protection devices that can maintain appropriate interpersonal relationships, while portraying individual participants as reasonably persuasive knowledge contributors in a disciplinary domain. PFMs construct committees' institutional and dynamic roles, thus supporting candidates with limited knowledge of discipline-related subject matter. These findings have considerable significance for awareness-raising and teaching activities designed to prepare students for English-medium oral defenses.

Acknowledgements

The project was funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan (MOST104-2410-H-155-028)

Appendix A

Number of graduates		
Year	M.A degree	Ph.D degree
2008	57674	3589
2009	59492	3705
2010	60024	3846
2011	60050	3861
2012	60218	4241
2013	59991	4048
2014	57461	4000
2015	55752	3623
2016	54941	3512
2017	54346	3423

https://depart.moe.edu.tw/ED4500/.

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