



PERGAMON

Journal of English for Academic Purposes  
2 (2003) 313–326

---

Journal of  
ENGLISH for  
ACADEMIC  
PURPOSES

---

[www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap)

# ‘This mystery...’: a corpus-based study of the use of nouns to construct stance in theses from two contrasting disciplines

Maggie Charles\*

*University of Oxford Language Centre, 12 Woodstock Road, Oxford OX2 6HT, UK*

---

## Abstract

This study investigates the construction of stance through nouns in two corpora of theses, 200,000 words in politics/international relations and 300,000 words in materials science. It examines nouns which are preceded by sentence initial deictic *This* and which serve to encapsulate earlier propositions. Such forms are called ‘retrospective labels’ by Francis G. (1994). Labelling discourse: an aspect of nominal-group lexical cohesion. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in written text analysis* (pp. 83–101). London: Routledge, and can be exemplified as follows: ‘Despite its lack of physical basis, the Potts model... has been very successful... *This mystery...*’. It is shown that through encapsulation, such nouns organise the text and indicate to the reader how the information is to be understood. In so doing they enable the writer to take a stance as a competent member of the discipline. Disciplinary differences are seen in the choice of noun, with higher frequencies in the politics corpus of both metalinguistic nouns (e.g. ‘argument’) and nouns that are inherently marked for stance (e.g. ‘confusion’). It is argued that this variation is due to differences between the disciplines in research practices and the construction of knowledge. I suggest that this use of nouns is important for thesis writers, as it constitutes a valuable resource for the construction of convincing arguments and the expression of appropriate stance.

© 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Stance; Evaluation; Thesis writing; Disciplinary discourse; Corpus studies; Nouns

---

\* Tel.: +44-1865-283360; fax: +44-1865-283366.

E-mail address: [maggie.charles@lang.ox.ac.uk](mailto:maggie.charles@lang.ox.ac.uk) (M. Charles).

## 1. Introduction

Stance has been defined as the expression of the writer's 'personal feelings, attitudes, value judgements, or assessments' (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Firegan, 1999: 966). Recently there has been wide-ranging research on this feature of academic writing, for example comparing its use by expert and non-expert writers (Barton, 1993), investigating markers of stance (Biber and Finegan, 1988, 1989; Conrad and Biber, 2000) and proposing a taxonomy of stance features (Hyland, 1999). Other researchers have examined this aspect of academic writing under the term 'evaluation'. These include Hunston (1989, 1993, 1994) and Thetela (1997), who analyse evaluation in academic research articles, Thompson and Ye (1991), who study reporting verbs and Hoey (2000), who discusses Chomsky's use of evaluative language.

The use of nouns to construct stance in academic writing has so far attracted little attention, despite the fact that several researchers have identified a group of nouns which offer the possibility of incorporating interpersonal meanings in the text. These nouns have two characteristic features: they require lexical realisation in their immediate context and they create cohesion. Halliday and Hasan (1976: 274–284) first identified a class of 'general nouns', and showed that they allow the writer to introduce 'an interpersonal element into the meaning' (276). Winter (1982: 185–186) distinguished a wider category of 'unspecific nouns', while Ivanic (1991) examined what she called 'carrier nouns'. Basing their findings on a large amount of corpus data, Hunston and Francis (1999: 185–188) propose a possible new word class, 'shell' nouns.

Perhaps the most detailed investigation of such nouns can be found in Francis (1986, 1994). In her 1994 paper, Francis uses the term 'label' for 'inherently unspecific nominal elements' that require lexical realisation in the co-text (Francis, 1994: 83). She examines the role of these labels in expository texts written with a persuasive purpose and characterises them as 'primarily interactive organisational signals' (Francis, 1986: 3). Nominal groups that refer to forthcoming propositions are termed 'advance labels' and those that refer to earlier propositions, 'retrospective labels' (Francis 1994: 83). The latter 'encapsulate' the whole of a previous proposition (Sinclair 1981, 1992, 1993), so that its meaning is present in the following sentence.

This paper will focus specifically on the use of retrospective labels in the construction of stance, as illustrated in (1) below. *This shortcoming* is lexicalised in the previous sentence and serves as a cohesive device; at the same time it clearly expresses the attitude of the writer towards *the Guidelines*.

- (1) . . . the Guidelines fall short of recognising that women as such constitute a particular social group. *This shortcoming* leads to problems. . . (mpokuch2) . . .<sup>1</sup>

Such nominalisations are examples of grammatical metaphor in Halliday's terms (1994: 342) and their use facilitates the construction of the argument.

---

<sup>1</sup> All examples come from the corpora described in Section 2. The code in brackets indicates the corpus, writer and chapter of the thesis quoted. Mpo denotes the politics corpus and dma the materials corpus.

## 2. Data and method

The present study employs a corpus-based approach to investigate the way in which retrospective labels are used to construct stance. The data is drawn from two corpora of theses written by native speakers of English at the University of Oxford. The politics corpus consists of eight MPhil theses (approximately 200,000 words) in politics and international relations, while the materials corpus is composed of eight doctoral theses (about 300,000 words) in materials science. A social science and a natural science were chosen in order to enable comparison between disciplines. Since the purpose here is to compare post-graduate native-speaker writing in the two disciplines, it is not thought likely that the difference in degree level will affect the results of the study unduly. The theses were obtained from the authors on disk and the corpora were examined using concordance software from WordSmith Tools (Scott, 1996).

According to Francis (1994: 89), retrospective labels are much more frequent than advance labels and the head nouns 'are almost always preceded by a specific deictic like *the, this, that or such*' (Francis, 1994: 85). Thus in order to facilitate the identification of labels and to ensure sufficient, while not overwhelming, numbers of instances, I restricted the investigation to retrospective labels that occur with the deictic *This* in sentence initial position. An example from the materials corpus is given below.

- (2) Despite its a [sic] lack of physical basis, the Potts model ( $e=0$ ) has been very successful in simulating the kinetics and topology of normal grain growth (Anderson et al., 1989b). This mystery is what makes the model so fascinating... (dmamich5)

All instances of sentence initial *This + noun* were retrieved from both corpora and examined in context to determine whether they were functioning as retrospective labels or not. Identification of labels was not always straightforward, however. First, it was often necessary to examine a large amount of context before analysis could be made. In the example below *This technique* simply refers back to a heading given five pages earlier: *Electrostatic Spraying* and thus is not a label.

- (3) *This technique* has proved its usefulness in fabricating cadmium sulphide, lead sulphide and gallium arsenide QD... (dmahuch4)

Second, as labels refer to and make use of the shared knowledge of reader and writer, it was not always possible for a non-specialist to be certain whether a given stretch of text provided a lexicalisation or not. For these two reasons the emphasis here will be on qualitative rather than quantitative statements. Although an attempt will be made below to quantify the extent of this type of labelling, it should be noted that such figures are only approximate.

Table 1 gives the frequency information on retrospective labels using sentence initial *This + noun* in the two corpora. In Politics<sup>2</sup> there are 146 tokens, 76.8 per

---

<sup>2</sup> Use of capitalisation (i.e. Politics, Materials) denotes reference to the corpus.

Table 1

Frequency data: sentence initial retrospective labels using This + noun

	Politics Corpus	Materials Corpus
Number of words in corpus	190,000	300,000
Tokens	146	180
Tokens per 100,000 words	76.8	60.0
Head noun types	108	99
Types per 100,000 words	56.8	33.0
Tokens per type	1.4	1.8

100,000 words, while in Materials there are 180 tokens, 60.0 occurrences per 100,000 words. Thus the overall occurrence of these labels is somewhat higher in the politics than the materials corpus. Comparison of the head noun types<sup>3</sup> shows 108 in Politics, giving a figure of 56.8 per 100,000 words, and 99 in Materials, resulting in only 33.0 per 100,000 words. Thus there is a much wider range of head nouns in the politics than in the materials corpus. There is very little difference between the two corpora in the figures for tokens per type: 1.4 for Politics as against 1.8 for Materials. In both corpora the large majority of nouns occur only once.

### 3. Metalinguistic and non-metalinguistic head nouns of labels

Francis (1994: 89) distinguishes a category of head nouns of labels which she calls 'metalinguistic'. These 'label a stretch of discourse as being of a particular type of language. They are used by the writer to forge relationships which are located entirely within the discourse itself; they instruct the reader to interpret the linguistic status of a proposition in a particular way'. Examples of metalinguistic nouns which occur in the data are: *point, distinction, expression*; non-metalinguistic nouns include: *effect, result, observation*.

Following Francis's definition, Table 2 shows figures for metalinguistic and non-metalinguistic head nouns in the two corpora.

Table 2

Types of head noun

Head noun type	Politics corpus		Materials corpus	
	Frequency	Normed per 100,000 words	Frequency	Normed per 100,000 words
Non-metalinguistic	92	48.4	136	45.3
Metalinguistic	54	28.4	44	14.7
Total	146	76.8	180	60.0

<sup>3</sup> Double-headed head nouns (Francis, 1994: 89) are counted as individual items, e.g. kind of approach is counted separately from approach.

It is noticeable that, while the normed figures for non-metalinguistic head nouns are roughly similar in the two corpora, Politics uses twice as many metalinguistic head nouns as Materials. We may account for this by referring to disciplinary differences in the construction of knowledge. First, politics research mostly draws upon resources that are language based: both written and spoken records. It is also primarily concerned with constructing accounts and interpretations of events that are predominantly in written form. Thus the activity of the discipline is inherently text-based. This leads to a higher frequency of metalinguistic nouns. An example is given below.

- (4) The following passages are recorded in the Sub-Committee's Report: [quotation omitted] *This discussion* between state representatives at the UNHCR illustrates the significant issues in the debate over gender-related persecution. (mpokuch2)

By contrast, although texts are, of course, produced in materials science, the activity of the discipline is primarily directed to the performance of experiments. As a result we find fewer metalinguistic nouns in Materials and occurrences of nouns referring to material processes are frequent. This is shown in the following example.

- (5) Specimens were cut, ground and polished, as for the optical examination. *This procedure* was followed in the first instance by electro-polishing (see Table 6.2). (dmamich6)

Second, as Becher (1989: 13) points out, in social sciences there is a 'predominantly recursive or reiterative pattern of development'. Knowledge is advanced by putting forward the views of others in order to take up a position in relation to them. This tendency is reflected in the more frequent use of metalinguistic nouns by writers in Politics. An example appears below.

- (6) Particular concern is expressed regarding the field of R&D, because of the dominance of military expenditure in this area and the scarcity of qualified people. *This point* is made by Glyn and Harrison... (mpowbch)

The growth of knowledge in the natural sciences, however, tends to proceed cumulatively, with one person's work building on that of another (Becher, 1989: 13). To the extent that the work of others is turned into 'fact', or 'black-boxed' in Latour and Woolgar's (1986) terms, there is less need for the materials science writer to take a stance towards it. Thus we find fewer instances of metalinguistic nouns in the Materials data.

#### 4. The construction of stance through the use of a retrospective label

Francis notes that a retrospective label 'is presented as equivalent to the clause or clauses it replaces' (Francis, 1994: 85 original emphasis) and stresses that 'such

synonymity is a construct' (Francis, 1994: 93). Given that all labels are constructions of the writer, it follows that their discourse-organising function will reflect the purposes and views of the writer and hence indicate the writer's stance. As Hoey points out, 'When a relation is signalled, a message is communicated about the way in which the discourse should be interpreted' (Hoey, 1983: 178). To the extent that the label signals a relation of equivalence, it also indicates the way in which the text should be interpreted.

The use of a retrospective label involves two important choices made by the writer: first, which information to encapsulate and second, the way in which it is labelled. These choices reflect the writer's perceptions, either of real world events or actions (using non-metalinguistic head nouns) or of the text itself (using metalinguistic head nouns). By choosing which information to label, writers organise the text and by choosing the label itself, they incorporate their meaning therein. In my data these choices reflect perceptions that are based upon the forms of knowledge and enquiry that characterise the relevant discipline. I will illustrate this with an example from Materials of a label with a non-metalinguistic head noun.

- (7) As the applied field moves beyond its maximum and starts to fall the screening currents within the sample respond, reversing their direction and changing the nature of the field profile within the sample, (b). *This process* continues as the field drops further until the state shown in (c). (dmahoch8)

The label *This process* encapsulates the whole of the previous sentence, showing the writer's perception of the series of real world events described. By labelling all these events together, the writer shows that he perceives them as a single entity and by choosing the head noun *process*, he indicates the specific way in which these events are linked. Indeed it is interesting to note that the same effect would not be achieved by connecting the two sentences with the deictic *This* alone. The writer's perceptions, however, are based upon discipline specific knowledge and it is this that enables him to see the events as forming a meaningful whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. A non-specialist describing the same phenomena might not regard the events as connected or might come up with a different label; for example, they could be called a 'sequence' or a 'chain of events'. Thus the use of retrospective labels shows the writer taking a stance as a member of a given disciplinary community. Both the fact of using a label and the chosen label itself reflect the disciplinary knowledge that the writer brings to bear upon the content with which he deals.

Moreover, as noted above, these labels are interactive: their use affects the reader's perception of the proposition(s) put forward and so enables the reader to perceive the organisation and meaning that the writer intends. Indeed the successful processing of the text depends upon the reader accepting, at least provisionally, the labels assigned. The next example from Politics uses a metalinguistic head noun.

- (8) Policies aimed at raising the stakes faced by a state... are likely to produce convergence in these competition-related areas of state practice... *This claim* is made on the basis of the conceptual analysis offered here. (mpoalch2)

As readers, we are expected first to perceive the relationship of equivalence that the writer sets up between the proposition in the first sentence and the nominal group *This claim* and second to accept that this label provides a more or less acceptable designation for that proposition. Again, however, it is the writer's view that we are offered; alternative labels such as 'This point' or 'This interpretation' could have been used. Nevertheless, in order to proceed with the text, it is necessary for the reader to suspend any possible objections and process the label as chosen by the writer.

When we focus specifically on their organisational role, we can see that these labels also mark the writer's stance. It is the writer who chooses the organisation of the text and the stance is revealed in the relationship that the writer constructs between encapsulated proposition and label. In the following example from Materials, the writer establishes that the information in the first sentence can be regarded as a *theory*. Through encapsulation, the label makes the preceding information available for extension with further details, which are then given in the rest of the sentence and ultimately contribute to the construction of the writer's argument. In this way the label functions as a discourse organiser, while at the same time expressing the writer's stance towards the proposition it encapsulates.

- (9) A consensus is forming around the idea of 'vortex pancakes' (Clem, 1991) in the highly layered Bi-2212, Bi-2223 and probably in the thallium based materials as well. *This theory* uses evidence that many of these materials are not in fact superconductors outside the CuO planes themselves... (dmahoch2)

A further function of retrospective labels, in particular those with metalinguistic head nouns, is that they assign to their replacement clauses 'a particular status in the argument' (Francis, 1994: 84). This also contributes to the marking of stance, as illustrated in the example from Politics below.

- (10) There may be strong ideological imperatives for adding a 'gender' ground... *This position* does not necessarily hold that women exist exclusively in the private sphere and that the refugee definition only protects against persecution in the public sphere. Rather, it holds that... (mpokuch1)

Here the necessity of *adding a 'gender' ground* is assigned the status of a *position* held by some of those involved in the ongoing debate concerning women's refugee claims. The label carries out an organisational function in that the writer can now use it as part of an examination of different positions on the issue. At the same time the label conveys the writer's view that the preceding information is indeed a *position*, rather than, for example, an 'idea', so it carries out a stance function as well. Crucially, by choosing the noun *position*, a writer gains the ability to attack or defend the proposition given. This in turn allows readers to predict the likely course of the text and ultimately leads them to expect a statement of the writer's own position.

So far, then, we have seen how nouns used as retrospective labels construct stance through their discourse organising function. Next we will examine how stance can also be expressed through the choice of head noun.

## 5. The construction of stance within the head noun of a label

Certain labels incorporate stance within the head noun itself. Here I identify these nouns using two types of stance distinguished by Biber et al. (1999): epistemic and attitudinal. Epistemic stance ‘comments on the status of information in a proposition’ (Biber et al., 1999: 972), marking, for example, certainty, doubt, actuality or precision, while attitudinal stance markers ‘report personal attitudes or feelings’ (Biber et al., 1999: 974). It should be noted that, although modification offers a further opportunity for the incorporation of stance, lack of space does not permit its discussion here. Accordingly the figures for epistemic and attitudinal stance given in Table 3 refer only to unmodified head nouns.

Comparing the normed figures, Politics uses about twice as many of these stance nouns as Materials, with double the number of epistemic nouns and roughly three times as many attitudinally marked nouns. In both corpora, nouns which express epistemic stance (e.g. *claim*, *theory*, *assumption*) are more frequent than those which express attitudinal stance (e.g. *problem*, *limitation*, *atrocities*).

In Materials it is noticeable that many of the metalinguistic head nouns that express epistemic stance introduce clauses in which the encapsulated information is shown to contribute in a positive way to the construction of the writer’s argument. An example is given below, where the information that constitutes the *hypothesis* provides an explanation for one of the writer’s findings and thus enables him to use it in building his argument.

- (11) Also, the Schmid factor for slip on the cube plane must not be infinitesimal. *This hypothesis* explains why inverse creep occurs in Ni<sub>3</sub>Al specimens oriented... (dmaluch2)

We may explain this phenomenon by referring again to the cumulative construction of knowledge. In materials science positive evaluation tends to be important, since work that can be evaluated in a positive light can most usefully form the basis of future research. Thus the nouns are often used in showing how theory and experimental findings support each other to construct a persuasive argument. Further examples that occur in the data include the following:

- (12) *This finding* is of use if very long-term tests are performed... (dmabuch7)

Table 3  
Epistemic and attitudinal stance in unmodified head nouns

Stance type	Politics corpus ( <i>n</i> =82)		Materials corpus ( <i>n</i> =116)	
	Frequency	Normed per 100,000 words	Frequency	Normed per 100,000 words
Epistemic	28	14.7	22	7.3
Attitudinal	17	9.0	8	2.7
Total	45	23.7	30	10.0

(13) *This explanation* is in agreement with the experimental observations.  
(dmasech7)

(14) *This theory* is supported by the wider scratch track observed in this coating.  
(dmacoch8)

In most of the Politics examples, however, the content of the clause following the label is not a positive evaluation; it merely supplies the next step of the argument.

(15) *This view* stems from their lack of belief in the ability of the market economy to reallocate resources... (mpowbch4)

(16) *This proposition* could be tested through a comparative analysis of...  
(mpoalch4)

(17) *This assumption* applied to other middle powers by extension. (mpobach2)

In both corpora the frequency of attitudinal stance nouns is rather low. In Politics, about three-quarters of attitudinally marked nouns evaluate negatively and the majority of these express a stance towards political situations or events. An example is given below.

(18) Only when acting in self-defence could UN troops employ force. *This limitation* was added to the resolution at the insistence of France and the United Kingdom... (mpomqch3)

Other nouns used in this way include: *atrocity*, *dilemma*, *disjointedness* and *restriction*, along with the one noun that evaluates positively: *improvement*. There are only two examples, both negative, which evaluate the work of other researchers: *confusion* and *failure*. An example is given below.

(19) The various attempts to connect the behaviour of middle powers to their capabilities have failed... *This failure* means that the term is not much more than a self-description. (mpobach2)

The figures for attitudinal nouns are lower in Materials. There are four examples of nouns that mark a negative stance towards the phenomena described: *problem* (2 examples), *limitation* and *ambiguity*. An example is given below.

(20) The predominance of <110> screw dislocations over edge ones is because... Conversely, it could also mean that... *This ambiguity* must be considered when using TEM to elucidate the processes responsible for slip during creep. (dmaluch5)

However there are also three nouns which evaluate positively: *solution*, *correction* and *progress*. Of these *solution* and *correction* refer to the writer's own work, as shown in example (21).

- (21) It is now thought the problem could be eliminated by controlling the relationship between the applied field direction and the direction of the transport current... *This solution* has not been tried in practice at this stage... (dmahoch6)

*Progress*, however, relates more generally to work within the discipline, as seen below.

- (22) The introduction of improved growth methods for Group III-V material... has enabled the reduction in device dimensions. *This progress* has demanded a corresponding improvement in characterisation techniques. (dmasech1)

Where evaluation of research is concerned, it could again be that the occurrence of positive evaluation in Materials is related to the cumulative construction of knowledge in this discipline, while the negative evaluation in Politics is connected to recursive knowledge-building in the discipline of politics. However further research with much larger corpora would be necessary in order to verify this suggestion; the number of instances is too low here for valid generalisations to be made.

Stance is evident, then, in the choice of inherently evaluative head nouns or labels, with Politics showing more extensive marking than Materials. However in both corpora attitudinal stance nouns are used only sparingly to evaluate the research of others.

## **6. The incorporation of stance as given information**

Although head nouns of retrospective labels are always presented as given information (Francis 1994: 86), Francis points out that the writer's evaluation of the proposition may actually be new information. In such cases the incorporation of writer stance in the given element of the clause may make the evaluation more difficult to detect and therefore less likely to be challenged by the reader. In my data, however, where evaluation occurs in the head noun, it is usually already apparent in the preceding proposition itself, particularly in the case of attitudinal stance. In these cases the label contributes to a double signalling of the writer's stance.

In the example below from Politics, the label is used in the middle of a passage that is highly critical of another writer's work. I have not quoted it all, but the first sentence gives an indication of the argument so far. This is then supported by the examples in the second and third sentences and culminates in the final sentence with the use of the noun *confusion*.

- (23) The lines of causation thus become difficult to untangle. Socialization, or normative co-option, leads to policy alignment in the first mechanism, but is the result of policy coercion in the second. The socialization of individuals is treated as the independent variable at times, the dependent variable at others. *This confusion* results from the attempt to define state socialization as change to the cognitive and normative framework of governing elites. (mpoalch1)

Here, although the noun *confusion* is evaluative, the information it contains is not new, but is easily predictable from the preceding context. Thus the label lends emphasis to the evaluation already given. This can be seen even more clearly when the head noun repeats the lexis of the encapsulated information, as in the next example.

- (24) The various attempts to connect the behaviour of middle powers to their capabilities have *failed* because no matter how we hold power constant, their behaviour still varies. *This failure* means that the term is not much more than a self-description. (mpobach2)

Where epistemic stance is concerned, the position is less clear, partly because of the difficulty in interpreting a specialist text. In example (24) from Materials, experimental observations are labelled as *evidence*. Although this is new information, it is likely that the specialist reader would, in fact, regard the observations as constituting evidence.

- (25) Furthermore, the dislocations do not appear as dissociated partials when they are strongly visible in (a)/(b) ( $g = 220$ ), (c) ( $g = 220$ ) and (e) ( $g = 020$ ). *This evidence suggests* that... (dmaluch4)

In the next example it is more likely that the use of *claim* does incorporate a new evaluation in the given element. Here the writer's intention may be to distance himself somewhat from the reported findings, since they raise doubts as to the validity of the modelling procedure used, as shown in the last sentence of the extract.

- (26) Li et al. (1994) has simulated 3D abnormal growth... They report that at low volume fractions abnormal grains are able to sweep through particles to consume the matrix. *This claim* raises an important issue regarding the Monte Carlo modelling of grain growth in the presence of particles; namely that at low volume fractions the pinned grain size approaches the dimensions of the model. Under these circumstances we must question the validity of the conclusions deduced from such a model. (dmamich2)

However for a thesis writer as candidate professional, it may be considered appropriate to use an unobtrusive position for the first indication of negative stance, since criticism of the work of others can constitute a face-threatening activity (Myers, 1989). We should also note that the subsequent text provides the basis for the evaluation, signalled by *namely*. Thus the purpose of the label seems to be to give an early signal of the writer's stance, rather than to incorporate evaluation in a position where it is unlikely to be questioned.

When evaluation is incorporated in the head noun, then, it often forms part of a more extensive construction of stance. In such cases the evaluation actually is given information and the label functions to emphasise rather than to hide the stance already taken. This facilitates reader scrutiny, enabling a challenge to be put forward if necessary.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has examined the use of nouns in retrospective labels and shown that they contribute significantly to the construction of stance in both disciplines examined. Through the encapsulation of preceding propositions the nouns structure the text and indicate to the reader how the information is to be understood. In so doing they enable the writer to take a stance as a knowledgeable member of the field. Disciplinary variation is also found, particularly in the noun chosen: higher frequencies of both metalinguistic nouns and nouns that are inherently marked for stance occur in the politics than in the materials corpus. I argue that differences between the two disciplines in research practices and the construction of knowledge lie at the root of the variation observed.

I suggest that the ability to handle nouns used as retrospective labels is important for thesis writers. There are two main reasons for this. First, the successful encapsulation of information leads to an argument which is clearly structured and thus more likely to be convincing. Second, the choice of a head noun for the label is a resource which writers can use to construct an appropriate stance by presenting themselves as competent professionals in the discipline.

As Johns and Swales (2002: 13) point out, uncertainty over ‘what role there might be for a personal voice’ is one area of difficulty that affects student writing at all levels, including the thesis. They illustrate this point by referring to the use of personal pronouns such as ‘I’ or ‘we’. However I would suggest that the creation of an appropriate authorial voice or stance is a much more pervasive phenomenon, which is realised through a wide range of linguistic resources, including the nouns examined here. The materials science student who writes in his thesis ‘This mystery is what makes the model so fascinating...’ has found a way of expressing his personal voice through his use of not only the noun *mystery*, but also the adjective *fascinating*, the adverb *so* and the cleft construction.

It is clear from this example that much work remains to be done to shed further light on the role of personal voice or stance and the means by which it is realised. However it is hoped that the findings of this study on nouns will contribute to the clarification of this area of uncertainty for all those involved in the writing of theses.

## Appendix

### *Politics/international relations corpus*

- Alderson, K. H. (1995). *Convergence under anarchy: Socialization and the state system*. (mpoal)
- Bays, J. (1996). *Fireproof house to middle power: Metaphor, identity and Canadian foreign policy, 1939–1950*. (mpoba)
- Hobbs, P. W. (1996). *The US and the UK in the Middle East: 'Alpha' and the search for a Palestine settlement in 1955*. (mpohb)
- Kuttner, S. A. (1996). *Crossing new boundaries: refugee regimes and gender-related persecution*. (mpoku)
- Martin, P. J. (1996). *Attitudes and coalition-building: the importance of significance in Burger court civil liberties cases*. (mpoma)

- McMenamin, K. I. (1996). *Giuseppe Mazzini's nationalism in European context*. (mpomm)  
 McQueen, C. V. (1996). *International relations and international law: safe areas in Bosnia*. (mpomq)  
 Webb, M. C. (1996). *Abandoning the world role: British foreign policy making, 1945–1967*. (mpowb)

### *Materials science corpus*

- Bowler, D. R. (1997). *A theoretical study of gas source growth of the Si(001) surface*. (dmabo)  
 Burden, A. P. (1996). *Electron microscopy techniques to further the understanding of conductive polymer composites*. (dmabu)  
 Cock, A. (1998). *The high temperature erosion of coated thermal barrier tiles*. (dmaco)  
 Hole, C. (1995). *Pulsed magnetic field characterisation of technological high temperature superconductors*. (dmaho)  
 Hull, P. J. (1996). *Synthesis and characterisation of quantum dots*. (dmahu)  
 Lunt, M. J. (1998). *The yield stress anomaly and inverse creep in L12 single crystals*. (dmalu)  
 Miodownik, M. A. (1996). *Fundamentals of grain growth phenomena in ODS alloys*. (dmami)  
 Sealy, C. (1997). *SEM characterisation of semiconductor dopant distribution*. (dmase)

### **Acknowledgements**

The permission of the authors to use their texts for linguistic research is gratefully acknowledged.

### **References**

- Barton, E. L. (1993). Evidentials, argumentation, and epistemological stance. *College English*, 55(7), 745–769.
- Becher, T. (1989). *Academic tribes and territories*. Milton Keynes: The Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Biber, D., & Finegan, E. (1988). Adverbial stance types in English. *Discourse Processes*, 11, 1–34.
- Biber, D., & Finegan, E. (1989). Styles of stance in English: lexical and grammatical marking of evidentiality and affect. *Text*, 9(1), 93–124.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1998). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Conrad, S., & Biber, D. (2000). Adverbial marking of stance in speech and writing. In S. Hunston, & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Evaluation in text: authorial stance and the construction of discourse* (pp. 56–73). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Francis, G. (1986). *Anaphoric nouns*. Discourse analysis monographs No. 11. University of Birmingham: English Language Research.
- Francis, G. (1994). Labelling discourse: an aspect of nominal-group lexical cohesion. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in written text analysis* (pp. 83–101). London: Routledge.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Edward Arnold.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman.
- Hoey, M. (1983). *On the surface of discourse*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hoey, M. (2000). Persuasive rhetoric in linguistics: a stylistic study of some features of the language of Naom Chomsky. In S. Hunston, & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Evaluation in text: authorial stance and the construction of discourse* (pp. 28–37). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hunston, S. (1989). Evaluation in experimental research articles. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Birmingham.

- Hunston, S. (1993). Evaluation and ideology in scientific writing. In M. Ghadessy (Ed.), *Register analysis: theory and practice* (pp. 57–73). London: Pinter.
- Hunston, S. (1994). Evaluation and organization in a sample of written academic discourse. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in written text analysis* (pp. 191–218). London: Routledge.
- Hunston, S., & Francis, G. (1999). *Pattern grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hyland, K. (1999). Disciplinary discourses: writer stance in research articles. In C. N. Candlin, & K. Hyland (Eds.), *Writing: texts, processes and practices* (pp. 99–121). London: Longman.
- Ivanic, R. (1991). Nouns in search of a context: a study of nouns with both open-and closed-system characteristics. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, XXIX(2), 93–114.
- Johns, A. M., & Swales, J. M. (2002). Literacy and disciplinary practices: opening and closing perspectives. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 1, 13–28.
- Latour, B., & Woolgar, S. (1986). *Laboratory life* (2nd ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Myers, G. (1989). The pragmatics of politeness in scientific articles. *Applied Linguistics*, 10(1), 1–35.
- Scott, M. (1996). *WordSmithTools*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, J. M. (1981). Planes of discourse. In S. N. A. Rizvi (Ed.), *The two-fold voice: essays in honour of Ramesh Mohan* (pp. 70–91). Salzburg: University of Salzburg.
- Sinclair, J. (1992). Priorities in discourse analysis. In M. Coulthard (Ed.), *Advances in spoken discourse analysis* (pp. 79–88). London: Routledge.
- Sinclair, J. M. (1993). Written discourse structure. In J. M. Sinclair, M. Hoey, & G. Fox (Eds.), *Techniques of description: spoken and written discourse* (pp. 6–31). London: Routledge.
- Thetela, P. (1997). Evaluated entities and parameters of value in academic research articles. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(2), 101–118.
- Thompson, G., & Ye, Y. (1991). Evaluation in the reporting verbs used in academic papers. *Applied Linguistics*, 12(4), 365–382.
- Winter, E. O. (1982). *Towards a contextual grammar of English*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

**Maggie Charles** is Tutor in EAP at Oxford University Language Centre, where she teaches academic writing. She is currently completing doctoral research at Birmingham University. Her interests include the study of evaluation, discipline-specific EAP and the application of insights from corpus linguistics to the teaching of academic writing.