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'The important point is': highlighting information in lectures

Helping students recognise the important points of a lecture is an essential feature of effective lecture delivery. One way in which this can be achieved is by metadiscursive devices signalling relevance, or 'relevance markers' (using a term from Hunston 1994). A better understanding of the use of such lexicogrammatical devices would benefit not only educational research on note-taking and lecture comprehension but also provide information that can be used in the design of English for Academic Purposes courses for non-native speaker lecturers and students. However, there have been very few corpus-informed discussions of relevance markers (Crawford Camiciottoli 2004, 2007 and Swales 2001 being notable exceptions); instead educational studies on discourse organization in lectures include very few (corpus-derived) examples (e.g. Kiewra, 2002), while linguistic studies either remain silent on the source of their examples of discourse organizing expressions (e.g. Chaudron & Richards 1986) or focus on lexical bundles (e.g. Biber 2006).

Using the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus, this study contributes to the mapping of the realizations of relevance markers in lectures. A list of relevance markers was first compiled from a manual search of 40 BASE lectures and from examples provided in Crawford Camiciottoli (2004, 2007). These were then quantified in all 160 lectures using Sketch Engine. The identification and quantification of these markers proved difficult because it often required studying discourse far beyond the concordance line and because some of the most common devices (e.g. remember; the point is) are polysemous. Furthermore, in the case of corpus linguistic research such as this the analysis of evaluation is also hampered by the lack of information about the lecturer's intentions, the students' knowledge, and non-verbal communication.

The investigation revealed a wide variety of patterns based on nouns (e.g. the important point is; that's the bottom line), verbs (e.g. remember; let me just emphasise) and adjectives (e.g. it is important to note; this is absolutely crucial). These could further be classified in terms of their orientation as speaker-oriented (e.g. that's the point i want to make; it's worth mentioning), listener-oriented (e.g. this is important to remember; it's worth knowing), content-oriented (e.g. so what's crucial is; that's the critical point) or as having joint listener-speaker orientation (e.g. we need to bear in mind; these are the things i want you to go home with). Finally, it is interesting to note that findings largely confirm those of previous research on the conversational features of this genre (e.g. Biber 2006), the extremely common use of 'the thing/point/question is' being a case in point.

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