Metadiscourse in lectures: importance marking

Katrien Deroey
What are importance markers?

Deroey & Taverniers (2012a)
Importance markers

Lexicogrammatical devices that overtly mark the relative importance or relevance of points which are presented verbally or visually

(Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a, p. 222)

✓ the most important thing to b bear in mind throughout the lecture really is pest is a human definition
× the first thing i want to do today is to is to formally er try and explain what the connection is
× mass warfare which is obviously such an important thing in the nineteenth century
How were the markers retrieved?

Deroey & Taverniers (2012a)
British Academic Spoken English corpus

160 lectures

Arts & Humanities, Social Studies & Sciences, Physical Sciences, Life & Medical Sciences

Corpus Query tool: Sketch Engine
Multipronged approach
(Deroey & Taverniers 2012a)

Subcorpus + literature + BASE word list

Whole corpus

Cross-searches + Related items

Manual analysis 40 lectures
Markers from other studies ≥50 BASE

Concordance co-text
Synonyms & derived words
How do lecturers mark important points?

Deroey & Taverniers (2012a)
Deroey (2014)
Deroey (2015)
Types according to key constituent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pattern type</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Frequency (N=782)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adjective patterns</td>
<td></td>
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Verb and noun markers predominate

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<td>this is the important <strong>point</strong></td>
<td>284 (36.3%)</td>
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<td>i want to <strong>emphasize</strong> this</td>
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## Other types are rare

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<td><strong>significantly</strong> this is made out of virtually one block of Carrara marble</td>
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<td>Exam-related expressions</td>
<td>it's something we can sort of ask exam questions on</td>
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Formulaic, multifunctional markers predominate

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<td>Noun patterns: MN v-link</td>
<td>the <strong>point</strong> is that people can't do that</td>
<td>c. 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb patterns: V n/clause</td>
<td><strong>remember</strong> slavery had already been legally abolished</td>
<td>c. 34%</td>
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Stereotypical & explicit markers are less common

deic v-link ADJ: **this is absolutely crucial**

*it* v-link ADJ clause: **it’s important to note** this is further subdivided

adj MN v-link: **the key point is** they do not give up those natural rights

1s pers pron V n/clause: **I want to stress this point**

2 pers pron V n/clause: **you should also note** that significance depends on the sample size
How do lecturers mark less important points?

Deroey & Taverniers (2012b)
Deroey (2014)
Spot the marker(s) of lesser importance

my cat is a demon i don't know why i put dow that down as a metaphor you only got to look at me to see that that's true but never mind
Key findings

Very few markers with inherent meaning of irrelevance / lesser relevance

Most express lesser relevance implicitly / cumulatively: ‘muted signals’ (Swales & Burke, 2003, p. 17)

Potential to function as markers of lesser relevance:

  - co-text
  - non-verbal, visual, prosodic cues
  - lecture genre
Message status

Assign negative importance to part of message
  that’s a little bit of a sideline *sideline*
  i'm *joking*

Signal transitions between more and less important discourse
  that does have certain consequences for for change but
  *anyway* i’m not i won’t be going on on to those
Topic treatment

Indicate limited discourse / time is devoted to topic

what i'd like to do now is to say **a little bit** about water

then you do a few more operations which i **will not drag you through** right now and why this is so **et cetera et cetera**
Lecturer knowledge

Suggests imprecise / partial knowledge

i can't remember it's in the textbook but ignore that 'cause it's totally irrelevant for the actual what i'm going to tell you

it's never called that in film study i don't know why but it isn't
Attention- and note-taking directives

Direct students not to pay attention / take notes

you don't need to copy them all down

ignore that 'cause it's totally irrelevant
Assessment

Indicate what information will not be examined

it won't come up on an exam paper

you don't have to know the details of Keynes' economic theories
Some implications for metadiscourse study
Corpus linguistic research revealing, but:

- Manual analysis and interrating necessary
- Triangulation, multimodality, prosody, non-verbal communication affect analytical accuracy
- Quantification: reliability and feasibility?

‘Judgments of plausibility rather than certainty’
(Mann & Thompson, 1988, p. 245)
Acknowledgement
The recordings and transcriptions used in this study come from the British Academic Spoken English (BASE) corpus. The corpus was developed at the Universities of Warwick and Reading under the directorship of Hilary Nesi and Paul Thompson. Corpus development was assisted by funding from BALEAP, EURALEX, the British Academy and the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

References

