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Modality Practices Among ELF Users in Academic Discussions: Dominant and Peripheral Participants

ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the variance in practices for expressing modality in ELF situations depending on a participant's role in the discussion – dominating or peripheral. A subset of a corpus of recorded discussions was examined for the expression of modality – specifically uses of modal auxiliaries and common epistemic and attitudinal markers («think», «like», etc.). Some participants displayed characteristic patterns for expressing modality only when they took a dominant role in the discussion, not when they took a peripheral role. The links observed in the study suggest that discussion dominance is an attribute that is unevenly distributed not only due to personality differences but also due to intercultural factors, and that this dominance is accomplished or enacted by specific language practices.

Introduction

The aim of this paper – part of a larger study of 'English as a lingua franca in Asian intercultural situations'[1] – was to discover the modality practices used in academic and professional discussions in an ELF context. The discussions observed were by three disparate groups in their respective settings: post-graduate interns at an inter-governmental development agency, graduate and undergraduate students in an English-medium Business Administration programme, and healthcare professionals in an NGO-operated training programme (see Table 1). The commonalities among the three groups/settings were that all were located in Japan, that all employed English as the main language of interaction, and that all were made up (except for 3 of 84 participants) of speakers of first languages other than English. All settings were those for which it could be expected that the interactions (those in English) could be characterised as instances of English as a lingua franca.

Table 1 – The three groups investigated, event types, and nationalities of participants

Group A	post-graduate interns at inter-governmental development agency
Event types	meetings, work sessions of 2 and 3 participants
Nationalities	*East Eurasia:* Japan (3), China (2), Philippines (1), Indonesia (1), Thailand (1), Myanmar (1) *Central Eurasia:* Jordan (1)
Group B	graduate students in English-medium MBA programme
Event types	discussions, presentations, and question-answer sessions
Nationalities	*East Eurasia:* Japan (7), Hong Kong (10), China (1), Malaysia (2) *Central Eurasia:* Kazakhstan (3), Saudi Arabia (1) *West Eurasia:* France (17), Germany (4), Portugal (3), Sweden (2), Norway (2), Finland (1), Lithuania (1) *Africa:* Senegal (1) *North America:* Mexico (3), Canada (2) *South America:* Colombia (1), Venezuela (1)
Group C	healthcare professionals at NGO training programme
Event types	discussions, role-plays
Nationalities	*East Eurasia:* Cambodia (1), Indonesia (1), Japan (3), Philippines (1), Thailand (2), Timor-Leste *Central Eurasia:* Bangladesh (2), Nepal (2), Pakistan (1), Sri Lanka (1) *North America:* USA (1)

The group as a whole, and the smaller sub-groups in most of the individual interactions, comprised a diverse range of cultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. Thus, it was not anticipated that the practice of English language among the participants would exhibit the kinds of regularities that often obtain in a local, long-term setting for English use. Rather, no assumptions were made except that the English-language interactions would be, by definition, instances of English as a lingua franca. Further, it was expected that the participants would practise English from a wide range of cultural and linguistic starting points, including great differences in participants' proficiencies and communication strategies, and that therefore their English language practice might best be described as «interactions across Englishes» (Meierkord, 2012), rather than interactions in any stable variety. Further, following Meeuvis (1994) and Firth (1996), the practices are seen the discursive accomplishment of users in a situation.

Therefore, in choosing the points of focus and the methodologies to be employed, emphasis was placed not on observing or discovering varieties of English, but on observing the practices of English that arise from the specific configuration of situation and users (or participants) attending the use of English as a lingua franca in this setting. For different users or in a different situation the practices would be different. (This point, though obvious when stated, can be lost when a researcher holds an a priori assumption that what will be observed is a rarified variety of system of language, or an instance of such.)

1. Methodology and data

The raw data collected were audio- and video-recordings of the interactions in the settings in which they naturally occurred. These were transcribed and a small corpus compiled. Next, the corpus was analysed in the following ways, all following from observations grounded in the data as they were collected:

1. It was observed early on that language-switching between the two dominant languages, English ('international language') and Japanese ('local language'), was common in all groupings of participants (whether or not there were Japanese involved). To ascertain whether there was a regular distribution of speech functions assigned to English versus Japanese, a manual analysis was carried out, and a rough correlation of English to functions of ideational exchange and Japanese to interpersonal orientation was observed

(see Thompson, 2009).

2. In interviews, participants mentioned that the social context of their interactions was different not only from their home cultures but also from how they understood Japanese culture to be, and one example, methods of addressing interlocutors, was highlighted. To characterise the representation of social situation among and by the participants, the frequencies of personal pronouns were compared, and their contexts of use were individually investigated. One notable finding (also in Thompson, 2009) was that the English pronoun *you* was relatively infrequent, and in places where it might have been used there was instead the interlocutor's name or a switch to Japanese where a greater range of interlocutor-referring devices are available.

The findings of the above two lines of inquiry suggested that modality was an important organising principle in the ways that participants constructed their interactions. That is, the participants' orientations to objects, events, ideas, and other participants, were realised not only in modal auxiliaries and epistemic/attitudinal markers, but also in their choices of which language to speak, of how to address interlocutors, etc.

3. Thus, it was decided to examine more deliberately how participants expressed modality, i.e. their epistemic and attitudinal orientation to the objects, events, ideas, an other participants in the context of their interactions.

It is a portion of this third line of investigation that is the subject of this paper, brought into focus by a further unanticipated observation. That is, midway through the analysis, it was noted that, especially in one of the groups (Group B in Table 1) many participants were not consistent in the roles they adopted in discussion; sometimes taking a leading role (asking questions, responding to most other participants' contributions, and continually summarising the group's progress), and at other times taking a much more relaxed stance (only occasionally commenting or making contributions). It was further observed that, for these participants who varied their role in the discussion, their expression of modality varied as well. Thus, it became a focus of the analysis to investigate the variance in these modality practices among participants depending on their role in the discussion – a dominating central role or a peripheral role.

For the stage of the study that is the focus of this paper, a corpus of interactions from the groups and settings listed above was examined. Because a detailed coding of the participants' dominant versus peripheral roles was not feasible for the entire corpus, a subset of the Group B corpus

was selected from interactions where the alternation between dominant and peripheral roles was most distinct. The data thus examined here were 3 group events totalling 98 minutes:

1. Event 1: discussion, 5 students participating.
2. Event 2: post-presentation question-answer session, 3 students participating.
3. Event 3: discussion, 3 students participating.

There were 8 participants involved in the three discussions, some of them taking part in more than one of the discussions. Each student in each discussion was assigned a different number (i.e. one student was Speaker 1 in one discussion and then Speaker 6 in another) for the purposes of analysing the correlation between role and modality practices.

As a representative, but by no means comprehensive, sampling of the practice of expressing modality, the analysis consisted of identifying, counting, and examining the contexts of a) uses of modal auxiliary verbs, and b) common (in this corpus) epistemic and attitudinal markers ('think', 'guess', 'feel', 'like', 'kind of/kinda', etc.).

2. Findings and analysis

The relative frequencies of the modal auxiliary verbs, shown below in Table 2, were, by and large, unremarkable, and the practice of this means of expressing modality showed no correlation to the role that a participant took in a discussion (i.e. dominant or peripheral).

Table 2 – Relative frequencies of modal auxiliary verbs in corpus subset

term	count	relative frequency	comment
can*	36	0.59%	
will*	30	0.49%	17 by one participant
have to	25	0.41%	
should*	19	0.31%	
would*	18	0.29%	
could*	9	0.15%	

Note 1: Terms followed by * include their negative contractions.
Note 2: Terms with a count of 0 (e.g. «may», «had to») are not included in the table.

The investigation of epistemic and attitudinal markers yielded results of greater interest. These markers displayed the participants' orientation to the idea (the ideational content of the utterance) either in terms of the status of their knowledge of the idea (epistemic) or in terms of their affective orientation to the idea (attitudinal). A problem in the initial identification of these terms was distinguishing instances of ideational meaning from instances of orientational meaning with terms such as «think», «like», and «kind of», as is illustrated below.

Excerpt 1

1	S8:	the thing is we are not changing our approach because it's the same thing in
2		the case their main objective is just to complete the mission that's it (.) we
3		should try to think long term more Asian way we are going to work together
4		or they are gonna have good relationship (.) they (.) you are gonna help us
5		then we will work together in the future on other projects

Excerpt 2

1	S2:	er i think the summary here sums it up pretty well.

In Excerpt 1 the use of «think» (in line 3) is ideational; that is, the speaker is referring to the act of thinking, or, in other words, the idea of thinking is part of the content of S8's meaning, that they should think in a more «long term» manner, or «more Asian way». In contrast, in Excerpt 2, the use of «think» (in line 1) is not in the construction of the content of S2's meaning, but rather, it is used to introduce the statement that «the summary here sums it up pretty well», and to show that S2 is epistemically fairly committed (not absolutely certain, yet not uncommitted) to that idea.

In the corpus subset, out of 55 uses of the token «think», 55 were orientational, and 2 were ideational, illustrating that this is a very common means of expressing modality.

Similarly, the token «like» was used largely as an attitudinal marker, though with much use as well in the ideational content (of 74 uses, 51

were orientational, and 23 were ideational), as seen in Excerpt 3 below.

Excerpt 3

1	S2:	oh another thing i wrote down in my analysis Louis saw the company like
2		family like company are really close whereas David doesn't understand what
3		he is concerned about for him business is just business he just made one as
4		efficient as possible (.) if you have three staff you have three staff so

In line 1, «like» is used as part of the expression of an idea («Louis saw the company like family»), whereas the use of «like» immediately following is used to show a non-committed orientation (both epistemically and attitudinally) to the idea «company are really close».

In this way, epistemic and attitudinal markers were identified (by being a confirmed orientational use) and counted, and the most common of this set of devices for expressing modality can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3 – *Most frequent epistemic and attitudinal markers in the corpus subset*

term	count	orientational uses	relative frequency
think	57	55	0.89%
like	74	51	0.83%
kinda / kind of	28	27	0.44%
maybe	25	25	0.41%
know	28	25	0.41%
sure	7	7	0.11%
guess	6	6	0.10%
if	38	3	0.05%
probably	0	0	0%

To determine the correlation between practices of modality and role (dominant or peripheral) in the discussion, a means of measuring interaction

dominance was needed. For this purpose, two measures of participant dominance were utilised. First, each speaker in each discussion is given a unique identifying number (as mentioned above, so that a given individual would be treated separately in different discussions). Then, for each speaker (S1, S2,…) two measures were calculated:

1. Number of words spoken (in the corpus subset).
2. Average and median number of intervening turns (i.e. the number of floor-changing turns that occur between one of the speaker's turns and the following one, counted from the transcript, with an average and median taken for each speaker).

These two measures yielded a rough characterisation of the role (with respect to dominant or peripheral participation) that each speaker took in a given discussion. There was overall a high correlation between these two measures – those who spoke much also spoke often, as would be expected but not logically necessary – and these are summarised in Table 4.

Table 4 – Measures of participants' roles in discussions

participant	words	turns	average intervening turns	median intervening turns
S1	397	48	5.54	2
S2	1543	149	1.59	1
S3	1037	129	1.93	1
S4	207	23	12.17	5
S5	114	15	18.44	5.5
S6	865	82	1.93	1
S7	732	40	4.55	2
S8	747	71	2.22	1
S9	320	38	5.05	2
S10	153	16	14.79	7
S11	1137	94	3.07	1.5

With these measures of the participants' roles, the frequency of the epistemic and attitudinal markers could be viewed alongside, and correlations discovered. When this was done, it emerged that, especially for two of the markers included in the analysis, «kind of»/«kinda» and «like», there was a pronounced correlation, as seen below in Table 5.

Table 5 – Use of the modality markers «kind of»/«kinda» and «like» arranged by decreasing participation by speaker

speaker	words	turns	average intervening	«kind of»/«kinda» (relative freq.)	«like» (relative freq.)
S2	1543	149	1.59	0.71%	1.88%
S11	1137	94	1.59	0.36%	0.94%
S3	1037	129	1.93	0.19%	0.29%
S6	865	82	1.93	1.27%	2.66%
S8	747	71	2.22	0.00%	0.94%
S7	732	40	4.55	0.00%	0.21%
S9	320	38	5.05	0.31%	0.37%
S1	397	48	5.54	0.00%	0.36%
S4	207	23	12.17	0.48%	0.48%
S10	303	16	14.79	0.33%	0.49%
S5	114	15	18.44	0.00%	0.00%

While such a correlation does not imply a dependence in one direction or the other arranged according to decreasing level of participant dominance, when we look more closely at pairs of discussion speakers who are actually the same individual in different discussions, the correlation is even more striking, and strongly suggestive of a dependent relation. In the above table, one individual is represented by the speaker identifying numbers S2 (dominant role) vs. S7 (peripheral role), and another by S6 (dominant role) vs. S1 (peripheral role). If we focus on these two individuals, omitting the other rows in the table above, we get Table 6 below.

Table 6 – Use of the modality markers «kind of»/«kinda» and «like» by two individuals, comparing dominant participation with peripheral participation

individual	speaker	words	turns	average intervening	«kind of»/«kinda» (relative freq.)	«like» (relative freq.)
A - dominant	S2	1543	149	1.59	0.71%	1.88%
A - peripheral	S7	732	40	4.55	0.00%	0.21%
B - dominant	S6	865	82	1.93	1.27%	2.66%
B - peripheral	S1	397	48	5.54	0.00%	0.36%

For both individuals, when dominant in a discussion (by the measures we have employed here), the marker «kind of» / «kinda» has a relative frequency higher than the overall frequencies of most epistemic and attitudinal markers (higher than all except «think» and «like», see Table 3 above). Yet when only peripherally involved in the discussion, this marker is not used at all by either individual. Similarly, and probably more significantly due to the higher overall frequencies, the marker «like» is used by both individuals more than eight times as often (relative to total number of words spoken) when in a dominant discussion role than when in a peripheral role.

3. Conclusions

Although the significance of these findings is limited by the small sample size of data that have been analysed thus far, several important statements can be made, and speculative interpretations appended.

First, we can measure the differentiation in participant role between that of a dominant discussion participant and a peripheral one. The measures that have been used in this paper are crude, but can be improved in time and with the suggestions and experimentation of other researchers. We can also measure some of the language practices that enact the role of dominant participant.

Second, we have observed a correlation between conversational dominance and frequency of some orientational (epistemic and attitudinal) modality markers. Those who dominate use the markers «kind of»/«kinda» and «like» more frequently, and, thus, appear to mark orientation (or stance) by subtler means. Those on the periphery do not use the above modality markers as much, and appear to mark orientation with more explicit means (for example with auxiliary verbs «should», «could», the negative marker «don't know», and utterance-initial «I think»).

Third, we can see that the appropriation or assignment of the role of discussion leader (the dominant role) is not consistent from speech-event to speech-event. Some participants, however, appear to take the dominant role more often. In this small corpus subset at least, speakers who would self-identify and would be identified as «native speakers» and «near-native speakers» were more often found in dominant roles.

Therefore, the results of this investigation lead to the interpretation that differing language practices are suited to differing roles (enacting dominance and peripheral participation) in a discussion. We can reword this interpretation to say that, as roles are generated and constructed by

language users in social situations, it is not only the participants' perceptions of varieties of English language, but also, or even more so, the context of English as a lingua franca, a context made up mainly of users in situations, that determines what kinds of language practices emerge in a given setting.

The practices observed and revealed in this paper might be understood as instances of «interactions among Englishes» (Meierkord, 2012). The several individuals bring different varieties into contact, and certain Englishes (that is certain practices) have more validity so their users are more likely to take dominant roles. However, we must also complicate this conceptualisation by saying that individuals bring a variety of practices with them – for example, practices for dominating discussions and practices for being peripherally involved. We may also interpret these practices as instances of an ELF-wide characteristic, in the same way as, for example, Baumgarten and House (2010) have suggested that L2 (ELF) speakers use «I think» in subtle verbal routines less, and as overt stance markers more.

Or, stepping back in order to appreciate a more expansive and comprehensive interpretation, we may view these differences in practices as evidence that what determines language practice in ELF settings is not varieties of English or characteristics solely of ELF, but rather a situation- and user- determined meaning system that develops in all interactions (lingua franca or not), and differential use of that system according to an individual's familiarity with the practices for enacting different roles in interactions.

Thus, to a teacher of English language who wishes to maintain an ELF perspective, it is probably best not to view these practices for marking modality as characteristic either of English as a lingua franca or of English in largely monolingual contexts, but instead simply to appreciate that wide differences among participants' practices (and their behaviour vis-a-vis taking a dominant or peripheral role) are more likely in ELF settings. Accordingly, the teacher should simply encourage ELF users to do what they are probably quite adept at doing already, that is, adjusting to a variety of practices for marking modality while negotiating ever-changing situations for English language use.

References

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