

‘I THINK’: OPINION, UNCERTAINTY OR POLITENESS IN ACADEMIC SPOKEN ENGLISH?

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ABSTRACT: Academic English is focusing the attention of many researchers in recent years, and especially the spoken academic language is becoming more and more relevant as a field for investigation (Flowerdew 1994; Thompson 1994). In the present research the use of the verb ‘think’ preceded by the personal pronoun ‘I’ is analysed in a corpus including Discussion Sections and Lectures taken from the MICASE Michigan Corpus of American Spoken English). The aim has been to find out why speakers use ‘I think’ so often and how they do it. The results show that giving an opinion is the main function of ‘I think’ in the corpus, though it is often aimed at expressing an evaluation of the understanding of students. This occurs mainly in Discussion Sections, where ‘I think’ is mostly concentrated. The article ends up by considering the implications of the results for teaching academic English at the university level.

KEY WORDS: spoken academic discourse, academic English, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics

RESUMEN: El inglés académico está recibiendo una gran atención en los últimos años, especialmente en su versión oral (Flowerdew 1999; Thompson 1994). En nuestra investigación presentamos un análisis de los usos del verbo ‘think’ precedido del pronombre personal ‘I’ en un corpus que incluye Secciones de Debate (Discussion Sections) y clases magistrales (Lectures) extraídos del MICASE (corpus de inglés académico hablado de la Universidad de Michigan). Nuestro objetivo ha sido averiguar por qué se utiliza ‘I think’ tan a menudo y cómo se utiliza. Los resultados muestran que la principal función de ‘I think’ en el corpus es dar una opinión, aunque a menudo el objetivo final es expresar una evaluación de la comprensión de los estudiantes. Esto ocurre sobre todo en las Secciones de Debate (Discussion Sections), en las que se concentra mayor número de expresiones de este tipo. El artículo concluye exponiendo las implicaciones de los resultados en la enseñanza del inglés académico en la universidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: discurso académico oral, inglés académico, análisis del discurso, lingüística del corpus

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the research of spoken academic English, mainly from the approach of discourse analysis. Many of these studies had as their main aim to facilitate the task of the lecturers who need materials for their classes of academic English as a second or foreign language. As an applied result of that research, books such as those by Swales and Feak (1994, 2000), Björk and Räisänen (1997), Fortanet (2002) or Reinhart (2002) have been published. It is obvious that academic English is today a

need in most universities all over the world, mainly due to internationalisation, the development of computer communication, and the mobility of both students and faculty.

1.1. Spoken academic English

Most previous research on academic English has dealt with different aspects of written texts, mainly the language of research articles (Swales 1990; Hyland 1994, 1998; Salager-Meyer 1994; Hunston 1994). However, spoken academic English may be even more relevant for both students and faculty than written academic discourse. Most students have to listen to and understand lectures before they have to write papers; and most faculty attend conferences and even present papers before submitting research articles to international journals. The presence of non-native speakers of English in the university classrooms of British and American universities and the increasing mobility of students and faculty in Europe, where English has been selected as the language of tuition in many courses, have aroused the interest of researchers for lectures and other classroom genres. As Flowerdew (1994:14) states, research of lectures

can indicate to teachers and course designers what linguistic and discoursal features learners need to be familiar with in order to understand a lecture and what, therefore, should be incorporated into ESL courses. In addition, a knowledge of the linguistic/discoursal structure of lectures will be of value to content lecturers in potentially enabling them to structure their own lectures in an optimally effective way.

The research in lecture language is mainly carried out by means of the analysis of transcripts of speech events collected in corpora. Corpora have been defined as collections 'of naturally occurring examples of language, consisting of anything from a few sentences to

a set of written texts or tape recordings, which have been collected for linguistic study. More recently, the word has been reserved for collections of texts (or parts of texts) that are stored and accessed electronically.’ (Hunston 2002: 2) The first corpus analyses were carried out using small corpora created ‘ad hoc’ (Thompson 1994; Flowerdew and Miller 1997; Jones 1999; among others). Today there is a wide range of major English corpora available for research (COBUILD, BNC – British National Corpus, ICE- International Corpus of English, ANC – American National Corpus)¹. However, mega-corpora are not very useful for the research of specific genres or settings, since they involve a great variety of texts and situations, but very few samples of each type. This is the reason why specific corpora have been compiled. One of these corpora already available for research is the MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English) (Simpson et al. 1999), which includes approximately 1.7m. words focusing on contemporary American speech at the University of Michigan. In the same line, another corpus of British academic spoken language is under construction in Britain, the BASE (British Academic Spoken English), which should be available by the end of 2005. The present research benefits from the invaluable work done in the MICASE, using part of it as a corpus for linguistic analysis.

1.2. Stance in spoken academic English

In academic spoken speech as well as in any other type of language, speakers establish a relationship with the audience by means of what they say. In order to establish this relationship, expressions of politeness (as defined by Brown and Levinson 1998), or hedging (Hyland 1998), among others, are used. However, a more general view of the attitude of the speaker must also include the relationship between speakers and their speech. Biber et al. (1999: 972-975) distinguish between

- Epistemic stance, in which the speaker comments on the status of information in a proposition; and
- Attitudinal stance, in which the speaker reports his/her personal attitudes or feelings.

These two types of stance could be related to the speaker-speech relation (epistemic stance) and the speaker-audience relation (attitudinal stance). However, it could be argued that speakers can also show an attitude or feeling towards what they say. For example, in ‘I wish I could promise to come tomorrow’ the speaker shows an attitude of regret for not being able to do something. According to Biber et al.’s classification this example shows an attitudinal stance, since it expresses the attitude of the speaker in relation to what s/he says. This classification is, thus, not valid to distinguish between the relationship between speaker and speech, and the relationship between speaker and audience. More accurate is Hyland’s (2003) classification of evaluation in two parts:

- Stance: attitudinal dimension- evaluation of propositional matter.
- Engagement: alignment dimension – evaluation of audience, that is, explicit recognition of readers to include them as participants and guide their interpretations.

Hyland (2003) makes a clear distinction between the relationship established by speakers with their speech and that established between speakers and audience. Although Hyland’s (2003) study used research articles as a corpus, I consider this approach can also be applied to spoken academic corpus, as I will try to prove in this paper.

1.4. The verb ‘think’

After analysing the use of pronouns (Fortanet 2003a; 2004) and of verbal stance in a subcorpus of the MICASE (Fortanet 2003b), I observed the high frequency of the verb ‘think’ often associated to the pronoun ‘I’, which amounted to over 40% of all the lexical

verbs used to convey stance. However, it was also noticed that ‘I think’ can have a wide range of meanings. In order to corroborate this assumption I looked up the entries of ‘think’ in the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2001) which provided 26 different meanings for ‘think’. This gives an idea of the versatility of this verb, as well as its ambiguity.

Some of these meanings have also been commented by grammarians such as Quirk et al (1985: 1111-1115), who assign to ‘think’ the functions of hedging, and expressing the speakers’ tentativeness over the truth value of the matrix clause. They also add that frequently the subject is ‘I’ and the verb is in the simple present tense. Additionally, ‘I think’ is often a parenthetical disjunct, a comment clause that may occur initially, finally and medially, and has generally a separate tone unit.

Biber et al. (1999: 972) identify ‘think’ as a marker of epistemic stance. It is considered a verb referring to mental attitude (1999: 472) which conveys ‘a sense of possibility combined with uncertainty’ (1999: 665). Moreover, ‘I think’ is very frequently used in conversation to report the speakers’ own personal thoughts (1999: 669). The most common collocation of ‘think’ according to these authors is the verb followed by a ‘that-clause’, with a tendency to omit ‘that’. ‘I think so’ is used to indicate epistemic stance expressing a lack of certainty about some previous proposition.

As can be seen, the use of ‘think’ has aroused the interest of grammarians and dictionary compilers in recent years. However, to our knowledge, no systematic analysis has been carried out in order to establish why speakers use ‘I think’ so often in academic settings and how they do it. This is the aim of the present research.

2. METHOD

In order to carry out this study, we selected a subcorpus of the MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Spoken Academic English) (Simpson et al. 1999), which included 5 lectures (L) and 5 discourse sections (DS). Lectures in the MICASE are divided in small (40 or fewer students) and large (over 40 students). All lectures selected for the corpus of the present research are large lectures. Another characteristic of lectures is their primary discourse mode, which refers to the ‘predominant type of discourse characterizing the speech event’ (Powell and Simpson 1999: 38). All the lectures in the corpus of this research are monologic, that is, ‘one speaker monopolizes the floor, sometimes followed by a brief question-and-answer period’ (1999: 38).

The second genre included in this corpus is the discussion sections. Discussion sections are defined as an ‘additional section of a lecture class designed for maximum student participation’, which may also be called recitation (Powell and Simpson 1999: 36). The main reasons for including this genre were because it shares many elements with the lecture (speaker, audience, setting, and sometimes even topic) and however its primary discourse mode is usually interactive. This offers the opportunity of comparing the results in order to check if there is any relationship between the frequency and function of ‘I think’ and genre, and consequently primary discourse mode. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the speech events in the corpus of the present research:

(1)

LECTURES	
1	L Intro Anthropology Lecture. Number of words: 11,312. Number of speakers: 2. Primary discourse mode: Monologic/ Lecture.
2	L History of the American Family Lecture. Number of words: 11,157. Number of speakers: 9. Primary discourse mode: Monologic/ Lecture.
3	L Medical Anthropology Lecture. Number of words: 11,821. Number of speakers: 5. Primary discourse mode: Monologic/ Lecture.
4	L Media Impact in Communication Lecture. Number of words: 9,431. Number of speakers: 13. Primary discourse mode: Monologic/ Lecture.
5	L Graduate Macroeconomics Lecture. Number of words: 8,038. Number of speakers: 7. Primary discourse mode: Monologic/ Lecture.
DISCUSSION SECTIONS	
S 1	D Intro Anthropology Discussion Section. Number of words: 9,265. Number of speakers: 18. Primary discourse mode: Interactional/ Dialogue.
S 2	D Intro Biology Discussion Section. Number of words: 10,889. Number of speakers: 22. Primary discourse mode: Interactional/ Dialogue.
S 3	D History Review Discussion Section. Number of words: 20,290. Number of speakers: 20. Primary discourse mode: Interactional/ Dialogue.
S 4	D Intro American Politics Discussion Section. Number of words: 11,608. Number of speakers: 18. Primary discourse mode: Interactional/ Dialogue.
S 5	D Philosophy Discussion Section. Number of words: 10,787. Number of speakers: 10. Primary discourse mode: Mixed.

Table 1: Corpus

In order to reach the objective of this research, first of all the frequency of ‘I think’ was estimated in the corpus, then two variables had to be determined. On the one hand, it was important to check the syntactic patterns of ‘I think’ in the corpus. In order to do this the search tools of the MICASE web site were used. On the other hand, the functions of ‘I think’ were also of interest for the study. After a preliminary observation, six functions were determined:

- 1.- **Opinion**, which is used by the speaker to give his/her personal point of view.
- 2.- **Vagueness**, to make statements and opinions sound less forceful, rude or direct.
- 3.- **Uncertainty**, when the speaker is not sure about the truth value of a statement.
- 4.- **Politeness**, when the speaker explains or suggests what s/he wants to do (or other people to do) or when accepting or refusing an offer.
- 5.- As an **approximator**, usually just before numbers, dates or periods of time.

6.- As a sign of **hesitation**, when the speaker is not sure of what to say or how to say something.²

Although the 21 entries of 'think' that were suitable for 'I think' in the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary* were considered before establishing this classification, only those which were defined as exclusive of 'I think', vagueness and politeness, as well as the two general functions of 'think', opinion and uncertainty, could be included in the taxonomy of this research after a preliminary study. In addition, two other functions were found relevant which had not been included in that dictionary, namely approximator and hesitation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to show the results clearly and concisely, the percentage of occurrence of 'I think' in the corpus is presented. Then, the findings on syntactic patterns and functions are shown together, so that the reader can observe the correlations.

3.1. Frequency of occurrence

Before carrying out the analysis of frequency in the corpus of this research, a general search was carried out in the MICASE, in order to find out the rate of use of 'I think' in the whole corpus of monologic discourse as well as in the corpus of interactive discourse. The results were in monologic discourse of 1.2 times every 1,000 words, whereas 'I think' appeared 3.2 times per 1,000 words in interactive discourse. According to this, my expectations were also to find over twice the number of occurrences in Discussion Sections as compared to Lectures in the corpus of this research. As can be seen in Table 2, these

expectations were confirmed, since the percentage of total occurrences of ‘I think’ in Discussion Sections (2.2‰), was almost three times that found in Lectures (0.8‰). However, both frequency rates were much lower than those for the whole corpus of the MICASE. The reason may be that ‘I think’ is more commonly used in other genres than in the ones analysed.

(2)

	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE (‰)
L1	4	0.3
L2	7	0.6
L3	16	1.3
L4	11	1.2
L5	6	0.7
<i>TOTAL LECTURES</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>0.8</i>
DS 1	43	4.6
DS 2	7	0.6
DS 3	56	2.7
DS 4	16	1.4
DS 5	20	1.8
<i>TOTAL DISC.SEC.</i>	<i>142</i>	<i>2.2</i>

Table 2: Frequency of ‘I think’

Table 2 illustrates the heterogeneity in the frequency of ‘I think’ both in Lectures, where it ranges from 0.3‰ to 1.3‰, and in Discussion Sections, where it goes from 0.6‰ to 4.6‰. One possible interpretation of these results could be the discipline. This could be applied to Discussion Sections and the conclusion reached would be that sciences, such as Biology (DS2), are more exact, and for that reason ‘I think’ is not so frequently used. However, although the disciplines are different, this does not apply to Lectures, where the speech event on Medical Anthropology (L3), a science comparable to Biology, has a rate of 1.3. A very surprising result is that of Lecture 1, as compared to Discussion Section 1. Even though both deal with the same topic (anthropology), the Lecture has the lowest rate of ‘I think’ in its group (0.3), and the Discussion Section the highest (4.6). The reason for this heterogeneity should then be found elsewhere. After analysing again Discussion Section 1,

which accounts for the highest percentage of ‘I think’, I found that over 50% of its occurrences are uttered by the main speaker, or leader of the speech event. The rest of the occurrences found in the contributions of students could be considered as a repetition or imitation of the main speaker or lecturer. Repetition has been dealt with by some linguists, dealing for example with the negotiation of topic (McCarthy 1998: 112-116), or with the reinforcement of requests (Sifianou 1992: 188-189). However, it was always lexical repetition they analysed. In Discussion Section 1, the main speaker may have created an atmosphere of speculation that can be related to the topic under discussion, by means of the introduction of ‘I think’, which the students just imitate in order to enhance their relationship with the lecturer. Secondly, most disciplines, especially at university level, can only be dealt with by means of specific language. Students are used to imitate the language they see in books and research articles on the discipline, as well as the style of speaking of their lecturers. This is a resource to enhance their relationship with the discipline. Thirdly, imitation of dominant speakers is something usual in everyday conversation, especially among young people, which can also contribute to the high number of occurrences in this Discussion Section.

3.2. Syntactic patterns and functions

Regarding the results of the research about the syntactic patterns of ‘I think’ and its functions, they are summarized in Table 3.

(3)

	LECTURES	DISCUSSION SECTIONS	TOTAL
I think (that)	37	105	142
<u>FUNCTIONS</u>			
• Opinion	27	80	107
• Uncertainty	6	15	21
• Politeness	2	7	9
• Vagueness	2	1	3
• Hesitation	--	2	2
Non-integrated	7	27	34

Table 3: Syntactic patterns and functions of ‘I think’

To start analysing this table, the syntactic patterns of ‘I think’ in the corpus of this research have not been so limited as it may seem from the table. Six different collocations were found. However, the ones not included in the table appeared only twice in the whole corpus of the research. As can be observed, the most common collocation of ‘I think’ was the verb followed by a ‘that-clause’, although the conjunction ‘that’ very rarely appeared in these instances, e.g.

(4)

1. **I think** I know what you intended to write [DS3]
2. I had these slides because **I think** it would do better justice to them [L1]

‘I think (that)’ is very common in Discussion Sections. Though not so common in Lectures, it still represents over 80% of all occurrences of ‘I think’ in this genre in the corpus. The second most common pattern is what I have defined as “non-integrated”. This could be related to the collocation observed by Quirk et al. (1985: 1111-1115) who defined ‘I think’ as a comment clause usually uttered with a separate tone unit, e.g.

(5)

3. only if you have time he had he had **I think** uh two caravels [DS3]

There is no syntactic integration, the speaker introduces the comment clause to mitigate what s/he is saying. Non-integrated ‘I think’ is far less common than ‘I think (that)’ in the corpus of this research. Even so, it is still much more frequent in Discussion Sections than in Lectures. As for the other four collocations, ‘I think’ can be followed by a quotation. This syntactic pattern only appears twice in Discussion Section 2, e.g.

(6)

4. S16: uh <READING> centromeres divide, <READING> I put, mitosis, and **I think**, does that happen in meiosis two? [DS2]

In example (4) a student poses a question to the lecturer introducing it with ‘I think’. ‘I think’ can also be followed by ‘yeah’, a colloquialism. It appears twice, in DS1 and in DS3, e.g.:

(7)

5. yeah, **I think** yeah that’s if society doesn’t have a problem with it [DS1]

This phrase, ‘I think yeah’, is used to express agreement and could be substituting ‘I think so’, which has not been found in the corpus, thus refuting Biber et al. (1999: 666) who pointed it out as one of the common collocations of ‘I think’. ‘I think’ was also found twice (DS4 and L3) in wh-cleft clauses with ‘what’. This syntactic structure with ‘I think’ was used to express a strong opinion or to reinforce it, e.g.:

(8)

6. that’s what **I think** [DS4]

Example (6) appears as the complete contribution of a speaker who had given his/her opinion in a previous turn. Finally, the collocation ‘I think + of’ shows also two occurrences (DS5 and L5). This syntactic pattern, used frequently to introduce examples, is much more common with the present continuous form, ‘I’m thinking of’, which is not within the scope of this research, e.g.

(9)

7. suppose **I think** of an economy where [L5]

Regarding the functions of ‘I think’ in the corpus, that is, why speakers introduce it in their utterances, all six functions presented in the Method section were found for the syntactic pattern ‘I think (that)’ (see Table 1), whereas only three of them were found for the ‘non-integrated’ collocation. Expressing an opinion is by far the most common function for both collocations. Uncertainty is also often found in Discussion Sections, mainly for ‘I think (that)’, followed by functions such as politeness, vagueness, and hesitation. Table 4 shows examples of all these functions:

(10)

I think (that)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion: • Uncertainty: • Politeness: • Vagueness: • Hesitation: 	<p>(8) so I mean I think the inconsistency is not something, that should surprise us. [DS3]</p> <p>(9) S16: well um, yesterday in the D-I think it was yesterday in the Diag you had, [DS4]</p> <p>(10) oh, I think I'll take this [L3]</p> <p>(11) cuz like there're lots of different people from different countries who are now American like first generation second generation. and like the way we treat them is like the same way we treat other countries in terms of fearing them and not, caring to get to know them. but I think it's just like cuz there's also safety in like, knowing what you're used to, you know, like used to your type of people [DS4]</p> <p>(12) but I know I-I think I mean I think that, just because you know I could make that argument doesn't mean that that what you're saying is not true [DS1]</p>
Non-integrated	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opinion: • Uncertainty: • Approximator 	<p>(13) and I that I think would be sufficient [DS3]</p> <p>(14) I think he, if I remember correctly, if you happen to go through the stop sign, you immediately look around [DS4]</p> <p>(15) well, Miang Kang who used to be a grand student here at the Universi-here in the Comm Studies Department, did a replication. um, it was Goffman's Gender Analysis Updated. whoops sorry. <p:07> from nineteen seventy-nine through ninety-six I think ninety five ninety six. [L4]</p>

Table 4: Examples of the functions of 'I think'

The function of Approximator was only found in non-integrated 'I think' since it always occurs associated to periods of time or numbers. Another function that was expected in this corpus was that of Starter, which as defined by Francis and Hunston (1994: 129) 'realizes the pre-head of an opening, answering, eliciting, informing, directing or behaving move head'. However, this function did only seem relevant in DS1, where over 30% of the occurrences of 'I think' were placed in the initial position of a turn in speech.

Opinion, as stated above, was the most common function of 'I think' in the corpus. However, it was noticed that in many occasions there were secondary functions associated with this one, namely

- Opinion–evaluation: the teacher includes 'I think' in a clause that evaluates the student's interpretation of what has been explained, e.g.

(11)

16. S1: I never thought of that, uh, would that have a bearing on, what a source of authority is?

S4: cuz if you had, money wealth power

S1: **I think** you could make it, somewhat broader than that. [DS3]

- Opinion–vagueness: usually the teacher introduces a statement as an opinion in order to sound less forceful or direct, e.g.

(12)

17. and although I-occasionally when I lecture on maternalism for example and progressivism we'll talk about the, little forays into dealing with the problem that um, gover- government made, uh or the culture made but for the most part **I think** avoidance has been the main, stance of um American culture, [L2]

- Opinion–politeness: a directive is introduced as an opinion as a sign of politeness, e.g.

(13)

18. so, try – all tried to access a previous culture, um, right you access the A-drive, but, **I think** you want to be as precise as you can. um, and I think I think Ken said to emulate is, is to imitate_okay. [DS3]

In example (16) the lecturer asks a question to the students, and one of them replies. Then the lecturer makes an assessment of the reply. The pronoun 'you', very often found near 'I think' with this function, refers directly to the student who just answered the question and who the teacher must be looking at. An evaluative adjective is also to be found in the immediate linguistic context, in this example 'broader'.

In example (17) there is an evaluative element showing an opinion of the speaker. However, it is also a statement that is part of the content of the discipline and thus objective

not subjective. The reason for using ‘I think’ in this example may be mitigating a negative statement about the American culture, which is that of the audience.

Finally, in example (18) opinion is associated to politeness. The lecturer has just introduced an anecdote relating the topic under discussion with his own life. However, in his opinion the explanation regarding the anecdote is not precise enough. S/he includes in his/her utterance the verb ‘want’, preceded by a ‘you’ that can have the audience as a referent but also the speaker³. The lecturer gives an opinion and, at the same time, suggests what s/he wants to do and/or wants the students to do.

In the utterances classified in these three groups (especially the second and third), it is very difficult to distinguish between the primary and the secondary function. Table 5 summarizes the occurrences of ‘I think’ with the function of expressing an opinion that seem to have one of these secondary functions.

(14)

	LECTURES	DISC.SEC.	TOTAL
I think (that)			
OPINION	27	77	104
OPINION-EVALUATION	6	26	32
OPINION-VAGUENESS	6	11	17
OPINION-POLITENESS	0	2	2
Non-integrated			
OPINION	4	16	20
OPINION-EVALUATION	0	4	4
OPINION-VAGUENESS	0	3	3
OPINION-POLITENESS	0	1	1

Table 5: Double function in some opinion instances of ‘I think’

As can be seen in Table 5, the combination of functions for ‘I think’ is more common in Discussion Sections than in Lectures, especially Opinion–Evaluation with the syntactic structure ‘I think (that)’. In both subcorpora about 50% of the occurrences of this structure have a double function. The same applies to non-integrated collocations in Discourse Sections, whereas no occurrence with a combination of functions was found in Lectures.

There are other elements in the context of the occurrences of 'I think' that have an influence on its function. Sometimes it is found modified by a modal adverb, such as 'definitely' ('I definitely think'), which reinforces the opinion function of 'I think'. However, it is collocated much more often in the nearby of particles that show uncertainty or hesitation such as 'um', 'uh' or interrupted words, which add up to the functions of uncertainty or hesitation but which can also position 'I think', when followed by a pause, as a hesitation pause filler, that is, an expression uttered to fill in 'a period of silence where the speaker appears to plan what to say next' (Biber et al. 1999: 1053).

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to find out why academic speakers use so often 'I think' in their utterances. The results showed that this expression is much more frequently found in Discussion Sections, which are interactional, than in Lectures, which have as their primary discourse mode the monologue. It can be thus concluded that the use of 'I think' is characteristic of interactional academic English although it can also be found sometimes in monologues. Additionally, the results obtained in a search of the whole MICASE support this statement. One of the Discussion Sections presented an unusual high frequency of 'I think' as compared to the rest. It was found out that over 50% of the occurrences were uttered by the lecturer. A possible reason for this could be related to the topic of the Discussion Section, or to a characteristic of disciplinary language, which students just imitate.

Regarding the syntactic patterns of 'I think' and their relation to the function they perform, there are two patterns that are often found in the corpus: 'I think + that-clause' and

‘I think’ as a comment not integrated in the syntactic structure of the clause. The main function of both of them is that of giving an opinion, followed by its use as an expression of uncertainty. For the first of these structures other functions are

- showing politeness when the speaker explains what s/he wants to do or wants other people to do, or accepting or refusing an offer;

- vagueness in order to sound less direct; and

- hesitation when the speaker is not sure of what to say or how to say it.

For the occurrences of ‘I think’ where it is not integrated, there is also an additional function, that of approximator, when certain numbers, dates or periods of time are preceded by this phrase. The function of giving an opinion was found in half of its occurrences in combination with evaluation, vagueness or hesitation. The first combination, opinion and evaluation, was the most outstanding in Discussion Sections. It can then be argued that ‘I think’ in spoken academic language is mainly used to express an opinion, although this opinion is the way some lecturers have to evaluate the participation of students in order to guide their interpretations and learning. Turning now to Hyland’s classification of stance in two parts that was presented in the introduction, the function of opinion either on its own or in combination with evaluation, vagueness or politeness conveys the engagement of the speaker with the audience. The same could be said of those occurrences directly related to vagueness or politeness. Only the functions of uncertainty and approximator could be considered as a sign of attitudinal dimension or evaluation of the propositional matter (Hyland 2003). According to the results of the present study, in spoken academic discourse speakers use the expression ‘I think’ more often in order to enhance their relationship with the audience than to evaluate the propositional matter of their communication.

The limitations of this study should be noted. Future research should attempt to replicate these results with a larger corpus of academic spoken English, maybe including also

the BASE corpus, for confirmation or comparison of results. It would also be interesting to check if other languages have similar expressions used in academic settings.

The results of this research have implications for the teaching of Lecture and Discussion Sections language. As stated by Flowerdew (cited in the Introduction) both students and lecturers are interested in learning about the characteristics of these genres in English for their particular reasons, namely, understanding academic language and being able to use it. In the particular case of this research, these results will be taken into account for the training of teachers who wish to introduce English as the language of tuition in some of their subjects, as well as students who will take subjects in English either at Universitat Jaume I or at another university.

5. ENDNOTES

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1. For more information on this point, find [[http://lingo.lancs.ac.uk/devoted to/corpora/corpora.htm](http://lingo.lancs.ac.uk/devoted%20to/corpora/corpora.htm)]
 2. Henceforth the words in bold will be used to identify these functions.
 3. For 'you' with the audience and/or the speaker as a referent, see Fortanet (2003)

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