Second language pragmatic ability: The effect of task variability on epistemic stance in advanced spoken L2 English

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Background: Epistemic stance is an important dimension of evaluative language. It plays an essential role in expressing opinions as well as in managing and negotiating interpersonal relationships between speakers (Hunston & Thompson, 2000). So far, the majority of studies investigating stance-taking in L2 focused on written language; the present study focuses on how stance is expressed by L2 users in different speaking tasks. In particular, two questions are addressed: How does the speaking task affect a) the frequency and b) the type of epistemic stance markers (ESMs) expressed by L2 speakers?

Method: The study was conducted using a subcorpus of the Trinity Lancaster Corpus (TLC) of spoken L2 production based on examinations of spoken English conducted by the Trinity College London, a major examination board. The subcorpus contains approx. 300,000 tokens from 132 advanced L2 speakers of English from different L1 backgrounds and age groups. Each speaker participated in four different speaking tasks (one monologic and three highly interactive tasks). Different types of epistemic markers (verbal, adjectival and adverbial) were identified in the subcorpus. Repeated-measures ANOVA was used to compare the ESMs across the four tasks.

Findings: The findings show that the production of ESMs differed significantly according to the type of speaking task. The major difference was found between the monologic task and the three dialogic tasks; however, there were differences (both in frequency and in the type of un/certainty expressed) found across the dialogic tasks as well (all differences were statistically significant). Overall, the study showed that advanced L2 speakers were able to adjust their stance-taking according to the requirements of different speaking tasks, showing sensitivity to contextual demands (e.g. the degree of politeness required) of the different interaction types. The findings are discussed in the context of the research on second language pragmatic ability.

Keywords: learner corpora, epistemic stance, pragmatics, L2 spoken production, advanced L2 speakers.