Reporting verbs argue, claim and believe in linguistics research articles: A corpus-based study

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Abstract

No research article is imaginable without reporting verbs. They help the writer voice his/her own views against the backdrop of other community voices, while also serving to project his/her authority and expertise in the field. The vast variety of reporting verbs in academic discourse and their disciplinary specificity account for a huge challenge this topic can pose for EAL academic writers. In this study, we analyzed the rhetorical and discursive functions of strong reporting verbs *argue, claim* and *believe* in a corpus of 40 articles from leading Linguistics journals, with close attention to their Self/Other references. It has been revealed that *argue* and *claim* are mostly used in this realm to refer to other authors, while *believe* is slightly more common with reference to the writer himself/herself. While it tends to be perceived as interchangeable with *argue*, *claim* is almost exclusively used to introduce the opinion of others; besides, it is often an opinion that the writer does not fully support. Also, we have shown that it is typical for *argue* to play a discourse-organizing role, being featured in retrospective endophoric markers. We believe it is important to help novice academic writers understand the subtle nuances in the semantics of these reporting verbs and their discourse functions.

Keywords: reporting verbs; research articles; argue; claim; believe; corpus; linguistics

1. Introduction

Situating the author's personal perspective within the context of prior research is one of the key genre-shaping features of a research article. Academic writers seek to construct a credible, knowledgeable and authoritative self-image by referring to a large bulk of relevant research, expressing the different degrees of commitment to it (ranging from absolute agreement to ardent refutation). As noted by Graff & Birkenstein (2018, p. 4), to be an influential writer, one must not only provide logical arguments, but also enter into conversation with other authors and their statements. This kind of conversation (described as 'heteroglossic interaction' by Liardét & Black, 2019, p. 37) necessarily involves the use of reporting verbs (henceforth RVs) for the purpose of integration, as well as evaluation, of outside evidence and beliefs.

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RVs are generally defined as verbs used to refer to the opinion of other authors; however, many researchers note that the term can also be applied to the verbs serving to express the writer's personal stance appearing in combination with first-person pronouns (e.g., *I prove that*, *we assume that*) (Bloch, 2010; Diani, 2009; Charles, 2006; Malmström, 2008). Of particular relevance here is the dichotomy introduced by John Sinclair between 'averrals' (propositions expressed by the writer) or 'attributions' (those he or she attribute to others) (Sinclair, 1987). However, more broadly, attributions are also averred by the writer, because it is he or she who chooses whether to refer to other authors and in which particular way. According to Hans Malmström (2008), verbs like *argue*, *suggest*, *propose* always imply direct or indirect reference to the author's personal knowledge reserve or to the knowledge reserve of others, hence he advocates the term 'knowledge-stating verbs' (Malmström, 2008). They have also been construed under the terms 'referring verbs' (Smith, 2020), 'evidential' (Aikhenvald, 2004), 'communication verbs' (Khamkhien, 2014), 'hedges and boosters' (Hyland, 1998, 2005), 'meta-argumentative expressions' (Bondi, 2011), 'epistemic verbs' (Bayyurt, 2010).

While some RVs clearly signal the author's commitment to the reported statement (like *prove* and *demonstrate*), others are more ambivalent and may thus be followed with a contrasting view (Hyland, 2002, p.119). RVs can be categorized based on the underlying type of activity: research (or real-world) acts (e.g., *find, show, measure*), cognition acts (e.g., *assume, think*), and discourse acts (e.g., *discuss, address*) (ibid.). Based on their intensity, RVs are often classified into neutral (e.g., *analyze, compare*), strong (e.g., *emphasize, prove*) and tentative/weak (e.g., *notice, imply*) (Eickhoff, 2020; Smith, 2020). Of the words addressed in this article, *argue* and *claim* are typically classified as discourse acts, while *believe* unequivocally belongs to cognition acts. With regard to intensity, these verbs belong to the strong type.

1.1. Literature Review

Over the last decade, RVs have been extensively studied from multiple perspectives. One important strand of research is a comparison of their use between L1 and EAL (English as an Additional Language) speakers, which reveals significant differences (Charles, 2006; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2008; Jafarigohar & Mohammadkhani, 2015; Neff et al., 2003; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015; Manan & Noor, 2014; Yeganeh & Boghayeri, 2015). Most importantly, it has been highlighted that L1 writers tend to use a wider range of RVs, thus expressing their stance with a higher persuasive effect (Neff et al., 2003). Disparities have also been reported in the use of these rhetorical tools with regard to novice and expert writers. Thus, in their recent corpus-assisted study, Liardét & Black (2019) have revealed that English L1 and EAL learners use RVs much less frequently than experts (contributors to leading research journals) and tend to rely more heavily on neutral RVs that convey no indication of their own intersubjective stance (e.g., *state, according to*). Disciplinary affiliation is another major factor affecting researchers' referencing practices: in humanities and social sciences discourse activity verbs (such as *argue*) are prevalent, whereas in science and engineering verbs describing research acts (such as *observe, show*) are more favored (Hyland, 1999; cf. Charles, 2006). With regard to linguistics, a recent quantitative study by Un-udom & Un-udom (2020), based on the sample of 52 research articles in applied linguistics, showed that research acts were the most widely used category of RVs in this field, with them being primarily used in the past simple form. However, their analysis was only limited to the literature review section of the articles.

While the literature on RVs in academic discourse in mounting, most available studies rely on quantitative and comparative design, paying very little attention to the particular rhetorical functions these verbs perform in various discursive situations. Our study aims to fill the gap by conducting an in-depth contextual analysis of some of the most widespread RVs in applied linguistics Samuel, J. (2009). We hope that the results will prove beneficial for the teaching practice in EAP as EAL students often

struggle with understanding the subtle nuances of meaning of RVs and choosing the most appropriate ones for their own writing (Bloch, 2009; Granger & Paquot, 2009; Nguyen & Pramoolsook, 2015). As emphasized by Liardet & Black (2019, p. 48), "Focused instruction on the types of RVs, how they build intertextuality and contribute to the discussion promotes the notion that students should have their own authorial voice and know how to achieve it". We focus on strong RVs in particular because novice writers should be especially careful when incorporating them in their papers to avoid sounding overly assertive.

1.2. Research Questions

Underlying our research are the following research questions:

(i) What is the distribution of the RVs *argue*, *claim* and *believe* in Linguistics research articles with regard to their reference to Self and Others?

(ii) What discursive functions do these RVs perform in Linguistics research articles?

(iii) What implications do the variations in the use of *argue*, *claim* and *believe* hold for teaching academic writing to Linguistics students?

2. Method

Underlying our research is the corpus-based approach, widely believed to be the biggest advance in linguistic research, as well as language instruction, especially as long as the language for academic purposes is concerned (Flowerdew, 2015). The sample of the paper comprises 40 articles extracted from ten journals, featured in the top 20 Linguistics journals in Scimago ranking, namely Journal of Second Language Writing, Applied Linguistics, Journal of Memory and Language, Modern Language Journal, Language Learning, Language Teaching Research, Communication Theory, Language Learning and Technology, Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, CALICO. The articles (four from each journal) were randomly selected from those available in open access in the latest issues (2019-2020) so as to reflect the most current trends in language usage. The size of the corpus exceeds 340, 000 words.

Each of the target words (argue, claim, believe), including all of their grammatical forms, was analyzed in the AntConc software (Anthony, 2019), with the application of the concordance tool, which renders the tokens in their immediate context. The manual check was undertaken to exclude the instances where the target words were featured in quotes or were not functioning as an RV (for example, when the claim was used in the meaning 'to request or demand'). Each concordance string was then manually coded for agency reference (Self or Other), with the total frequency of instances in each category being calculated. Next, in-depth contextual analysis was undertaken to zoom in on the particular discursive and rhetorical functions performed by reporting words in each individual case.

3. Results and Discussion

The relative frequencies of RVs *argue, claim, believe* in our corpus of Lingustics articles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Instances of RVs *argue, claim, believe* in the Linguistics corpus

argue		*claim*		*believe*	
128		29		15	
Self	Others	Self	Others	Self	Others

ideational function	text-organizing function	86	4	25	9	6
30	11					

3.1. The reporting verb "argue"

As we expected based on the previously reported findings (Hyland, 2002; Charles, 2006), *argue* turned out to be the most frequent of the verbs understudy, being used 127 times in general. Its normalized frequency in our corpus thus approximately equals 3, 3 occurrences per article. However, one of the articles showed a significant overuse of this verb, featuring it 16 times, so we excluded it from the count, resulting in three occurrences per article.

One of the most prominent rhetorical dimensions in the use of RVs is the distribution between their being used in relation to self vs. in relation to others. In our corpus *argue* was used more than twice as often to introduce the opinion of other researchers as the writer's personal stance (86 vs. 41 occurrences, respectively). This finding is totally consistent with available empirical research. Based on interdisciplinary research articles, *argue* has been shown to be used more frequently to report the claim of others in the studies by Hewings & Hewings (2002) and Bloch (2009). Hans Malmström, focusing specifically on linguistics by Syahid, A., & Qodir, A. (2021) and literary studies, demonstrates that *argue*, along with *claim*, is usually a low-accountability verb, meaning writers mostly use this word to foreground Others and background themselves, as opposed to high-accountability verbs used mostly highlight the writers' personal opinion (Malmström, 2008). Of all the cases when *argue* is used to report the author's personal opinion, 30 times it stands in present or future form, thus representing an actual assertion (*I argue, we argue, one could argue, we would argue, it can be argued, I will argue*), while eleven times it is featured in endophoric markers (adopting the term by Hyland, 2005) referring to previously mentioned information (*we have argued, as argued above*). Though being used for text organization, the latter instances, we suggest, are important rhetorical choices the author makes to highlight their stance to the matter under question. They definitely convey much stronger meaning than more widely used endophoric markers like *as noted above* or *as mentioned above* and express a higher degree of confidence in one's propositions. Regarding the distribution of *argue* for Self in various structural parts of the articles, they are mostly concentrated in the introduction and conclusion sections, where authors present and consolidate their research, trying to make their position as clear as possible.

In-depth contextual analysis, carried out using concordance function in AntConc, revealed the overarching tendency for mitigating (or hedging) *argue* when it relates to Self, as it is perceived as a word conveying strong semantics. In overall, hedging is a pervasive phenomenon in academic discourse and is gaining mounting attention nowadays (see, for example, Demir, 2018; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2013; Hardjanto, 2016; Takimoto, 2015). According to Hyland, the main purpose of hedging is "to show doubt and indicate that information is presented as opinion rather than accredited fact, or it may be to convey deference, humility, and respect for colleagues views" (Hyland, 1998, p. 351). One of the most prominent ways used to assuage this inherently forceful word is through the use of impersonal phrases *one could argue*, *we would argue*, *it could be argued*. Drawing upon the dichotomy of 'averral-attribution' by John Sinclair, Maggie Charles considers the phrase *one can argue* as hidden averral with general attribution, in contrast to emphasized averral, represented with *I argue* (*we argue* for multiple authors) (Charles, 2006, p. 497). *One can argue*, alongside *one could argue* (which conveys even stronger mitigation) reflect the author's striving to diminish his/her own responsibility for his/her statements, on the one hand, and make them seem more universally accepted, on the other hand:

(i) *Going back to Bruner's (1986) distinction between the paradigmatic and the narrative mode of thinking or meaning-making* **one can argue** *that the text analyzed in this article corresponds to neither of these binaries.* (*Applied Linguistics*, 41)

(ii) *Given these findings,* **one could argue** *that higher positive affect led to higher task engagement and thus outweighed the disadvantage posed by reduced time.* (*Language Learning, 70*)

An interesting impersonal *argue*-pattern that warrants some attention due to its contextual ambivalence is *it could be argued*. Starting with the introductory *it*, it conceals the actual agent of the action, thus opening space for different interpretations. It can be used both to voice the author's opinion (example (iii)) and to introduce an objection that he or she intends to refute (examples (iv), (v)):

(iii) *Since after the first course, there are differences between learners in the timing of the adjectival phase,* **it could be argued** *that later on the instruction did not play a big role in the emergence of different phases.* (*Applied Linguistics*, 42)

(iv) **It could be argued** *that our sample of learners had had their awareness raised before our study, but it seems unlikely.* (*Language Learning*, 70)

(v) **It could be argued** *that the first repetition of the target words has the same effect as a familiarization phase.* (*Journal of Memory and Language*, 114)

Remarkably, in example (iii) *it could be argued* signals the authors' observation in the course of their research (the article has collective authorship), while in example (v) it introduces a tentative assumption the author infers from previous relevant research. In our view, the contextual variability of this kind is an additional factor that underscores the importance of paying considerable attention to the semantics of RVs in EAP classrooms.

The verb *argue* is typically followed with the conjunction *that* + subordinate clause (the so-called 'reporting clause'): a lexico-grammatical pattern that dominates in our corpus. While *argue* can generally be followed with *for/against* + noun/noun phrase, this pattern seems to be avoided by the researchers, perhaps being perceived as inviting polemics. Only one of the articles in our corpus features the "combative" phrase *argue against* in the context of differing opinions on language teacher cognition research, and even then, it is mitigated with *would*:

(vi) **We would argue against** *attempts to dismiss the value of such work and seek to demonstrate here that it can shed light on the thinking and work of language teachers and identify areas of research that can be subsequently explored more qualitatively.* (*Language Teaching Research*, 23)

In combination with *for*, *argue* is used twice in another article in a tentative pattern *it is difficult to argue*, which clearly does not serve the goal of asserting the author's opinion but rather the goal of assuaging his criticism of an experiment under discussion:

(vii) *The results of our analysis of Dillon et al. (2013)'s Experiment 1 show that* **it is difficult to argue for** *a dependency interference interaction (within grammatical or within ungrammatical conditions).* (*Journal of Memory and Language,* 111).

(viii) *Hence, from the replication data,* **it is difficult to argue for** *a difference between the dependency types in ungrammatical conditions as claimed by Dillon et al. (2013).* (ibid.)

In those rare occasions when corpus authors use *argue* without any hedges to explicitly voice an opinion running counter to mainstream research, they make sure to cite the supporting literature they prop upon, e.g.:

(ix) *Following Canagarajah (2013),* **we instead argue** *that students' alignment of communicative resources through translation provides evidence of performative competence.* (*Modern Language Journal, 104*)

Alternatively, they go into much detail explaining the personal experience and reflections that make them think this way. Thus, researchers represented in our corpus generally realize that they need to have firm footing to argue something that seems counterintuitive or contradicts the common opinion. Otherwise, they tend to favor weaker reporting words like *suggest*, *assume*, *propose* and the like.

Notably, the use of *argue* for others mostly correlates with the situations when the author concurs with the cited opinion, building his/her own argument upon it. We were able to identify only one instance when it was used to report a finding the authors seek to disprove, which is specified explicitly with the classifying adverb *incorrectly ("argued incorrectly that…")*.

3.2. The reporting verb "claim"

Things stand quite differently for *claim*, an RV that is widely regarded by EAP students as interchangeable with *argue* (Bloch, 2010, p. 234). In our corpus, at least 30% of its occurrences are followed by subsequent refutations or reservations, which signal the author's full or partial disagreement with the cited opinion, e.g.:

(i) *Many scholars* **claim** *that modes are embedded in and shaped by cultures—often over periods of time – and must be recognizable to members of a culture or community* […] **This is somewhat problematic** […] (*Applied Linguistics, 39*)

While Ken Hyland (2002, p. 124) classifies *claim* among the verbs which signal a supportive role in the author's argument, we can see that it is not always so, at least not in the Linguistics discourse that we are concerned with. The specific nature of *claim* amidst other RVs is aptly observed by James Martin and Peter White: "*claim* acts to explicitly mark the internal authorial voice as separate from the cited, external voice" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 153). Researchers thus may use it to distance themselves from the cited proposition, possibly raising counterclaims or leaving it without any further elaboration. It is important that EAP students should understand this specific nuance of the use of *claim* as compared to *argue* in academic writing.

Overall, in our corpus *claim* is almost exclusively used in relation to Others (25 cases in total) rather than Self, which is consistent with the studies by Malmström (2009) and Bloch (2010). Only once did we encounter its explicit use to report the authors' opinion – in a highly tentative phrase "*this led us to claim that*", preceded with the indication of their main findings and citation of another study, which produced similar results. Thus, the authors lay a solid foundation for the introduction of their claim, representing their research findings as directly responsible for it. Interestingly, *claim* for Self in our corpus is more prominent in negative statements, which serve the authors to head off potential objections, e.g.:

(ii) *No causal links* **can be claimed** *between the behavior of any given individual and motivational, affective, cognitive, or contextual factors.* (*The Modern Language Journal,* 104)

However, by far the most prominent feature in the use of *claim* in linguistics research articles is its frequent association with non-human agents, which disguises the actual people making the claims, e.g.:

(iii) **Literature on multimodality claims** *that modes are embedded in, and must be recognizable to specific cultural groups.* (*Applied Linguistics, 39*)

In the examples above, claims are attributed to such abstract entities as *literature* and *therapeutic approaches*, eclipsing the human agents behind them. Moreover, a claim often appears in general and

rather vague references such as *many claim* and *it is often claimed*, not followed with any particular citations. It creates a stark contrast with *argue*, which serves to lend more prominence to particular human agents, being mostly used in integral citations. According to John Swales, integral citations are ones where the name of the cited author appears in the sentence, as opposed to non-integral citations, where it is only featured in parenthesis (Swales, 1990). Another remarkable difference is that *claim* is never used with the discourse-organizing purposes, whereas *argue* is often featured in endophoric markers referring to previous or following sections. Therefore, it is quite obvious from our findings that *argue* and *claim* are not always interchangeable in the milieu of academic discourse due to their contextual semantic differences.

3.3. The reporting verb "believe"

Another strong RV we have taken a close look at in our study is *believed*, which is a bit different from the previous ones as it belongs to 'cognition verbs' rather than 'discourse verbs'. EAP students are not always sure how to understand and use this word properly, confused by its primary faith-related meaning. Basically, within the frames of academic discourse, it is synonymous to *think*, the latter being tacitly perceived as too simple and colloquial and thus requiring a more sophisticated substitute. According to Malmström (2009), contrary to *argue* and *claim*, *believe* in research articles is a high accountability verb, meaning that writers tend to use it to foreground themselves, rather than other researchers. This also holds true in our corpus: *believe* is used nine times in relation to Self and six times in relation to Others. Remarkably, *believe* for Self is most often featured in concluding sections of the articles, in the context of addressing limitations and future prospects of the research. Typically framed with concessive constructions, *believe*-clauses mark authors' attempts to advocate the worth of their research, despite certain drawbacks, e.g.:

(i) *Another limitation is that we did not observe the classroom teaching to ensure treatment fidelity.* ***However, we believe*** *our materials and instructions for teachers ensured considerable standardization of the vocabulary training.* (Language Learning, 70, p.37)

Even when used elsewhere (in introduction or discussion sections), *believe* is always linked to the authors' rhetorical strategy of presenting their research to the best advantage, showcasing its methodological rigor or theoretical value, e.g.:

(ii) ***We believe*** *such a design can help to measure changes in perceptual sensitivity more accurately than the previously used type of test that employs only two contrasting stimuli.* (*Language Learning,* 71)

When discussing the procedural assumptions that are potentially debatable, however, authors opt for the tactic of diminishing their responsibility through the use of impersonal phrase *it is believed*, which, in this case, is a "hidden averral with internal attribution" (Charles, 2006):

(iii) *Since there were no missing data* […] ***it is believed*** *that the resulting data are a valid reflection of the population they come from.* (*The Modern Language Journal,* 104)

The tentative structure *it is believed* signals either a low degree of authors' confidence in their propositions or an intentional attempt to shift the readers' attention away from their personal agency, given that in another context *it is believed* can serve as a general reference and thus bears the connotation of the collective agreement.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of our study was to trace the specific rhetorical and discursive strategies associated with the strong RVs *argue, claim, believe* in a corpus of linguistics articles from leading journals in the

field. Of these verbs, *argue* was found out to be the most frequent, used approximately three times per article. With regard to its referential function, in our corpus, it is employed twice as often to report the opinion of other authors as the opinion of the writer, which is consistent with previous findings. In about one-third of self-referring cases *argue* is featured in retrospective endophoric markers referring readers to above-stated information. While these constructions primarily perform the discourse-organizing function, they are still important in projecting the writers' explicit self-presence and authoritative tone, as they are deliberately chosen by the writers instead of more neutral markers such as *as stated above, as mentioned before*. A prominent tendency in the use of *argue* in the linguistics corpus is its pervasive mitigation with hedging constructions (such as *one could argue*), which serve the twofold purpose of partially removing the author's responsibility for their claim and making it seem widely accepted or naturally stemming from the presented premise. An interesting phrase displaying semantic ambiguity in our corpus is *it could be argued*: depending on the context, it can either introduce the author's opinion based on their findings or mention a potential objection, which they set out to disprove. *Argue* is typically followed with that-clause ('reporting clause') in our sample: the pattern *argue for/against* + nominalized group is generally avoided, highlighting the persistent value attached to seeming neutrality in academic discourse.

Though *argue* is often perceived by the students as interchangeable with the *claim*, the latter word has a subtle nuance in its use, often introducing an opinion that the author does not fully agree with. Also, this verb in our corpus is almost exclusively used in relation to Others. However, there were a few instances where it was used in negative statements when the authors aimed to refute a potential or actual objection. Most remarkably, the *claim* is predominantly associated with non-human agents (abstract entities such as *literature*, *approaches*) in contrast to *argue*, which foregrounds human agency and is mostly featured in integral citations. In contrast to *argue* and *claim* (which are 'discourse verbs'), the cognition verb *believe* is used in the corpus to refer to self more often than to Others. It tends to be situated in the concluding sections of the articles when the authors discuss the limitations of their research and advocate its value despite them. Even when used in other sections, this verb seems to strongly correlate with the authors' endeavor to persuade the readers of the importance of their research and its methodological rigor, as well as warding off potential criticism. Therefore, our findings elucidate the subtle semantic differences in the use of key RVs of the strong type in the context of research articles in linguistics.

Teaching novice academic writers to use RVs properly is very important in terms of their academic voice, which has become one of the key concepts in English for Academic Purposes and, more specifically, English for Research Publication Purposes (see, for example, Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2012, Herrando-Rodrigo, 2019, Hewings, 2012, Javdan, 2014). EAL writers often find it hard to strike the right tone, sounding either too humble or overly confident in their articles. Moreover, they are not always sure to what extent they are allowed to highlight their own contribution and position. Strong RVs can help writers sound more assertive, but in many situations they should be mitigated with hedging, which is a common strategy in our sample, to leave some room for debate.

Future research in this area might focus on the comparison of strong and tentative RVs in a specific field or across different fields. It would be of particular interest whether writers employ more tentative verbs when expressing their views as compared to citing others. Corpus approaches should be pushed further in EAP instruction to provide students with a large number of relevant and up-to-date lexical patterns that they could follow in their own writing. Apart from equipping students with a go-to set of rhetorical options in their particular discipline, their approaches also have the additional benefit of stimulating their learner autonomy.

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Appendix

List of cited journals from the Linguistics corpus

Applied Linguistics, Volume 39

Applied Linguistics, Volume 41

Applied Linguistics, Volume 42

Journal of Memory and Language, Volume 111

Journal of Memory and Language, Volume 114

Language Learning, Volume 70

Language Learning, Volume 71

Language Teaching Research, Volume 23

Modern Language Journal, Volume 104