Importance marking: Giving reference to the highlighted discourse in academic lectures

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to explore how important points are highlighted in Persian academic lectures. More specifically, this paper was aimed to reach a taxonomy of importance markers based on (a) the discourse functions of importance markers, and (b) the relative position of the importance marker to the highlighted discourse. A mixed-methods (exploratory) approach and a corpus-driven method were used to extract importance markers from 60 lectures of the Persian SOKHAN corpus. In terms of discourse functions, importance marking was found to be done by a set of five discourse functions, i.e. discourse organization, audience engagement, subject status, topic treatment, and relating to exam. Among these, audience engagement was the first most frequently used discourse function. Additionally, in terms of the position of the highlighted discourse, eight patterns were found for anaphoric importance marking. Ten patterns were also found for cataphoric importance marking. Moreover, cataphoric importance markers were considerably more prevalent than anaphoric importance markers. Generally, the findings suggested that lecturers are more inclined to function interpersonally in Persian academic contexts. The paper ends with pedagogical implications.

Keywords: importance marking, discourse function, Persian academic lecture, corpus.

Resumen

Los marcadores de importancia: La referencia al discurso señalados en las clases magistrales

Este artículo es un intento de explorar cómo determinados aspectos importantes se destacan en las clases magistrales. Más concretamente, este artículo buscaba

crear una taxonomía de marcadores de importancia basados en (a) las funciones discursivas de los marcadores de importancia, (b) la posición relativa del marcador de importancia en el discurso señalado. Un método mixto y un análisis de corpus (corpus-driven) se utilizaron para extraer los marcadores de importancia de 60 clases magistrales recogidas en el corpus SOKHAN. En cuanto a las funciones discursiva, se demostró que para destacar la importancia se utilzan cinco tipos de funciones, i.e. la organización del discurso, la involucración de la audience, la importancia de la asignatura, el tratamiento del tema y la relación con el examen. Entre estos, se demostró que la involucración de la audiencia es la función discursiva más frecuentemente usada. Además, por lo que se refiere a la posición del discurso destacado se utilizan ocho estructuras para destacar la importancia de forma catafórica. Los marcadores discursivos catafóricos son considerablemente más prevalentes que los marcadores discursivos anafóricos. En general, nuestros resultados sugieren que los profesores tienen una mayor inclinación hacia la interpersonalidad en el ámbito académico en persa. Este artículo concluye con las implicaciones pedagógicas del estudio.

Palabras clave: marcadores de importancia, función discursiva, clases magistrales en persa, corpus

1. Introduction

Academic lectures are one of the most important genres lecturers and students need to deal with at the university. On the one hand, the importance of academic lectures is rooted in the fact that they are the main instructional method through which lecturers present their theoretical knowledge. The instructors' success in their career thus depends on their successful undertaking of this genre. On the other hand, the knowledge students obtain from lectures accounts for the largest part of assessment and with that of academic success. As Sutherland and Badger (2004: 285) note, lecturing is "tightly geared towards assessment" and lecturers see "their lectures as a means of conveying the assessment needs of the course to the students". Yet, the abundance of information presented in the lecture, and lack of control over the speech rate, along with the students' limited command of English, make comprehending lectures a demanding task. Therefore, the ability to distinguish between important and less important points seems crucial for efficient comprehension of the lecture.

Importance markers, also called "relevance markers" (Hunston, 1994; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004, 2007; Deroey, 2014, 2015) are

"lexicogrammatical devices which overtly mark verbally or visually presented points as being comparatively relevant, important or significant" (Deroey, 2014: 266). According to Hunston (1994: 199), relevance markers have four main features: (a) they are retrospective or prospective; (b) they "overtly mark the relevance of preceding, or subsequent, stretches of text"; (c) they evaluate the discourse and are, thus, metadiscursive; and (d) they have an important discourse organizational role. The last two features concern the metadiscursive nature of relevance markers.

Metadiscourse refers to discourse about discourse or discourse about the evolving discourse (Ädel, 2006). According to Hyland (2004, 2005), metadiscourse expressions comprise two main functions: interactive and interactional. Interactive resources are used to guide the reader through the text; interactional resources, on the other hand, are used to involve the reader in the argument. The metadiscursive nature of importance markers can also be supported by the fact that examples of these markers are found in "delimiting topic", "marking asides", "managing the message", and "speech act labelling" metadiscourse (Ädel, 2010), and "text-structuring metadiscourse" (Thompson, 2003).

Discourse organizational patterns are reported to improve lecture comprehension, note-taking, and recall of the students (e.g., Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Thompson, 2003; Jung, 2006). As importance markers help students identify which portions of the lecture are important to learn, remember, or take note of, they are considered as decisive discourse organizational expressions (Flowerdew, 1994). Hence, an understanding of how important portions of lecture discourse are highlighted is useful. Nevertheless, very little is known about importance markers. The studies that have exclusively dealt with importance markers are few and far between (e.g., Crawford Camiciottoli, 2004, 2007; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a; Deroey, 2014, 2015).

Deroey (2015) explored importance markers derived from 160 lectures of the BASE corpus. This author classified importance markers in terms of their orientation to the discourse participants and the highlighted discourse. She labelled the patterns of importance markers with content, listener, speaker, or joint orientation as, respectively, "MN v-link", "V n/clause", "1s pers pron V n/clause", and "1p pers pron V n/clause". Importance markers with prospective, retrospective, or combined orientation to the highlighted discourse would have the patterns of "V n/clause" and "MN v-link"; "deic

v-link ADJ", "deic v-link MN", and "deic v-link adj MN"; and "1s pers pron V n/clause" and "deic v-link adj MN", respectively. Most markers were found to be either directed towards the content (e.g., "the point is") or listeners (e.g., "you should remember"). Few importance markers were oriented towards the speaker (e.g., "I should stress") or speaker and listeners jointly (e.g., "I want you to notice"). Deroey also made a distinction between primary and secondary interactive orientation. Classifying a marker as primary interactive orientation "depends on its main constituents, namely Subject or Object pronouns, full verbs, metalinguistic nouns, importance adjectives, and adverbs, while its secondary interactive orientation depends on possessive determiners, pre- and postmodifiers (adjectives, pronouns, verb type), and accompanying discourse markers" (2015: 4). She found many content-oriented markers with secondary listener orientation (e.g., "these are the things to take home").

Partington (2014) examined the marking of importance at local and macro levels in TED talks based on a corpus of 27 TED talks given between 2007 and 2012. Partington found four types of importance markers including (i) concordancing lexical items and simple word patterns, (ii) necessity items, (iii) personal relevance items, and (iv) big number items. "Concordancing lexical items and simple word patterns" is related to the lexical items (e.g., "key", "vital", "important", "essential", and the like) that explicitly highlight the importance of information. "Necessity" items concern expressing that something is necessary to do (e.g., "you have to, "you've got to", "needs to be", "so we need"). "Personal relevance" items involve appealing to personal relevance (e.g., "this is an example that you might care about someday"). And "big number" items necessitate using large numbers to highlight the importance of a topic (e.g., "it's a 130-fold improvement", and "that is 10 times further and faster than anything we've ever achieved in industrial history").

Deroey and Taverniers (2012a) explored 160 lectures from the BASE corpus to discover relevance markers in English lectures. The authors found importance markers with adjective, noun, verb and adverb as their main elements. Among these, the verb pattern "V clause" (e.g., "remember slavery had already been legally abolished"), followed by the noun pattern "MN v-link" (e.g., "the point is"), were found to be the dominant relevance markers in English lectures.

Crawford Camiciottoli (2004, 2007) investigated a small corpus comprising 12 Business Studies lectures delivered by UK, US and non-native speaker

lecturers and 10 MICASE lectures from different disciplines for potential relevance markers. She found six retrospective and prospective patterns for relevance markers with various combinations of deictics, determiners, relevance adjectives, metalinguistic nouns, and the linking verb "is". Among retrospective patterns, the "DEIC + IS + ADJ" (e.g., "This is important") one was dominant. Among prospective importance markers, the pattern "DET + ADJ + META N + IS", equivalent to Deroey & Taverniers' (2012a) "MN v-link" (e.g., "The main point is"), was the most prevalent. Prospective importance markers were found to be considerably more frequent than retrospective markers.

Drawing on authentic discourse data derived from the Persian SOKHAN corpus[1], this study was an endeavor to explore how important portions of discourse are highlighted in Persian academic lectures. More specifically, this paper sought to reach a taxonomy of importance markers based on the relative position of the highlighted discourse to the importance markers. Furthermore, we aimed for a new taxonomy of importance markers based on their discourse functions.

2. Material and method

2.1. Corpus

The corpus used in the present study was the Persian SOKHAN corpus. SOKHAN contains 60 authentic academic lectures distributed across the four disciplinary groups of engineering, humanities, medicine, and basic sciences, 15 from each broad group. The lectures in SOKHAN are all in Persian and are all delivered by male native speakers of Persian lecturers.

2.2. Analytical procedure

A mixed-methods approach was adopted in the study. The design of the study was exploratory, to use Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle's (2006) term. A quantitative measure of the distribution of importance markers was reached based on the qualitative data (transcripts of the lectures) collected formerly.

In order to derive importance markers, we followed Deroey and Taverniers's (2012a) research design. We constructed a sub-corpus of 16 lectures from the SOKHAN corpus (four from each disciplinary group), totaling 170,000

words. To control for the factor of discipline, lectures from all the four broad disciplinary groups were included in the study. In order for the sub-corpus to be representative of the entire SOKHAN corpus, the study level was also taken into consideration in selecting the lectures. The sub-corpus was, thus, systematically varied in terms of discipline and study level. The transcripts of the lectures in the sub-corpus were carefully read to locate the patterns which appeared to highlight important discourse. In this endeavor, only expressions that highlighted discourse entity, rather than world entity were extracted (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a). Here, a distinction needs to be made between discourse and world entities. Discourse entities are examples of expressions that are related to the discourse, that is, expressions where the lecturer evaluates the importance of discourse, not a world activity or issue. Accordingly, examples where it was not clear whether the highlighted discourse was a discourse entity or world entity were not included (1). Besides, following Deroey and Taverniers (2012a), we disregarded the expressions that marked the importance of student or third-party discourse and quoted material (2).

(1) Banabarin *in mohem-e ke in mansha-e ab-o bebinim*

[So, *it is important to see the source of water*]

(2) *Je nokte-i ke ona eshare mikonan in-e ke*

[*A point that they mention is that*]

WordSmith (Scott, 2015) was used to generate concordances for the patterns that seemed to highlight important discourse in the SOKHAN corpus. Other lexemes that seemed to mark important points were also discovered. These lexemes of marking importance were complemented by their synonyms and derived forms (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a). The co-texts of the retrieved importance markers, generated by WordSmith, were then inspected independently by each author to determine whether they functioned as importance markers. Afterwards, the researchers compared their results to reach a compromise. A total of 293 instances of importance marking were hence found.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Anaphoric, cataphoric and exophoric importance marking

Using WordSmith Concord tool (Scott, 2015), concordances of the 293 instances of importance marking were broken down. The importance markers were then classified in terms of the relative position of the highlighted discourse to the importance markers. This was done to see if the highlighted discourse goes before or after the importance marker. Crawford Camiciottoli (2004, 2007), and Deroey and Taverniers (2012a) have used retrospective and prospective terms for this classification. However, in order to have a more comprehensive taxonomy, taking into account both verbal and visual features of academic lectures, the terms "endophoric", "anaphoric", "cataphoric", and "exophoric" reference were used.
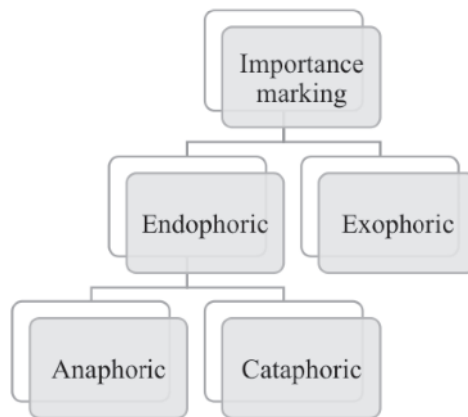
Figure 1. Importance markers in terms of the position of highlighted discourse.

As Figure 1 shows, in this taxonomy a distinction is made between endophoric importance marking, which deals with verbal cues used to signal the importance of discourse, and exophoric importance marking, which is concerned with visual aspects. Endophoric importance marking comprises anaphoric and cataphoric reference. Anaphoric importance marking occurs when the importance marker refers to portions of discourse mentioned earlier (3). Here, the audience need to look back in the speech to discover the highlighted discourse. Cataphoric importance marking, on the other hand, is when the highlighted point is mentioned later in the discourse (4). Thus, to

recognize the highlighted point the audience need to look ahead in the speech.

(3) … Xob! In *nokte* aval.

[… Well! This is the first *point*.]

(4) *Nokte mohem* in-e ke …

[The *important point* is …]

Exophoric importance marking occurs when the highlighted point is outside the verbal discourse. This happens when the lecturer refers to a point in the handouts or slides (5). To detect the highlighted discourse the lecture participants need to go beyond the verbal cues and look at the visual information presented.

(5) In slide *mohem-e*.

[This slide is *important*.]

Since the video files of the SOKHAN corpus were not accessible and the study was limited to exploring verbal cues only, exophoric importance markers were disregarded. Table 1 shows the lexicogrammatical patterns of anaphoric importance markers along with their distributions. Hunston and Francis' (2000) notation system[2] has been used to represent the patterns. Note that the focus of the patterns, what signals the importance of points, is in upper case.

Anaphoric importance markers	Raw counts	%
hd[3] + deic (adj) MN	9	3
hd + this v-link MN n/clause	2	0.7
hd + deic v-link (adv) ADJ	2	0.7
hd + deic v-link (adv) ADJ mn	7	2.3
hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ	12	4
hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ mn	3	1
hd + topicalized-ADV (deic) v-link adj mn	1	0.3
hd + exam points	12	4
Total	**48**	**16**

Table 1. Distribution analysis of anaphoric importance markers.

As Table 1 shows, the analysis of concordances revealed eight patterns for giving anaphoric reference to important points of discourse. Among anaphoric patterns, "hd + exam points" and "hd + deic mn v-link (adv)

ADJ" outnumbered the other patterns as the first most frequently used patterns in Persian academic lectures (4,4 %). The pattern "hd + exam points" includes those instances of importance markers that indicate the likelihood of portions of discourse to be included in the exam (6). Though very helpful for students to detect important points, this pattern constituted only four percent of all the importance markers in the SOKHAN corpus. The infrequence of this pattern may be related to the fact that the constant use of this pattern by the professor might reflect a teaching-to-the-test attitude: where the lecturer only stresses the materials which are considered important for assessment and the students are discouraged from paying attention to the other parts of discourse.

(6) In *soal-e emtehan-e.*

[This is an *exam question.*]

The pattern "hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ" is somehow similar to the most frequent retrospective pattern, "DEIC + IS + ADJ", that Crawford Camiciottoli (2007) found in English lectures. What makes our pattern different is the inclusion of a metalinguistic noun (e.g., "point"), in addition to an evaluative adjective (e.g., "important"), to signal the importance of discourse (7). The occurrence of these elements together makes this pattern an explicit importance marker, thus assisting the lecture audience in detecting the important portions of discourse. The metalinguistic nouns found in Persian lectures were "point", "question", "idea", "thing", "matter", "truth of the matter", and "focus". Among these, "point" outnumbered the other lexemes (105 instances). This mirrors the findings in Swales (2001), who investigated the use of "point" and "thing" in MICASE and observed "point" among the most frequent discussive nouns.

It is important to note that lexemes such as "question", "idea", "thing", "matter", "truth of the matter", and "focus" do not necessarily signal the importance of discourse *per se*. Counting these lexemes as importance markers depends on the presence of other elements such as evaluative adjectives (8). The evaluative adjectives found in Persian lectures were "important", "necessary", "fundamental", "main", "interesting", and "considerable". In line with Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), and Swales and Burke (2003, as cited in Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a), "important" outnumbered the other evaluative adjectives (29 instances). As in English (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a), in Persian "interesting" did not

signal the importance of discourse by itself (9). The presence of an interactive verb highlighted the importance of points.

(7) *In nokte mohem-e.*

  [*This point is important.*]

(8) *Chizi* ke *vase ma mohem* hast in-e ke

  [*What* is *important for us* is]

(9) *Jaleb* ine ke *bedonid*

  [It is *interesting for you to know* that]

What is common among most anaphoric patterns is the presence of a deictic (e.g., "this"). A deictic was found in six out of eight patterns. The frequent use of dectics in anaphoric importance markers mirrors the findings of Deroey and Taverniers (2012a), who found retrospective relevance markers with a deictic. The deictic used in the patterns is important, as it encapsulates the highlighted parts of discourse and its detection and interpretation are crucial for the comprehension of the lecture by the audience. Each anaphoric pattern is provided with an example in the appendixes (Appendix A).

Table 2 presents the derived patterns of cataphoric importance markers along with their distributions.

Cataphoric importance markers	Raw counts	%
(adj) MN + hd	16	5.5
(adv) (adj) MN v-link + hd	68	23.3
there v-link (adj) MN + hd	14	4.8
let 1st pers pron V (MN) + hd	3	1
V + hd	108	37
(ADV) 1st/2nd pers pron V + hd	20	7
it V + hd	1	0.3
let's (not) V + hd	3	1
it v-link ADJ + hd	5	1.7
what v-link ADJ v-link + hd	7	2.3
Total	**245**	**84**

Table 2. Distribution analysis of cataphoric importance markers.

As Table 2 shows, the analysis of concordances revealed ten patterns for giving cataphoric reference to important portions of discourse. Among cataphoric patterns, "V + hd" (37%) outnumbered other patterns as the most frequently used pattern in Persian academic lectures, followed by "(adv)

(adj) MN v-link + hd" (23.3%). This mirrors the findings of Crawford Camiciottoli (2007), who found "DET + ADJ + META N + IS" to be the most frequent pattern in English lectures.

In "V + hd", an interactive verb signals the importance of upcoming discourse (10). The verbs used in this pattern were "remember", "remind", "keep in mind", "forget", "pay attention", "note", "notice", "highlight", "take note of", "learn", "know", and "understand". The verbs may be complemented by a following deictic such as "here" and "this", or a that-clause. In a similar vein to English lectures (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012a), the pattern was predominant (37%) in cataphoric patterns and all the importance markers. The dominance of this pattern may be due to (a) the simple structure of this pattern and (b) the interactive verbs used in it. The basic structure of this pattern (using a main verb only) makes it a convenient way of signaling importance. Moreover, the imperative nature of the interactive verbs used in the pattern orient the audience to certain parts of discourse by involving them in the discoursal process.

(10) *Deqat konid* man nemixam begam

[*Note*! I'm not saying]

The pattern "(adv) (adj) MN v-link + hd", which was found to be the second most frequent cataphoric pattern, comprises chiefly a metalinguistic noun and a linking verb with sporadic pre-modifications such as adjectives and adverbs (11). The nouns were the same as anaphoric importance markers, with "point" being the most frequent one. Here, the parts of discourse which are aimed to be highlighted are either embedded in the same clause as the importance marker (11) or encapsulated by a deictic and said afterwards (12).

(11) *Nokte asli* in-e ke

[The main *point* is that]

(12) *Ide* in-e. Bebinid je

[The *idea* is this. See, a]

The pattern "(ADV) 1st/2nd pers pron V + hd", which was the third most frequent cataphoric importance marker, comprises an initial adverb and a main verb principally (13). What is important about this pattern is the fact

that the adverb does not indicate the importance of points by itself. The presence of another element such as an interactive verb complements this function (13).

(13) *Faqat* bajad *bedonid* ke

[*Only* you *should know* that]

What is interesting to note is that all the patterns containing interactive verbs were cataphoric in nature. Note that in these patterns, the highlighted discourse always follows the importance marker either in the same clause as the importance marker or summed up by a deictic and stated completely afterwards in another sentence. Each cataphoric pattern is provided with an example in the appendixes (Appendix B).

Table 3 presents the overall counts of anaphoric and cataphoric importance markers.

Importance markers	Raw counts	%
Anaphoric	48	16
Cataphoric	245	84
Total	**293**	**100**

Table 3. Distribution analysis of anaphoric/cataphoric importance markers.

As Table 3 shows, cataphoric importance markers dominated the Persian importance markers in the entire SOKHAN corpus, accounting for 84 % of them. This mirrors the findings of Crawford Camiciottoli (2007) and Deroey (2015) for English lectures. The dominance of cataphoric importance markers may be twofold. First, the presence of interactive verbs in most of these importance markers involves the participants of the lecture in the discourse and makes them participate actively in the process. Second, the initial position of the importance marker in relation to the highlighted discourse informs the audience of the prominence of the information, which is about to be presented and thus of the necessity of paying close attention to or taking note of them.

3.2. Importance markers in terms of discourse functions

The 293 instances of importance marking that were derived from the SOKHAN corpus were examined manually by the two researchers to see which discourse functions they served. A compromise was reached, in case

their opinions differed. It is important to note that this part of the study was conducted to extend the results of Deroey and Taverniers (2012b) on importance markers. In a study on lesser importance marking, these authors observed five types of markers of lesser importance in English academic lectures, including "message status", "topic treatment", "lecturer knowledge", "assessment", as well as "attention-and note-taking directives". We wanted to see if the same types of markers are found for highlighting importance. Consequently, the functional analysis of the importance markers led to a set of five importance marking functions.
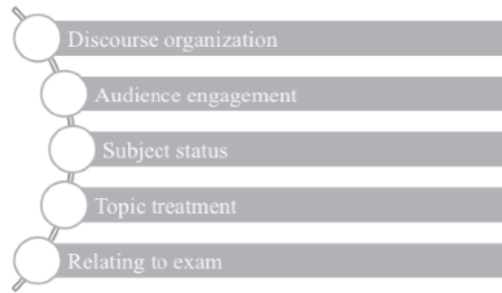

Figure 2. Importance markers in terms of discourse functions.

As Figure 2 shows, these functions include "discourse organization", "audience engagement", "subject status", "topic treatment", and "relating to exam". From these five importance marking functions, "subject status", "topic treatment", and "relating to exam" were taken from Deroey and Taverniers (2012b), not to mention the fact that they discuss them as "types", rather than "functions". Note also that Deroey and Taverniers' study was on the marking of lesser importance. We found it interesting to investigate whether the same markers can be found for importance marking. Interestingly, "lecturer knowledge" markers of lesser importance were not present in importance markers. "Message status", "topic treatment", "assessment", and "attention-and note-taking directives", however, were present among the importance markers with some noteworthy differences.

All the importance markers were then investigated to see which functional category they belonged to. Table 4 presents the distribution of each functional category in the Persian SOKHAN corpus. Each discourse function is provided with an example in the appendixes (Appendix C).

Importance markers	Raw counts	%
Discourse organization	82	28
Audience engagement	134	46
Subject status	59	20
Topic treatment	7	2.5
Relating to exam	11	3.5
Total	**293**	**100**

Table 4. Distribution analysis of importance markers.

As Table 4 shows, audience engagement was found to be the first most frequently used discourse function. Audience engagement refers to instances of importance marking where the lecturer involves the audience in the discourse process (14). Here, the audience is supposed to pay attention, memorize, or take note of specific portions of the discourse. The audience is attracted to the discourse by using verbs such as "remember", "keep in mind", "not forget", "pay attention", "notice", "highlight", "take note of", "learn", "know", and "understand". The preponderance of this discourse function may suggest that lecturers tend to function interpersonally in importance marking by actively involving their audience in the lectures. Audience engagement importance markers are somehow similar to Deroey and Taverniers' (2012b) "attention-and note-taking directives". Whereas audience engagement markers draw the attention of the audience to the important information of lectures, attention-and note-taking directives "explicitly direct the audience not to pay (much) attention to particular discourse" (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012b: 2096).

(14) *Doresh-o qat bekeshid*

[*Circle* that]

Discourse organization was the second most frequently used function among Persian importance markers. Discourse organization involves organizing the discourse by means of dividing it into points and non-points (15). This is done by the use of such nouns as "point", "question", "idea", "thing", "matter", "truth of the matter", and "focus". The prevalence of discourse organization as an importance marking function may be related to the prevalence of "point" in academic lectures.

(15) Je *nokte-i* ke inja hast in-e ke

[There is a *point* here that]

"Subject status" or "message status" (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012b) involve explicitly evaluating the importance or relevance of information, using evaluative adjectives (16). This is usually done by the use of such adjectives as "important", "necessary", "fundamental", "main", "interesting", and "considerable". Subject status was the third most frequent function of importance marking in Persian lectures. This function can be used to mark explicitly certain portions of discourse as important or less important.

(16) Chizi ke *mohem-e* in vasat in-e ke

[What is *important* here is that]

Relating to exam involves revealing what is likely to be assessed in the exam in relation to the content of present discourse (17). Deroey and Taverniers use "assessment" (2012b) or "assessment-related" (2012a) to refer to those markers of (lesser) importance that "point out the likelihood of being assessed on particular content" (2012a: 231). In all the instances of this function, the word "exam", its synonyms, or derived forms were identified. Whereas relating the discourse content to assessment and exam is a useful way of telling the students which parts to pay attention to, this function was quite rare. According to Deroey and Taverniers (2012a), as information concerning what to examine in the test is usually discussed in the first or last sessions of the course, and we do not know for sure whether the lectures incorporated into the SOKHAN corpus are from the first or last sessions of the semester or not, the infrequence of these markers cannot be explained. However, it can be hypothesized that the rareness of this function is related to the fact that relating specific content of the discourse to assessment might overshadow other parts of discourse which are necessary to learn as disciplinary content but are not normally assessed in exams. This might lead to a teaching-to-the-test attitude and discourage the audience from paying attention to other portions of discourse.

(17) *Soal-e emtehan* hamin-e

[This is an *exam question*]

Topic treatment is the function dealing with the way the lecturer lectures in a special subject. Deroey and Taverniers (2012b: 2091) refer to topic treatment markers as "discourse organizational statements signaling that topics or aspects thereof are not covered, or that little discourse or time is devoted to them". We have taken topic treatment as another way of

highlighting importance in academic lectures. Here, topic treatment refers to statements that suggest whether a topic or its aspects need to be covered extensively (18), or are not necessary to cover at all (19, 20). This function involves using expressions such as "go into", "cover", "skip", "briefly", and "in more detail". It is important to note that the interpretation of topic treatment as importance marking is based on the idea that only salient topics and information make it into the lecture, considering the limited time available and the abundance of topics to discuss (Deroey & Taverniers, 2012b). However, it must be born in mind that lack of time to cover everything might be the case sometimes.

(18) *Takid mikonim* roj-e in

[I *stress* this]

(19) Vali man *vared-e jozejat nemisham*

[But I *don't go into the details*]

(20) Hala *az in ke begzarim*

[Let's *skip this subject*]

What makes topic treatment different from subject status is that in subject status, the lecturer presents his/her attitudinal evaluation of the importance of the presented information along a "parameter of importance" (Thompson & Hunston, 2000: 24), whereas in topic treatment whether a topic gets limited or preferential treatment is stated. In other words, importance marking is done explicitly in subject status, whereas it is implied in topic treatment. As topic treatment deals with topics, the rareness of this function may be related to time management, the fact that only a few topics are usually discussed in every session.

4. Conclusion

This study was informed by the belief that an understanding of the discourse structure of lectures is beneficial to the students' comprehension, note-taking, and recall of lectures (e.g., DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988; Flowerdew & Tauroza, 1995; Khuwaileh, 1999; Jung, 2003a, b, 2006; Thompson, 2003). With the limited analysis of this study, which, as video recordings of the SOKHAN corpus were not accessible, explored verbal

importance markers only, any generalized conclusions are necessarily tentative but perhaps worth noting with respect to their implications.

First, in terms of the position of the highlighted discourse, eight patterns were found for anaphoric importance marking, among which the patterns "hd + exam points" and "hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ" outnumbered others. Ten patterns were also found for cataphoric importance marking among which "V + hd" was predominant. Second, cataphoric importance markers dominated the entire SOKHAN corpus. Third, in terms of discourse functions, marking certain portions of discourse as important was found to be done by one of the five discourse functions – discourse organization, audience engagement, subject status, topic treatment, and relating to exam. Interestingly, audience engagement was found to be the first most frequently used discourse function.

By and large, the findings of this study may imply that lecturers are more inclined to involve the audience than to refer to the text when signaling importance in Persian academic contexts. That is to say, instead of providing information without caring about the interpretations of the audience about the relative importance of discourse, lecturers tend to ensure that what they present is given enough attention to by drawing their addressees in and providing the important points of discourse in a way that makes planning for online processing and note-taking possible. In other words, Persian academic lectures are more oriented towards the audience than to the content.

Theoretically, the authentic patterns and discourse functions of importance marking that were found in this study may be used as a basis for comparative research on how this function is done in other genres, and across other languages and disciplines. Pedagogically, these patterns, discourse functions and examples of their specific uses may be utilized in materials for listening and lecturing courses. Specific courses for lecture listening, comprehension, and note-taking can also be designed and implemented based on these patterns for native and non-native speakers of Persian.

This study suggests various areas for further research on the function of importance marking. Further research needs to be conducted to find if the taxonomy of the discourse functions of importance marking is the same for other languages such as English. Additionally, it seems necessary to investigate some of the variables that are relevant to lectures such as lecturing styles, academic culture and field of study.

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NOTES

[1] The Persian corpus of SOKHAN was developed at the Science and Technology Park of North Khorasan, Iran under the directorship of Javad Zare and Zahra Keivanloo-Shahrestanaki. Corpus development was assisted by funding from the Technology University of Esfarayen and the Science and Technology Park of North Khorasan, Iran. The lectures of SOKHAN were recorded between 2010 and 2015. SOKHAN totals 480,526 words.

[2] Following Deroey and Taverniers (2012), Hunston and Francis' (2000) notation system has been used for the patterns of importance markers. Here, the pattern focus is in upper case, other elements are in lower case and lexemes are in italics.

deic = deictic, adj = adjective, mn = metalinguistic noun, v-link = linking verb, n = nominal complement

[3] "hd" stands for "highlighted discourse" in the derived patterns.

Appendix A

Anaphoric importance markers: patterns and examples

Anaphoric importance markers	Example
hd + deic (adj) MN	In je nokte [This is one point]
hd + this v-link MN n/clause	Pas in nokte-i bod ke [So, this was the point]
hd + deic v-link (adv) ADJ	Chon in xeili mohem-e [Because this is very important]
hd + deic v-link (adv) ADJ mn	In matlab-e mohemi-je [This is an important topic]
hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ	In nokte mohem-e [This point is important]
hd + deic mn v-link (adv) ADJ mn	In nokte nokte mohemi-je [This point is an important point]
hd + topicalized-ADV (deic) v-link adj mn	Xeili nokte xobi-je [A very good point it is]
hd + exam points	Soal-e emtehan hamin-e [This is an exam question]

Appendix B

Cataphoric importance markers: patterns and examples

Cataphoric importance markers	Example
(adj) MN + hd	Nokte xeili mohem [A very important point]
(adv) (adj) MN v-link + hd	Nokte in-e ke [The point is that]
there v-link (adj) MN + hd	Do-ta nokte inja vojod dare [There are two points here]
let 1st pers pron V (MN) + hd	Je nokte-i-o aval eshare konam [Let me make one point first]
V + hd	Deqat konid man nemixam begam [Note! I'm not saying]
(ADV) 1st/2nd pers pron V + hd	Faqat bajad bedonid ke [Only you should know that]
it V + hd	Takid mishe age [It is emphasized that if]
let's (not) V + hd	Faramosh nakonim ke [Let's not forget that]
it v-link ADJ + hd	Jaleb in-e ke bedonid [It is interesting for you to know]
what v-link ADJ v-link + hd	Chizi ke vase ma mohem hast in-e ke [What is important for us is]

Appendix C

Importance markers in Persian academic lectures in terms of discourse functions: examples

Importance markers	Example
Discourse organization	Je nokte-i ke inja hast in-e ke [There is a point here that]
Audience engagement	Doresh-o qat bekeshid [Circle that]
Subject status	Chizi ke mohem-e in vasat in-e ke [What is important here is that]
Topic treatment	Takid mikonim roj-e in [I stress this]
Relating to exam	Soal-e emtehan hamin-e [This is an exam question]