

## 8. ACTUALLY, PRESS REPORTS AND ACADEMIC WRITING ARE NOT “FACELESS”

Elizabeth CLOSS TRAUGOTT

*Stanford University*

**Abstract :** Speech and writing both involve cognitive structuring and strategic use of that structure. Academic writing and press reports have their own conventions, but they are not necessarily as different from speech as is often claimed. Adverbs like *obviously* and *in fact* are used strategically in both kinds of writing, as well as in speech, in two uses: epistemic stance adverbs expressing the speaker/writer's strong commitment to a position, and discourse markers, which express the speaker / writer's view of the relationship between what precedes and what follows in the flow of discourse.

**Key words :** writing, speech, stance adverbs, discourse markers, evidentials, subjectivity

In their pioneering article on stance types Biber and Finegan (1988: 31) claim that the use of modal stance adverbs expressing strong epistemic commitment to a position, e.g. *in fact*, *actually*, is primarily associated with speech or writing that is interpersonal in orientation (editorials, essays, telephone conversations, spontaneous speeches).<sup>16</sup> Press reports, academic prose, and, surprisingly, general fiction are, by contrast, said to disfavor such adverbs and to be “faceless”. On the other hand, in a later work they note that “more formal, more “literate” situations typically exhibit[] a more frequent use of explicit and elaborated variants, and less formal, more “oral” situations exhibit[] a more frequent use of economy variants” (Biber and Finegan 1994: 317). Because the strong epistemic class of modal stance adverbs expresses commitment to a position explicitly, one might therefore expect the use of markers of epistemic attitude to occur in formal press reports and academic prose after all.

In these remarks I will address two questions:

---

<sup>16</sup>. Thanks to Lisbeth Lipari for introducing me to the challenges of adverbial *in fact*, and to Scott Schwenter for extensive discussion of issues related to this paper.

*Question I:* Is it true that press reports and academic writing are faceless? I will suggest that although it is true that these genres may statistically disfavor use of strong epistemic adverbs in comparison with more interactive genres, nevertheless strategic placement of those tokens that are used renders the prose in question far from faceless and does indeed bear out the prediction that explicit, elaborated variants are an excellent locus for them. Statistically Biber and Finegan (1988) may be right, but the role that they play renders the description “faceless” inappropriate.

*Question II:* What conclusions might we reach about embodied vs. situated cognition from this finding? I will suggest that cross-linguistically epistemic commitment to a position is probably universal (assuming that evidentials can be included among the class of epistemic modal expressions, see Chafe (1986)). In other words, structurally it is a category anchored in both perception and cognitive abilities of reasoning, but in terms of use it is unavoidably contextualized in the discourse purposes to which language is strategically directed.

I am a historical linguist, and my primary focus is on the development of English from the earliest records (around the seventh century AD) to the 20th century. My data are therefore inevitably written. Much work has been done in linguistics on the problem of theorizing the relationship between the written texts that come down to us from the past and the spoken language in which they were embedded (see Rissanen (1986) for some discussion). What may have been less widely discussed within the field is the impact some concepts of written style have had for linguistic theory, and for assumptions that are made about certain categories of language.

Among these concepts is that of “classic style”. Thomas and Turner show how it developed in America out of values asserted by Descartes and Pascal. These include the notion that: “In classic style, the reader and writer are brought together by a common recognition of truth. The writer is never merely indulging personal interests. As a result, a complementary relationship is created between reader and writer: the writer presents truth, and the reader recognizes it” (Thomas and Turner 1994: 34). Interestingly, this view of style, as articulated by Thomas and Turner, is supposedly inter-personal, based on dialog (41), but each participant is construed as speaking “as an observer of the truth” (35) with the same competence (50), and similar ability to observe the same things (51), with attention to clarity and non-redundancy (the analysis is expected to be presented “in the simplest accurate form” (166). We now question what the truth is, whether there is one truth, whether it is possible for speakers and hearers, readers and writers to observe the same things. Nevertheless, we do not seem to question the notion that some kinds of writing, especially academic writing and press reports, focus on the observed truth, can avoid subjective language (more specifically, subjective metatextual markers), and can therefore be objective.

In recent years I have been working on the development adverbs like *in fact*, *indeed*, *actually*, and I have repeatedly been told that they are markers of subjectivity and are not used in academic writing and press reports, or are “edited out” by copy-editors.<sup>17</sup> While it may be true that editors leave relatively few traces of subjective linguistic markers in academic writing and press reports, nevertheless, it is simply not true that these genres are written objectively or that adverbs like *in fact*, *indeed*, or *actually* are sufficiently absent to render them “faceless”. Those who make such claims may be piously repeating a myth about their profession, e.g. “objective journalists are expected to stick to the facts and report only material that is “borne out by evidence [Mencher 1994: 38]” (Lipari 1996: 821). They may be overvaluing and overgeneralizing the alleged objective nature of twentieth century “scientific discourse” (note, however, that Fernandez rightly refers to the hypothetical nature of the assumption of objectivity when she refers to “une hypothétique énonciation objective” (1994: 23)). They may be relying on statistics such as those of Biber and Finegan (1988) rather than

---

<sup>17</sup>. The assumption that “discourse” or “pragmatic” markers are features of oral language is discussed and interestingly also assumed in Brinton’s (1996) study of the development of a wide variety of discourse markers, all based on written English historical texts.

on placement and strategic purpose. Or they may be assuming a one-meaning:one-form correlation for adverbs like *in fact*, *indeed*, *actually*, and hence underdifferentiating the different functions and different effects of the adverbs. However, it is well known that adverbs can be used in several ways, at a minimum both literally and pragmatically (e.g. *then* as a temporal adverb, and as a discourse marker linking inference sequences (Schiffrin 1992)). It is also likely that they are relying on intuitions, and thinking of constructed examples, out of context.

In a paper testing the claim that “journalists are presumed to have no word, no voice, no conceptual system”, Lipari (1996: 831) shows how *obviously* is used by reporters in three modes or senses:

a) the manner adverb or empirical mode indicating that the proposition *p* is based on physical (typically visual) evidence:

(1) [about Perot’s withdrawal from the US Presidential race] ‘Did you hear the latest?’

“Yes, yes, and I am sick, sick, sick,” replied the man, *obviously* distraught over the announcement. (United Press International 7/16/1992) [*obviously* marks the reporter’s empirical, objective observation, which is being made manifest to the reader]

b) the epistemic, inferential mode indicating that evidence for *p* is based on reasoning:

(2) There was no indication how long the State Department review would take but it was *obviously* designed to bring Jordan into line. (United Press International 2/8/1991) [*obviously* marks the reporter’s conclusion; one that is presumed to be easily sharable by the potential audience, based on normative reasoning]

c) the “metalinguistic” mode (I prefer to call it “metatextual”, following Dancygier (1992)), functioning to reorient the interpretation and information flow, particularly to smooth over a tenuous link between observed “fact” and reporter inference:

(3) In his remarks, Bush, *obviously* taking a shot at Buchanan, said: “From some quarters, we hear the dim voice of defeatism, that tin trumpet sounding retreat”. (United Press International 2/19/1992)

Lipari’s conclusion is that all three meanings are widely attested in her data base, the United Press International in the years 1990-1992, and that journalism is subjective in the sense that “as Bakhtin theorized about all speakers, [journalists] are always already engaged in social dialogue with other speakers, arguments, claims, and conversations” (Lipari 1996: 831).

In my own work (e.g. Traugott (1995, In press); see also Powell (1992)) I have been struck by the same kinds of things. Take *in fact*. It has three senses (data are from academic writing):

a) An adverb functioning as an oblique adverb modifying the verb and answering the question “With respect to what?” (evidenced from the seventeenth century on):

(4) [of referents of words] They are not really and *in fact* present to the mind, but only in power; nor do we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. (Hume 1739-40: Bk. 1, p. 21) [note *in fact* contrasts with *in power*]

b) An adversative epistemic sentential adverb (evidenced from the eighteenth century on). This has scope over the whole clause, and typically occurs after a complementizer like *that*, *if*, *which*, or adjacent to the finite verb :

(5) a. An example will make this clear. Out of malice a man prosecutes you for a crime of which he believes you to be guilty, but of which *in fact* you are not guilty. (Bentham 1789: 93) [*in fact* signals that the proposition *You are guilty* is not true]

b. In terms of discourse structure, we might expect there to be radical differences between messages and dialogue, but *in fact* there are interesting similarities. (Ball *et al.* 1989: 60)

c. Yet apart from some syntactic correlates of thematic roles, there is *in fact* a notable absence of consensus about what thematic roles are. (Dowty 1991: 547)

The epistemic adverb uses of “stance adverbs” are on a literal reading usually redundant. Redundancy is often associated with spoken language. What happens in these texts is that the redundancy emphasizes the pragmatic, subjective, meaning. In (5a) the clause *but of which you are not guilty* is implied by *out of malice* and *crime of which he believes you to be guilty*, hence *in fact* is redundant to the epistemic certainty; the same is true of (5b) given *we might expect*; and of course both examples in (5) show redundancy with adversative *but* or *yet*. This adversative *in fact* is strategically positioned to mark just those controversial positions that the author wants to draw particular attention to in the evolving argument.

c) A discourse marker signaling that what follows adds specificity to what precedes (Rossari 1994: 20-21 calls this kind of use “re-examination” of *p*) (infrequent before the nineteenth century). This occurs outside the complementizer, if there is one, and is metatextual, signaling the speaker’s view of the relationship between prior discourse and what follows :

(6) a. There is nothing in the conditions of life, in the geological nature of the islands, in their height or climate, or in the proportions in which the several classes are associated together, which resembles closely the conditions of the South American coast: *in fact* there is a considerable dissimilarity in all these respects. (Darwin 1859: 136)

[what follows *in fact* (*there is considerable dissimilarity*) confirms and gives more detail to what precedes (*there is nothing which resembles closely the conditions of the South*)]

b. A syntactician might dismiss these items [*hello, ouch*, etc.] as “outside language,” since they do not participate in the “combinatorial system,” except in quotational contexts like (9a), where virtually anything is possible. Note, however, that they do not occur in an environment such as (9b), reserved (in non-teenage dialects) for *nonlinguistic* expressions. This suggests that they are regarded as linguistic items.

(9) a. “Hello,” he said.

b. Then John went, “[belching noise]”/\*Hello.”

*In fact*, the items are made of standard phonological units... and they undeniably carry some sort of meaning. (Jackendoff 1997: 94)

[this illustrates well the way in which discourse marker *in fact* is typically adversative to some position not shared by the author in a long-distance prior context (*a syntactician might dismiss these items*) but in the local context specifies the author’s already partially articulated contrasting position (*this suggests that they are regarded as linguistic items*)]

In its discourse marker use exemplified by (6), as in its adversative epistemic use exemplified in (5) *in fact* is strategically positioned: to mark just those important positions or hypotheses that the author wants to be sure are cogently articulated, either as the basis of further discussion, or as the culmination of an exposition.

The uses of *in fact* in (5) and (6) are quite similar to those Haviland describes in connection with evidentials in spoken Zinacanteco Tzotzil. He says they “may serve as affective and interactional devices that have little to do with a literal characterization of the ‘realm of validity’ or narrated events” (Haviland 1989: 36). He cites:

a) The particle *yu van*.<sup>18</sup> This suggests “of course, indeed, what I am now saying is true, despite what you might think (and probably you should have known it, despite the fact that you appear to have forgotten it or to be ignoring it, perhaps deliberately)” (47), uses which have much in common with the adversative epistemic *in fact*,

b) *A`a* “indeed! surely! certainly!, of course!” (42), somewhat like the discourse marker use of *in fact*.

---

<sup>18</sup>. The symbol ` represents a glottal stop.

The purpose of such markers in Tzotzil, Haviland says, is not to objectively identify the truth, but to serve as a “filter through which propositions and attitudes must pass in order to be incorporated into a mutually agreed on, interactively constructed universe of discourse” (61). Haviland (1987) cites similar adversative and agreeing functions in the Australian languages Guugu Yimidhurr and Warlpiri.

Academic writing and press reporting undergo similar filtering. One thing that may make it difficult to fully understand how stance adverbs function in English is that, subjective though this filtering is, one class lexical items that have been recruited to serve purposes similar to those in Tzotzil (*deed, fact, act, certain, real*) all appear to be objective. They are “masquerading as evidence” (Lipari 1996: 832). Writing is not autonomous, but the reader can of course only partially co-construct the argument. So the reader can easily become subject to the insistent epistemic certitudes of the author. So too can the analyst. For example, in a paper that aims to distinguish fact and factual representation, Almeida fails to distinguish between those representations that *masquerade* as factual representations and those that do not when she says that her observations have supported van Dijk’s claim that “newswriters are engaged in a ‘textual ritual’ whose aim is the production of impersonal, objective, and neutral text” (Almeida 1992: 261).

Epistemic sentential adverb vs. discourse marker uses are often hard to distinguish unless close attention is paid to discourse flow, because in the absence of a complementizer both may occur clause-initially (consider e.g. *In fact, the items are made of standard phonological units*). This compounds the masquerading. Chafe notes that in speech evidentiality is largely limited to modals (*maybe, must*), epistemic verbs (*it seems, I guess*), and a few adverbs (*probably, certainly*). But, he points out, many more distinctions are made in writing: “academic writing, especially, is sprinkled with words like *basically, by definition, essentially, exactly, generally, in some sense, invariably, literally, normally, particularly, primarily, specifically, and virtually...* In other words, writers are prone to worry about HOW true something is” (Chafe 1986:165). Such writers may not realize that in some uses other adverbs of a similar sort, such as *indeed, in fact, actually*, have strong adversative functions of the kind outlined above in connection with (5), and further that they may have discourse marker functions, in other words, they express not so much truth but subjective attitude.<sup>19</sup>

Another dimension to consider is that a reporter or academic, is, in that role, a member of the middle class. It is therefore of some interest that Macaulay (1995) noted in spoken narrative interview data collected by him in Ayr, Southwest Scotland in the late 1970’s that either middle class speakers used epistemic -ly adverbs more frequently than lower class speakers, or lower class speakers did not use them at all:

Fig. I. From Table 3 of Macaulay (1995: 44).  
Relative frequency of some epistemic sentence adverbs

	Middle-class	Lower class
actually	52	5
certainly	14	10
obviously	20	2
possibly	16	1
probably	20	2
Totals	122	20

Macaulay associates this use of evidentials with “what Bakhtin called ‘authoritative discourse’ because it imposes the speaker’s interpretation on the original utterance” (Macaulay

<sup>19</sup>. Chafe categorizes *in fact* among “devices that match knowledge against expectations” and says that it is more characteristic of conversation than academic written language (1986: 272). It appears, however, that *in fact* is currently not used much in spoken American English in the adversative sense; in this meaning it appears to be being supplanted by *actually* (see Aijmer (1986) on uses of *actually* in the London-Lund corpus).

1995: 52). This suggests that in addition to marking subjective point of view, adverbs like *obviously*, and *in fact* in their epistemic and discourse marker functions may also imply social attitudes and affiliations.

I have suggested that all languages have resources to express evidentials; among them are epistemic markers with adversative function (e.g. *but*, *in fact*, *actually*, *indeed* in their adversative function). They are in polyphonic dialog with some point of view either expressed by a different voice, or set up as a straw argument by the author (Schwenter 1997). There are also markers of metatextual agreement with and further specification of what preceded (e.g. *actually*, *indeed*, *obviously*, *in fact* in their discourse marker function). Such multifunctionality, which Haviland (1987: 352) hypothesizes to be “common... across both situations and languages” functions are, it seems reasonable to believe, part of cognition, anchored in experience, reasoning, and textual strategies.

How frequently they are used, where exactly they are used in a discourse, and by whom, depends on situations, contexts, and purposes. But they are rarely absent. Truly “faceless” prose is unusual in the humanities and social sciences, and, I should add, in rapid demise even in the one arena which has labored during this century to achieve it, scientific writing. We should in fact(!) not treat embodied cognition and situated cognition as mutually exclusive, but complementary. Whether the data are oral, written or signed, context always matters, redundancy is present unless a conscious, often artistic minimalist effort such as Hemingway’s, is made to eliminate it. But without linguistic structure, there would be nothing to contextualize.

## REFERENCES

Aijmer, K. (1986). Why is *actually* so popular in spoken English? In: *English in Speech and Writing: A Symposium* (G. Tottie and I. Bäcklund (Eds)), Almqvist & Wiksell, Uppsala, p. 119-129.

Almeida, E. P. (1992). A category system for the analysis of factuality in newspaper discourse. *Text* 12, p. 233-262.

Bakhtin, M. (1986). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (M. Holquist (Ed.), trans. by C. Emerson and M. Holquist). University of Texas Press, Austin.

Biber, D. and E. Finegan (1988). Adverbial stance types in English. *Discourse Processes* 11, p. 1-34.

Biber, D. and E. Finegan (1994). Register and social dialect variation: An integrated approach. In: *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register* (D. Biber and E. Finegan (Eds)). Oxford University Press, New York, p. 315-347.

Brinton, Laurel J. (1996). *Pragmatic Markers in English*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.

Chafe, W. (1986). Evidentiality in English conversation and academic writing. In: *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology* (W. Chafe and J. Nichols (Eds)). NJ: Ablex, Norwood, p. 261-272.

Dancygier, B. (1992). Two metatextual operators: Negation and conditionality in English and Polish. In: *Proceedings of the Eighteenth Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society*, (L. A. Buszard-Welcher, L. Wee and W. Weigel (Eds)). University of California, Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society, p. 61-75.

Fernandez, M. M. J. (1992). *Les particules énonciatives dans la construction du discours*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris.

Haviland, J. B. (1987). Fighting words: Evidential particles, affect and argument. In: *Proceedings of the Thirteenth Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* (J. Aske, N. Beery, L. Michaelis, and H. Filip (Eds)). University of California, Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society, p. 343-354.

Haviland, J. B. (1989). 'Sure, sure': Evidence and affect. *Text* 9, p. 27-68.

Lipari, L. (1996). Journalistic authority: Textual strategies of legitimation. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, p. 821-834.

Macaulay, R. K. S. (1995). The adverbs of authority. *English World-Wide* 16, p. 37-60.

Mencher, M. (1994). *News Reporting and Writing*. Brown and Benchmark, Madison.

Powell, M. J. (1992). The systematic development of correlated interpersonal and metalinguistic uses in stance adverbs. *Cognitive Linguistics* 3, p. 75-110.

Rissanen, Matti (1986). Variation and the study of English historical syntax. In: *Diversity and Diachrony*, Benjamins, Amsterdam, p. 97-109.

Rossari, C. (1994). *Les opérations de reformulation: Analyse du processus et des marques dans une perspective contrastive français – italien*. Peter Lang, Bern.

Schiffrin, D. (1992). Anaphoric *then*: Aspectual, textual, and epistemic meaning. *Linguistics* 30, p. 753-792.

Schwenter, S. A. (1997). *The Pragmatics of Conditional Marking: Implicature, Scalarity, and Exclusivity*. Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University.

Thomas, F.-N. and M. Turner. *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Traugott, E. C. (1995). The role of the development of discourse markers in a theory of grammaticalization. Paper presented at International Conference on Historical Linguistics XII, Manchester, UK.

Traugott, E. C. (In press). The rhetoric of counterexpectation in semantic change: A study of subjectification. In: *Historical Semantics and Cognition* (P. Koch and A. Blank (Eds)).

#### TEXTS CITED

Ball, C., D. Dahl, L. Norton, L. Hirschman, C. Weir, and M. Linebarger (1989). Answers and questions: Processing messages and queries. *Proceedings of the DARPA Speech and Natural Language Workshop*. San Mateo: Morgan Kaufmann.

Bentham, J. (1789). *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart (Eds)). University of London, The Athlone Press, London (1970).

Darwin, C. (1859). *The Origin of Species: By Means of Natural Selection*. Avenel Books, New York (1979).

Dowty, D. (1991). Thematic proto-roles and argument selection. *Language* 67, p. 547-619.

Hume, D. (1739-40). *A Treatise of Human Nature*. London: Everyman's Library (1911).

Jackendoff, Ray (1997). *The Architecture of the Language Faculty*. MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

United Press International. 1990-1992. Top stories.