



A Study on the Use of Reporting Verbs in Academic Papers by Native English Speakers

—Taking “Argue” and “Suggest” as Examples

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Abstract. This study uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to analyse the use of the reporting verbs “argue” and “suggest” in Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers. It is found that: 1) Upper-level native English-speaking students use “suggest” more frequently and “argue” less frequently in their academic writing. “Suggest” and “argue” are most often found in the third person singular; 2) “Argue” is often paired with animate subjects, “suggest” with inanimate subjects; 3) “Argues for/against” is the most frequent collocation of “argue”, and “suggest” is often used with “seem (s) to”. This study may provide references for Chinese English learners to use reporting verbs in academic writing.

Keywords: reporting verbs, academic writing, native English speakers, corpus

1 Introduction

Reporting verbs play a crucial role in the field of academic writing, not only can they be used to introduce ideas, but they are also closely linked to the credibility of the ideas, and have become a common way to help both writers and readers to construct new knowledge systems. Through the accurate use of reporting verbs, writers are able to effectively integrate sources of ideas and enhance the persuasiveness of their arguments. Reporting verbs are of great importance in academic writing and communication. However, there are not sufficient relevant studies in China. Thus, this study selects “argue” and “suggest” in ARGUE-type reporting verbs as the research objects, and uses the native speaker corpus of the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers as the data source, aiming to reveal the characteristics of the use of reporting verbs by upper-level native English-speaking students in their academic writing. It also provides references for Chinese English learners to use reporting verbs in academic writing and helps them improve their academic writing skills.

2 Literature Review

Reporting refers to attributing propositional content to a source other than the author of the article and marking this with special attribution markers 10. Reporting or quoting is a meta-linguistic representation of ideas from other sources in an article. The author of an article can indicate the way in which language (idea, thought, or discourse) has been used in an earlier situation by using reporting verbs that refer to the use of language in another situation 10. Authors synthesise and integrate sources of ideas into their texts through reporting verbs, which are a key element of citation when students write evidence-based arguments 6. The use of reporting verbs when citing one's own or others' claims is increasingly closely associated with the credibility of such claims 2, and is also a common way in which authors and readers collaborate to construct new bodies of knowledge 12. Through the use of reporting verbs, authors are able to associate the most appropriate words with ideas that they find compelling and supportive of their claims 7.

Academic research papers can be identified by recognizable communicative purposes and standardized forms, functions or presentation characteristics, and one identifying mark of academic articles that researchers are interested in is the reported viewpoints or references to previous research therein, which are usually introduced by reporting verbs 10. Previous research on reporting verbs in academic discourse can be divided into the following categories: single-domain studies, interdisciplinary studies, and studies of writers from different native language backgrounds 157.

Different scholars have also classified reporting verbs from different perspectives, but there is no universally accepted classification criterion. Reporting verbs were classified into indicative verbs and evaluative verbs 11, and the more influential classification criterion includes Francis et al. 4, who distinguished semantic groups according to the grammatical patterns associated with reporting verb. Based on Francis et al. 4, Maggie 8 classified reporting verbs into four categories and named each category after the verbs that appeared most frequently in the corpus he created.

Reporting verbs are classified into four categories, ARGUE verbs, SHOW verbs, FIND verbs and THINK verbs 8. The ARGUE-type reporting verbs is related to writing and other forms of communication, and they can be used to indicate which function the communication performs (e.g., argue, suggest). Reporting verbs, as frequently used vocabulary in academic writing, deserve to receive extensive attention. However, there are not many studies focusing on reporting verbs in China, especially on the use of reporting verbs in academic writings. ARGUE-type reporting verbs appear more frequently than other types of reporting verbs in the corpus 8, and this type of reporting verbs is mainly used in writing and other forms of communication. The corpus selected for this study comes from students' essays as well. Therefore, the main research purpose of this study is to analyze how ARGUE-type reporting verbs are used in the academic papers written by advanced native speaker students. This study analyses the characteristics of the use of reporting verbs in the academic papers of upper-level native speakers of English, in order to provide references for the Chinese English learners to use reporting verbs in academic writings.

3 Research Design

3.1 Data Collection

The corpus of native English speaker students selected for this study comes from the Michigan Corpus of Upper-Level Student Papers (MICUSP). The corpus is a corpus of written English developed by the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan, with a corpus capacity of 2.6 million words, consisting of 829 A-level papers from fourth-year undergraduate students across 16 disciplines. The papers in MICUSP can be searched by topic or discipline.

3.2 Research Methods

In order to learn the use of reporting verbs in academic papers by native English speaking students, this study firstly ticks native English speakers as the object of study, and counts the occurrences of the two reporting verbs of “argue” and “suggest”, as well as their inflected forms in MICUSP. Then, the study also investigates the subjects that ARGUE-type reporting verbs are often paired with in MICUSP, and whether the paired subjects are animate or not. From a grammatical point of view, the subject of a sentence is mainly classified into three categories, animate noun phrases, inanimate noun phrases or the undirected pronoun “it”⁸. Lexical collocations are indispensable for fast and fluent speech⁹, and words in preference collocations have a higher frequency of co-occurrence than random combinations³. Therefore, this study also examines the commonly used collocations of the ARGUE-type reporting verbs “argue” and “suggest”, in order to further understand how native English speakers use reporting verbs in academic papers, and to provide references for Chinese learners of English to write academic papers.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Frequency Analysis

Firstly, this study retrieves the raw frequency of occurrence of “argue” and “suggest” (containing their inflected forms) in MICUSP. The results show that there is a difference in the frequency of native English speakers in the use of ARGUE-type reporting verbs “argue”, “suggest” and their inflected form.

According to the frequency of occurrence in Table 1, the most common chosen word used by upper-level native English speakers when using ARGUE-type reporting verbs is “suggest”, with a frequency of 1170 (including its inflected forms). This suggests that when using reporting verbs in academic writing, advanced native English speakers prefer to use “suggest” to express the purpose of the communication to be achieved. In contrast, those upper-level native English-speaking students were less likely to use “argue” to quote from a report in their academic writing ($F=1002$) (“F” represents the raw frequency of occurrence). Specifically, advanced native English speakers use “argue” and “suggest” mainly in report-type essays, with a frequency of 38%, 42% and 42% of

the total number of occurrences of the paper, respectively. “Argue” is most frequently used in sociology essays, whereas “suggest” is most commonly used in psychology-related essays. The most frequently used forms of the reporting verbs when using “suggest” and “argue” are the third person singular forms of “suggests” and “argues”, indicating that native speakers tend to use the third person singular form as the subject of reporting verbs, and the tense used is mostly the simple present tense, which will be discussed in more detail in the following part of this study. The least used form of two verbs is the progressive form. This indicates that native speaker students are less likely to use the progressive tense form of reporting verbs in academic writing. The average frequency of the different forms in the ARGUE-type reporting verbs are all roughly in the range of 1-2 in each paper, indicating that native speaker students may use the same form several times when using this type of verb in a text. The above usage shows the preference of native English students to use reporting verbs in academic writing, which is worthwhile for Chinese English learners to learn from.

Table 1. Occurrences of Argue, suggest and propose in MICUSP

Word Form	Frequency	Percentage	Number of papers appearing	Average frequency of occurrence per paper
Argue	328	32.7%	164	2
Argues	420	41.9%	143	2.9
Argued	163	16.3%	101	1.6
Arguing	91	9.1%	56	1.6
Sum	1002	100%		
Suggest	415	35.5%	198	2.1
Suggests	448	38.3%	210	2.1
Suggested	207	17.7%	135	1.5
Suggesting	100	8.5%	67	1.5
Sum	1170	100%		

4.2 Analysis of the Use of “Argue”

“Argue” is the second most frequently used ARGUE-type reporting verb in MICUSP, with a total frequency of 1002 (including its inflected forms). By observing the searching results, it can be found that the third-person singular form “argues” is used significantly more frequently than other forms when advanced native speakers use the word “argue”. The common ways of using this form are “He/ She argues that...” followed by a subordinate clause (F=281), where the subject is usually “He/She/the author’s name”, and this is consistent with Maggie’ description of the common collocations of the subject of “argue”, as well as the use of tense for ARGUE-type reporting verbs 8. The collocations commonly used for “argue” include “argues for/ against” (F=28), both of which are often followed by an abstract noun to indicate the object of support or opposition, e.g., notion, ideology, inferiority.

In general, “argue” is often used with animate subjects, including “one, they and some”. “One” in the paper is used to refer to a generic subject such as “anyone” or “a

person”, and students often use the phrase like “one may argue that” (F=3) or “one might argue that” (F=7) to introduce a possible point of view or direction of discourse. Students also use “they” or “some” to refer to certain scholars mentioned in the text, followed by the views held by these scholars, e.g. they argue that (F=22), some argue that (F=5).

It is worth noting that the word form “argued” is seldom used in the passive voice, but is more often used to form the past tense or the perfect tense. “Argued” is often used with the inanimate pronoun “it”, and the expressions include “it could be argued that” (F=8), “it can be argued that” (F=3), etc. The passive voice “be argued” can make the views stated later more objective and credible, and increase the scientific validity of the views stated later [8]. “Arguing”, on the other hand, is often used in accompanying clauses, in which the main clause is used to state a fact, and the accompanying clause guided by “arguing” is used to draw out the views held by the former, such as:

Ex1: Many academics also joined the critique of rehabilitation, arguing that treatment programs.

4.3 Analysis of the Use of “Suggest”

“Suggest” is the most frequently used reporting verb in MICUSP, with a frequency of 1170 (including its inflected forms). By searching for the usage of “suggest”, it can be concluded that, unlike “argue”, “suggest” is often paired with inanimate subjects such as “study” and “finding”. Besides, “suggest” is also often paired with “to” in order to form “to suggest (that)” for the purpose of expressing a purpose (e.g., Ex. 2). In addition, it is worth noting that “suggest” is often used with “seem(s) to” followed by a subordinate clause (F=17), like “This would seem to suggest that...” It conveys a speculative tone, indicating that the author is not making an absolute certainty, but a reasonable speculation. This reflects the rigour and scientific nature of academic discourse and avoids overly absolute statements. At the same time, this speculative tone also leaves room for reflection and discussion, allowing the reader to scrutinise and question the speculation. In addition, the demonstrative pronoun “this” is also often co-occurring with “suggest” (F=46) as a significantly collocated word, which is used to further describe the significance arising from the facts elaborated in the previous sentence (e.g., Example 3).

Ex. 2:we had no negative feedback from the students or our CT to suggest we should do otherwise.

Ex. 3:but the plants showed no signs of wilting, browning, or loss in turgor pressure. This suggests that.....

In MICUSP, “suggesting” is often used as a complement after a noun or as an accompaniment to a preceding fact (e.g., Ex. 4), while “suggesting” is less often used in the passive voice (F=46) and more often in the past tense or perfect tense. This shows that upper-level native speakers use “suggest” less often in the passive voice and more often in the active voice when they are writing their academic papers.

Ex. 4: The fetal hypothalamus also expresses leptin receptors, suggesting that leptin may also play a role.....

5 Conclusion

This study focuses on the use of ARGUE-type reporting verbs “argue” and “suggest” in MICUSP, and the results show that these two reporting verbs are not completely interchangeable. There are many differences in the use of these two words by advanced native English speakers.

“Suggest” occurs more frequently in the academic papers of advanced native speakers, while “argue” less frequently. This shows the difference in the degree of preference for different reporting verbs among native speakers. When choosing the subjects to be paired with reporting verbs, “argue” is often paired with animate subjects. In contrast, “suggest” is often paired with inanimate subjects. In addition, when native speakers students use both “suggest” and “argue”, the most frequent form is the third person singular form. This reflects the preference of upper-level native speakers for tense and voice when using different reporting verbs.

Therefore, when choosing reporting verbs for academic writing, Chinese learners of English should take account of the frequency distribution of the native speakers’ use and reasonably choose appropriate reporting verbs according to specific expressive needs and contexts. Learners can also flexibly choose animate or inanimate subjects to collocate with according to the characteristics of the reporting verbs and the content, so as to enhance the logic and readability of the academic papers. Regarding the choice of tense and voice, Chinese learners of English can draw on the preferences of native speakers in academic writing. When using “suggest” and “argue”, they can use the third person singular form of the subject and the general present active voice more often.

The usage of reporting verbs in academic writing by advanced native speakers studied in this study provides rich references for Chinese English learners. By analysing the use of reporting verbs in MICUSP, Chinese learners of English can gain insight into the characteristics of these verbs in terms of frequency, collocated subjects, collocations, and choice of tense and mood. Chinese English learners can also learn similar expressions in the process of writing to improve the standardisation of writing and the accuracy of expression.

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