Concession in Academic Spoken English
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This study attempts to analyse the discourse rhetorical relation of Concession in the interactive component of MICASE, a corpus of Academic English. No study of Concession in academic discourse has ever been undertaken and the previous studies on this relation are not many. Of these the most important have been Barth-Weingarten (2000, 2003), which develop Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson's idea of concessive patterns (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 1999, 2000). Here they serve as a point of reference. We show that Concession in the academic contexts exhibits a number of various realisations, whose distribution is different from previous findings. This might be indicative of the context in which Concession correlates with the practices of the discourse community.

Defining Concession
Concession as understood here, was first discussed within the domain of ‘finding the available means of persuasion’, as Aristotle characterised rhetoric. This ‘rhetoric-based sense’ of concession was noted by the OED, where among four major entries for this expression, we find:

2. [...] In Rhet., the surrender by a disputant of a controvertible point or position, in order to ground a fresh argument thereon, or to clear the way for one of greater importance.

The above definition is formulated in terms of interaction between disputants, such that a claim (a controvertible point or position) made by one of the interlocutors is accepted by the other one only to be followed by a presentation of more persuasive counterargument (fresh argument) in the subsequent move. The initial ‘surrender’ requires a previous formulation of a claim by the other interlocutor. Concession is then a conversational activity that in its prototypical form requires two interacting participants. It is also how this concept will be understood in this study.

Politics and the academia
Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson (1999) have demonstrated that the relation is realized in dialogues, mainly private conversations, through several patterns. Barth-Weingarten (2000, 2003) has examined their model focusing on the public domain talk. She has significantly developed the idea of prototypicality of Concession as a kind of contrastive relation and demonstrated a close relationship between functional characteristics of Concession and the
means of its realization. The political discourse that she analyses abounds with various configurations and patterns of the relation.

Undeniably, the frequent use of Concession in political discourse is not accidental. The concessive relation in political discourse must take a specific form, especially if we accept the view that effective political performance consists not only in reasoning the opponents into accepting someone else’s views but also in demonstrating how misconceived their views are. In other words, politics and its discourse are governed by the principle of competition rather than cooperation.

This contrast sharply with a somewhat idealized picture of the academic community, in which, ‘mutual criticism is polite, perhaps out of self-protection’ (Becher 1989: 99) and linguistic strategies are employed so that conflict should seem to be minimized or shifted from person onto some inanimate entity (Martin-Martin and Burgess 2004). Here categorical rejection of fellow researchers’ views is rare while the expression of one’s own convictions is often modified by hedges. The mechanisms of academic discourse are then as different from those of politics as different are the goals of their members. Academic ‘search for truth’ undoubtedly requires a code of conduct that does not resemble the linguistic manoeuvres in the area of politics, where political success is measured by popularity ranks. It raises an expectation that this quest for truth for the sake of truth should become apparent in the preference for recognizing the true or the likely in other scholars’ views and for acknowledging their validity in the name of cooperation rather than competition or even conflict.. Academic discourse, oriented towards accord than discord, must exhibit then properties contrasting with the rhetorical properties of political discourse. Whether it is so will be shown on the basis of the MICASE, Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English,

**MICASE**

MICASE, compiled in the late 1990s, is a spoken language corpus of 200 hours of recordings of over 150 texts and approximately 2 mln words. In MICASE academic speech is defined as that speech occuring in academic settings. In this study the range of data analysed is limited to academic spoken English in its interactional/dialogue mode, i.e. interaction between two or more speakers and to one relation, i.e. Concession.
Concession as a discourse-rhetoric relation

The Cardinal Concessive Schema (CCS) represents a situation, involving two interacting speakers A and B producing three different moves X, X’ and Y:

A: X
B: X’
Y

The first of these moves X serves the purpose of making a claim, the validity of which is acknowledged in the second move X’. However in the third move Y an assertion is made that another claim, incompatible with X, can hold.

This pattern is well instantiated in the following fictitious example:

X A: Norwich are a breath of fresh air.
X’ B: True,
Y but then so too are Villa.

It is important to note that rather than being a two-part relation between the main and the subordinate clause, Concession is a three-part action sequence. This as well as the composition of the three moves in terms of unit size are considered distinctive characteristics of Concession in conversational interaction (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 2000).

The schema does not constrain its constituents in respect the size of units realising these parts. Similarly, the CCS (XX’Y) does not specify any type of linkage between X’ and Y. Actually, apart from syndetic means it allows for asyndetic constructions, where the idea of concessivity results for example from the juxtaposition of claims.

The degree of incompatibility between two propositions cannot be assessed precisely: in some cases it is an incompatibility between an entailment or an implicature of X and the proposition expressed in Y. Also other types of the incompatibility are possible.

The CCS becomes actualised in a real speaking situation involving concession. In real speech the order of the three steps is established, the actual realisation reflecting the prototypical pattern X, X’ and Y or a variation on the pattern, such as XX’Y, XYX’ etc. Although, theoretically, six patterns are possible, two - in which none of the three moves are missing - are reported most often: XXY’ (Cardinal Concessive) and XYX’ (Reversed Cardinal).

Two other comments are in place. First, the number of moves can be reduced to two by means of omission of the final move Y, which remains only tacitly understood as present
and thus, completing the concessive pattern. Secondly, although Concession is predominantly dyadic, the CCS can be enacted by a single speaker. The monologic variant can take two different forms depending on the presence of X move: pseudo-dyadic and monadic. In the pseudo-dyadic form the general sequence of moves is identical with that of the dyadic CCS, the only difference being the production of the moves by a single speaker. By contrast, in the monadic variant move X is not expressed and must be reconstructed from the context. In some cases the missing move belongs to a prior discourse and is activated intertextually; in other cases it is only envisaged as a possible claim, which is acknowledged and countered.

In what follows I will focus on structural and functional characteristics of Concession in academic discourse against the background of previous studies. For obvious reasons this discussion will concentrate on selected aspects of Concession in MICASE.

**Frequency: Speech Event relation in MICASE**

The total length of recordings for the interactive component of the MICASE is about 80 hours, with the total number of 1,531 Concessive constructions in the corpus. They have been identified in 57 events representing 14 different academic communicative events in which the interactive primary mode is predominant. The interactive mode is determined on the basis of such factors as: the amount of direct interaction between participants, the reversibility and the actual reversal of roles of the speaker and the hearer, and mutual monitoring possibilities. The degree of interactivity can vary even within the same academic genre. The actual number of the events is shown in Fig. 1.

**FIG. 1. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERACTIONAL SPEECH EVENTS IN THE MICASE**

![Bar chart showing the distribution of interactional speech events in MICASE](image-url)
Fig. 1 clearly shows that for such genres as advising, office hours etc. interactivity is a typical feature. In other cases, e.g., discussions and especially small lectures, interactivity is likely to vary, depending on the extent to which one speaker monopolizes the floor.

When we turn now to the distribution of the particular events in the interactive component, their distribution expressed as the percentage of the total number of events is as shown in Fig. 2.

**Fig. 2. The distribution of interactional speech events in the MICASE**

![Distribution of interactional speech events in the MICASE](image)

However, it would be misleading to predict the frequency of Concession on this basis since there are significant differences in the length of individual recordings. Thus, it would be more accurate to represent the distribution by referring to their percentage measured by the total recording length, as in Fig. 3.

**Fig. 3. The distribution of interactional events according to the total length of recordings**

![Distribution of interactional events according to the total length of recordings](image)
If we assume that Concession constructions had identical distribution across all event types, we can predict the total number of occurrences in each type.

**Fig. 4.** The observed and expected number of Concession in interactional events according to the total length of recordings

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Fig. 4 shows that for six event types the observed number of Concession constructions is higher than expected, while for the remaining eight types the value is lower. It is interesting to note that the expected value was lower than the observed one in two non-classroom events (dissertation defence and service encounters), but was higher also in two events: the tour and research group meetings.

Within the group of classroom events the situation is more complex, since for some of them the frequency of Concession is higher (17-45%) than the one predicted on the basis of their share in the whole interactive corpus. Still the value is slightly lower (2-13%) than the expected one for study groups, labs and discussion groups and much lower (25-29%) for student presentations, and small lectures. It is reasonable then to suspect that the differences result from other situational parameters.

One of such parameters might be related to the volume of verbal production, measured by the number of words/minute. This is a more reliable index than the total time of recording, because recordings include also longer pauses in the verbal production. Here the differences are significant and the word/minute indices are shown in Fig. 5.
However, if the index can serve as an explanation for lower frequency of production of Concession in discussion groups, labs and service encounters, there still remain academic events, e.g., students’ presentations or lectures, which in spite of high volume of verbal production score low.

Interestingly, all events with a number of Concession constructions lower than the expected one originate from these generic groups in which the interactional status is not unambiguous: the degree of interactivity is relatively low for the events, yet sufficient for the group membership. To verify this hypothesis would require a count of all turns taken by the speakers. However, even a brief look at the transcripts shows that although the structure of such events as small lectures differs from the structuring of large lectures, in which long monologic turns prevail, there can still be observed longer monologic periods. Similar observations are valid in the case of students’ presentations.

This allows us to conclude that the degree of interaction is an important factor contributing to the increase of Concession construction.

**Patterns: Speech Event relation**

21% of all Concession constructions are monadic i.e., produced by a single speaker with no explicit claim preceding X’Y or YX’ sequences. Barth-Weingarten (2003:75), who links monadic patterns with monologic concessive constructions in writing, claims even that
spoken Monadic examples are the link between written Concessive constructions and the Cardinal Concessive schema […] [W]ritten Concessive structures can be seen as the product of a ‘mute’ dialogue between the writer and a (temporally and spatially separated) reader.

If monadic patterns are the bridge between the spoken and the written modes, then it is likely that they will occur more frequently in monologue-like events will reveal a clearer preference for Concessive markers typical of writing rather than speech. This finds confirmation in our data.

**FIG. 6. THE DISTRIBUTION OF INTERACTIONAL EVENTS ACCORDING TO THE TOTAL LENGTH OF RECORDINGS IN THE INTERACTIVE SUBCORPUS**

The number of observed monadic patterns exceeds the expected one in five events with lower interactional value, e.g., defenses and discussions. Further, the value is exactly as expected for students presentations. However, in labs the value is considerably lower.

There could still be another factor responsible for this distribution, namely, the degree of preparation of discourse In lectures, students’ presentations and dissertation defences there are identifiable prearranged topics and established procedures to follow. For example, dissertation defences are a highly structured genre, with distinct parts differing in the degree of their interactivity, which in turn is related to the criterion of editness. They are then likely to share some characteristics with writing, e.g., the use of Concession markers typical of the written mode or the relatively more frequent monadic patterns.

This observation applies also to lectures, because over 20% of all *althoughs*, the most common concessive connective in writing, is found in this academic event.
Patterns: Cardinal vs. Reversed

Although the proportion between the cardinal and the reversed patterns may vary for particular events, in monadic and dyadic patterns the more common order is when the acknowledgement precedes the countermove. Generally, the distribution of patterns is dependent on several correlated factors.

One factor is related to the very type of action accomplished by the two moves and their interactional consequences. If the acknowledgement can be interpreted as a move preserving harmony between the speakers, the countermovement, is a potentially face-threatening act. Consequently, the order in which the moves are produced may lead to dissimilar effects in the subsequent stages of the interaction.

The ordering of the moves follows then two general word order principles: the end-weight and the end-focus, according to which more important contribution will tend to be made at the end of the utterance. Arnold et al (2000:30) point out “postponing elements that are hard to produce, such as long and complex constituents, gives the speaker more time to formulate them”. Since the production of a countermovement is more complex than acknowledging, the preponderance of X’Y patterns seems natural. Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) suggest that the three-turn argument exchanges, by which they mean Concession, are primarily determined by participants’ attempts at doing facework. Rees-Miller (2000:1089) shares the view but adds that disagreement is also influenced by “the purpose and particular [pedagogical] contexts within which the disagreement occurs”.

For Rees-Miller the pedagogical context is strongly related to power and its execution in the classroom. In her study on disagreement she shows that discourse in a university setting exhibits properties contrasting sharply with other institutional discourses, in which direct forms of disagreement are used more often by powerful participants. The institutionalised right of a faculty member to disagree with a student is rarely exercised, and even when professors disagree with students they use politeness markers more often than the students. In 62% of all turns of disagreement, a prefacing move was followed by disagreement.

In the interactive corpus, these observations gain partial support. Although the verbal contribution of students and faculty members is not equal, and amounts to 63% and 26% respectively, over 40% of Concession constructions are produced by the non-students.

To sum up this part, the strongest correlation between forms of realisation of concession and situational factors seems to be related to the genre and the configuration of roles that are taken by students and faculty members. Such factors as interactivity of speech
events, power distribution, and purpose of the interaction are among the most powerful factors responsible for the variation in concessive constructions in the academic discourse. Indirectly, they are related to the factor of age and expertise.

**Academic Spoken English against previous findings**

The most interesting finding in this study concerns the frequency of Concession in interactive academic discourse. Previous research has shown that the frequency is relatively stable and amounts to about 27-30 instances per hour. However Concession in MICASE is less frequent with 19.11 concessive patterns an hour.

At least two factors are responsible for the lower value. The first one is related to minor differences in the methodology used to determine the concessive/non-concessive status of discourse sequences. The other follows from the very framework of the academia and its genres.

Since the mean value of the Concession constructions, has been calculated for all academic genres, a question arises whether among the fourteen academic genres in the subcorpus there can be found such ones whose value approximates the mean value of 28.5. The comparative results are shown in Fig. 6.

**Fig. 6.** The observed and expected number of Concession in interactional events vs. the expected number according to previous studies (Barth-Weingarten 2003)

In all the events the observed number is lower than predicted from the previously determined value. For such events as dissertation defense, small lecture or student presentation the observed numbers amount to no more than 50%, which corroborates the hypothesis that
genres in which the floor can be monopolized tend to contain fewer Concession constructions
than more interactive ones. In other cases the value is slightly higher, but generally reflects a
difference between the spontaneously produced American English and the academic corpus.

However in five events the differences are not so sharp. In advising sessions, interviews, office hours, seminars, and tutorials, the observed values amount to 85.5%, 80%, 78.7%, 77.3%, and even 95.1% of the expected BW value. The two top value events, advising sessions and tutorials, have already been defined as highly interactive.

The overall differences in the frequency of Concession are not significant. However, the lower frequency index for all Concessions is not reflected in the same way in the number of monadic and dyadic patterns. This discrepancy is related to the fact that academic discourse includes more monologue-like events, previously shown to be related to monadic patterns.

Interestingly, Concession in the academia is realised more often than shown in previous studies by reversed patterns, which may indicate its increased interpersonal function.

However general patterns of Concession marking determined in previous studies are very similar, in spite of an insignificant difference in the proportion of syndetic and asyndetic patterns.

References: