

VERBS DENOTING AUTHORIAL POSITION: A CONTRASTIVE BULGARIAN-ENGLISH STUDY OF MEDICAL RESEARCH ARTICLES

Ivaylo Yordanov Dagnev

*University of Agribusiness and Rural Development – Plovdiv;
Medical College at Medical University, Plovdiv (Bulgaria)*

Abstract: *The article addresses the issue of a specific discourse category, that of verbs expressing authorial stance in the context of the medical research article. A contrastive study is performed based on two corpora comprising original medical research articles in Bulgarian and English languages, respectively. All the articles have been excerpted from journals with high impact factors covering almost every field of medicine. All data have been processed with the help of word processing programmes to achieve a high level of accuracy. The paper looks into the most frequently used verbs both in the Bulgarian articles and the English ones. The analysis rests on a division of three types of verbs – factive, non-factive and counterfactive ones. Each of the presented verbs is analyzed in the light of this division supported by a number of exemplar sentences extracted from the corpora. One corollary that could be drawn is the fact that Bulgarian authors refrain to a large extent from expressing categorical disagreements which is not so characteristic of the authors in the English-language medical research articles.*

Keywords: *stance verbs, medical research article, contrastive study, Bulgarian, English*

About the author: *Assoc. Professor Ivaylo Yordanov Dagnev, PhD is an Associate Professor of ESP and EAP at UARD – Plovdiv and a Senior Lecturer at the Medical College of Medical University in Plovdiv. He holds a PhD in linguistics and his particular areas of interest include Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Translation Studies, Cognitive Semantics, Discourse Studies, English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes. His PhD title is: Metaphorical Terms in Anatomy: An English-Bulgarian Comparative Study. He has submitted two habilitation papers. The primary one is entitled: ‘The „Scientific Medical Article“ Genre in Bulgarian and English Academic Discourse’ and the second one written in English is entitled: ‘Medical Discourse - Implications of Inverse Translation for the Medical Research Article Genre’. He has published a book based on his PhD with a title: Metaphors and Shells in Anatomy: Bulgarian-English Cross Linguistic Study.*

e-mail: ivaylo.dagnev@mu-plovdiv.bg

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8287-5307>

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Introduction

The research article

The article and, in particular, the research article (RA) is the academic genre heavyweight, whose structure serves as the mainframe of all other genre forms. In its turn, the medical research article (MRA) has been evolving since the 18th century and is the vehicle for medicinal research. MRA took a fully-fledged form in the middle and late 20th century, adopting the IMRD structure – constituted by Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion (IMRD) sections, respectively. In their turn, the sections can be subdivided into specific subparts, which Swales (1991) calls *moves*, because they are the vehicles of information flow in a paper. *Moves* are defined as “discoursal or rhetorical units that perform a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse” (Swales, 2004, p. 228) and are identified by “text segment[s] made up of a bundle of linguistic features (lexical meaning, propositional meanings, illocutionary force, etc.) which give the segment a uniform orientation and signal the content of discourse in it” (Nwogu, 1997, p. 122). Similarly, *moves* comprise one or more *steps*, i.e., “constituent elements or slots which combine in identifiable ways to constitute information in the move” (ibid).

Stance verbs

A key feature of academic writing and the rhetorical structure of MRA is “an author’s reporting and offering commentary on previous work on a topic or subject of investigation, both by himself/herself as well as by others” (Davies, 2015, p. 125). In this train of thought, it is appropriate to pay more attention to verbs with a comment function, since they are inextricably linked to the expression of a position, and hence to hedging. The latter concept, as is known, refers to a particular place in the plane of pragmatics, having the meaning of “mitigation” or reducing the power of expression (Dagnev, 2020:16). Given that MRAs put forward scientific hypotheses, which are either proven or contradicted, it is quite natural to resort to different strategies of distancing or expressing solidarity (Myers, 1989). As Davis (2015, p. 127) notes, commenting on previous research on the topic of a given study is a key factor in academic writing, and describing the achievements of other participants in the discourse invariably includes reporting verbs. These verbs in English academic discourse have been primarily investigated by Thompson and Yeh (1991) and Thomas and Hawes (1994), and more recently by Bloch (2009) and Jirapanakorn (2012), the latter two analyzing these verbs in the field of medical research. All these authors employ the division introduced by Tadros (1993, p. 5) into *factive* and *non-factive* verbs. In Tadros’ terms (ibid) the former show agreement with the opinions of others, while the latter express the opposite – disagreement. Thompson and Yeh (1991, p. 372) have expanded the category of factivity by

adding a third group of verbs to the two listed above – *counter-factive verbs*. In his study Davies (2015, p. 176) uses the category of *non-factive* verbs closer to neutral as they can be used to convey a stance of agreement or disagreement depending on the context, while *counter-factive* ones communicate a negative attitude. We would adhere to his interpretation in this paper. Here are some examples of the all the three groups:

- Factive verbs: acknowledge, show, demonstrate, identify, improve, notice, prove, recognize, establish, observe, prove, recognize – present the information as true
- Counter-factive verbs: confuse, disregard, ignore, misuse – present information that the author considers false
- Non-factive verbs: argue, doubt, hypothesize, recommend, assume, estimate, imply, suggest, believe, expect, predict, suspect, claim, foresee, presume, think – with these verbs the author does not give a clear sign of the truth of their statement or opinion.

Verbs elucidating authorial position

Given the rhetorical structure of the MRA, of particular interest are verbs describing the literature review moves. Here the position of the author (authorial stance) stands out clearly, since the attitude towards a given development, experiment and procedure suggests the author's situation in the discourse of the topic (Hyland & Guinda, 2012). The interpretation of facts is never a simple matter but is “filtered through multiple lenses” (Hyland, 2009, p. 299). After all, the authorial position, as a linguistic concept, has a wider meaning than distancing from being categorical (hedging) and should include it. Many discourse analysts study the author's stance under many names: evidentiality (Chafe & Nichols, 1996), appraisal (Martin & White, 2007), evaluation (Biber, 2006), hedging (Hyland, 1998), positioning (van Langenhove & Hare, 1999). Although bearing certain differences, all the abovementioned terms relate to the same phenomenon. On the other hand, factivity is inextricably linked to the concept of authorial position, since the first is the belief of a given author in the truth of a given statement (Tadros, 1993). Factive constructions can be epistemic in that they convey the author's belief in a statement, or affective in that they refer to an attitude, opinion, or value system. In this sense, the epistemic predicate indexes the degree of certainty in the information presented in the sentence from the producing text (Field, 1997, p. 803), while also indicating the stance with respect to the referent explicated by the grammatical subject.

Research question

The aim of this paper is to present an analysis of verbs referring to stance in a comparative fashion regarding Bulgarian and English language MRAs.

Methods

Building the corpora

The corpora in the current research have been built so as to suit the purposes of the specific analysis of stance verbs. The study employs the methodology of both corpus-driven and corpus-based approaches (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001; McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006), aiming at the most detailed analysis of the selected language material. On the other hand, because of our desire for verification, we adhered to free access sources or those that could be obtained through institutional subscription. Desiring the highest possible representation, the paper is based on a broad-spectrum corpus of Bulgarian articles from almost every field of medicine. The English-language articles are excerpted from journals with high impact factors, published in countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, the Netherlands, etc. All English-language journals are from the Elsevier and Scopus systems and are peer reviewed. All the excerpted articles were published between 2012 and 2022.

Data processing

We have built two corpora: the first one in Bulgarian, dubbed Bulgarian language corpus (BLC) and the second has been comprised of original English-language articles (English language corpus – ELC) from foreign journals. As far as size is concerned, we have excerpted 50 articles to build BLC, while ELC incorporates 34 articles. In terms of word count, the BLC consists of 95586 words, and ELC – 105641 words. Our guiding principle with regard to size was word count, with texts being very close on that gauge if we consider both BLC and ELC corpora. For the sake of analysis, we have abstained from building very large corpora. Nevertheless, the total count of words is 201227 words, which is a formidable number and accounts for excellent representativeness by this criterion.

All articles were initially scanned into PDF files and then into word processing files for ease. For data processing, we used WordSmith, version 6.0 (Scott, 2012), freely available. To this end, the two corpora were merged into two respective files, and the sections Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion, constituting the MRAs' structure, were further separated and combined into separate files for more efficient processing. Separately, we also used a second word processing program, Antconc, due to the fact that different programs sometimes give ambiguous figures for the number of words, phrases, etc., especially when referring to “unpopular” word processing software in lesser-used in science languages like Bulgarian.

Results and Discussion

We have selected five verbs from BLC and seven from ELC that are most frequently used when commenting on both authors' own results and those of others. Table 1 presents the most often used verbs of authorial position in both corpora.

Table 1.
Most frequently used stance verbs in BLC and ELC

BLC		ELC	
Lexemes	Number of tokens in corpus	Lexemes	Number of tokens in corpus
показвам (show)	502	report	192
установявам (establish)	407	find	167
доказвам (prove)	47	suggest	144
считам(consider)	43	observe	143
позволявам (allow)	36	show	88
		indicate	65
		consider	48

The lexemes *показвам* (show) and *доказвам* (prove) in BLC are most often used when commenting on someone else's experience in the literature review which is part of the *moves* in the Introduction. More than 80% of the manifestations of *показвам* refer to *moves* and *steps* describing other scholars' research, while with *доказвам*, two-thirds of all uses (tokens) are for such a purpose. They are mainly in third person plural.

1. Редица проучвания *доказват*, че отказът от тютюнопушене може да намали смъртността до 50% след преживян миокарден инфаркт. - BLC 12¹

Tr. A number of studies prove that quitting smoking can reduce mortality up to 50% after experiencing a myocardial infarction.²

2. Проучванията *показват*, че всички пациенти с алергичен ринит могат да страдат от бронхиална астма, но тези с умерено тежък/тежък персистиращ алергичен ринит по – често са с астма от онези, които имат лек и/или интермитентен алергичен ринит - BLC 14

Tr. Studies have shown that all patients with allergic rhinitis may suffer from bronchial asthma, but those with moderate/severe persistent allergic rhinitis more often have asthma than those with mild and/or intermittent allergic rhinitis.

1. We have provided enumeration of the excerpted articles and we present the examples in their original language. The examples taken from Bulgarian language articles are also translated for ease of analysis.

2. All translations of the examples in Bulgarian are made by the author.

Считам (consider) is another verb that is almost one hundred percent used to comment on scientific facts and common knowledge, and invariably in the impersonal reflexive verb form.

3. *Счита се*, че до 70% от лицата с предиабет в крайна сметка развият и ЗД2. BLC 22

Tr. It is believed that up to 70% of individuals with prediabetes eventually develop type 2 diabetes.

4. Почти при 200 милиона души *се счита*, че заболяването все още не е разпознато. - BLC 22

Tr. Almost 200 million people are thought to have the disease as yet unrecognized

At the opposite pole in terms of usage is the lexeme *установявам* (establish), which almost always (in 80% of cases) refers to the authors' own research, found both in the *moves* in the Introduction and Discussion sections, respectively.

5. В настоящото изследване честотата на анти тяло позитивност към ZnT8 е относително висока – ZnT8-Ab *се установяват* при почти половината от изследваните – 45,7%, и при повече от половината от тези с давност на захарния диабет под 1 година – 63,6%, което напълно отговаря на известните данни. - BLC 26

Tr. In the present study, the frequency of antibody positivity to ZnT8 is relatively high; ZnT8-Ab were found in almost half of the examined - 45.7%; in more than half of those with a history of diabetes mellitus less than 1 year - 63.6%, which fully corroborates the known data.

Позволявам (allow) is oriented towards commenting on one's own research results and is almost never used to describe someone else's experience. It invariably occurs in the Discussion *moves*.

6. Основен недостатък на настоящото проучване е относително малкият брой изследвани пациенти и крос-секционният дизайн на изследването, които не *позволяват* да се направи анализ на анти тяло позитивността към ZnT8 по възрастови декади на изява на заболяването, както и анализ на динамиката на титъра на ZnT8-Ab във времето. – BLC 26

Tr. The main shortcoming of the present study is the relatively small number of studied patients and the cross-sectional design of the study, which do not allow the analysis of antibody positivity to ZnT8 by age decades of onset of the disease, as well as the analysis of the dynamics of the ZnT8-Ab titer in time.

Of the listed verbs, two are used with a factive function – *установявам* (establish), *доказвам* (prove), two – *считам* (consider) and *позволявам* (allow), although defined as non-factive (Tadros, 1993; Thompson & Ye, 1991; Wyse, 2009), are used as factive, and *показвам* (show) is non-factive in the studied corpus. This divergence in the opinion of the above-mentioned analysts of the

concept is due to the fact that the latter have analyzed not only academic texts, while in medical ones particular verbs have very often a more special use. All these five verbs are used to create Positive Face (Brown & Levinson, 1987), i.e. they express agreement with scientific facts or other people's opinions.

Regarding the seven cited verbs in the English corpus, the verbs *find*, *observe* and *show* are considered factive and are used as such. *Find* is very often used to show contrast, as Davis (2015, pp. 157-159) also notes.

7. Unlike other studies, our study did not *find* a correlation between nasal symptoms (TNSSs) and cells and cytokines that increase specifically in patients with allergic rhinitis. ELC 9

8. In contrast, Wetsch and colleagues [25] failed to *find* a higher success rates or faster tracheal intubation time with VL compared with DL in a manikin study involving the ice-pick position. – ELC 28

In most cases, *find* is used, as Examples 7 and 8 show, in a negative form or with a verb imparting a negative meaning (e.g. *failed*). This does not make it counterfactive, as Davies (2015, p. 159) also comments in his paper, as in many cases *find* has a non-factive meaning, thus giving impartiality to the utterance, and therefore also serving as a form of distancing from determinateness

Like *find*, *observe* is mostly used in reporting.

9. Eotaxin was specifically elevated only after the second challenge in our study, whereas König et al. *observed* this increase already after a single challenge. ELC 9

When referring to one's own results, *observe* is used as a factive verb, and when referring to other scholars' results, it rather has a neutral connotation (non-factive use) and is close in meaning to *report*. In some cases, a shade of counterfactivity can be detected only from the context:

10. However, in 1994, Van Mieghem's trial of amiodarone *observed* a higher rate than expected of ARDS in patients who underwent pneumonectomy. Their experience was believed to be caused by a high volume of IV amiodarone. However, later studies showed that lower doses of IV amiodarone followed by oral administration were safe and effective. ELC 29

The combination of the factive *observe* and the counterfactive *believe* (in Passive Voice) impart to the entire paragraph a negative connotation and the overall interpretation of the two verbs is counterfactive – i.e., the author states their disagreement with the explicit information.

Unlike *observe*, *show* was identified almost exclusively in a factive role, both in terms of own results and in view of other people's developments.

11. Our network meta-analysis *showed* that magnesium was inferior to b-blockers and amiodarone in preventing POAF, which is consistent with the findings in cardiac surgery.- ELC 29

12. A recent large RCT failed to *show* any benefit of perioperative rosuvastatin in preventing POAF after cardiac surgery. – ELC 29

Report is classified by Wyse (2009) as a non-factive verb, but in many cases where it is used in the English corpus, it has the status of a factive one with the meaning of *observe*, rather than *claim* or *argue* (non-factive verbs). Also, *report* is used in more than two-thirds of the cases in retelling forms to convey information about other developments, in active voice.

13. In 2009, a study by Wong et al [4] *reported* that when the appropriate equipment and personnel are available and the clinical setting permits, FFS may be a safer approach than the GlideScope for patients with cervical instability. However, Wong et al [4] also *reported* that head and neck maneuvers performed before FFS (eg, a jaw thrust) resulted in an increase in cervical spine movement compared with the C-MAC VL for elective tracheal intubation of patients with inline cervical stabilization. - ELC 28

Example 13 is interesting due to the fact that at first sight *report* is being used as non-factive in both cases, i.e., it has no bearing on the author's belief in the truth of the statement. The use of the discourse contrast marker *however* can lead us to such a judgment. However, if we analyze the meaning of *report* in both cases, it has the sense of *observe* and *find*, i.e., factively.

Example 13a Wong et al [4] *reported* [...] FFS may be a safer approach

The meaning of *reported* with the complement that follows the verb in Example 13a is comparable to the uses of *claim* and *argue* (non-factive verbs), but in the latter case, *report* is to be considered factive, since the logical induction in this proposition supports a factive situation:

Example 13b However, Wong et al [4] also *reported* [...] resulted in an increase...

In Example 13b, the verb *reported* is logically connected to *resulted*, which presents factive information, therefore *reported* has more of the meaning of *find* and *observe*.

Suggest, according to Wyse (2009), is a non-factive verb. In the corpus, it is employed in 70% of cases when commenting on other scholars' research and generally accepted facts. When referring to one's own research, it comments on experimental results. In a number of cases, the verb is also used when summarizing in the Conclusion section, to draw the readers' attention when announcing unexpected results:

14. In conclusion, the study results *suggest* that 2.5 mg of ramosetron is useful for treating female patients with IBS.... Based on this study and previous studies, ramosetron *has been shown* to be the most promising 5-HT3 antagonist for treating patients with IBS-D regardless of sex. - ELC 33

In Example 14, *suggest* carefully introduces the proposition into the subordinate clause, the information in it being confirmed by the actual use of the verb *show* in a subsequent clause.

Indicate is a non-factive verb (Wyse, 2009) and is used in most cases when presenting information about other scholars' research. However, there are also manifestations that correspond in a sense to *suggest*:

15. This study *indicates* that 2.5 mg/day of ramosetron is an effective treatment for female patients with IBS-D.- ELC 33

Indicate goes also together with the adverb *as* in the phrase *as indicated*.

16. *As indicated*, discrepancies were clarified with the principal investigator at the study site. - ELC 22

The verb repeatedly appears in a participial form with a referential meaning:

17. There were 533 PTDs: 248 (4.7%) spontaneous and 285 (5.9%) medically *indicated*. [with reference to medicine] – ELC 10

Examples 16 and 17 only reinforce the argument that *indicate* is perceived as a non-factive verb that was not chosen by authors to certify their opinion about a given fact.

The last verb we examined is *consider*, which according to Wyse (2009) is non-factive. Its use in the English-language corpus strongly confirms this role.

18. Carryover effects attributable to priming must be *considered* when designing crossover studies with allergen challenge chambers. - ELC 9

19. The methods used (5-point scale, 0–4) were compatible with those in the FDA recommendation but use of an identical 11-point (0–10) scale and independent evaluation of abdominal pain and discomfort may be *considered* in a future study. – ELC 34

In a large number of cases, *consider* is part of modal clusters, which moves it away in meaning from the simple true/false opposition, i.e., from factivity in the sense put forward by Tadros (1993) and Thompson & Ye (1991).

In our brief survey of verbs expressing position, we paid attention only to the most frequent ones, but other verbs falling into the category of factivity such as *define* and *recommend* should also be considered. The most interesting point in the analysis of the verbs, both from the point of view of hedge forms and in relation to the category of factivity, is the very weak manifestations of counterfactivity in the articles from BLC. In contrast, in the articles from ELC, both the above-mentioned seven verbs and others such as *claim* – when describing experiments in other scholars' research, *argue* – without a specific focus, *think* – with a focus on the subject of the development, are used with a counterfactive role.

Hyland and Guinda (2012, p. 7) share an interesting observation based on corpus research when comparing authors with greater authority and experience and those with less. According to the two analysts, distinguished authors disagree with the opinions of others in the field more strongly than less prominent ones. Without making any definite conclusions, based on the corpus data, we can say that it seems that Bulgarian authors refrain to a large extent from articulating categorical disagreements with the literary sources, which is not characteristic of the authors cited by the English-language texts.

Conclusion

The paper makes an attempt at delving into a particular element of discourse: verbs denoting authorial position. In a theoretical plan, it is appropriate to emphasize that this discourse element is part of the author's Ethos and identity, the degree of its presence in the text. This form of authorial expression also determines the place of the latter in the scientific discourse and in the socializing community. By examining various markers of the presence or absence of the author in the text, we can grasp not only the confidence encoded in the rhetorical persuasiveness in the architectonics of MRA, but also the most fundamental idea – the place where the author himself/herself is perceived in scientific discourse.

Of course, we should acknowledge the limitations of the study due to its short length which does not allow for a detailed analysis of the issue at hand. Further studies are needed to unravel the intricacies of the notion of stance verbs and in a broader sense – authorial position. For a successful comparative study to be performed, analyses of more diverse in terms of scholarly subject texts are necessary to be placed under scrutiny, as well as they must be aligned and juxtaposed with other discourse elements.

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