Specific functions of stance adverbs in interaction: "obviously" in *Sherlock Holmes*

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Abstract: Much research has studied stance markers, but little does detailed analysis on specific stance functions of a epistemic adverb apart from its classified basic function. This research does a corpus-study on the different stance functions of one epistemic adverb "obviously" in three seasons of *Sherlock Holmes*. The results are generated using Antconc software. Three practical functions are induced and some implications on learning and teaching stance markers are further discussed.

Key words: stance marker; epistemic adverb; English teaching; obviously

1 Introduction

While developing communicative competence has become the common goal of English learning, accurate expressions of personal stances are crucial for communications. Personal stance is individual expressions of attitudes, emotions, and evaluations [1]. As signals of stance expressions, stance markers are key components of communications and have been highly studied by linguists. *Sherlock Holmes*, a TV series, is characterized by rich stance markers. This essay investigates the use of a stance marker "obviously" in the first three seasons of the series to discover its practical stance function in specific situations. The investigation can also intrigue implications of teaching and learning stance markers.

2 Literature review

Stance markers refer to the grammatical devices that are apparent indicators of personal stances. They are categorized in different ways, with many studies only focusing on one way. In terms of form, the categories of stance markers that have been studied include nouns, adjectives, adverbs and so on [2][3]. Among them, stance adverbs seem to be a common research focus. Liu and Ren discover that stance adverbs are underused by Chinese students in academic writings. However, some other researchers hold the opposite opinion. For example, Gilquin et al. report the overuse of certainty adverbs, one type of stance adverbs, by non-native speakers [4]. While they have different ideas on whether the adverbs are overused or underused, the researchers agree that non-native speakers meet difficulties in using stance adverbs properly.

Stance markers can also be categorized in terms of function. Based on the framework proposed by Biber, stance markers can be divided into evaluational, attitudinal, and epistemic ones [5]. Appendix 1, extracted from a book chapter by Biber and Gray, lists some examples of this categorization [6]. Among them, epistemic markers are ones denoting certainty or likelihood of the proposition. In the research of Gilquin et al., the certainty adverbs, which hinder non-native speakers' language use, belong to epistemic adverbs. Meanwhile, epistemic adverbs seem to be more frequently used in

communications than the other two [7]. Therefore, the use of epistemic markers, especially epistemic adverbs, needs deep investigation.

Specific stance functions of the adverbs also need further study. As Biber and Staples suggest, stance functions of certainty adverbs are becoming increasingly diverse, so it seems meaningful to investigate their specific stance functions in context. However, although there is research focusing on the certainty adverb "obviously", few studies have analyzed its specific stance function. For example, Aijmer analyzes its functions as modal rather than stance adverbs [8]. Pérez-Paredes and Bueno-Alastuey mainly analyze its stance function of expressing certainty, still deducing the function from the framework by Biber [9]. This research analyzes the different stance functions of "obviously" in different situations, which may make up for the gap.

3 Methodology

This research investigates specific functions of "obviously" in the three seasons of *Sherlock Holmes*. The stance markers are reported to appear more frequently in spoken and personal registers than in written and academic ones, while most researchers are still analyzing stance markers in academic written registers [10][11][12]. *Sherlock Holmes,* as one detective series, involves many personal dialogues that belong to spoken and personal registers. As the series is popular among both native and non-native speakers, the study of it can influence and easily get through the two groups. Therefore, this research chose to analyze *Sherlock Holmes*.

Research questions:

RQ1: What is the frequency of certainty adverbs such as "obviously" used in the three seasons?

RQ2: What stance functions does "obviously" play in the three seasons?

This research applied a corpus-based approach with AntConc, a computer software designed for language analysis, following Biber and Gray. Firstly, this research used AntConc to quantify and identify the use of "obviously" and some other stance adverbs in the transcripts of the three seasons. Next, this research analyzed the specific meaning of "obviously" in each situation, as all situations are listed by AntConc. Lastly, the research induced three functions from the specific meanings.

4 Results

This research generates two findings that answer the research questions respectively. The first finding reveals that "obviously" is frequently used in the three seasons, appearing 32 times in total. As shown in Appendix 2, the other epistemic adverbs normally appear more than 10 times, while few attitudinal and evaluational adverbs are used more than 5 times. Not to mention that many attitudinal and evaluational adverbs even cannot be found in the texts. It seems that the appearing frequency of epistemic adverbs is higher than attitudinal and evaluational adverbs in communication.

The second finding reveals three stance functions of "obviously" in the transcripts. The first function is still to express a degree of certainty, which is the classified function of epistemic adverbs (see Example 1 in Appendix 3). The second function is evaluating others' opinions. The adverb used in this context is to show agreement with others' statements (see Example 2) or to affirm others' uncertain opinions (see Example 3). In Example 4, the two speakers can even complete one interaction using only the word "obviously", while the first one is used to affirm Watson's uncertain opinion and offer an answer to his question, and the second is used by Watson to show agreement with Sherlock's answer. The final function revealed is conveying the speaker's negative emotions to indicate a sarcastic or ironic sense. For instance, in Example 5, Sherlock uses the word "obviously" when saying that he can tidy things up, while he means that he is not capable of making things organized. The last two functions are surprising ones other than expressing certainty.

5 Discussion and implications

According to the results, the significance of stance adverbs can be verified. While Biber and Staples present that epistemic adverbs are used more frequently than other stance adverbs, the first finding in this research further supports this statement. The second finding also suggests the key role that stance markers play in communication. In the examples of the second function, the stance markers are highly used for responding to others, which can be essential in interaction. As for the third function, individuals will need to use the stance marker properly to avoid listeners from misunderstanding their real intentions. Therefore, it can be inferred that stance markers should be taught when teaching spoken English, as stance markers are crucial for communication.

One stance marker can play various stance functions in different situations. As mentioned in the literature review, some research points out that stance markers are now taking on many different functions other than their classified function. According to the findings of this research, the opinion seems true as "obviously" can have various stance functions. Similarly, Aijmer and Simon-Vandenbergen suggest that the use of certainty adverbs has become more personalized, so certainty adverbs can be used by individuals to convey many different attitudes or emotions [13]. As the functions of stance markers become diverse and complex, this may also lead to the problems of overusing or underusing the markers among non-native speakers. Therefore, it is necessary to raise learners' awareness of the various functions of stance markers.

6 Conclusion

This research investigates the frequency and different stance functions of the stance adverb--"obviously" in *Sherlock Holmes*. This adverb is used frequently and can play three different stance functions. Deriving from this, it seems that stance markers are significant in communications and teaching, and one stance marker can have multiple stance functions. Therefore, students need to raise their awareness of this complexity and learn about the specific functions that one stance marker may play, which can be achieved through research on the topic.

However, many studies remain focused on quantifying form or classified function instead of making contextualized investigation of practical stance functions [14]. This research takes a step in analyzing the contextual examples and the practical stance functions, although it only generalizes three functions due to the limited time and corpora. However, this can serve as an example and intrigue future research to study various stance functions. Channell also stresses the significance of qualitatively investigating one stance marker and conducts a research in analyzing the phrase "par for the course", which can serve as another example [15].

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix 1

Stance framework in Biber and Gray(2014):

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1 Stance adjectives + *that*-complement clauses

Epistemic: certainty	e.g., *apparent, certain, clear, evident, impossible, sure*
Epistemic: likelihood	e.g., *doubtful, likely, possible, unlikely*
Attitude/emotion	e.g., *afraid, amazed, annoying, curious, embarrassing, hopeful, pleased, sorry, surprised, worried*
Evaluation	e.g., *acceptable, appropriate, awful, conceivable, critical, fitting, interesting, necessary, noteworthy, preferable, sufficient, unfair, unusual*

2 Stance adjectives + *to*-complement clauses

Epistemic: certainty and likelihood	e.g., *certain, due, likely, prone, unlikely, sure*
Attitude/emotion	e.g., *afraid, angry, annoyed, curious, delighted, disappointed, glad, grateful, happy, proud, surprised*
Evaluation	e.g., *awkward, appropriate, bad, careless, dreadful, essential, important, improper, reasonable, useful, vital, wrong*
Ability or willingness	e.g., *able, anxious, determined, eager, ready, unable, unwilling, willing*
Ease or difficulty	e.g., *difficult, easy, hard, impossible, possible, tough*

3 Stance nouns + *that*-complement clauses

Epistemic: certainty	e.g., *assertion, conclusion, fact, knowledge, statement*
Epistemic: likelihood	e.g., *claim, assumption, belief, idea, opinion, perception, possibility, rumor, suggestion*
Attitude/emotion	e.g., *fear, ground, hope, reason, thought, view*
Communication	e.g., *comment, proposal, proposition, remark, report, requirement*

4 Stance nouns + *to*-complement clauses

All stance meanings combined	e.g., *ability, agreement, attempt, chance, commitment, decision, desire, effort, failure, intention, obligation, opportunity, proposal, reluctance, responsibility, tendency, willingness*

Appendix 2

Table of word frequency in the first three seasons of *Sherlock Holmes*.

Word	Frequency in TV series
Epistemic adverbs:	
Obviously(32),apparently(19),definitely(15), certainly(13)	79
Actually(50), clearly(24), possibly(16), perhaps(13)	103
Evaluational adverbs:	
Honestly(4), frankly(5), truly (5)	14
Essentially(0), awfully(1), importantly(5), necessarily(1)	7
Attitudinal adverbs:	
Fortunately(2), hopefully(1), amazingly(0)	3
Surprisingly(1), happily(1)	2

Appendix 3

Excerpts of conversations in *Sherlock Holmes*.

Example 1

Watson: Old block of flats. He certainly gets about.

Sherlock: Well, obviously I lost that round.

Example 2

Watson: That's... That's the pink lady's case, that's Jennifer Wilson's case

Sherlock: Yes, obviously. Oh, perhaps I should mention - I didn't kill her.

Example 3

Sherlock: So they didn't have it put down then, the dog?

Watson: Obviously. I suppose they just couldn't bring themselves to do it.

Example 4

Sherlock: She used a fountain pen. Parker Duofold, Meridian nib.

Watson: She?

Sherlock: Obviously.

Watson: Obviously.

Example 5

Watson: Soon as we get all this rubbish cleaned up… Oh. So this is all…

Sherlock: Well, obviously I can straighten things up a bit.