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SUMMARY IN ENGLISH
OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

**Lexical Means of Stance in English and German Academic Writing:
Corpus-Based Analysis of Academic Essays by Multilingual Students in a
Romanian University Environment**

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Cuvinte cheie / Key words

academic writing, stance, lexical bundles, n-grams, modal verbs, stance verbs, bilingual learner corpus, multilingual students, English as a foreign language, German as a foreign language

Rezumatul în limba engleză al tezei de doctorat

Summary in English of the Doctoral Thesis

Introduction and context

Academic writing is widely acknowledged not merely as a vehicle for transmitting information, but as a complex communicative practice through which writers construct knowledge, assert credibility, and negotiate their membership within discipline-specific communities (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2012). At the heart of this process lies the concept of *stance*—the linguistic means by which authors convey evaluation, certainty, and identity in relation to their readers (Hyland, 2005; Thompson, 2001).

The role of stance becomes particularly salient in multilingual academic contexts, where students are required to navigate and reconcile different rhetorical traditions. English academic writing typically encourages explicit dialogic positioning and interpersonal engagement (Hyland, 2005), while German traditions are more closely associated with impersonality, caution, and restraint (Clyne, 1987; Duszak, 1997). This contrast raises important questions about the ways in which multilingual students adapt their strategies when writing in different languages, and how these adaptations reflect broader cultural and discipline-specific expectations.

Existing research offers several perspectives that frame the present study. One important line of inquiry focuses on lexical stance markers—modal verbs, stance verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—that function as key resources for calibrating certainty and managing interpersonal relations in academic discourse (Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Hyland, 2012). A second perspective highlights multiword expressions and lexical bundles, which have been shown to constitute the building blocks of discourse organization and to play a crucial role in stance-taking (Wray, 2002; Hyland, 2008; Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004). A third research strand draws on cross-linguistic studies, demonstrating how rhetorical traditions shape stance and revealing striking differences between English and German academic practice (Helbig, 1983; Diewald, 1999; Frank, 2017). Finally, learner-centred perspectives emphasize that stance is not solely a matter of linguistic

competence but also of cultural negotiation and identity construction, as multilingual students must balance fluency, clarity, and conformity with discipline-specific norms (Bychkovska & Lee, 2017; Li & Schmitt, 2009; Bao & Liu, 2022).

Research objectives and questions

Building on these considerations, the present thesis seeks to integrate corpus-based analysis with learner perspectives in order to explore how stance is expressed in academic writing across languages. More specifically, it compares English and German essays written by the same group of Romanian philology students, thereby minimizing background variability and allowing for a focused investigation of language-specific and cultural conventions. The overarching goal is to generate insights of relevance for multilingual higher education, particularly in contexts where students are required to write competently across multiple linguistic and discipline-specific traditions. To this end, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the overall frequency and distribution of lexical bundles in English and German essays by the same multilingual writers?
2. Which stance-oriented lexical bundles are used, and how do they differ between languages?
3. What single-word stance markers are most frequent in each language, and how are they distributed across categories?
4. In what syntactic patterns do stance verbs occur in English and German academic essays, particularly in relation to complement clause constructions?
5. How do students' perceptions of academic writing (as reported in replies to a questionnaire-based survey) relate to their actual use of stance expressions?

Methodological approach and corpus

The study adopts a mixed-methods design combining corpus-based analysis with learner perspectives. Its empirical foundation is a bilingual learner corpus of 120 essays, evenly divided between English and German and written by the same group of Romanian philology students.

The analysis proceeded along two complementary strands: recurrent lexical bundles were extracted as n-grams and classified using established structural and functional taxonomies, while single-word stance markers (modal and lexical verbs) were identified following Biber's (2006) list of stance words used in English academic writing, which was adapted for the German corpus as well. Particular attention was given to their syntactic environments, especially complement clause constructions.

To complement the textual data, a questionnaire was administered to the authors of the essays, whose responses provided insights into challenges, strategies, and perceptions of academic writing across languages. Despite limitations of corpus size and proficiency differences, this triangulated design ensures both quantitative rigor and qualitative depth.

Chapter overview

This thesis is structured into six chapters. Chapter I “Introduction” establishes the context of the study by situating it within current debates on academic writing and stance. It also outlines the motivation for the research, presenting the theoretical background, identifying existing gaps, and formulating the aims and research questions that guide the thesis.

Chapter II “Theoretical foundations” lays out the theoretical framework of the thesis, providing the conceptual tools necessary for the subsequent analysis. It begins by defining stance as the expression of attitudes, judgments, and degrees of certainty, a concept that has been systematically described in corpus-based studies (Hyland, 2005; Charles, 2009). These works have shown that stance is not merely ornamental but a central means of negotiating meaning and credibility in academic discourse.

The discussion then contrasts English and German traditions. Anglo-American academic writing encourages explicit self-positioning, hedging, and dialogic interaction (Hyland & Tse, 2005; Charles, 2009), whereas German academic discourse has historically emphasized impersonality, objectivity, and caution, often expressed through nominalizations, passives, and modal verbs (Helbig, 1983; Diewald, 1993; Eisenberg, 2004). More recent studies confirm that German writing maintains a preference for formal rigor and conventionalized formulations (Steyer, 2018; Wallner, 2014; Siepmann, 2006).

Lexical bundles and formulaic sequences form another major theme. They are defined as recurrent multiword units that serve both organizational and rhetorical purposes (Hyland, 2005; Charles, 2009). Research has shown that expert writers rely on a wide and discipline-specific repertoire of bundles, while novice writers often draw on a limited or conversational range (Stumpf, 2015; Burger, 2010; Brommer, 2018). Cross-linguistic evidence suggests that English tends to favour content-driven and dialogic bundles, whereas German writing relies more on structural, formulaic expressions that reinforce impersonality (Wallner, 2014; Steyer, 2018).

The chapter also considers single-word stance markers—modal verbs, stance verbs, and evaluative lexis—as central tools for encoding epistemic meaning and evaluation (Hyland & Tse,

2005). English academic writing makes frequent use of hedging modal verbs such as *may* or *might*, while German relies on modal-passive constructions such as *lässt sich sagen*, especially in conclusion sections (Helbig, 1983; Diewald, 1993). Complement clause constructions are highlighted as important syntactic environments for stance verbs, allowing writers either to hedge claims or to assert them more forcefully (Charles, 2009).

The chapter further shows that academic writing is shaped by multiple overlapping layers of variation, including cultural traditions, linguistic systems, discipline-specific orientations, and genre conventions, which together prevent the existence of a single, universal model. Instead, academic literacy emerges at the intersection of these influences and is typically encountered by students not in theoretical discussions but in the practical rules and recommendations of universities, writing centres, and instructional materials. Although these guidelines often differ in matters of detail, such as the use of first-person pronouns, they converge on deeper principles: across contexts, academic writing is consistently expected to display clarity, coherence, precision, and appropriate use of evidence, while conforming to discipline-specific and institutional conventions. This perspective frames academic writing as a constellation of locally and globally shaped practice rather than a monolithic norm.

The final section of the chapter turns to the learner's perspective, emphasizing that academic writing is shaped not only by linguistic ability but also by students' attitudes, identities, and perceptions. Studies show that writers who accept their novice status and see writing as an opportunity for growth, rather than a mere requirement, develop stronger skills (Sommers & Saltz, 2004; Petric, 2002). Research on writer identity further illustrates that students move through developmental phases, from anxious to more independent and confident, a process strongly influenced by the student-supervisor relationship (Bekar & Yakhontova, 2021). Together, these perspectives underscore that academic writing is as much an identity-building practice as a technical skill, one that requires motivation, reflection, and social support.

Chapter III "Methodological approach and description of the bilingual corpus" presents the methodological framework of the study, outlining both the design of the bilingual learner corpus and the procedures employed for analysis. It builds directly on the theoretical discussion of stance, emphasizing that the investigation of lexical bundles and stance markers requires carefully structured data and systematic methods. The overarching aim is to describe how multilingual

students express stance in academic writing, with attention to both multiword sequences and single-word markers, and to connect these textual findings with learner perspectives.

The chapter begins by introducing the bilingual learner corpus that forms the empirical foundation of the research. The corpus comprises 120 student essays, evenly divided between English and German, all written by the same group of Romanian students enrolled in a philology programme. By using comparable essays produced by the same individuals in two languages, the study minimizes variability due to writer background and allows a more precise comparison of linguistic and cultural conventions. The essays, which are literary analysis assignments, were chosen because of their relative homogeneity in genre and communicative purpose. The chapter explains the selection criteria, ethical considerations regarding student consent, and the steps taken to anonymize and standardize the texts for analysis.

The description then moves to corpus processing. The texts were digitized, cleaned of extraneous material, and prepared for computational analysis (Anthony, 2020). N-gram extraction procedures were employed to identify recurrent lexical sequences, with a focus on four-word bundles, since this unit has been shown in prior research to capture meaningful phraseological patterns. Filtering techniques were applied to eliminate non-lexical sequences, while classification relied on Biber and Barbieri's (2007) and Hyland's (2012) models to distinguish types of bundles, with Simpson-Vlach and Ellis's (2010) framework used specifically for stance expressions. This step provided the foundation for a systematic analysis of multiword stance expressions.

Alongside multiword expressions, the study also investigates single-word stance markers, adopting the classification developed by Biber (2006). From this list of single words expressing stance in academic writing, only modal verbs and stance verbs were considered. To allow for a valid comparison across languages, the same list was carefully translated and adapted for the German corpus. The frequencies of single-word markers were calculated, and their distribution was examined across functional categories: for modal verbs, these included possibility, necessity, and prediction; for stance verbs, they encompassed certainty, likelihood, attitude, communication, cognition, desire, and causation. Special attention was paid to their syntactic environments of stance verbs, particularly complement clause constructions, which are key resources for expressing epistemic meaning and evaluation.

To enrich and triangulate the corpus findings, the chapter also introduces a student questionnaire. Sixteen participants were asked to reflect on their experiences writing in English

and German, their perceived challenges, and their views on the conventions of each academic tradition. The questionnaire included open-ended questions, allowing qualitative insight into student perceptions. These data provide an essential learner-centred dimension, offering a means to connect observed textual patterns with students' conscious awareness of their writing practices.

Chapter IV “Empirical study: analysis, findings and discussion” presents the results of the study, analysing the bilingual corpus of student essays and discussing the findings in relation to the research questions. It is divided into two main parts: the analysis of four-word lexical bundles (4-grams) and the analysis of single-word stance markers. Each part follows a systematic structure: quantitative results are presented first, followed by qualitative interpretation and discussion of their significance.

The analysis of 4-grams begins with a description of their overall distribution across the English and German corpora. All bundles were classified into four functional categories—discourse organizers, referential expressions, stance expressions, and discipline-specific formulas. This baseline revealed notable contrasts between the two languages. English essays contained a greater variety of content-driven bundles, often linked to epistemic stance, while German essays relied more heavily on structural and formulaic expressions that emphasized organization and evaluation.

Closer analysis of stance-oriented bundles shows clear cross-linguistic differences. English student writing is characterized by epistemic frames such as *the fact that* or *can be seen as*, which allow authors to present interpretations confidently, sometimes even categorically. German essays, by contrast, make frequent use of modal-passive constructions such as *lässt sich sagen*, especially in conclusions, which foreground caution and tentativeness. Evaluation bundles were relatively scarce in English, typically appearing in phrases like *an important role in*, while in German they occurred with greater frequency and variety, reflecting a rhetorical preference for explicit justification and significance marking. Predictive and intentional bundles also diverged: German essays employed them liberally (*weil ich herausfinden möchte, um zu zeigen dass*), whereas English essays contained relatively few, aligning with broader cultural traditions of implicit rather than explicit self-positioning.

The second major section turns to single-word stance markers, covering modal verbs and lexical verbs. The analysis shows that English essays exhibit greater rhetorical flexibility, especially in the use of modal verbs of possibility and prediction (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*,

would), which enable writers to hedge interpretations, hypothesize, and speculate. German essays, in contrast, make limited use of such modal verbs for hedging, instead relying on formulaic constructions with *sich lassen* to express cautious interpretation. Modal verbs of obligation (*must*, *should* versus *müssen*, *sollen*) are present in both corpora but serve different functions: in English they are integrated dynamically into analytical passages, while in German they are used in fixed, organizing formulas. Volitional markers also differ, with English essays making extensive use of *will* and *would*, while German students restrict themselves to *möchte* or *wollen* in introductions.

Analysis of stance verbs reveals clear contrasts across the seven categories examined. English essays frequently employ epistemic verbs of certainty such as *realize*, *show*, and *prove*, often without hedging, while German writing relies more narrowly on *zeigen* and *feststellen* in formulaic or cautious contexts. Verbs of likelihood (*think*, *seem*, *believe*) are common in English, but German students use *scheinen* and *glauben* less frequently and in conventionalized forms. Attitude verbs are rare overall, though English essays occasionally use *feel* or *hope*, while German equivalents like *fühlen* or *wünschen* appear only in restrained contexts. Communication verbs such as *say* and *suggest* help English writers attribute claims and engage readers, whereas *sagen* and *zeigen* in German essays appear mostly in fixed conclusion markers. Cognition and perception verbs (*expect*, *consider*) are more varied in English, while German essays favor *glauben* or *wissen* in limited functions. Verbs of desire and intention (*want*, *decide*) give English writers greater agency, but German students restrict *möchte* or *sich entscheiden* to introductions and methods. Finally, causation and effort verbs (*allow*, *try*) in English connect interpretation to reader engagement, while German equivalents like *versuchen* and *ermöglichen* serve mainly methodological purposes.

The discussion highlights three overarching patterns. First, English student writing tends toward directness, confidence, and rhetorical openness, often at the risk of overstating claims. Second, German writing privileges caution, restraint, and formulaicity, which reflect its academic conventions but can make the texts appear rigid. Third, both corpora show underuse or misuse of certain stance resources, particularly hedges, suggesting that novice writers are still learning to calibrate their positioning effectively.

Chapter V “The students’ voice” shifts the focus from textual analysis to the lived experiences of the students themselves. While the corpus-based study revealed how stance is realized in practice across English and German essays, it could not capture the perceptions,

challenges, and strategies of the writers. To address this, a questionnaire-based survey was conducted, offering a learner-centred perspective that complements and enriches the linguistic findings.

The questionnaire was distributed to the sixty students whose essays formed the bilingual corpus, though only sixteen responded due to the timing of the survey at the end of the academic year. Despite this modest sample, the responses provide valuable exploratory insights into how multilingual students perceive academic writing in English and German. The instrument consisted of seven open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on their experiences with different academic genres, the frequency of writing tasks, the specific difficulties they encountered in each language, the techniques they employed to overcome these, and the contrasts they observed both between English and German writing and across discipline-specific contexts.

The results confirm and nuance the patterns observed in the corpus analysis. Students overwhelmingly describe English academic writing as more fluent, direct, and expressive. They report feeling confident in using English to convey ideas, noting that the language allows for creativity and a personal voice. By contrast, German writing is widely perceived as rigid, technical, and demanding. Respondents highlight difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and particularly citation practices, often admitting to heavy reliance on translation tools and online resources. While English writing is associated with fluency and intuitive expression, German writing is described as requiring painstaking precision and adherence to conventions that restrict individuality.

Strategies for overcoming these challenges vary. In English, students rely mainly on practice and reading academic texts, while in German they depend more on external aids such as dictionaries, machine translation, and grammar tools. These coping strategies reflect the greater perceived difficulty of mastering German academic conventions.

The questionnaire also reveals that students perceive significant differences across disciplines. Writing for literature courses is generally experienced as open and creative, offering opportunities for interpretation and personal engagement. In contrast, writing for linguistics, translation studies, or other more technical courses is described as rigid and mechanical, demanding strict structuring, specialized terminology, and detailed citation. This discipline-specific variation reinforces the idea that stance is shaped not only by language but also by genre and institutional expectations.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that multilingual students are acutely aware of the challenges of writing across languages and disciplines. They perceive English as offering greater freedom and expressiveness, while German is viewed as constrained and rule bound. These perceptions echo the corpus findings and confirm that stance-taking is as much a matter of cultural and discipline-specific negotiation as it is of linguistic form. By giving voice to learners, Chapter 5 closes the empirical study with an emphasis on identity, agency, and the subjective dimensions of academic writing in multilingual contexts.

Finally, chapter VI “Conclusions” brings together the findings of the study and evaluates them against the research questions. The results fall into two broad areas: the overall distribution of lexical bundles and the expression of stance through both multiword and single-word markers. These findings are enriched by student questionnaire data, which provide insight into how multilingual writers perceive their own academic practices.

The analysis of multiword expressions shows striking contrasts between English and German essays. English student writing is characterized by epistemic four-word bundles such as *the fact that*, which allow interpretations to be presented with rhetorical confidence, though often with less nuance. German essays, on the other hand, employ a wider repertoire of evaluation and intention/prediction bundles, reflecting both local academic conventions and pedagogical expectations that encourage explicit justification and topic motivation. Interestingly, hedging and directive bundles were rare in both languages, suggesting a tendency among students to formulate absolute statements rather than guiding the reader directly. Yet hedging and obligation did surface in single-word markers, indicating some awareness of rhetorical caution. These findings highlight how academic stance is shaped not only by language-specific resources but also by cultural attitudes towards evaluation, interpretation, and rhetorical authority.

The comparison of modal verbs underscores further cross-linguistic differences. English essays contain a richer variety of modal verbs for possibility, prediction, and speculation—particularly *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, and *would*—which students use flexibly across personal and impersonal constructions. German essays, however, favour formulaic modal-passive structures such as *lässt sich sagen*, especially in conclusions, to frame cautious interpretations. While obligation is expressed in both languages (*must/should* versus *müssen/sollen*), English essays use these forms more dynamically in analysis, whereas German students employ them in more fixed, text-organizing ways. Volition and prediction also diverge: English essays make frequent use of

will and *would* to signal aims or hypotheses, while German essays tend to employ *möchte* or *wollen* in introductions, limiting their presence in analytical passages. Overall, English essays reveal greater rhetorical flexibility and speculative reasoning, while German essays adhere to cautious, formulaic, and conclusion-bound conventions.

The stance verb analysis reveals both convergences and divergences. English essays show frequent use of verbs of certainty such as *realize*, *show*, *find*, *see*, and *prove*, which often frame interpretations as factual knowledge. German essays rely on a narrower set, with *zeigen* and *feststellen* dominating, typically in hedged or formulaic constructions found in introductions and conclusions. Likelihood verbs are more varied and common in English (*think*, *seem*, *believe*, *appear*), whereas in the German corpus *scheinen*, *glauben*, and *denken* occur less often and in more restricted contexts. Attitude verbs are rare across both corpora; in English, verbs such as *feel* or *agree* appear occasionally to signal personal stance, whereas in German they are used more sparingly and in limited contexts. Communication verbs are more frequent in German (*sagen*, *zeigen*), but their usage is often formulaic and conclusion-oriented, in contrast with English essays, where *say*, *suggest*, and similar verbs engage readers in interpretation. These contrasts underline the broader finding that English student essays tend to project confidence, directness, and interpretive openness, whereas German texts emphasize caution, impersonality, and adherence to established academic conventions.

When considered against the research questions, the study shows that lexical bundles, stance markers, and syntactic framing devices differ significantly between the two languages, not only in frequency but also in rhetorical function. English writing privileges explicit positioning, interpretive hedging, and speculative reasoning, while German academic writing foregrounds evaluation, structured justification, and cautious modal formulations. Student questionnaire data confirm these tendencies: English writing is experienced as fluent and expressive, whereas German writing feels rigid, technical, and demanding. This convergence of corpus analysis and learner reflection demonstrates that stance in multilingual academic writing is simultaneously a linguistic, cultural, and identity-based phenomenon.

The chapter concludes by reflecting on the broader contributions of the study. It advances understanding of stance in multilingual academic writing by integrating single-word and multiword perspectives, extending analysis to German as well as English, and situating textual findings alongside student perceptions. It also underscores the challenges faced by multilingual

students, who must negotiate between rhetorical traditions that reward confidence and dialogicity on the one hand, and restraint and impersonality on the other. Finally, the thesis highlights pedagogical implications, calling for greater support in helping students balance clarity, fluency, and discipline-specific expectations across languages.

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