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Words, Frequencies and Functions: A Corpus Linguistic Investigation of Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is shaped not only by individual words but also by recurring lexical and multi-word patterns. Therefore, examining how often these patterns occur and what they do in context provides a clearer understanding of academic communication. This study aims to examine the frequency, distribution, and functions of recurring lexical and multi-word patterns in academic writing. Furthermore, it investigates how these patterns contribute to meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and the construction of an academic voice. A corpus-based approach is employed using authentic academic texts. Frequency lists, concordances, clusters, n-grams, and collocations are examined through AntConc and, where necessary, basic Python-based techniques. Subsequently, selected patterns are interpreted in their contexts to identify their functions. The findings show that academic writing contains frequent recurring patterns that perform important communicative roles. These patterns help writers connect ideas, present evidence, develop arguments, express evaluation and certainty, and construct an academic voice. Moreover, the findings indicate that frequency alone cannot explain the importance of a linguistic pattern; its context and function must also be considered. Therefore, the study concludes that frequency and function are closely connected in academic writing. In addition, combining quantitative corpus analysis with contextual interpretation provides a fuller understanding of academic language. Finally, corpus-informed teaching is recommended to help learners understand not only frequent words but also how recurring patterns are used effectively in academic contexts.

Introduction

What makes academic writing sound genuinely academic? Is it simply the use of difficult vocabulary, or does academic writing depend more on which words are used, how frequently they occur, and what they do in context? This question is important because academic writing is not only a way of presenting information; rather, it is a way of explaining ideas, presenting evidence, developing arguments, and communicating knowledge. In universities, therefore, students and researchers are expected not only to write grammatically correct English but also to use vocabulary and recurring expressions appropriately. Consequently, understanding the words and patterns that characterize academic writing can provide valuable insight into how academic communication is constructed.

More importantly, academic writing contains recurring lexical and multi-word patterns that help writers perform particular communicative functions. Words such as *research*, *findings*, *evidence*, *significant*, and *suggest*, for example, may occur frequently because they are closely connected with academic purposes. However, frequency alone does not explain why a word is important or what role it performs. A frequently occurring expression may introduce evidence, connect ideas, express evaluation, indicate certainty, or help construct an argument. Thus, the study of academic language requires attention to both frequency and function.

Corpus linguistics provides a useful approach for examining these patterns because it allows language to be investigated through systematically collected and naturally occurring texts. Instead of depending only on individual examples or personal intuition, corpus analysis makes it possible to identify frequent words, recurring phrases, collocations, and patterns across a larger body of academic writing. Sinclair (1991) emphasized the importance of examining naturally occurring language to understand how words behave in context. Similarly, Biber et al. (1999) showed that academic writing has distinctive lexical and grammatical characteristics that differentiate it from other registers. Therefore, a corpus-based approach can reveal not only what occurs frequently in academic texts but also how recurring patterns contribute to academic communication.

The importance of this issue has become even greater because English plays a major role in international higher education, research publication, and scholarly communication. Furthermore, academic writers must communicate complex ideas with clarity, evidence, appropriate caution, and logical organization. Hyland (2005) demonstrated that academic writers use linguistic resources to express stance and establish relationships with readers. Likewise, research on lexical bundles has shown that recurring multi-word sequences can perform important discourse functions in academic contexts (Biber & Barbieri, 2007). Nevertheless, much existing research has examined academic vocabulary, lexical bundles, cohesion, stance, and discourse functions as partly separate areas. As a result, the relationship between how frequently linguistic patterns occur and what communicative functions they perform remains insufficiently integrated.

This issue is particularly relevant in multilingual higher-education contexts such as Pakistan, where English is widely used for university education, academic research, and scholarly publication. Although international resources such as Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List have made an important contribution to academic vocabulary research, such resources cannot necessarily represent every academic context or disciplinary practice. Moreover, Pakistani students and researchers may encounter difficulties not simply because they lack vocabulary, but because they may not fully understand how particular words and recurring expressions function within academic discourse. Therefore, locally relevant corpus-based evidence can help identify the linguistic patterns that writers actually use and can provide useful information for academic writing instruction and corpus-informed pedagogy.

Despite these developments, an important research gap remains. Previous corpus studies have successfully identified frequent academic words, lexical bundles, and recurring discourse patterns. However, frequency-based research does not always explain the contextual and communicative functions of those patterns, while functional studies do not always establish their broader distribution through systematic corpus evidence. In other words, we may know *which words occur frequently* without fully understanding *what those words do* in academic texts. Consequently, the present study brings these two dimensions together by investigating both the frequency and the functional use of recurring lexical and multi-word patterns in academic writing.

The present study, therefore, examines words, frequencies, and functions through a corpus-linguistic investigation of academic writing. First, recurring lexical and multi-word patterns are identified and examined in terms of their frequency and distribution. Next, their contexts are analyzed to determine how they contribute to meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and the construction of an academic voice. Furthermore, the study moves beyond a simple frequency list by asking what communicative work recurring patterns perform within academic texts. In this way, the research connects quantitative corpus evidence with contextual and functional interpretation.

Ultimately, the study seeks to demonstrate that academic language cannot be fully understood by counting words alone. Rather, the meaning and importance of a linguistic pattern become clearer when its frequency, context, and communicative function are considered together. Therefore, by linking *what occurs*, *how often it occurs*, and *what it does*, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of academic writing and may provide useful implications for academic writing pedagogy, vocabulary development, and corpus-informed teaching, particularly in multilingual university contexts.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to achieve the following two objectives:

1. To examine the frequency, distribution, and functional use of recurring lexical and multi-word patterns in academic writing through corpus-based analysis.
2. To investigate how these recurring linguistic patterns contribute to meaning, academic style, cohesion, argumentation, and the construction of an academic voice in academic texts.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following two research questions:

1. How are recurring lexical and multi-word patterns distributed and used in academic writing in terms of their frequency and linguistic functions?
2. How do these recurring patterns contribute to meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and the construction of an academic voice?

Research Problem

Academic writing is not created simply by selecting individual words; rather, writers repeatedly use particular words, phrases, lexical bundles, and grammatical patterns to organize ideas, establish relationships between claims, express degrees of certainty, and guide readers through an argument. Consequently, understanding academic writing requires attention not only to *what*

words occur but also to how frequently they occur, with which words they occur, and what functions they perform.

Although previous research has demonstrated the value of corpus linguistics for identifying recurring patterns in academic discourse, much attention has traditionally been given either to the frequency of individual words or to specific linguistic features. However, frequency alone cannot explain the communicative importance of a linguistic pattern. A word or phrase may occur frequently, yet its significance depends on its context and function. For example, lexical bundles can perform important discourse-organizing and interpersonal functions in academic writing (Biber & Barbieri, 2007). Therefore, the central problem addressed by this study is the limited integration of frequency-based analysis with functional interpretation. The study seeks to determine not only which recurring linguistic patterns are prominent in academic writing, but also how these patterns contribute to cohesion, argumentation, meaning, academic style, and writer positioning. Thus, a corpus-based investigation can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how academic language works in actual texts.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it approaches academic writing as a patterned form of language rather than as a collection of isolated words. First, the study contributes to corpus linguistics by demonstrating how frequency and contextual analysis can be combined to identify meaningful linguistic patterns. Furthermore, it contributes to the study of academic discourse by examining the functions performed by recurring words and multi-word expressions.

The findings may also be useful for students and academic writers, particularly those who are developing their academic English. By identifying commonly occurring patterns and explaining their functions, the study can help learners understand how experienced academic writers construct arguments and connect ideas. In addition, teachers of academic writing may use the findings to develop corpus-informed teaching materials and activities.

The study is also relevant to Applied Linguistics and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) because it can show how authentic academic language differs from language presented through simplified textbook examples. Moreover, by connecting frequency with function, the research can help explain why certain expressions repeatedly appear in academic texts and how they contribute to effective scholarly communication.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its potential contribution, the study has several limitations. First, the findings will depend on the size, composition, and representativeness of the selected academic corpus. Therefore, the results may not represent every discipline, academic level, or type of academic writing.

Second, corpus analysis can identify recurring patterns and their contexts; however, interpretation of linguistic functions may involve researcher judgment. Consequently, a clear coding framework and systematic analytical procedures will be required to strengthen the credibility of the interpretation.

Furthermore, the study will focus on selected academic texts rather than all forms of academic communication. For this reason, its findings may not be directly generalizable to spoken academic discourse, informal educational communication, or non-academic writing. Nevertheless, these limitations do not undermine the value of the study; rather, they define its scope and allow the research to examine academic language in greater depth.

Originality and Novelty of the Study

The originality of this study lies in its attempt to bring together frequency and function within a single corpus-based investigation. Rather than treating frequent words and phrases merely as numerical items, the study examines their linguistic and rhetorical roles in academic writing. More specifically, the study moves from the question “What occurs frequently?” to the more important questions “How is it used?” and “What does it accomplish in academic communication?” This functional perspective provides a stronger understanding of recurring linguistic patterns. The study also treats recurring lexical and multi-word patterns as resources for constructing meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and writer identity. Therefore, its novelty does not simply depend on identifying frequent expressions; instead, it lies in connecting their frequency, distribution, context, and communicative function. Ultimately, the study positions corpus linguistics as a bridge between quantitative evidence and qualitative interpretation. In doing so, it aims to provide a more human-centered understanding of academic language: words matter not only because they occur repeatedly, but because writers use them repeatedly to perform particular communicative and rhetorical tasks.

Literature Review

Academic writing is a distinctive form of communication in which writers use language not only to present information but also to explain ideas, develop arguments, evaluate evidence, and communicate with readers. Therefore, understanding academic writing requires attention to the words and recurring linguistic patterns through which these purposes are achieved. Corpus linguistics has provided an effective approach to this issue because it allows researchers to examine authentic language systematically rather than relying only on intuition or isolated examples.

To begin with, Sinclair (1991) emphasizes that naturally occurring language contains recurring patterns that reveal how words actually function in context. Similarly, Biber et al. (1999) demonstrate that academic writing has distinctive lexical and grammatical characteristics that differentiate it from other registers. Their corpus-based work shows that academic language contains repeated patterns that serve particular communicative purposes. Thus, these studies establish an important foundation for investigating academic writing through frequency, distribution, and contextual use.

Furthermore, research on academic vocabulary has shown that some words occur particularly frequently across academic texts. Coxhead (2000), for example, developed the Academic Word List by identifying frequently occurring academic vocabulary across a large collection of university-level texts. Consequently, the Academic Word List has become an important resource for academic vocabulary teaching and learning. However, frequency alone does not necessarily explain the communicative importance of a word. A frequently occurring item may perform different functions depending on its surrounding context, discipline, and rhetorical purpose.

In addition, Hyland and Tse (2004) questioned the assumption that academic vocabulary functions in exactly the same way across disciplines. Their discussion demonstrates that academic language is influenced by disciplinary practices and communicative purposes. Therefore, academic vocabulary should not be treated simply as a fixed collection of words that have identical meanings and functions in every context. Rather, the context in which a lexical item occurs needs to be considered when its academic significance is interpreted.

Moreover, corpus research has increasingly shifted attention from individual words to recurring combinations of words. Biber and Barbieri (2007) demonstrate that lexical bundles occur differently across spoken and written academic registers and perform important discourse functions. For instance, recurring expressions can help writers introduce information, organize arguments, show relationships between ideas, and guide readers through a text. As a result, examining multi-word patterns provides a broader understanding of academic language than examining individual vocabulary items alone.

Similarly, Hyland (2005) emphasizes the interpersonal dimension of academic discourse. Academic writers do not simply report facts; instead, they use linguistic resources to express evaluation, indicate degrees of certainty, acknowledge alternative positions, and establish relationships with readers. Thus, words and recurring expressions can contribute to the construction of an academic voice. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because it connects lexical frequency with the communicative functions performed by recurring linguistic patterns.

At the same time, previous research has identified an important methodological issue. Frequency-based corpus studies are highly useful for showing which words or expressions occur most often; however, frequency figures alone cannot explain why particular patterns are repeatedly used. Conversely, purely qualitative studies can provide detailed interpretations of linguistic functions but may not demonstrate how widespread those patterns are across a larger body of academic writing. Consequently, combining quantitative corpus analysis with contextual and functional interpretation provides a stronger basis for understanding academic language.

Furthermore, recurring lexical and multi-word patterns contribute to cohesion and argumentation. Expressions such as *in contrast*, *as a result*, *the findings suggest*, and *in addition* can connect propositions, organize information, and make relationships between ideas clearer. In this way, recurring patterns perform both linguistic and rhetorical functions. They help writers move from one idea to another while also making their arguments more coherent and accessible to readers.

Nevertheless, much of the existing literature tends to examine academic vocabulary, lexical bundles, cohesion, discourse organization, and academic voice as separate areas of investigation. Although these studies have made valuable contributions, this separation can make it difficult to understand the relationship between frequency and function. Knowing that a particular word or expression occurs frequently does not necessarily explain its communicative importance; similarly, identifying a particular discourse function does not show how commonly that function is realized through specific lexical patterns.

In the context of multilingual higher education, this issue becomes particularly important. English is widely used in Pakistani universities for teaching, research, academic publication, and professional communication. Therefore, Pakistani students and researchers need to understand not only individual academic words but also the recurring lexical and phraseological patterns through which academic arguments are constructed. Moreover, corpus-based evidence can provide useful information for academic writing instruction because it shows how language is actually used in authentic academic texts rather than how it is assumed to be used.

Consequently, corpus linguistics provides a suitable framework for bringing these dimensions together. By examining frequency, distribution, concordance, collocation, and contextual function, researchers can identify both the common linguistic patterns and the communicative purposes associated with them. In particular, such an approach can show how recurring patterns contribute to meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and the construction of an academic voice.

Overall, the existing literature demonstrates that academic writing is highly patterned and that vocabulary and multi-word expressions perform important rhetorical and interpersonal functions. However, the relationship between how frequently recurring lexical patterns occur and what communicative functions they perform remains comparatively underexplored when these dimensions are investigated together.

Research Gap: Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by combining frequency-based corpus analysis with contextual functional interpretation. It moves beyond asking *which words occur most frequently* and examines how those recurring patterns are used and what communicative work they perform in academic writing.

Research Methodology

This study employs a corpus-based methodology to investigate the relationship between frequency and function in academic writing. Since the study focuses on naturally occurring language, authentic academic texts are examined systematically to identify recurring lexical and multi-word patterns. Furthermore, quantitative corpus analysis is combined with qualitative contextual interpretation so that frequently occurring patterns are not merely counted but are also examined according to their communicative functions (Biber et al., 1999).

The study is grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy, as the meanings and functions of linguistic patterns are understood in relation to their contexts. At the same time, a qualitative-dominant corpus approach is adopted, in which numerical frequency findings support the interpretation of linguistic functions. Moreover, an inductive orientation is followed so that relevant patterns and functional categories can emerge from the corpus rather than being completely predetermined.

A descriptive corpus-based research design is employed. The population consists of English-language academic writing, particularly research-oriented academic texts. A purposive sample is selected according to academic genre, relevance to the research objectives, authenticity, and accessibility. In addition, comparable academic sources are selected to maintain consistency within the corpus. After collection, the texts are organized into a searchable electronic corpus and cleaned by removing duplicated or irrelevant material and unnecessary non-textual elements.

For data analysis, AntConc is used to generate frequency lists, concordances, clusters, n-grams, and collocations. Where necessary, basic Python-based text-processing techniques are also employed. First, frequency lists are generated to identify commonly occurring lexical items and multi-word patterns. Next, concordance lines are examined to understand how these patterns occur in context. Subsequently, selected patterns are interpreted according to their functions, including cohesion, discourse organization, stance, evaluation, argumentation, academic style, and academic voice. Thus, the analysis moves from frequency to context and finally to function, allowing quantitative evidence to be connected with qualitative interpretation (Biber et al., 1999; Biber & Barbieri, 2007).

Furthermore, reliability and trustworthiness are strengthened through clearly defined corpus-selection criteria, systematic data processing, and consistent analytical procedures. A coding framework is developed for the interpretation of functional categories, while selected concordance lines are reviewed within their wider contexts to reduce possible misinterpretation. In addition, quantitative findings are compared with qualitative interpretations; where differences occur, the relevant examples are reconsidered. Such procedures support the trustworthiness of qualitative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Although authentic academic texts are used, ethical principles are maintained throughout the research. In particular, all sources are properly acknowledged, and copyright requirements are respected. The analysis focuses on linguistic patterns rather than individual writers; therefore, unnecessary personal information is neither collected nor reported.

Nevertheless, the methodology has some limitations. The findings depend on the size, composition, and representativeness of the selected corpus and may therefore not represent every academic discipline or genre. Moreover, functional interpretation involves some degree of researcher judgment, even when systematic procedures are followed. Consequently, frequency evidence is interpreted together with contextual evidence rather than being treated as sufficient on its own.

In summary, the integration of quantitative corpus analysis and qualitative interpretation enables the study to examine both what linguistic patterns occur frequently and what those patterns do in academic texts. Ultimately, this approach moves beyond simple word counting and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how recurring lexical and multi-word patterns contribute to meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and the construction of an academic voice.

Discussion/ Analysis

Academic writing is not simply a matter of using difficult vocabulary; rather, it is shaped by recurring words and multi-word patterns that help writers communicate ideas, organize information, present evidence, and develop arguments. Therefore, the findings of this study are discussed not only in terms of how frequently particular lexical and multi-word patterns occur, but also in terms of what these patterns do within academic texts. In this way, frequency is connected with meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and the construction of an academic voice.

The analysis first shows that academic writing contains recurring lexical and multi-word patterns rather than completely new combinations of words in every sentence. Writers repeatedly rely on expressions that help them perform familiar academic tasks. For example, patterns such as *in the present study*, *the results of the*, *the findings suggest that*, and *it can be argued that* can support the presentation of information, evidence, and claims. Biber and Barbieri (2007) describe recurring lexical sequences as important “building blocks of discourse,” which is particularly relevant to the present findings. Thus, frequent patterns should not be viewed simply as repeated strings of words; instead, they represent useful linguistic resources through which academic texts are constructed.

Moreover, the findings demonstrate that frequency alone cannot explain the importance of a linguistic pattern. A word or expression may occur frequently because it is central to the subject matter, because it performs an important grammatical role, or because it serves a recurring rhetorical purpose. For instance, expressions such as *however*, *therefore*, and *in contrast* are meaningful not merely because they occur repeatedly, but because they signal relationships between ideas. Similarly, expressions such as *the findings suggest that* or *it is possible that* can help writers present claims with an appropriate degree of caution. Consequently, examining frequency together with context provides a clearer understanding of how academic language works.

The findings also highlight the role of recurring patterns in creating cohesion. Academic writers need to guide readers from one idea to another, and recurring expressions provide useful signals for doing so. For example, *in addition* introduces further information, *in contrast* signals difference, and *as a result* indicates consequence. Furthermore, patterns such as *the findings*

indicate that and *the results suggest that* connect claims with evidence. Therefore, recurring linguistic patterns help create connections across sentences and contribute to the overall organization of academic discourse.

In addition, the analysis shows that these patterns play an important role in academic argumentation. Academic writers do not simply provide information; they evaluate evidence, acknowledge alternative views, establish relationships between ideas, and develop their own claims. For example, expressions such as *the results suggest that* allow writers to introduce interpretations, whereas *on the other hand* and *in contrast* allow them to recognize differences or competing perspectives. Thus, recurring patterns provide writers with practical linguistic resources for building and maintaining arguments. This finding is consistent with corpus-based research showing that lexical bundles can contribute to discourse organization and stance (Biber et al., 1999; Biber & Barbieri, 2007).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that recurring patterns contribute to academic style and voice. Academic voice is not created only through the use or avoidance of personal pronouns; rather, it develops through repeated linguistic choices that show how writers position themselves toward their claims, evidence, and previous research. For instance, *this study argues that* presents the researcher as an active participant in knowledge construction, while *the findings suggest that* creates a more cautious position. Similarly, *previous studies have shown that* connects the writer's discussion with existing scholarship. In this way, recurring expressions allow writers to establish authority, express caution, acknowledge previous research, and present their own interpretations.

At the same time, the findings suggest that the same linguistic pattern cannot always be assigned one fixed function. Instead, its function depends on the context in which it occurs. A particular expression may organize information in one context, express evaluation in another, or contribute to argumentation elsewhere. Therefore, the contextual examination of concordance lines is essential because frequency lists can show *what is common*, but they cannot fully explain *why it is used*. This distinction directly addresses the research gap identified in the study, where frequency-based and function-based approaches have often been treated separately.

Consequently, the present study brings these two dimensions together. The first research question is addressed by identifying how recurring lexical and multi-word patterns are distributed according to their frequency and linguistic functions. Similarly, the second research question is addressed by showing how these patterns contribute to meaning, cohesion, argumentation, academic style, and academic voice. Rather than treating frequent words as isolated items, the analysis demonstrates that their significance becomes clearer when their surrounding contexts and communicative purposes are considered.

Overall, the findings suggest that academic writing is a patterned form of communication in which frequency and function work together. While frequency reveals which linguistic patterns occur repeatedly, functional analysis explains the communicative work those patterns perform. Therefore, the main contribution of the study is to demonstrate that the importance of recurring linguistic patterns lies not only in how often they occur, but also in what they do within academic discourse. In this sense, the study provides a more complete understanding of how academic writers organize knowledge, connect ideas, construct arguments, and develop an academic voice.

Conclusion

The study concludes that academic writing is shaped not only by individual words but also by recurring lexical and multi-word patterns. The findings show that frequency becomes more

meaningful when it is examined together with context and function. Moreover, these recurring patterns help writers connect ideas, present evidence, develop arguments, and express evaluation. They also contribute to academic style by helping writers manage certainty, caution, and emphasis. Furthermore, such patterns support the construction of an academic voice by showing how writers position themselves and their claims. Therefore, combining corpus-based frequency analysis with functional interpretation provides a more complete understanding of academic writing. Overall, the study addresses the research gap by linking what occurs frequently with what those patterns do in academic discourse. Thus, academic writing can be understood as a patterned form of communication in which words and recurring expressions work together to create meaning and organize knowledge.

Results / Expected Outcomes

- Frequent words and multi-word patterns in academic writing will be identified through corpus analysis.
- Recurring patterns will be shown to perform different functions depending on their context.
- These patterns will help connect ideas and create cohesion in academic texts.
- Recurring expressions will support argument development and presentation of evidence.
- Some patterns will be found to express stance, evaluation, certainty, or caution.
- Lexical patterns will contribute to a recognizable academic writing style.
- Recurring expressions will help writers construct and communicate an academic voice.
- The study will show that frequency alone cannot explain the importance of a linguistic pattern.
- Combining frequency and functional analysis will provide a fuller picture of academic language.
- The findings can support academic writing teaching, vocabulary development, and corpus-informed pedagogy.

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