Metatalk in American Academic Talk

The Cases of *point* and *thing*

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There is a small-scale but healthy tradition of research into academic spoken discourse in both its British and North American variants. Some of this research comes from communication studies (e.g., Tracy 1997) and some from sociology (e.g., Grimshaw 1989), but the greater part, at least in quantity, has emanated from applied linguists eager to provide better services for students in English-medium institutions who are themselves not native speakers of the language (e.g., Flowerdew 1994). As might be expected, a primary focus has been on the lecture (Flowerdew 1994) because of its central educational role in many university settings. However, Erickson and Schultz (1982) and Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993) have investigated advising sessions, Furneaux et al. (1991) and Tracy (1997) colloquia and seminars, Grimshaw (1989) and Grimshaw and Burke (1994) a dissertation defense, Axelson (1999) a graduate student study group, and Dubois (1980), Shalom (1993), and Rowley-Jolivet (1999) speech at academic conferences.

In this body of work, approaches and foci of interest have varied widely from the general structure of lectures (Coulthard and Montgomery 1981) and the signaling of main points (Olsen and Huckin 1991) to more specific investigations such as Flowerdew (1992) on definitions, Dubois (1987) on "rounded" and "unrounded" numbers, and Strodt-Lopez (1991) on personal anecdotes and asides in university classes. Throughout this diverse range of studies, several trends emerge. First, there is widespread recognition that the samples studied are very small when set against the plethora of academic speech-events that occur on a standard campus on a standard workday in a standard semester. This problem of representation is further compounded by the considerable evidence available (Dudley-Evans and Johns 1981; Johns 1997) that academic speech is much more variable in structure, func-

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tion, and style than academic writing. Second, academic speech tends to be much more "contingent" in the sense of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) than academic writing; in other words, it is more open about the problems and difficulties the speaker encountered en route. Rowley-Jolivet (1999), in particular, is able to show that conference presenters offer apologies, admissions of uncertainty, and confessions of errors in ways and in numbers that would be hardly permissible in academic writing. Third, academic speech, across the genres and disciplines so far subjected to empirical investigation, is heavily signaled and signposted (Swales and Malczewski forthcoming). In other words, there is much commentary by speakers about where the discourse has been, where it is going, and why—all presumably connected to the underlying educational and informational roles of such discourse in both more monologic lecture-type contexts and more dialogic tutorial ones.

Among the linguistic resources available for such signaling, one small lexical set would seem to play a (semiliterally) pivotal role in the orchestration of such academic monologues and dialogues and, by extension, can be presumed to play a broadly corresponding role in professional and business meetings and presentations. If we restrict this set to its nominal forms, its main members would seem to be certain "discursive" uses of *question*, *problem*, *issue*, *point* (as in "my point is"), and *thing* (as in "the thing is"). *Concern* is another, if less frequent, candidate, as attested by "my only real concern is that we decide. . . ." Additionally, they all, of course, have other uses and meanings as in the following single illustrations: "the exam consists of fifty multiple-choice questions," "now let's turn to problem number two," "the first share issue was unsuccessful," "the population is now about five point seven million," and "regulations and things like that." In the 700,000-word corpus of academic speech that I am using (see below), "discursive" uses of these five words all run into three figures. These uses—that is, their orchestrating roles in academic discourse management, their linking of prior to imminent utterances, and their functions in commenting on and "pointing up" aspects of the discussion that the speaker feels salient—emerge as of greatest interest to the analyst on both descriptive and practical pedagogical levels. They form part of what has been called either "Vocabulary 3" (Hoey 1983) or "summary words" (Swales and Feak 1994) and typically perform important anaphoric and cataphoric functions. They are often self-reflexive ("my point is . . .") or overtly intertextual ("turning now to your second point") and in these uses form part of metadiscourse, which has become an area of great interest to those concerned with academic prose over the past decade or so (e.g., Mauranen 1993). As Barton (1996) has observed, metadiscourse is being increasingly recognized as what she calls a "rich feature," that is, a discoursal characteristic that can serve to distinguish one class of discourses from another and also to relate those distinguishing aspects to contextual factors.

In fact, we know rather less about this kind of reflexivity in academic speech, less about academic speakers' propensities for retrospection and prospection, and

less about how these are realized in linguistic performance than we do for research writers. As a preliminary investigation, in this article I will focus on just those two members of the lexical set that are associated more with speech than writing: *point* and, more obviously, *thing*. Discussive *point* as a lexical item is of interest partly because there have been suggestions in the literature that speech-events such as lectures are driven by "points" rather than by "facts" (Olsen and Huckin 1991). *Thing*, on the other hand, is a classic instance of one of Channell's "vague" words (Channell 1994), and anecdotal evidence would seem to suggest that its metadiscoursal employment in the groves of academe is often mildly frowned upon. I would guess that many academics would have a stylistic preference for a lexical bundle (Biber et al. 1999), such as "the point I want to make is," as opposed to one of the form "the thing I want to say is," while both might be thought inferior in certain circles to some such formulation as "the issue that I would like to raise is" (P. Shaw, personal communication, 2000).

One practical consequence—to be revisited in the final section—is that discussive *thing* raises knotty problems for those with responsibilities for helping nonnative speakers of English improve their spoken academic English, especially in light of recent moves in corpus linguistics to compare native speaker and nonnative speaker corpora and ascertain whether nonnative speakers "underuse" or "overuse" certain words or structures in relation to the frequencies made available through a reference corpus (Granger 1998). In a nutshell, should we be teaching nonnative speakers of academic English productive uses of expressions like "well, the thing is . . ."?

The Corpus

The Michigan Corpus of Academic Speech in English (or MICASE) provides a good locus for carrying out this investigation into the discursive roles of *point* and *thing*. As of January 2000, the corpus consists of transcripts of seventy speech-events recorded at the University of Michigan. This adds up to about ninety-two hours of digitally audio-recorded and transcribed material (with some video backup), in turn producing 700,000 words; it also represents about half of the total envisioned size of the project, the main data collection phase of which is due to be completed by the middle of 2001.

Recordings have been made across this large and complex public research university, using, as a primary cut, its Graduate School's classification of disciplines into four divisions: Physical Sciences and Engineering, Biological and Health Sciences, Social Sciences and Education, and Humanities, Arts, and Law. In addition, recordings are being collected according to a categorization of speech-events or genres—a procedure designed to cover the speech activities of the university in a comparably coherent manner. These speech-events range from official speeches di-

rected at large audiences to small student study groups; from Ph.D. dissertation defenses to a campus tour for incoming freshmen; from large introductory lectures to small advanced seminars to office hours; and from students working in labs, taking part in student government formal meetings, and presenting their work in class.

The amount of hours allotted to each type of speech-event is determined by our best efforts to assess the frequency and salience of that speech-event type in the university; as a result, the plan calls for higher loadings for lectures and discussions than for tours or celebratory speeches. We have also made an effort to make sure that women and men are adequately represented in areas where they are demographically in a decided minority, such as the former in engineering and the latter in nursing. Finally, in this new millennium, there has been no attempt to exclude nonnative speakers of English from the corpus but rather an attempt to represent them roughly according to their total population in the university (some 15 percent overall). Although the issues of sampling and representation alluded to in the introduction are not fully resolved, MICASE offers a database for contemporary academic speech in America of greater robustness than others hitherto available.

The MICASE project has been designed to be an open-access, multipurpose resource available through the following Web site: www.hti.umich.edu/micase. This custom-made database, unlike those using the Wordsmith software, allows easy categorization into speaker classes according to predetermined categories such as gender, age group, position in the university, mother tongue, and role in the speech-event. In the longer term, we hope MICASE will be able to provide some kind of answer to a number of large questions, such as the following:

(a) Is academic speech "more like" casual conversation or academic writing?

(b) How and where does academic speech change and evolve as individuals proceed through the system from incoming first years to senior academics? (And here recollect that we know a lot about how and where academic *literacy* evolves [e.g. Geisler 1994; Granger 1998] but very little about the evolution of academic *oracy*.)

(c) Are there gender differences? And, if so, are they of the kind posited by Tannen (1994) and others for "ordinary" American speech?

(d) What are the relative effects on the resultant discourse of *genre*, on one hand, and *discipline*, on the other?

(e) What new evidence can we provide about the characteristics of particular genres, especially those that occur with some frequency in the corpus, such as lectures?

(f) Assuming the availability of a comparable British corpus, what are the differences and similarities between British and American academic speech?

Internally, we have already carried out a variety of exploratory investigations, some directed at providing first-shot answers at these questions, such as Poos and Simpson's (2000) study of gender differences in the use of *sort of/kind of* by main speakers. Others have had more specific and limited linguistic and pragmatic aims, as in a detailed look at the uses of *just* (Lindeman and Mauranen 1999), the interesting occurrences of *strings* of discourse markers ("okay so now") as indicators of new discoursal episodes (Swales and Malczewski forthcoming), and an overview of metadiscourse and reflexivity in the MICASE corpus (Mauranen forthcoming). This article falls into this second category of specific descriptive studies since its primary focus is on the roles and uses of discussive *point* and *thing*.

The Nouns *point* and *thing* in MICASE: An Overview

Before we look at the discussive uses of these two words in the corpus, it is helpful to briefly examine the overall employment of these nouns in academic speech. *Point* will be taken first, and then *thing*. The Wordsmith Tools word-list option shows that the noun *point*, in all its manifestations, is a pretty common word in the extant MICASE corpus, being ranked about the 120th most frequent item. There were more than a thousand occurrences, predominantly as a singular noun, and its "popularity" can be seen from the words that clustered around it in the frequency list: *take*, *she*, *four*, and *why*. However, as is well-known, *point* is remarkably polysemous in English, probably more so than its standard translation equivalent in most other languages. The *Advanced Learners Dictionary* (*ALD*) (Hornby and Cowie 1991) lists twenty-one meanings for *point*, the last of these consisting of a large grab bag of widely different idiomatic uses. As it happens, not all of these are represented in the current MICASE database, including the very first use given in the *ALD* (the sharp end, as in "the point of a pencil"). Furthermore, there are only six examples of the second meaning category, that of a promontory or headland, and all six are proper names, such as "Cedar Point." The corpus-based *Cobuild* (Sinclair 1987) dictionary could not be more different since it opens with discussive *point*: "1 The word **point** is used in a number of different ways to refer to something that is said in a discussion, argument or debate" (Sinclair 1987, 1105).

If we omit nonoccurring categories, leave out ambiguous cases (some 2 to 3 percent), and amalgamate some of the closely comparable *ALD* and *Cobuild* distinctions, the raw numbers and overall percentage distribution of *point* usage in the data are given in Table 1.

Not unexpectedly with a specialized corpus, the frequency distribution here is somewhat skewed with regard to the dictionary arrangements of lexicographers devoted to characterizing "general" English. For instance, in MICASE, the top three categories contributed more than 90 percent of the tokens. (Of course, categories 1 and 2 could be subdivided.) At the other end of the scale, there was in fact no occur-

TABLE 1
Frequency Breakdown of *point* Meanings in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Speech in English

	Number	Percentage
1. Point = dot (decimal point; point on graph)	485	44
2. Point = moment or place (at a certain point)	319	29
3. Point = argument element ("my main point")	210	19
4. Point = grade or score ("two points for this")	33	3
5. Point = (in the expression "point of view")	30	3
6. Point = purpose ("the point of doing this is")	13	1
7. Point = headland ("Cedar Point")	6	>1
8. Point = distinction ("there's a fine point between")	2	>1
9. Point = feature ("Camus is not my strong point")	1	>1
Totals	1,099	100

rence of that asseverative British adjective *pointless*, and it is unclear at this juncture whether this is because the word is actually rare in American speech or whether it is contraindicated by the "niceties" of academic oral discourse—as opposed to, say, arguments in bars. Furthermore, there was only one obvious occurrence of usage nine ("Camus is not my strong point"), and what is particularly surprising here is the absence of formulations such as, "I find the strong/weak point of your argument to be the following . . ." (which probably would have fallen within this category). The relatively high occurrence of *point* in its use as *mark* or *score* (around thirty exemplars) is influenced by the fact that the instructor in one of the "first-day of class" recordings spent a long time explaining the grading system for the course; outside of this localized context, and apart from some student discussions in labs, this usage is rare.

As might be expected, the frequency of the commonest use ("three point two million"; "hey Brian did you wanna get the reference point?") is heavily discipline dependent. In some cases, where the lecturer is explaining the construction and interpretation of graphs, its frequency is amazingly high. The spatiotemporal use, which occurs second, is most remarkable for its co-occurrence with the preceding preposition *at*, which can be found in about 60 percent of the cases. Here are a few examples (here and passim I have italicized certain relevant forms):

(1) this continues until all the agents stop bidding, *at which point* we are at quiescence.
(2) okay are there any questions *at this point*?
(3) I may contact you *at some point* for a recommendation.
(4) And that was *the launching point* for my comparison.

Overall, *thing* and *things*, taken together, would rank somewhere around fifty in terms of frequency, clustering with such common items as *well*, *would*, and *an*.

There were in total 2,535 tokens for the lexeme, including just this one example of (*pace* British usage) *thingy*:

> (5) with this little minus capital-A little-A *thingy*, called a flag, okay?

Of these, around four hundred (approximately 17 percent) are used meta-discoursally and are, broadly speaking, substitutable by *point* or *issue*, as in

> (6) well one of the *things* I uh did not cover or uh zipped by on Monday morning is the matter of the literature,

This usage can usually be separated from the major use of *thing* to refer to some kind of (vague) object:

> (7) one of the *things* I wanted to find out was what happens in borderland situations . . .

A analysis of a sample of five hundred occurrences of nondiscussive *thing* showed an overwhelming preponderance of references to objects of various kinds (real, imaginary, conceptual, verbal, etc.), but attempts to divide these into vague and less vague categories have proved unconvincing. In contrast, in the corpus as a whole, few instances were found of its intensifier use:

> (8) I don't understand *a thing* I'm saying.

Nor were there many examples of *doing one's thing* nor of its use as a vague second noun or "dummy compound" (Hohenhaus 2000), as in *the Clinton thing*, *the growth rate thing*. Finally, there was only one example of the possibly passé idiomatic phrase, *sure thing*.

Discussive *point* and *thing*

There are, in fact, a number of exploratory questions that can be asked about discussive *point* and *thing* in the Michigan data, any answers to which may have pedagogical as well as descriptive benefits. In this article, I have tended to choose those that are relatively amenable to a corpus + concordancer approach and that also allow a preliminary "mapping" of these items at various levels ranging from the lexical company they keep, as in (a) below, to their variable distribution in speech-events (e). To these ends, an attempt will be made to answer the following five questions:

   (a) The primary suppletive or "carrying" verb for *point* is traditionally thought to be "make." Are there others? What verbs co-occur with *thing*?

   (b) When speakers use *point* and *thing* in their discussive sense, are they more likely to use them about their own discourse, that of somebody else present, or about a third party?

   (c) Do these discussives tend to be used forwards or cataphorically ("the thing that I want to say is . . .") or backwards or anaphorically ("That was my main point")?

   (d) Do these discussives have positive or negative prosodies (Sinclair 1991; Stubbs 1996); in other words, do they tend to collocate with positive or negative words, such as "that's a good point," as opposed to "that's a ridiculous point"?

   (e) How are these uses distributed across the available speech genres?

What Are the Carrying Verbs for *point* and *thing*?

The MICASE data in fact confirm that *make* is the primary verb that collocates with discussive *point*: there were twenty-eight examples, of which only one was passive:

   (9) I think the *point* was *made* that the assumption . . .

Other verbs were rare: *see* (three), *have* (two), *get* (two), and single examples of *go back to*, *get back to*, *illustrate*, *raise*, *repeat*, and *stress*. Only two were somewhat unexpected:

   (10) so I'm not sure that you can *hold this point*, so think about it some more.
   (11) they have to like, *live with the point* that they're not helping the children.

Verbs that might have occurred (perhaps) but did not do so would include the somewhat formal *return to*, *elaborate*, and *emphasize*, which may turn out to be more associated with self-monitoring TV and radio "talking heads," rather than with academic speech per se. More important, however, there were only about 40 examples (out of total of 210 discussive *points*) of the use of *lexical verb + point* or *point + lexical verb*. Among other things, this relatively low proportion would suggest that, whatever the suggestions typically made for the teaching of "gambits" in professional spoken discourse (e.g., Goodale 1987), using the verb *make*—or for that matter other lexical verbs—as a support for *point* is by no means the only or the standard way of getting the speaker's point across.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Types of Speaker Reference with Discussive *point*

	Number	Percentage
Reference to own discourse	99	46
Reference to discourse of other interlocutor(s)	53	26
Reference to third party or to a text	38	18
Hard to classify (for various reasons)	20	10

Broadly similar observations can be made about discussive *thing*, where again only a minority of instances (just under 25 percent) involved a carrying verb. Only two verbs reached double figures, *say* (sixteen instances) and *talk about* (twelve); in the former case, *thing* tended to follow the verb, while in the latter to precede it:

(12) let me just *say* a couple *things* administratively before we start
(13) I guess the last *thing* that I wanna *talk about* is. . . .

Other verbs that occurred four times or more were *do* (typically prefaced by *wanna* or *gonna*), *ask*, *point out*, *remember*, *notice*, and *mention*; more formal verbal locutions (*take into consideration*, *call attention to*, *address*) tended to occur much less frequently, suggesting that speakers find they do not collocate easily with "common or garden" *thing*.

Whose Discourse Is Being Referred To?

In response to the second issue, the raw figures and percentages for the 210 examples of discussive *point* are given in Table 2.

Thus, we see that the two commonest uses are the interpersonal ones, which together comprise more than 70 percent of the occurrences in the corpus. Here are five examples, the first three self-reference, the last two other-reference:

(14) and *the point I wanna make* with this audience tonight is that modern hygiene means that the body requires more, not less upkeep.
(15) now um *a final point here* in these slides
(16) *my point is* that anything you do is gonna diminish what your conception of the scheme is.
(17) but that's a *good point you raise* because it's very salient to speakers
(18) now Jim *you make a good point* . . . at least in two of the con- of the transgene arrangements, it does have, these essential elements

TABLE 3

Distribution of Types of Speaker Reference with Discursive *thing*

	Number	Percentage
Reference to own discourse	356	90
Reference to discourse of other interlocutors	22	4
Reference to a third party or a text	10	3
Hard to classify	12	3

Now follow two illustrations of *point* being used to refer to nonparticipants, at least in some literal sense, in the ongoing discourse—the first to a historical figure, the second to a student text under review:

> (19) so what Darwin argues is that essentially may be emotional expressions evolved as a mechanism of communication. *It's an extremely profound point*.
>
> (20) this is a way that malls design themselves to be places you wanna socialize, right? *That's the point of* this paragraph.

Readers may have noted that in this subsection, the percentage of unclassified uses is quite high. I have also left unclassified phrases like "any other points for discussion" since at the time of utterance, it is open as to whether anybody will actually make a point. I have also excluded utterances like "okay, did we touch on the main points?" since only considerable back-tracking through the prior discourse would establish whether others in fact made contributions that would have been counted as "main points."

The percentages for the four hundred instances of discursive *thing* considerably extend the "egocentric" and "interpersonal" tendencies we have previously seen for *point*, as can be seen in Table 3.

As can be seen, there are relatively few references to other interlocutors, one of the few examples in declarative rather than interrogative form being the following:

> (21) so there's a couple of *things that you're not mentioning*. . . .

Another occurred when the instructor said, "I am hearing a couple of things," and then proceeded to dispel class anxieties about homework assignments. More typically, other-references occurred in interactional contexts when main speakers used "other things?" to open the floor for possible further comments and questions. In-

TABLE 4
Anaphoric and Cataphoric Uses against Reference *point* (numbers)

Type	Anaphoric	Cataphoric	Total
"my point"	9	90	99
"your point"	30	0	30
"third-party point"	7	6	13
Totals	46	96	142

deed, this use underscores in a dramatic way just how well established *thing* has become as a verbal label.

Although there are quite close parallels between "the point is" and "the thing is," there is one important pragmatic difference that may help explain the paucity of other-interlocutor uses of *thing*. This is that *thing*, unlike the other members of the set, cannot directly or simply be used as a reference label for a previous interlocutor's prior discourse. In effect, we cannot say (at least not without usually appearing to be sarcastic) "now turning to your second thing," but we have to expand the utterance into "now turning to the second thing you said," and even this might seem mildly dispreferred.

It may also be relevant that we can comment on another's utterance by saying "good point" but not apparently "good thing."

Are the Two Discussives Retrospective or Prospective?

The answer to this question, especially with regard to *point*, turned out to be the most difficult and complex but may in the end prove to be the most interesting. One temporary simplification was to remove all exophoric references to texts under discussion in office hours or advising sessions, as in the following:

> (22) now *make the point you wanna make about* sort of race and class in some sense . . .

Such references are less obviously retrospective ("that was my last point") or prospective ("my point here is the following") than the endophoric uses. (See also the discussion in Biber et al. [1999] on "situational reference.") This procedure then produced the following distribution (see Table 4) of relatively clear exemplars (now reduced from 210 to 142).

The next two examples neatly illustrate both prospective and retrospective uses:

> (23) if they were so strongly interacting, *that's point number one*, yeah. And *point number two* is that there is a theoretical thing that I won't go into.

(24) I mean *the point is* you can't have both, an accident and no-accident. *That's my point*.

Such double or iterative uses of *point* are in fact quite rare in MICASE, but they do serve to underline contrasts in referential direction. And here it should be noticed that tense, and past tense in particular, is not necessarily a strong indicator of direction. In 25, for example, a doctoral candidate is explaining his work:

(25) in the final chapter I discussed . . . and *my general point* was that, to do science successfully, in a culture, requires a particular way of thinking style.

In the context of the oral defense of his dissertation, the candidate is here making a new and hence forward-looking point, even though his reportage requires a past tense.

The data in Table 4 indicate that interlocutor references, such as "I see your point," consistently—and unsurprisingly—refer to previous points that have been made. Indeed, much more surprising, especially given the number of tutorial situations covered, was the fact that there were no examples of "ventriloquized" other-interlocutor uses of *point*, such as "If I were you, the point I'd make would be. . . ." There remain, however, some ambiguous cases, at least in terms of transcripted data. Here is one example:

(26) A. they don't care about their citizens and things like that, and the people in it.
 B. What other ways do they give the city a bad name? I think *that's a really important point*.
 A. What other ways?
 B. Yeah
 A. um, homelessness adds to the crime a lot, adds to desperation and more mental illness.

B, the instructor, with her "a really important point" comment, could have been offering the student (A) a delayed commendatory message; alternatively, she could be suggesting that the as-yet-unprovided answer to her question is the real issue at hand. Notice here that a switch to a definite article would have confirmed the second interpretation because the definite article latches it to the immediately preceding utterance:

(26a) I think that's the really important point.

Overall, the MICASE data in Table 4 give a strong impression that discursive *point*, especially in monologue situations, serves to announce to the listeners that

something significant—and hence noteworthy?—is about to come up. In fact, prospective uses are more than twice as frequent as retrospective ones. Second, *point* appears most strongly associated with the discourse of the present speaker rather than with that of previous speakers or third parties. Earlier, I observed that *make* figured prominently here as the supporting verb; however, prefabricated formulations like "I would like to make the point that" were not, in fact, overwhelmingly common. In fact, there were more than fifty examples in the corpus of some version of the following formula for discussive "point":

    the+(adj)+ point+ (here)+ is . . .
    the main point   is

Furthermore, there were surprisingly few examples of "my point is," suggesting that even in situations where we find all-powerful lecturers in their classrooms (Johns 1997), even these speakers would seem to prefer a strategy, insofar as that is detectable at a discoursal level, which focuses on the argument or point at issue rather than prefacing their use of *point* with a singular first-person pronoun.

The situation regarding discussive *thing* in MICASE is more straightforward, since only about thirty of the four hundred instances are clearly anaphoric. Here are three of them:

(27) they vary in their susceptibility to penicillin, right? That's the first *thing*.
(28) embellishment, it's an important *thing* to understand about jazz.
(29) Buck?
     They wanna, like make large bonuses while working in a relaxed environment.
     Okay, so there's two *things* there.

More common by an order of magnitude is the use of *thing* or *things* to signal prospectively salient features of the upcoming speaker discourse:

(30) let me just say *a couple of things* administratively before we get started . . .
(31) but *the thing* to consider is, dropping Math one-oh-five would mean that you would need to retake it.
(32) notice that R-F and the theta are exogenous. *Second thing*. Part of the definition of the equilibrium . . .
(33) now, *couple quick things*, *first thing*. . . .

As might be expected, *the thing is* (even without intervening words such as in 31) is a common three-word lexical bundle (Biber et al. 1999), with forty-four occurrences per million words. However, the two relevant four-word bundles they cite as having between ten and nineteen occurrences per million words (*but the thing is* and

TABLE 5
Evaluative Premodifiers for *point* and *thing* in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Speech in English

point	Number of Instances	*thing*	Number of Instances
good	16	interesting	18
important	12	important	15
great	2	main	6
interesting	2	neat	5
key	2	good	4
		key	2
		tricky	2

the only thing is) do not reach this threshold in the MICASE data; on the other hand, *the other thing is* (not mentioned in Biber et al. 1999) comes in at twenty-four instances per million words. Overall, *the . . . thing + is* structure accounts for just over 25 percent of the four hundred occurrences. As might have been predicted from the discussion at the end of the last subsection, there were no discursive uses of *my thing*.

How Are the Two Discussives Evaluated?

The fourth question raised the issue of whether *point* and *thing* in their discursive use tended to be found in antagonistic or supportive academic speech contexts. The evidence so far strongly suggests the latter. Table 5 shows the evaluative adjectives preceding the two discussives.

There were in, fact, no negative adjectives used, even when the speaker was discussing a third party not present in the room; there were no instances, for example, of a point being *poor* or *weak* or *irrelevant*; indeed, the well-attested phrase, at least in British contexts, "off the point" only occurred once and that was a speaker self-reference, "I'm getting off the point here." Nor do we find careful, guarded evaluations, such as *points* being *fair*, *plausible*, or *possible*. Other small pieces of evidence contribute to this wholesome and collegial picture. For example, it has already been noted there are more than fifty examples of the phrase "the . . . point (here) is," but only six of these—very much to my personal surprise—are preceded by the adversative *but* (cf. Biber et al. 1999). Furthermore, in only one case does a negative precede *point*; this occurs in the following heart-to-heart interview:

(34) A. . . . so many consequences, that you don't want to face. So many, it's got
      real messy for you.
    B. yeah
    A. *but that's not the point*. *The point is* you can, but you won't

TABLE 6
Discussive *point*-Rich and *thing*-Rich Speech Events

point	thing
1. A colloquium in women's studies	1. A dissertation defense in musicology
2. An office hour in cultural anthropology	2. A large introductory lecture in psychology
3. An advising session in the Writing Center	3. A lecture in cultural studies
4. A meeting of mid-level administrators	4. A lab session at the Biological Station
5. A doctoral defense in social psychology	5. A large but interactive lecture on business
6. A meeting of Literature, Science, & Art's student government	6. Senior undergraduate presentations (bilingualism)

As might be expected, the most common adjectival modifier *good* is never used by the speaker to refer to his or her point but is used in fifteen cases to the interlocutor ("that's a good point") and in a single instance to a third party and/or more distant interlocutor ("Glenda had the good point that . . ."). The other frequent adjective *important* invoked no such self-congratulatory sensitivities since it was used eight times to refer to the speaker's own argument and four times to those of others, including one inanimate object (see 36 below).

With regard to *thing*, it is again important to point out first that the majority of uses are unmarked in terms of evaluation. Unadorned *the thing* is the most frequent, followed by neutral determiners such as *other*, *one*, *first*, *couple (of)*, and *last*. The evaluative adjectives that we do find are quite similar to those found for *point*, and again we observe a strongly positive prosody, where even *tricky* ("now the tricky thing here is") in this context would seem more descriptive rather then negative. The nearest the current corpus comes to an instance of self-deprecation takes place when the senior undergraduate tour leader (and incidentally the main user of *neat thing*) says,

(35) this is gonna be the *cheesiest thing* you're gonna hear on the entire tour

That said, it may be more important to note (as with *point*) that the opportunity for adjectival evaluation is only taken up in about 15 percent of the cases.

How Are the Two Discussives Distributed across Speech Events?

The final exploratory question concerned the distribution of discussive *point* and *thing*, and again there were surprises in store. This use of *point* (in the singular) occurred more than ten times in six of the seventy files, with hits per one thousand words ranging from 1.37 to 0.88, while the six files with the most uses of discussive *thing* had ranges from 1.62 to 1.29. The two sets of top files are shown in Table 6.

The results for *point* have produced a pretty eclectic list, and what at first sight is most surprising is the absence of lectures, especially those large introductory lectures in which we might have expected a lot of hortatory metadiscoursal signposting of the type "the important point for you to remember about this is. . . ." In fact, no large lectures reached 0.50 hits of discursive *point* per one thousand words. However, if we concentrate on the two top genres in the left-hand list, the colloquium and the office hour, we may be able get a somewhat clearer sense of what is happening. All of the fourteen examples from the colloquium consist of the speaker's referring to her own evolving discourse as she unfolds her arguments about the treatment of women in the media over the past hundred years or so. Eight of these fourteen instances use in some way the phrase "make a point," perhaps in part because the speaker uses slides to illustrate her argument:

(36) here's an ad for ham *and it makes an important point . . .*
(37) this one, also just a postcard, *just to make the point* that weight was not a private matter.

The office hour session is a long one (well over two hours), and there are forty instances of discursive *point*. In this transcript, the white female graduate teaching assistant is discussing projects related to contemporary racial and social mores seen from the perspective of cultural anthropology. The graduate student speaker, at least in this potentially stressful context, exhibits a number of discursive features, such as a marked tendency to hedging, that are discussed elsewhere (Poos and Simpson 2000). The great majority of the *point* uses are made by the TA rather than by the students who troop in one after another into her office hour session. Twenty-five tokens are in response to what the students have written or said:

(38) oh *that's a good point*, but I think you also want to say . . .
(39) okay now this is a bit of *different point*, right?

There were only two self-references, and one has been left unclassified for the time being. The remaining twelve referred to people outside of the interaction, such as the following:

(40) he kinda *stressed the point* that they were not trying to like, help everyone.

Overall, the distributional MICASE data for *point* suggest its primary use in interactional contexts, but with the proviso that it may occur fairly frequently in monologic contexts that either have specific features (such as a slide show?) or reflect ideolectal preferences of the main speaker.

In the case of *thing*, however, we do see the appearance of three lectures among the top six, typically in the linguistic contexts that we might have expected to find

for *point*, but only occasionally did so. In addition, we can note, perhaps with wry amusement, that the most "*thing*-using" speech event was the doctoral defense in musicology, where the only speakers were four full professors and one (German) doctoral candidate. Here are three examples from this speech event, which is particularly rich in metadiscourse:

(41) wow, that's an interesting question . . . the first *thing* that comes to my mind is this may be, a little off the wall but the first *thing* that comes to mind is um, this has done a lot for me as a musician . . .

(42) let let me add just one more *thing* which I didn't think of this morning when I was saying but I but I and looked at this, I'm not sure, that in any of your comments on specific pieces, that I take away an impression, of your saying . . .

(43) but since you're referring back to the original of this, then that brings up one other *thing* < uh-ha > may I may I uh < sure > interject one *thing*, th-the- one of my bigger arguments about, Jarrett the jazz improviser is that he . . .

In 41, we can see that "the first thing that comes to mind" phrase, which is repeated *verbatim*, is most likely functioning as a playing-for-time prefabrication, as indeed may be the "wow, that's an interesting question" onset. In 42 and 43, however, we see the *thing* phraseology operating primarily as a means for the speaker to maintain his turn. Finally, there is some evidence that *thing* and *point* operate in something fairly close to complementary distribution in many speech-events; there are only five examples of discussive *point* in the musicology defense and no examples at all of discussive *thing* in the women's studies colloquium.

Discussion

In all uses, *thing* turns out to be the most common of all nouns in the MICASE data with 2,535 tokens, and *point* emerges as the sixth most common noun with 1,031 tokens. Their commonest uses fall outside the purview of this article, but in both instances, there was a sizable minority of cases in which they can be seen to function in a discussive, metadiscoursal, and/or reflexive way. These words, in these uses, would appear to have some interesting pragmatic features. First, this study suggests that items from this lexical set may need to be examined in terms of the particular characteristics of the particular speech genres available for analysis, since the answer to some of the questions posited is genre specific rather than residing in academic speech in general. In monologic genres, *point* tends to be self-referring and to function as a signal of the significance of the immediately upcoming discourse; in dialogues, in contrast, it tends to be other-referring and to validate previous utterances or to offer commentary on other discourses, which are most

likely to be previously published texts or students' work in progress. Furthermore, whether in the last case it refers to published texts or student texts, in turn, depends on genre: the former tends to occur in larger and more public speech genres and the latter in one-on-one or small group discussions.

On the other hand, on the evidence available, *thing* appears to function as a self-referring prospective across a range of genres and broader genre classes. It also looks as though, at least in self-referring contexts, that the choice of *thing* versus *point* may turn out to be a largely ideolectal preference. In effect, some members of the academy are "thing-ers" while others are "point-ers." However, further research is needed to confirm or disconfirm this observation. Another area of current uncertainty is the extent to which these discussives—and others in the lexico-pragmatic set—are affected by broad disciplinary area (e.g., science vs. social science). We should be able to approach this issue when the full MICASE corpus of 1.5 million words becomes available toward the end of 2001.

On the relatively few occasions when evaluative modifiers occur, both nouns exhibit an overwhelmingly positive semantic prosody. Indeed, it would seem that when a discussive *point* or *thing* is overtly recognized by the use of those labels, they carry with them the in-built assumption that what has been said or will be said is somehow valid, valuable, and contributory. There is nothing here that points specifically to episodes of critical or adversarial discourse that are often supposed to be characteristic of sterotypic academic speech. Even more surprising, academic modesty and self-deprecation seem not to arise at these *points* or with these *things* since there were no examples of such demurrals such as "this may be a trivial point, but I'd just like to mention . . ." or "I only have a little thing to add, but for what it is worth. . . ."

If these two lexical items are not available for critique, it remains for further research to see how negative evaluations are actually signaled lexically in contemporary American academic speech. Indeed, concordance runs of adjectives such as *poor* and *weak* show that in the MICASE data, they are almost never used to refer to the discourse of other interlocutors in the speech-event. Perhaps negative comments are becoming a thing of the past, just as negative comments in letters of recommendation have largely disappeared.

Another unexplored area is what the findings displayed in this study might mean in various practical senses. Could we begin to get a better pragmatic understanding of what a *point* in argument actually is, as revealed by how academics and academic aspirants use the term in their presentations and discussions? What might be a full list of the lexico-functional sisters of discussive *point* and *thing*? *Issue* is certainly one, but are there others such as *trouble* and *challenge*? And how does the set as a whole function and pattern both lexico-grammatically and discoursally? This, in turn, raises questions as to how corpus investigations such as this might prove of assistance to those concerned with training university lecturers, those involved in na-

tive-language tertiary level study skills, and those concerned to help nonnative speakers survive and flourish in academic environments (Swales forthcoming). Certainly, on the evidence of the musicology defense, it would seem that one can go all the way up the academic ladder, beginning utterances with "the thing is"! But do we in consequence *teach* it to nonnative speakers of English? Channell (1994, 21) argued that underuse by nonnative speakers of vague words such as *thing* may make such speakers "sound rather bookish and pedantic to the native speaker." On the other hand, it could equally well be argued that such underuse provides an opportunity for such speakers to appear as clear, clever, and precise.

The more difficult question, as always, is trying to decide when such marked prospective flagging is called for and when it is not. Compare the following:

(44)   One thing to keep in mind as we go along even when we get into some of the technical things . . .

(44a) Keep in mind as we go along even when we get into some of the technical things . . .

And here at the end of this story, a corpus approach unsupported by other methodologies may not greatly help us because corpus study alone seems neither conducive to attending to what is not there—to discoursal absence and silence (Swales 1999)—nor to easily detecting the broader rhetorical movements at work in academic and professional discussions.

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