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SIGNALLING NOUNS IN ENGLISH

Signalling nouns (SNs) are abstract nouns like *fact*, *idea*, *problem*, and *result* which are non-specific in their meaning when considered in isolation and specific in their meaning by reference to their linguistic context. SNs contribute to cohesion and evaluation in discourse. This work offers the first book-length study of the SN phenomenon to treat the functional and discourse features of the category as primary.

Using a balanced corpus of authentic data, the book explores the lexicogrammatical and discourse features of SNs in academic journal articles, textbooks, and lectures across a range of disciplines in the natural and social sciences. The book will be essential reading for researchers and advanced students of semantics, syntax, corpus linguistics, and discourse analysis, in addition to scholars and teachers in the field of English for Academic Purposes.

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SIGNALLING NOUNS IN ENGLISH

A Corpus-Based Discourse Approach

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City University of Hong Kong

RICHARD W. FOREST
Central Michigan University

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107022119

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First published 2015

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Flowerdew, John, author.
Signalling Nouns in English : A Corpus-based Discourse Approach / John Flowerdew, City University of Hong Kong ; Richard W. Forest, Central Michigan University.
pages cm – (Studies in English language)
ISBN 978-1-107-02211-9 (hardback)
1. English language – Noun. 2. English language – Parts of speech. 3. English language – Grammar. 4. Lexical grammar. I. Forest, Richard, author. II. Title.
PE1205.F56 2014
425′.54–dc23
2014018778

ISBN 978-1-107-02211-9 Hardback

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Acknowledgements (John Flowerdew)

I have been studying signalling nouns for a very long time. In fact, my first presentation on the topic was at the 24th Annual TESOL convention in Baltimore, USA in 1994. The title of that presentation was Rhetorical/organizational Lexis in English for Academic Purposes. The term *signalling noun* was coined in this talk. This partly explains why I use the term *signalling noun* in preference to other terms found in the literature, such as *type 3 vocabulary*, *carrier noun*, *anaphoric noun*, *lexical label*, and *shell noun*. All of these terms refer to various aspects of the same phenomenon, and this is another reason for using my own term; a *signalling noun* has very much in common with all of these other terms but it also has particular specific features which are not shared by all of these other terms.

It is only now that, with the collaboration of Richard W. Forest, I have felt ready to present a book-length study on the *signalling noun* phenomenon. So this book represents the result of many years of thinking about and investigating the *signalling noun* phenomenon. During these years many people have helped my thinking and have helped me in practical ways.

The first person to make me interested in corpus linguistics was the sadly departed John Sinclair, a man who can be considered a doyen of corpus linguistics. John visited the Middle-Eastern University where I was working, Sultan Qaboos University, Sultanate of Oman, in the mid 1980s and introduced me and my colleagues to corpus linguistics. Following this visit, a very talented technician there, David Poulton, designed a concordancer for our use (concordancers were not generally available at the time) and I started to do concordancing work with the academic discourse that students at Sultan Qaboos University were having to grapple with. It was during this time that, with the use of the concordancer and word frequency function, I realised the importance of what I later termed *signalling nouns* in academic discourse.

Another important figure in my thinking on *signalling nouns* was Michael Hoey. Mike's work on lexical patterning in discourse is well known and his

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discourse approach to lexis was influential in my thinking. I think I also probably 'borrowed' the term *signalling* (perhaps subconsciously) from an early monograph of his, *Signalling in Discourse* published by the English Language Studies Unit at the University of Birmingham, although Mike's view of signalling is broader in its application than to just nouns.

A third influential figure, although I have never had the opportunity to meet him in person, is Hans-Jörg Schmid, author of *Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells: From Corpus to Cognition*. This book has been very influential in my thinking on *signalling nouns* and is much cited in the present volume. Of course, I am also indebted to the work of Eugene Winter, Gill Francis, Ros Ivanic, and others on this same topic. A fourth person I should acknowledge is Michael Halliday, who was kind enough to spend time with me discussing my work on *signalling nouns*, in particular the semantic categories, the final version of which I alone am responsible for.

A final influential person in my thinking on *signalling nouns* is Richard W. Forest, my co-author. Rich was my Ph.D. student in Hong Kong (he worked on a corpus approach to critical discourse analysis) and after he finished his Ph.D. he kindly agreed to help me with this project, which was becoming too big for just me to handle. Rich brought great knowledge and expertise in corpus linguistics and functional grammar to bear on the project, which has greatly enriched the final outcome.

With regard to this particular volume, I would like to thank Susan Fitzmaurice, series co-editor at Cambridge, whom I first approached about the book and who gave the proposal strong support. I would also like to thank the series editor, Merja Kytö, for giving her approval to the proposal and checking the manuscript very carefully, as well as Helen Barton, commissioning editor at Cambridge and her assistant Helena Dowson. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewer of the proposal, who gave invaluable feedback.

On a more practical level, I would like to acknowledge the important contribution of various research assistants who have helped me over the years. They are Meilin Chen, Antonio Domingo, Jennifer Eagleton, Delian Gaskell, and Josephine Lo. Finally, I would like to thank Hilary Nesi of the University of Coventry (previously University of Warwick), who, before it was publicly available, kindly gave me permission to use data from the BAWE corpus of academic lectures as part of the corpus for the present study.

The research leading to the findings presented in this book were partially funded by two Hong Kong Research Grants Committee Competitive Earmarked Research Grant awards: CityU 1215/00H and CityU 1312 U/03H.

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Acknowledgements (Rich Forest)

It takes a long time to write a book, as many readers of the volume will already be aware, and the number of debts accrued, both personal and intellectual, are many. My greatest debt is to my co-author, John Flowerdew, for inviting me to join him on the project when I was completing my Ph.D. studies with him some years ago. Since then, we have worked on this book together in both Hong Kong and Leeds, and separately with me working from my position at Central Michigan University and him in his at City University of Hong Kong. I am indebted to him both for his confidence in me on the project and for his insights into the nature of the *signalling noun* phenomenon. His observations regarding the importance of analysing *signalling nouns* from the perspective of discourse are integral to the approach taken by this volume, and it is richer for it. Moreover, his personal support during work on the project, both as a colleague and friend, has been invaluable.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Peter Fries and William Spruiell, both of Central Michigan University, for their perceptive questions and comments in our discussions of the signalling noun phenomenon. While working on the project, I have had more than one occasion to discuss aspects of the phenomenon with them. Their questions have often led me to rethink aspects of the study, to the benefit of the project.

I would also like to reiterate John's acknowledgement of Susan Fitzmaurice, series co-editor at Cambridge and Merja Kytö, the series editor for their approval of the proposal and for Merja's careful reading of the manuscript, as well as Helen Barton, commissioning editor at Cambridge and her assistant Helena Dowson. Finally, the feedback of the anonymous reviewer of the original proposal was valuable and is appreciated.

My work on this project was supported by a number of institutions, all of whom merit thanks. In the earliest days of my work on this project in 2008, the School of Education at the University of Leeds provided a research position that was essential to my start on the project, including early work on the corpus and its initial theoretical underpinnings. In 2010, the

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Department of English at City University of Hong Kong provided me with a Visiting Young Scholar position to continue work on the project, enabling me to spend much of the summer working closely with John tagging the corpus and further developing the theoretical foundations of the study. In the intervening years, funding to support further travel and research on the book has been provided by Central Michigan University's Department of English Language and Literature, College of Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Office of Research and Sponsored programs. The support of these institutions has been essential to my ability to contribute to this project.

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