

A Study on Evidentiality in the Abstract Part of Learners' English Academic Papers

CHEN Jianhong

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Evidentiality indicates the source of information and the speaker's attitude towards the reliability of information. This paper analyzed evidentiality in 30 abstracts of English academic papers written by second-year science and engineering students and revealed that reporting evidentials and inferring evidentials have been used in the abstracts, while sensory evidentials and belief evidentials have not been used. The enlightenment from the analysis is that teachers can introduce to students the functions of different types of evidentials and the varied ways of expressions and help students raise the awareness of using evidentials consciously and properly to enhance their academic abstract writing.

Keywords: evidentiality, reporting evidentials, inferring evidentials, sensory evidentials, belief evidentials

Introduction

Ever since the 1980s, there has been extensive research about the theory of evidentiality abroad. Many scholars at home also have been interested in this language phenomenon that commonly exists in the area of epistemology. In recent years, the research about evidentiality has been deeper and more diversified, ranging from its grammatical features to the cognitive function and the pragmatic and discoursal analysis. Especially, the research on a discourse level has been an important part in the study of evidentiality. Academic discourse, being a type of discourse, is a communication between the author and the reader on certain academic issues, which not only conveys academic content, but also requires the way that the author expresses his/her ideas is well accepted by the academic community. Actually, proper use of evidentiality can help the author convey academic content, establish an academic identity, and express in a reliable and objective way that is required of academic discourse. So in the teaching of academic writing, it is necessary for teachers to notice the use of evidentiality in students' academic papers and also guide them to use evidentiality properly to help them write more professionally. Thus, this paper intends to analyze evidentiality in the abstract part of 30 English academic papers written by second-year science and engineering students to gain some enlightenment for the teaching of academic abstract writing.

Evidentiality and Classifications of Evidentials

Evidentiality is a language phenomenon. According to Chafe and Nichols (1986), evidentiality can be defined broadly and narrowly. Evidentiality in its narrow sense mainly indicates the source of information, which includes direct source and indirect source. Information can be gained from a direct source like sight, hearing, or

CHEN Jianhong, M.A., lecturer, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

some other sensory experiences or inferred from an indirect source like cause/effect relationship, logical relationship, second-hand/third-hand materials, or hearsay. Evidentiality in its broad sense both indicates the source of information and reveals the speaker's judgement of information. Generally speaking, evidentiality in its broad sense has been widely accepted by the academic community.

Evidentiality can be represented linguistically as evidentials or evidential markers. The following examples can serve to explain what evidentials are:

1. *It seems* he is disappointed.
2. He *must* be very disappointed.
3. *I think* he is very disappointed.
4. *Actually*, he is very disappointed.
5. *It can be seen* that he is very disappointed.

By using “It seems”, Example 1 indicates an inference based on the speaker's observation or other people's words. Example 2 is a more positive inference based on a certain indirect source of information. In Example 3, “I think” suggests the speaker's personal view, which is a judgement of information. Example 4 suggests the fact that “he is very disappointed” is out of the speaker's expectation due to the use of the word “actually”. Example 5 tells us “he is very disappointed” based on one's sight experience. In these examples, “It seems”, “must”, “I think”, “Actually”, and “It can be seen” are evidentials that indicate the speaker's cognitive state based on a certain source of information.

Table 1

Lexical and Grammatical Realizations of Different Evidential Types

Evidential types	Representative realizations		Examples
Sensory evidential	First-person pronoun plus see verbs or passive forms of see		I/we see; be seen
	it is/can be seen		It is/can be seen that
	as (be) seen		as seen above
Reporting evidential	(author+year) or (website+year)		(Hunston 2000)
	Verbal realization	Verb that structure, be verbed structure	X argue, maintain, found, ... that
		It is ved structure	It is argued, it has been revealed
		as structure	as indicated by...
	Non-verbal realization	noun that	fact, observation, agreement, finding, view, claim
		Adjunct	According to X, in X's data, in X's view
Belief evidential	subjective	I/we + mental state verb	I think; I believe; I/we suggest
		Adjunct	In my/our view
	objective	It (modal verb) + mental state verbed	It can be suggested; it may be tentatively argued
		Adjunct	arguably; admittedly
Inferring evidential	Modal verbs		can; may; could; might; must
	Relational process		Seem to/that; appear to/that
	Modal adjunct		clearly, probably, evidently, possibly, certainly, obviously
	Impersonal it structure		it's possible that, it's certain that, it's clear that, it's evident that

There are different classifications of evidentials. On the whole, the classification frameworks proposed by Chafe and Nichols (1986) and Aikhenvald (2004) have been frequently referred to by many scholars. According to Chafe and Nichols (1986), evidentials can refer to the source of information, the way of gaining information,

reliability of information, and a match between verbal resources and expected information. That's to say, information can be gained or inferred from a certain source like witnessing, hearsay, or other people's words. There are different ways of gaining information, such as believing, hearing, generalizing, inferring, etc. The information gained can be reliable or unreliable, and there can be varying degrees of reliability. The information gained is not always consistent with the expected information. Aikhenvald (2004) classified evidentials into six types referring to sight, other sensory experiences, inference, hypothesis, hearsay, and reporting respectively. Based on Chafe and Nichols' and Aikhenvald's frameworks, different scholars have made different revisions and have proposed different classifications of evidentials. In this paper, the classification by Yang Linxiu (2009) as shown by the above Table 1 will be adopted for the analysis of the English academic abstracts.

An Analysis of Evidentiality in the Abstract Part of Science and Engineering Students' English Academic Papers

Abstracts are genre-sensitive in English academic paper writing. The main components of abstracts vary across disciplines. The abstracts of the English academic papers for science and engineering purposes usually comprise of these following components: introduction which may include background information, scope, purpose, etc., methodology, results, and conclusion. The author collected 30 abstracts of the English academic papers written by 30 second-year science and engineering students to analyze the features of evidentiality with the help of Yang Linxiu's classification of evidentials mentioned above. The results showed that out of the four types of evidentials, reporting evidentials and inferring evidentials have been used by the students, while sensory evidentials and belief evidentials have not appeared in their abstracts (see Table 2).

Table 2

Frequency of the Use of Different Evidential Types per Abstract

Evidential types	Frequency per abstract
Sensory evidential	0
Reporting evidential	0.875
Belief evidential	0
Inferring evidential	1.1

The Use of Reporting Evidentials

The reporting evidentials like "show" and "indicate" have been used in these abstracts. The frequency per abstract is 0.875, indicating that there is almost one reporting evidential in each abstract. The following examples are excerpted from two abstracts respectively:

1. The research results *show* that students who use virtual reality technology for learning exhibit higher learning interest and active participation...

2. *According to* a report by Xinhua News Agency on May 26, 2022, ozone has become the main air pollutant during the current summer season...

In the first example, the reporting evidential "show" summarizes the research results and lets the author integrate into the evaluation of and commitment to the information, so as to make the author's point more convincing. While in the second example, the reporting evidential "according to" takes the form of an adjunct and provides the authoritative source of information to help the author show respect to the previous research and establish an academic identity. So, reporting evidentials play an important role in expressing academic content and establishing an academic identity.

The Use of Inferring Evidentials

In these abstracts, inferring evidentials have also been used by the students. The frequency per abstract is 1.1, indicating that there is more than one inferring evidential in each abstract. Actually the frequency per abstract is the highest out of the four types of evidentials, suggesting that the students tend to use inferring evidentials more. The following examples are from the students' abstracts:

1. Internet addiction *can* negatively impact work performance, family life, social relationships, and physical and mental health...

2. In the future, urban planning and social operation will *inevitably* require the power of AI...

In the first example, the inferring evidential “can” adds to the objectivity of the research, as it puts the author in an outsider position to engage in an inferential research. The inferring evidential “inevitably” in the second example is a modal adjunct, which also achieves the effect of objectivity and reliability, as it reveals a hidden reserved attitude of the author. So, employing inferring evidentials properly can help one write in an academic way.

Enlightenment

As can be seen from the above results, reporting evidentials and inferring evidentials have been used in these 30 students' English abstracts, which endows their abstracts with an academic style to some degree, for both reporting evidentials and inferring evidentials can help the author to express convincingly, reliably, and objectively and establish an academic identity. Belief evidentials have not been used in the abstracts, which also verifies a study conducted by Chafe and Nichols (1986) that belief evidentials seldom appear in written works of researchers. This can be explained by the fact that belief evidentials express personal opinions or thoughts, which are contradictory to the aim of academic discourse—being scientific and objective. Sensory evidentials have not been used in these abstracts either. However, sensory evidentials do contribute a lot to reliability, as they emphasize that the information originates from the speaker's direct experience with the help of senses. Actually, sensory evidentials are widely employed in academic writing. Therefore, teachers can introduce sensory evidentials to students and let them know the features and functions of sensory evidentials. All in all, teachers can introduce to students' different types of evidentials, especially those evidentials that can help them write English academic papers objectively and professionally, and help them enlarge their evidential vocabulary and enrich their ways of expressions. Also, relating to the components of the abstract part of English academic papers for science and engineering purposes, teachers can guide students to grasp the type(s) of evidentials generally used in each component. Aware of the functions of evidentials and informed of the different ways of expressions, students are sure to make progress in English abstract writing.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the use of evidentials in the abstract part of 30 English academic papers written by second-year science and engineering students and revealed that both reporting evidentials and inferring evidentials have been used in these students' abstracts, while sensory evidentials and belief evidentials have not been used in their abstracts. As the sample for this analysis is not big enough, the results may just reflect some truth. Anyway, in the teaching of English academic writing (including English academic abstract writing), teachers can introduce the functions and features of different types of evidentials to students and raise their awareness of using evidentials consciously and properly. Students can also be encouraged to read more English

academic papers for science and engineering purposes to grasp the features of academic English and learn to write in an academic way.

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