

Analysis of Authorial Stance in BA Thesis by EFL Learners in China*

DENG Ting, LIU Ying-liang*

School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei 430070, China

Based on Hyland's (2005) framework of stance, this study explored the distribution of authorial stance used by undergraduates in their BA thesis. Through two self-built corpora, the result of the study shows that the use of stance markers in the corpora displays the following sequence: hedges>boosters>attitude markers>self-mentions. Further analysis on each stance marker reveals that undergraduates, as novice academic writers, have some problems with appropriately using stance markers in their academic discourses. The results provide some implications for both student writers and teachers of academic writing.

Keywords: academic discourses, stance markers, Chinese English-major undergraduates

1. Introduction

Academic discourse is not just a carrier of factual and objective content. More and more studies recognize that writers in the domain of academic writing employ various linguistic devices to convey their expressions (Hyland, 2005; Lou, 2013; Yang, 2015). Hyland (2005) pointed out that academic writing has come to be regarded as a persuasive way for writers to interact with readers. In the composition of academic writing, writers reveal their thoughts, through the use of stance markers, which not only express their stance but also help them build an interactive relationship with target readers.

Hyland (2005) claims that stance concerns the extent writers' commitment and attitude towards an entity, a proposition, or the reader. In order to better analyze linguistic resources of stance, Hyland (2005) proposed a framework of stance which includes four main elements, that is, hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions.

In recent years, a plethora of studies concentrated on stance from six aspects. The first aspect focuses on the conceptions of metadiscourse (Gray & Biber, 2012). The second aspect explores disciplinary differences in the use of stance markers (Hyland, 2005; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012). Hyland (2005) found that writers' rhetorical choices in expressing stance in published research articles vary from discipline to discipline. The result also shows that writers in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences tend to employ more personal positions than those in the disciplines of science and engineering. The third aspect explores different sections of the

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DENG Ting, postgraduate student, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

LIU Ying-liang (Corresponding author), Ph.D., Professor, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

research paper, such as abstract (Chen, 2021; Li & Cheng, 2020), discussion (Peng & Zheng, 2021), and conclusion (Wu, 2010). The fourth aspect deals with genre differences in writers' choice of stance markers. Commonly explored genres include argumentative and explanatory writing (Aull, 2019), dissertation or thesis (Wu & Paltridge, 2021), and research articles (Chen, 2021). The fifth aspect investigates L2 learners with different language proficiency. Studies in this aspect mainly compare published research articles written by experts (Chen, 2021; Hu & Cao, 2015) and essays written by advanced learners such as master students and doctoral students (Wu & Paltridge, 2021; Wang & Jiang, 2019; Xu, 2015). In Xu's (2015) study, the author found that student writers tend to use fewer stance markers, moreover, master students have the most prominent awareness of the use of authorial stance. The sixth aspect studies stance making by native speakers and non-native speakers (Lv & Zhou, 2013). The results in Lv and Zhou's (2013) study reveal that stance markers used in Chinese scholars' academic discourses are less frequently when compared to native scholars' writings.

It is not hard to notice that research related to stance mainly concentrates on experts and advanced L2 learners, relatively few studies focus on the stance made by novice students. Therefore, this paper aims to through two self-built corpora and investigate the use of authorial stance in academic discourses written by novice academic writers—undergraduates, and take experts' published journal articles as reference, to examine the stance making in undergraduates' BA thesis and what differences exist in the use of stance devices between undergraduates and experts. Thus, two research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the frequencies of stance markers in undergraduates' BA thesis?
2. Is there any difference in the use of stance markers between undergraduates and expert writers?

2. Methodology

2.1. Corpus

In order to answer the two research questions, two self-built corpora were constructed. The first corpus is called BA Thesis Conclusion Corpus (BCC) which is the target corpus, and the second corpus is called *Journal Article Conclusion Corpus* (JCC) which is a reference corpus. BCC is made up of the conclusion part of 30 English BA thesis written in 2021 by English major undergraduates from a university in central China. JCC is made up of the conclusion part of 30 published English journal articles in 2021. To ensure fairness, all the texts in BCC and JCC are both randomly selected. To guarantee reliability, texts in JCC are all chosen from three authoritative international journals, that is, *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, *System*, *Linguistics and Education*. Information about the two corpora is further displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Information of the Corpora

Corpora	Texts	Words
BCC	30	10,634
JCC	30	16,922

2.2. Data Identification and Annotation

All the data in the two corpora were identified and annotated based on the framework of stance (see Table 2) proposed by Hyland (2005). Firstly, this study converted all the data into text files and used AntConc 3.4.3w (a text concordance software program) to search for the four types of stance markers in the two corpora. Secondly,

the four types of targeted terms searched in both the two corpora were annotated and counted, which contributes to the raw frequency of the two corpora. During the process of annotation, we strictly identify which words belong to stance markers. Then, since the corpora size is different, to make the research reliable, the raw frequency of the two corpora was converted into normalized frequency per 1,000 words respectively. The whole process of identification and annotation was being checked two times to ensure the reliability of the data. Lastly, the counted number and specific items of each stance marker in the two corpora were recorded and analyzed.

Table 2

Classification of Stance Markers (Hyland, 2005)

Stance markers	Examples
Hedges	<i>About, may, mainly, some, possible</i>
Boosters	<i>Can, fact, must, should, demonstrate</i>
Attitude markers	<i>Difficult, expected, meaningful, necessary</i>
Self-mentions	<i>I, my, we, the author, the researcher</i>

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overall Frequency of Stance Markers

Table 3 shows the overall frequency of stance markers in the two corpora. In Table 3, the overall use of stance markers in JCC is more than in BCC. The use of stance markers in the two corpora displays such distribution: with hedges being the most frequently used one, boosters being the second, followed by attitude markers, and the least used one being self-mentions. The results of the chi-square test show that there is a significant difference in hedges, attitude markers, and self-mentions between BCC and JCC ($P < .05$).

Table 3

Overall Frequency of Stance Markers in the Corpora (per 1,000)

	Hedges		Boosters		Attitude markers		Self-mentions	
	Rfreq.	Nfreq.	Rfreq.	Nfreq.	Rfreq.	Nfreq.	Rfreq.	Nfreq.
BCC	221	20.78	158	14.86	77	7.24	29	2.73
JCC	453	26.77	209	12.35	161	9.51	99	5.85
χ^2	9.811*		3.124		3.941*		13.778*	

(Note: "Rfreq." = raw frequency, "Nfreq." = normalized frequency, and "*" means $p < .05$)

3.2. Hedges

Holmes (1982) points out that hedges are lexical items that "reduce or soften the illocutionary force of utterance" and it is a way to express "the speakers' views tentatively or unconfidently". In Table 3, hedges are the most frequently used stance markers in the two corpora, which means both experts and undergraduates in this study prefer to use hedges to express academic stance. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference in the use of hedges between BCC and JCC ($p < .05$). The specific use of hedge items in BCC and JCC displays some differences. 43 hedge items appear in students' BA thesis while there are 60 in experts' journal articles. Compared to experts, undergraduates seem to be less capable of using more alternative hedge items.

Table 4
Commonly Used Hedges in the Corpora

BCC		JCC	
Linguistic items	Proportion	Linguistic items	Proportion
should	19.45%	would	9.71%
some	14.93%	could	8.83%
may	6.78%	might	7.73%
many	5.42%	should	7.73%
mainly	4.98%	may	6.18%
most	4.98%	some	5.30%

Table 4 shows the top six hedge items in the two corpora. We can see that the three items *should*, *some*, and *may* appear in the two corpora, which indicates that both student writers and experts in this study prefer to use these three items to express relatively low commitment to the statements in academic writings. Among the top six hedge items in JCC, five are modal verbs, which reflect that in experts' academic writing, modal verbs play a large role in the expression of hedge meaning. In BCC, *should* and *some* are the most frequently used hedge items. *Should* can help writers to express their suggestions or advice in a tentative way.

- (1) Therefore, we *should* welcome the arrival of machine translation technology in a receptive manner, and learn to master other skills with an unyielding spirit and an optimistic attitude (BCC8.txt).
- (2) China has different cultures from western countries. Chinese belongs to Sino-Tibetan language family and English to Indo-European language family. It's not easy to translate food names, and *some* of them reflect certain aspects of Chinese culture (BCC15.txt).

In example (1), *should* help the writer to give a tentative suggestion and call for readers to accept machine translation technology. By using *should*, in this case, the writer is actually interacting with readers and trying not to make her statement too assertive that will harm readers' faces (Wu, 2010). As the second frequently used hedge item in BCC, *some* are usually used by writers to hedge uncertain or unprecise numbers and quantity. In example (2), since the student writer cannot provide a concrete number of food names that reflect certain aspects of Chinese culture, the hedge word *some* still helps the writer obey the convention of objectivity.

From the distribution of hedges in the two corpora, we can notice that experts employ various hedge items and mostly use modal verbs to express their hedge stance, which is in line with the result in Li and Cheng's (2020) study. Xu (2015) also indicates that modal verbs are the most frequently used stance markers in written academic discourse. In this study, undergraduates less frequently rely on the use of modal verbs to express hedge stance, which reveals their insufficient ability on making use of modal verbs to convey hedge meaning.

3.3. Boosters

Boosters refer to writers' expression of certainty and conviction towards statements, its function serves to convey intentions with strong confidence and conviction (Holmes, 1982). From Table 3, we know that there is no significant difference in the frequency of boosters between BCC and JCC ($p > .05$). One possible explanation may be that some undergraduates have the awareness to imitate experts' expression of boosters to improve their authorial stance and reduce their novice position as academic novice writers.

As shown in Table 5, among the top six commonly used boosters, *can*, *show*, and *find* appear in both corpora. The result indicates that both experts and undergraduates favored these three booster items.

Table 5
Commonly Used Boosters in the Corpora

BCC		JCC	
Linguistic items	Proportion	Linguistic items	Proportion
can	36.08%	can	31.58%
find/ finds/found	7.59%	show/shows/showed/shown	11.48%
show/shows/ showed/shown	6.33%	find/ finds/found	9.57%
reflect/reflects	5.70%	evidence	6.70%
believe/believes/believed	5.70%	reveal/reveals/revealed	5.26%
must	5.06%	demonstrate/demonstrates/demonstrated	4.78%

Table 3 shows that the frequency of boosters in experts' and undergraduates' academic discourses does not display a significant difference. In Table 5, *can* is the most frequently used booster item in the two corpora, and it can help authors show confidence and conviction toward propositions and assertions.

(3) The findings of this study *can* help us understand the role of English as a foreign language in writing rather than speaking, and not just provide useful guidance for English majors' writing performance (BCC4.txt).

In Example (3), the student writer uses *can* show the significance of and certainty about the findings of the study, which can help the author construct a reliable authorial self and persuade readers to believe the reliability of her research results.

Although Table 3 shows no significant difference in the frequency of boosters in BCC and JCC, the specific choice of booster items in the two corpora reveals that undergraduates tend to overuse some boosters in their BA thesis.

(4) However, in the real teaching context, teachers *must* consider the differences of students' English proficiency and knowledge reserve, so as to carry out the specific TBLT classroom design (BCC11.txt).

As shown in the corpus data, none of the experts used *must* in their journal articles, while *must* appears in undergraduates' BA thesis eight times. In Example (4), the student writer gives a suggestion to teachers by using *must* which may make target readers feel that the writer is making a command. Therefore, in our view, using the hedge word *should* may be a better choice in this case.

3.4. Attitude Markers

Attitude markers serve to express "the writer's appraisal of propositional information, conveying surprise obligation, agreement, importance, and so on" (Hyland, 2004). In this study, attitude markers are relatively few used by undergraduates, which means student writers are very cautious about conveying personal attitudes towards their propositions or evaluating others' statements. From Table 3, it can be seen that there is a significant difference in the use of attitude markers between BCC and JCC ($p < .05$). Under the influence of Confucianism, Chinese writers tend to avoid expressing personal attitudes (Liu & Chen, 2020), which explained why undergraduates in this study use attitude markers few.

Table 6
Commonly Used Attitude Markers in the Corpora

BCC		JCC	
Linguistic items	Proportion	Linguistic items	Proportion
important/importantly	22.08%	important/importantly	12.42%

even x	10.39%	positive	11.18%
effective	7.79%	significant/significantly	10.56%
difficult	7.79%	critical	6.83%

As shown in Table 6, among the top four commonly used attitude markers, *important/importantly* is the most frequently used one in both the two corpora. The result is consistent with the study made by Liu and Chen (2020). Their study shows that *important* is a commonly used attitude marker in Chinese students' MA thesis.

(5) High quality subtitle translation is an *important* condition for the development of China's film industry (BCC5.txt).

In Example (5), the student writer employs *important* to show his emphasis on the significance of high-quality subtitle translation.

In this study, the result shows that undergraduates use fewer attitude markers and displays a significant difference with experts. Expert writers pay attention to the role of academic criticism (Xu, 2011) while undergraduates in this study are very cautious about expressing personal attitudes.

3.5. Self-mentions

Self-mentions refer to writers' use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives to convey information (Hyland, 2001), and it plays an important role in the achievement of authorial self and success of academic writing (Yang, 2015). In this study, self-mentions are the least frequently used stance markers by undergraduates, and the chi-square test reveals that there is a significant difference in the use of self-mentions in the corpora ($\chi^2=13.778$, $p<.05$) (see Table 3). In Table 7, student writers mainly rely on third person noun (*the author*) to represent themselves in writing, while experts mainly employ *we* to indicate their authorial self. The result is consistent with Xu's (2015) study, which shows that compared with expert writers, Chinese student writers significantly underuse self-mentions.

Table 7
Commonly Used Self-mentions in the Corpora (per 1,000)

BCC		JCC	
Linguistic items	Proportion	Linguistic items	proportion
I	10.34%	I	7.07%
we	10.34%	we	36.36%
the author	58.62%	the author	0%

(6) In this thesis, *the author*, under the guidance of functional equivalence theory, analyzes the translation practice of Du Fu: China's Greatest Poet at lexical level, syntactical level and stylistic level (BCC6.txt).

In Example (6), the student writer chose *the author* instead of *I* to represent himself, which shows that the author wants to reduce his role in the article. Wu (2010) points out that the use of *I* in experts' journal articles indicates their emphasis on the contribution to the research and the confidence in the research results. Therefore, student writers' preference to use third person nouns may be due to their lack of confidence in directly presenting their authorial identity in academic writings.

Conclusion

Based on Hyland's (2005) framework of stance, the study analyzed the distribution of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions in student writers' BA thesis. The result shows that undergraduates use hedges and boosters most frequently, and self-mentions are used the least frequently. Taking experts' published journal articles as reference, the study reveals that student writers may overuse some boosters and use a limited range of stance markers to convey authorial stance. The result can provide some implications for student writers to better improve their use of stance markers.

The present study only collects 30 texts in the two corpora respectively. Future studies can enlarge the corpus size and explore more on undergraduates' use of stance markers. Besides, future studies can also investigate the developmental trajectory of stance markers on same student writers' BA thesis, MA thesis, and Ph.D. thesis.

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