

A Comparative Study of Metadiscourse Features
in the Abstracts of Chinese- and English-Language Journals of Applied Linguistics

A central assumption underlying contrastive rhetoric research is that “to the degree that language and writing are cultural phenomena, different cultures have different rhetorical tendencies” (Connor & Moreno, p. 153). A corollary of the assumption is that a writer often transfers first language linguistic and rhetorical patterns and conventions to second language writing. Metadiscourse, it can be argued, is a best testing ground for the assumption and the corollary. Hyland (2005) defines metadiscourse as “linguistic expressions which refer to the evolving text and to the writer and imagined readers of that text” (p. ix). These linguistic expressions index “the writer’s awareness of the unfolding text as discourse: how we situate ourselves and our readers in a text to create convincing, coherent prose in particular social contexts” (p. ix). Thus, metadiscourse may be seen as doubly sensitive to sociocultural influences. For one thing, it is an integral part of socioculturally shaped rhetorical conventions. For another, it is used to mark writer stances that index socioculturally embedded beliefs and attitudes.

This paper reports an exploratory study of metadiscourse in academic writing. The study was conducted to examine the use of select metadiscourse expressions (i.e., hedges and boosters) in the abstracts of research articles authored by academic writers from two communities: Chinese applied linguists who write for Chinese-language journals published in China and international applied linguists who write for international English-language journals published outside of China. The study was aimed to address two related research questions: (a) do Chinese applied linguists differ from their international counterparts in the use of hedges and boosters in the abstracts of their research articles? (b) to what extent are hedging and boosting different or similar in the Chinese- and English-language abstracts authored by Chinese applied linguists?

To answer these questions, three corpora of research article abstracts were constructed following the taxonomy of *tertia comparationis* developed by Connor and Moreno (2005) for the design and analysis stages of contrastive rhetoric research. The first corpus consisted of all the abstracts (n = 111) written by non-Chinese authors that appeared in three leading international journals of applied linguistics: *TESOL Quarterly* (Vols 37 and 38), *The Modern Language Journal* (Vols 87 and 88), and *Applied Linguistics* (Vols 23 and 24). The second corpus consisted of all the Chinese-language abstracts (n = 143) written by Chinese applied linguists that appeared in three leading Chinese journals of applied linguistics: *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (Vol. 38), *Journal of Foreign Languages* (Issues 161 to 165), and *Modern Foreign Languages* (Vol. 17). The third corpus was comprised of all the corresponding English-language abstracts for the research articles included in the second corpus. All the abstracts were coded for their use of hedges and boosters based on a coding scheme adapted from Hyland (2005). Statistical analyses of frequency data revealed interesting patterns of similarities and differences between the three corpora. These patterns are interpreted in terms of Chinese beliefs about scientific research/knowledge and Chinese applied linguists’ proficiency in academic English.

References

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