

A Comparative Study of Stance Markers in the Abstracts of Chinese Master's Theses and Research Articles by English Expert Writers

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Abstract

This study employs Hyland's (2005) classification framework for stance markers as its core analytical tool. It constructs two small, comparable corpora—one comprising abstracts of Chinese master's theses and the other comprising abstracts of scholarly articles by experts—and utilizes corpus-based quantitative statistics and comparative analysis to systematically examine the usage characteristics and differences of stance markers in these two text types. The findings reveal that while the total number of stance markers in master's thesis abstracts is higher, their density is only half that of expert abstracts, indicating issues of loose and redundant usage and low expressive efficiency. In contrast, stance markers in expert abstracts are used with greater precision and restraint, achieving a balance between academic rigor and expressive efficiency. The results of this study provide empirical evidence and practical insights for teaching the writing of academic English abstracts at the master's level.

Keywords

Master's theses; Academic abstracts; Stance markers; Comparative study.

1. Introduction

An academic abstract is a condensed presentation of academic achievements. It serves as the primary text through which readers obtain core information and assess the value of research, and it is also a vital medium for the academic community to facilitate knowledge dissemination and academic dialogue. Within the framework of academic English writing, the abstract fulfills not only an informational function but also an interpersonal function—authors use linguistic means to explicitly or implicitly express their degree of conviction regarding the thesis and their judgment of the research's value, and stance markers play a crucial role in this process.

In the current Chinese academic context, the standardization of English abstracts in master's theses and the use of international academic discourse have garnered significant attention. Qi Ruihua (2025) compared Chinese and foreign master's theses and found significant differences in the frequency of language use between the two. Liu Yingliang and Chen Yang (2020) found that Chinese master's students tend to use strong language more frequently, while using fewer vague qualifiers and self-references. Chen Qingbin (2021) noted that abstracts in domestic journals contain more strong language and fewer self-references. Yang Chuanming and Leng Litian (2023) confirmed that domestic scholars use stance markers less frequently than their foreign counterparts. Existing research has largely focused on the full texts of journals or theses, with insufficient specific comparisons between master's thesis abstracts and published paper abstracts. Therefore, this study employs Hyland's stance marker framework to systematically reveal the differences in stance construction between master's students and established researchers in the Chinese academic context. This research aims to enrich the empirical

evidence in the fields of academic metadiscourse and second-language academic writing, assist students in understanding the norms of stance expression in international academic abstracts, and enhance the academic rigor, objectivity, and international readability of thesis abstracts [1,2,3,4,5,6] .

2. Research Design

2.1. Analytical Framework

Stance markers are linguistic means through which authors construct their stance in academic discourse; they serve as crucial tools for authors to express views and attitudes, as well as to make evaluations and value judgments (Hyland 2005a) [7]. This study adopts Hyland's (2005) analytical framework, classifying stance markers into four categories: vague qualifiers, strong qualifiers, self-referential markers, and attitude markers. Fuzzy qualifiers can weaken assertions and maintain academic caution, such as "may" and "might"; strong qualifiers can reinforce certainty and highlight the definitiveness of conclusions, such as "show" and "demonstrate"; attitude markers are used to express value judgments and emotional attitudes, such as "important" and "significant"; and self-referential markers explicitly reveal the author's identity, such as "we" and "I."

2.2. Research Questions

- 1) What differences exist between abstracts of Chinese master's theses and those of published research papers in terms of the frequency and distribution of these four types of stance markers?
- 2) What insights does this study offer regarding the writing of English abstracts for master's theses and the teaching of academic English?

2.3. Research Methodology

This study constructed two small corpora: one comprising master's thesis abstracts and the other comprising abstracts from scholarly articles by experts. Each corpus contains 10 English abstracts, with all articles collected from the three-year period of 2023–2025. The 10 English abstracts from master's theses were selected from master's dissertations in the Department of Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at five normal universities in China, located in the Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Central, and Southeast regions. The English abstracts of scholarly papers were sourced from three SSCI Q1 journals: *Language Teaching Applied Linguistics*, and *Modern Language Journal*. The master's thesis abstract corpus totaled 38,044 characters, while the scholarly paper abstract corpus totaled 13,828 characters. This study utilized AntConc to identify stance marker lexemes in both subcorpora (Hyland 2005b). Subsequently, the study calculated total frequency, frequency per category, frequency per thousand characters, and the proportion of each category. It then compared the differences between the two corpora, analyzed the underlying causes, drew conclusions, and offered implications for teaching.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on Hyland's (2005a) four-part framework for stance markers, this study conducted a systematic quantitative analysis and comparative study of the usage characteristics of stance markers in two corpora: abstracts of Chinese master's theses and abstracts of scholarly papers by experts [8]. As shown in Table 1, the two types of abstracts exhibit significant systematic differences in both the overall distribution of stance markers and the usage density of each category. These differences not only reflect the preferences in stance expression among authors with different academic statuses but also profoundly illustrate the distinctions in genre

conventions, writing purposes, and academic rhetorical logic between theses and published journal articles.

Table 1

Category	Master's Thesis Abstracts (Frequency per 1,000 words)	Abstracts of Papers by English Expert Writers (Frequency per 1,000 words)
Hedges	89 (16.3)	67 (34.7)
Boosters	42 (7.7)	51 (26.4)
Attitude Markers	58 (10.6)	43 (22.3)
Self-mentions	63 (11.6)	29 (15.0)
Total	252 (46.2)	190 (98.3)

In terms of the overall usage characteristics of stance markers, both corpora contain 10 abstracts of empirical studies in the same field. Among them, the master's thesis abstract corpus has a total of 5,451 words, with stance markers appearing 252 times in total; after normalization, the frequency of use per 1,000 words is 46.2; The English expert writers abstract corpus had a total of 1,932 words, with stance markers appearing 190 times, resulting in a normalized frequency of 98.34 per thousand words—approximately 2.13 times that of the master's thesis abstracts. These results indicate that although the absolute total frequency of stance markers is higher in master's thesis abstracts, this difference essentially stems from the disparity in text length—master's thesis abstracts contain a greater volume of information per document and are longer in length, resulting in a more dispersed distribution of stance markers and lower efficiency of stance expression per unit of text; In contrast, abstracts of published papers, subject to strict journal length constraints, employ stance markers more efficiently and concentratedly to construct academic stances and facilitate interpersonal interaction. Consequently, the density of stance expression per unit of text is significantly higher, reflecting mature researchers' precise mastery of the rhetorical norms of academic genres.

As a core linguistic resource for achieving cautious expression and avoiding absolute assertions in academic writing, qualifiers were the most frequently used type of stance marker in both types of abstracts. Master's thesis abstracts used qualifiers 89 times, accounting for 35.3% of the total markers, with a standardized frequency of 16.3 per thousand words; In contrast, abstracts of papers by English expert writers used such qualifiers 67 times, accounting for 35.2% of the total markers, with a normalized frequency of 34.7 per thousand characters—approximately 2.13 times that of master's thesis abstracts. In terms of textual context, the use of vague qualifiers in both types of abstracts follows general academic writing conventions, primarily appearing in the literature review, research background, and discussion of results sections to facilitate an objective evaluation of existing research and a precise delimitation of the applicability of research conclusions. However, there are significant differences in their usage logic: vague qualifiers in master's thesis abstracts are concentrated in the literature review section, with expressions such as “mainly,” “primarily,” “relatively fewer,” and “may be limited” to broadly describe the shortcomings of existing research, thereby establishing the entry point for their own research; their usage is relatively loose and repetitive. In contrast, the use of vague qualifying terms in the abstracts of papers by English expert writers is more precise and restrained, concentrated primarily in the research background and discussion of results sections. Expressions such as “far less,” “minimal,” “few,” and “not always,” which not

only reflect academic caution but also more precisely define the scope of application for research conclusions. This avoids redundant and vague expressions, achieving a balance between academic rigor and expressive efficiency.

As core stance markers that reinforce the reliability of research conclusions and highlight the strength of evidence, differences in the use of intensifiers constitute one of the key distinctions between the two types of abstracts. Master's thesis abstracts used intensifiers 42 times, accounting for 16.7% of the total marked instances, with a standardized frequency of 7.7 per thousand characters; In contrast, abstracts of papers by English expert writers used intensifiers 51 times, accounting for 26.8% of the total marked instances. After standardization, the frequency per 1,000 characters reached 26.4 times—approximately 3.43 times that of master's thesis abstracts—significantly exceeding the latter in both absolute frequency and density per unit. In terms of textual usage contexts, the use of intensifiers in English expert writers abstracts is highly concentrated in the presentation of research results. Expressions such as “indicate,” “show,” “revealed,” “find,” and “significantly” are used to reinforce the reliability and evidential strength of research conclusions, reflecting the academic confidence of mature researchers in their own research methods, data, and conclusions. The usage contexts are precise, and the intensity is sufficient; In contrast, master's students' use of intensifiers is more conservative and dispersed, primarily appearing in the research background and conclusion sections. Their usage frequency is lower, and they are often paired with vague or qualifying expressions. This reflects not only the master's students' cautious attitude toward their own research conclusions but also indirectly highlights the objective gap in research scale and methodological rigor compared to mature researchers. Consequently, the intensity of intensifier usage is insufficient, failing to fully fulfill the function of reinforcing research conclusions.

As a core linguistic resource for expressing authors' value judgments, emotional leanings, and research attitudes, the use of attitude markers in the two types of abstracts exhibits the characteristic of “slightly higher absolute frequency in master's theses, but significantly higher density per unit in expert papers.” Master's thesis abstracts used attitude markers 58 times in total, accounting for 23.0% of the total markers, with a standardized frequency of 10.6 per thousand words; In contrast, abstracts of English expert writers papers used attitude markers 43 times, accounting for 22.6% of the total markers, with a standardized frequency of 22.3 per thousand words—approximately 2.10 times that of master's thesis abstracts. In terms of usage contexts and expressive logic, there are fundamental differences in the use of attitude markers between the two types of abstracts: in master's thesis abstracts, attitude markers are highly concentrated in the sections on research significance and pedagogical implications, with expressions such as “crucial,” “valuable guidance,” “effectively,” and “important” to repeatedly emphasize the theoretical value and practical significance of the research. Essentially, this is to meet the core writing requirement of a thesis to “highlight research contributions and demonstrate research value,” resulting in relatively vague, repetitive language with a strong subjective tone. In contrast, the use of attitude markers in abstracts by English expert writers is more restrained and precise, often scattered throughout the research background and discussion sections. They employ expressions such as “meaningful,” “challenging,” “fundamental,” and “reliable” to convey their stance. They avoid excessive subjective evaluation, instead demonstrating research value primarily through the innovation and reliability of the findings themselves. This strictly adheres to the writing norms of international journal articles—namely, “objectivity, neutrality, and evidence-based reasoning”—achieving a balance between the expression of attitude and academic objectivity.

As explicit markers of the author's identity that establish the author's presence and academic accountability, differences in the use of self-referential language represent one of the most prominent features distinguishing the two types of abstracts. Master's thesis abstracts

contained 63 instances of self-referential language, accounting for 25.0% of the total markers, with a standardized frequency of 11.6 instances per 1,000 words; In contrast, the abstracts of English expert writers papers contained 29 instances of self-referential language, accounting for 15.3% of the total markers, with a standardized frequency of 15.0 instances per thousand words—slightly higher than that of the master’s thesis abstracts. From the perspectives of textual context and expressive logic, there are fundamental differences in their usage: in master’s thesis abstracts, high-frequency self-referential expressions such as “this study,” “the study,” “the author,” and “this paper,” with a maximum of over ten occurrences per abstract. These terms span all sections of the text—including research design, results presentation, and conclusions—with the core objective of emphasizing the study’s subjectivity through explicit author presence, highlighting research contributions, and establishing preliminary academic identity. This loose and repetitive usage shifts the text’s focus from research content to the author’s presence; in contrast, self-referential language in English expert writers abstracts is used with extreme restraint, primarily consisting of “This study,” “We,” appearing only 2–3 times per abstract and concentrated in the research design at the beginning and the discussion section at the end. This strictly avoids excessive authorial presence, placing the text’s focus entirely on the research content itself. It aligns with the core rhetorical norms of international academic writing—namely, “de-subjectification” and “focusing on the research itself”—and achieves a balance between the author’s identity and the research content.

4. Conclusion

Based on Hyland’s four-part stance marker framework, this study compared the usage characteristics of stance markers in English abstracts of Chinese master’s theses and published international papers. It found that while the total number of stance markers in master’s abstracts was higher, their density per unit was only half that of expert abstracts, indicating issues of loose, redundant usage and low efficiency. In contrast, expert abstracts demonstrated greater precision and restraint in the use of all four types of stance markers, achieving a balance between academic rigor and expressive efficiency. The fundamental difference between the two text types lies in the distinction of academic status, writing purposes, and genre conventions. This study offers practical insights for teaching academic English abstract writing for master’s students. However, it is limited by a small sample size and narrow disciplinary coverage; future research could further expand the scope and depth of this study.

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