

A Comparative Study of Engagement Resources in the Abstracts of MA Theses in Linguistics in China and International Journal Articles

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Abstract

The abstract of a research paper is a core carrier of academic communication. Existing studies on engagement resources have mostly focused on cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary comparisons, while there remains a research gap in the refined cross-group comparison of engagement resources between abstracts of MA thesis in China and international journal articles. Based on the engagement system framework of Martin's Appraisal Theory, this study takes 20 English abstracts of the two types as research corpus, and conducts manual annotation and quantitative comparative analysis. The results show that the density of engagement resources in abstracts of international journal articles is 1.71 times that in MA Theses. The core difference lies in the attribute-acknowledge resources: abstracts of MA theses rely heavily on citations of authoritative literature, while abstracts of international journal articles focus more on their own research innovation. This study enriches the application of Appraisal Theory in academic discourse research, and can provide references for English academic writing and teaching for postgraduate students in China.

Keywords

Engagement Resources; Appraisal Theory; Research Paper Abstracts; Comparative Study; English for Academic Purposes Writing.

1. Introduction

A research paper abstract enables readers to quickly conduct literature retrieval and grasp the core content of an article, which is extremely important for the dissemination of academic viewpoints. Therefore, it is particularly crucial to enhance the attractiveness of abstracts and fulfill their persuasive function (Chen & Pan, 2020, p. 106). The realization of the persuasive function of abstracts cannot be separated from the interaction between the writer and the reader, and the engagement system can help us analyze the linguistic resources used by the writer to interact with the reader at the semantic level of discourse. Meng and Li (2010) compared the engagement resources in papers by Chinese and foreign writers, constructed an annotated corpus, and laid the methodological foundation for cross-group comparative research. Xu et al. (2020), Liu (2021), and Liu and Zhang (2023) respectively compared English-Chinese, traditional Chinese and Western medicine, and academic discourses of different disciplines, revealing the cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary distribution differences of engagement resources. However, existing studies have not carried out refined cross-group comparative analysis of engagement resources between abstracts of MA theses and international journal articles. Therefore, following the analytical framework of the engagement system, this study takes abstracts of Chinese MA these and international journal articles as corpus, and through quantitative annotation and comparative analysis, enriches the application of the engagement system of Appraisal Theory in the comparative study of academic discourse,

provides new empirical evidence for the study of interpersonal meaning in academic discourse, helps postgraduate students master the interpersonal meaning construction strategies of mainstream international academic writing, and provides a reference for the content optimization of postgraduate English academic writing teaching in universities [1,2,3,4,5,6].

2. Research Design

2.1. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework of this study adopts the engagement resource framework established by Martin. The Appraisal Theory, founded by Australian linguist Martin and his colleagues, outlines the linguistic realization patterns of interpersonal meaning through specific and detailed semantic description. According to Martin et al., the Appraisal Theory provides systematic resources for constructing interpersonal meaning, which can be divided into three subsystems: Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement. Among them, the Engagement subsystem is further divided into monoglossia and heteroglossia subsystems, which refer to "the engagement of attitudes with different degrees". The monoglossia subsystem only presents the writer's own stance, without mentioning the source of information or other possible viewpoints, while the heteroglossia subsystem can better reflect how the writer projects other voices into the discourse to state things. For this reason, the heteroglossia subsystem has received more attention from the academic community, and it can be further subdivided into several subsystems (Table 1). Realizing the co-negotiation of meaning between the speaker and the audience, and forming an alliance with the reader by constructing a dialogic space is an important channel to examine the interpersonal meaning of academic discourse [7,8,9].

Table 1

Primary Category	Secondary Category	Tertiary Category	Typical Markers
Dialogic Contraction	Disclaim	Deny	no, didn't, never
	Counter	yet, although, amazingly, but	
	Proclaim	Concur	naturally, of course, obviously, admittedly... [but], sure... [however]
	Pronounce		I contend, the facts of the matter are..., indeed
	Endorse		the report demonstrates/shows/proves that...
Dialogic Expansion	Entertain	-	perhaps, it's probable that, this may be, must, it seems to me, apparently
	Attribute	Acknowledge	Halliday argues that..., many Australians believe that..., it's said that..., the report states...
	Distance		Chomsky claimed to have shown that...

As shown in Table 1, the heteroglossic resources of the engagement system can be divided into two categories: contraction and expansion. The classification is based on "whether one or more words or discourses are used to consider other positions or voices at the dialogic level, or on the contrary, show the intention to challenge, avoid or restrict this scope". Contraction resources can be further divided into disclaim and proclaim, through which the writer indicates their opposition to a certain position or clearly puts forward their own viewpoints. Expansion resources can be further divided into entertain and attribute, through which the writer acknowledges the possibility of the existence of other voices or positions, or finds the source of a voice, so as to evade the discourse responsibility.

2.2. Research Questions

1) What are the differences in the use of engagement resources between bstracts of Chinese MA theses and international journal articles?

- 2) What are the specific differences in the use of the two core categories of engagement resources, namely dialogic contraction and dialogic expansion, between the two types of corpus?
- 3) What are the underlying reasons for the differences, such as academic writing norms, writer identity, and language proficiency?

2.3. Research Methods

This study constructed two small corpora: one consisting of abstracts from Chinese MA theses, and the other consisting of abstracts from international journal articles. Each corpus contains 10 English abstracts, all selected from the three-year period from 2023 to 2025. The MA thesis abstracts are selected from MA theses in the major of Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at five normal universities in Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Central, and Southwest China. The academic paper abstracts are from three SSCI-indexed journals: *Language Teaching*, *Applied Linguistics*, and *Modern Language Journal*. The MA thesis abstract corpus has a total of 38,044 characters, and the academic paper abstract corpus has a total of 13,828 characters. This study used manual annotation to label the engagement resources. Subsequently, the study calculated the total frequency, frequency of each category, frequency per 100 characters, and the proportion of each category. It then compared the differences between the two corpora, analyzed their underlying causes, drew conclusions, and provided implications for teaching.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Overall Comparison of Engagement Resource Use

Statistical results show that there is an extremely significant difference in the density of engagement resource use between the two corpora: the total frequency of engagement resources per 100 words in international journal articles abstracts is 3.05, while that in Chinese MA thesis abstracts is only 1.78, with the former being 1.71 times the latter.

This result clearly indicates that in abstract writing, writers of international journal articles are significantly more adept at using engagement resources to construct academic dialogues with readers and express their academic stances, resulting in richer and more dialogic interpersonal meaning construction in their abstracts. For example, international journal articles abstracts have an average of more than 3 stance expressions and interaction designs per 100 words, while MA these abstracts only have 1.78. The writing of MA theses abstracts focuses more on the objective restatement of research content, with a serious lack of understanding of the interpersonal dialogic function of academic abstracts, which is one of the core gaps between English abstracts of domestic MA postgraduates and mainstream international academic writing norms.

3.2. Comparative Analysis of Differences in the Use of Dialogic Contraction Resources

Dialogic contraction resources are the most frequently used engagement resources in both corpora, which fully aligns with the core function of academic paper abstracts: to strengthen the core stance of the research and the authority of the research findings by contracting the dialogic space, so that readers can quickly grasp the core value of the research. In Chinese MA thesis abstracts, the frequency of dialogic contraction resources per 100 words is 1.52, accounting for 85.39% of the total engagement resources; in international journal articles abstracts, the frequency of this category of resources per 100 words is 2.69, accounting for 88.20% of the total engagement resources. Both corpora take dialogic contraction resources as the core, reflecting the common norms of academic paper abstract writing.

The core difference between the two corpora lies in the use of disclaim resources: in Chinese MA thesis abstracts, the total frequency of deny and counter disclaim resources per 100 words is 0.40; in international journal articles abstracts, the total frequency of these two categories of resources per 100 words is 0.72, with the latter being 1.8 times the former. Writers of international journal articles are more adept at using disclaim resources to accurately construct research gaps. For example, expressions such as "However, far less is known about the specific mechanisms of..." and "Few learner corpora contain reliable and multi-dimensional evaluations of text proficiency" frequently appear in international journal articles abstracts, which accurately point out the gaps in existing research and make the innovation points of this study clear at a glance. In contrast, most Chinese MA thesis abstracts only briefly mention that "existing research has shortcomings", with extremely weak highlighting of research gaps, and fail to establish a clear logic for research innovation.

Proclaim resources are the most frequently used subcategory in both corpora, serving as the core means of stating the core content of the research in academic abstracts: in Chinese MA thesis abstracts, the frequency of proclaim-pronounce per 100 words is 1.12, accounting for 62.92% of the total engagement resources; in international journal articles abstracts, the frequency of this category of resources per 100 words is 1.97, accounting for 64.59% of the total engagement resources, with the latter being 1.76 times the former. The writers of international journal articles abstracts state their core research claims more intensively and directly. For example, they clearly state "This study investigates..." and "The results indicate that..." at the beginning, with extremely prominent core viewpoints. In contrast, in MA theses abstracts, pronounce expressions are scattered, and most of them just state the research process in a flat manner, failing to highlight their core research findings and theoretical contributions through concentrated pronounce expressions.

3.3. Comparative Analysis of Differences in the Use of Dialogic Expansion Resources

The proportion of dialogic expansion resources used in both corpora is relatively low, which is in line with the objective and rigorous stylistic characteristics of academic paper abstracts: academic abstracts need to clearly state the core findings of the research, rather than excessively opening up the dialogic space, so the use of dialogic expansion resources is strictly limited in both corpora. However, from the disassembly of specific subcategories, the difference between the two corpora is extremely significant, which is also one of the core differences between the two types of corpus: in Chinese MA theses abstracts, the frequency of dialogic expansion resources per 100 words is 0.26, accounting for 14.61% of the total engagement resources; in international journal articles abstracts, the frequency of this category of resources per 100 words is 0.36, accounting for 11.80% of the total engagement resources. Although the overall proportion is not high in both, the subcategory differences are extremely large.

The core difference is concentrated in the attribute-acknowledge resources: in Chinese MA theses abstracts, the frequency of attribute-acknowledge per 100 words is 0.24, accounting for 92.31% of the dialogic expansion resources; in international journal articles abstracts, the frequency of this category of resources per 100 words is only 0.05, accounting for 13.89% of the dialogic expansion resources, with the former being 4.8 times the latter. This result clearly reflects the essential difference in the academic argumentation logic between the two types of writers: in English abstract writing, Chinese MA postgraduates rely heavily on attribute-acknowledge resources, and construct the theoretical basis and legitimacy of their own research by extensively citing previous authoritative studies and classical theories. Expressions such as "Based on Hyland's (2005a) interpersonal metadiscourse model, this study..." and "Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998) proposed four categories of language indicators" frequently appear in MA theses abstracts, which completely anchor their own research on existing

authoritative studies. In contrast, attribute-acknowledge resources are rarely used in international journal articles abstracts. Within the limited space of the abstract, they completely focus on their own research findings and theoretical innovations, with extremely high transmission efficiency of core research contributions.

Entertain resources are rarely used in both corpora: the frequency of entertain resources per 100 words in Chinese MA theses abstracts is 0.02, and that in international journal articles abstracts is 0.05, with only 1 occurrence in each. This is fully in line with the objective and rigorous stylistic characteristics of academic paper abstracts: academic abstracts need to state research findings clearly and definitely, rather than using vague modal words to leave room for uncertainty. Therefore, the use of entertain resources is strictly limited in both corpora, and there is no significant difference between the two in this regard.

4. Conclusion

This study systematically compares the characteristics of engagement resource use between Chinese MA theses abstracts and international journal articles abstracts, and reveals the core differences in the construction of interpersonal meaning in academic discourse between the two types of writers. The study finds that writers of international journal articles use engagement resources more accurately and intensively, and are more adept at highlighting research innovations, which is in line with mainstream international academic writing norms; in contrast, Chinese MA postgraduates use engagement resources in a single and scarce manner, and rely excessively on citations of authoritative literature, with an obvious gap from international academic writing norms. This study provides empirical references for the optimization of English academic writing and teaching for postgraduate students in China. Future research can expand the corpus scale and carry out more systematic cross-disciplinary comparative studies.

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