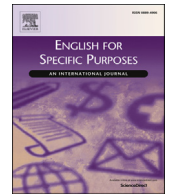


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Evaluative language and interactive discourse in journal article highlights



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ABSTRACT

Today many academic publications are not only descriptive and evaluative, but also promotion-oriented. Numerous studies have examined how journal article authors persuade readers by deploying discourse markers to present their arguments, and how they acknowledge the presence of and connection to readers. While studies have examined various sections of published articles; however, a novel genre with a periphery status, highlights preceding many journal articles, has received relatively less attention. To address this void, the present study analysed the highlights from 240 journal articles from both the soft disciplines and hard science using mixed methods. Textual analysis, keyword analysis and the analysis of writers' stance and engagement revealed that different disciplines have different highlight preferences, and found contradictions with the conventional assumptions regarding disciplinary differences in personal pronoun in the making of claims in the soft and hard disciplines. Moreover, in the questionnaire survey with both journal editors and writers, they generally acknowledged the promotional value of highlights, but held different and sometimes even contradictory views on their necessity and actual effect. This paper demonstrates that highlights, although an attendant academic genre, can support the academic stance of the main paper and a credible scholarly image, while promoting relevant disciplinary values, beliefs and conventions.

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1. Introduction

Since the notion of "Publish or Perish" has become a prevalent doctrine among scholars academic publication for researchers has become not only obligatory, but also extremely competitive (Breivega, Dahl, & Fløttum, 2002), and has increasingly been colonised by promotional cultures (Fairclough, 1995). Not only are scholars subject to the managerial modes of corporations to compete against each other for resources (Furedi, 2010), they also have to publish their work to make it visible. At the same time, academic journal publishers work hard to attract potential authors and expand their readership. No doubt, academia has become a highly competitive enterprise (Furedi, 2010), which has in turn led to an increase in the use of promotional language over time (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Okamura & Shaw, 2014). Thus, how to promote publications is a major concern for institutions of higher education, researchers and journal publishers.

One novel way to increase the visibility of articles is to require the authors to write bullet-pointed *highlights* of their articles to hook the readers. These highlights are "a short collection of bullet points that convey the core findings and provide

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readers with a quick textual overview of the article. These three to five bullet points describe the essence of the research (e.g., results or conclusions) and highlight what is distinct about it" (Elsevier, 2014). The author guidelines for manuscript submission indicate that highlights should be submitted as a separate file, and should total less than 85 characters including spaces. Highlights have only been recently introduced since 2010 and increasingly journals have adopted this policy, while Elsevier remains the sole source in the present study.¹ Interestingly, currently highlights only appear in the on-line version of a journal's table of contents and research articles, and not in the downloaded version. A typical example of an article's highlights is as follows (Gravelle & Sivey, 2010):

- We model two hospitals which have regulated prices and compete on quality.
- We examine changes in the level of information about hospital quality.
- Increasing information will increase quality if hospital costs are similar.
- Increasing information will decrease quality if hospital costs are very different.
- Welfare effects depend on ex-ante or ex-post assumptions about quality information.

This online device serves the unique purpose of attracting potential readers to broaden the visibility of the journal articles. Highlights can help readers to easily locate the most relevant papers from hundreds of similar search results. Compared to online articles without highlights, those with them may stand out, encouraging readers to read the full text, and thus helping to broaden their visibility and promote the authors' research in the Internet environment.

The writing of highlights has multi-faceted purposes for not only authors but also publishers. First, the highlights accompanying the manuscript can be used for an initial screening by editors and reviewers attempting to assess the value of a manuscript and could therefore contribute to an editor's decision to desk reject a paper or send it for review. Similarly, the highlights can help reviewers formulate an initial impression of a manuscript. For journal publishers, a look at the highlights may not only help readers to quickly locate newly-published articles or journal article abstracts from a mass of publications, but may also attract potential readers to purchase full access. Highlights may also be equally important for readers who do not have full access to the article and need some assurance that the paper will contain the desired information. Well-constructed, closely- and ideally-linked highlights can concisely tell a story about a paper and help readers to quickly gain a better sense of the entire study. In other words, highlights potentially serve as a screening device for readers to determine whether or not they should continue reading the abstract or access the full paper. Thus, how to write effective highlights to allow editors, reviewers and readers to see the value of a paper is a critically important task for writers.

Apart from their value as a screening device, highlights also provide an opportunity for authors to establish their voice and help to position themselves in their communities. Highlights not only influence how writers construct themselves and their arguments and how they create and disseminate their research, but also promote different forms of interaction between writers and readers (Hewings, 2012; Lea & Jones, 2011). Although writers' stance and engagement with their audience have been extensively explored in research articles, as has promotional language in various areas of academic discourse, highlights have largely been ignored, and little is known about how they might be similar or different in the soft and hard disciplinary communities.

Despite the importance of these short texts, they have received relatively little attention from researchers due to their novelty and implicit status. In addition, the author guidelines appear to do little to prompt authors to engage in promoting their research through their highlights. The lack of an explicit statement of the purposes of promoting research and the journals in the guidelines can cause a mismatch between what the guidelines say and what the authors actually write. Thus, the present study on how authors attempt to draw attention to their accomplishments by constructing an effective highlight; what elements could be reported in highlights; how lexico-grammatical features are deployed to reach the communicative purposes with limited words; and how editors and writers view these texts, could hopefully shed light on the promotional language expressed in these brief and less attended academic texts. A related goal here is also to help research article authors write effective highlights.

2. Literature review

2.1. Promotional genres in academic discourse

Nowadays, academic discourse is apparently characterised by self-advocatory and boosting language to establish the credibility of the writer and the research to potential readers (or customers) (Swales, 2004). Many academic genres have indeed become very promotion-oriented texts (Askehave, 2007). One major feature of promotional language in academic discourse is that it may look descriptive, while in fact deploying generic values of evaluation to persuade, elaborately mixed with deliberate choices of rhetorical devices to promote the product, service or publication, and to attract clients' attention (Bhatia, 2004a; Fairclough, 1995).

¹ All the highlight samples in the study come from journal papers published by Elsevier and I am so thankful for the journals' and their authors' contributions.

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