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Direct or indirect? Critical or uncritical? Evaluation in Chinese English-major MA thesis literature reviews



Jianping Xie

School of English and Education, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, 178 Waihuang Donglu, Guangzhou Higher Education Mega Center, Guangzhou 510006, China

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is a “persuasive endeavor” (Hyland, 2011, p.171), and evaluation plays an important role in enhancing such persuasiveness. However, evaluation poses challenges for novice L2 writers. Previous studies on Chinese EFL learners’ evaluation in English academic writing generated only partial and inconsistent findings, and generally neglected the subgenre of thesis literature reviews. Applying Martin and White’s (2005) full appraisal framework, this study conducts a detailed textual analysis, complemented by a quantitative perspective, of evaluation in Chinese MA thesis literature reviews of Applied English Linguistics. Results present a complicated picture which could not be simply labeled in any one of the binary pairs as direct-indirect, critical-uncritical, or assertive-unassertive. For instance, opposite to the common stereotypical view, Chinese students prefer to express evaluation more in an explicit than an implicit way; they encode dominantly positive evaluation but tend to stand neutrally when referring to other voices; they tend to make compelling claims yet also frequently mitigate their assertiveness. Various cognitive and social factors contribute to such complexity. Findings of this study enable a comprehensive understanding of advanced Chinese EFL learners’ evaluation in English academic writing, and provide implications for the teaching of English academic writing.

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1. Introduction

In the past two decades, a huge number of studies (e.g., Hunston, 1994; Hyland, 2005; Bondi & Mauranen, 2003; Kong, 2006; Hood, 2004, 2010) have revealed that academic writing is a “persuasive endeavor” (Hyland, 2011, p. 171), in which evaluation plays an important role in enhancing such persuasiveness. The academic writer takes advantage of various evaluative resources such as *reporting verbs* (Thompson & Ye, 1991), *hedges and boosters* (Hyland, 2000), *modality* (White, 2003), *directives* (Hyland, 2002a), and *attitude markers* (Conrad & Biber, 2000) to show their attitudes, opinions, or stances towards the construed propositions or research entities and to interact with the readers, so as to persuade the readers of the validity and soundness of their knowledge claim. Hyland and Diani (2009) even said that “among all the activities of the academy, what academics mainly do is evaluate” (p. 5).

However, constructing evaluative stances poses a big challenge for L2 novice writers. Actually, the lack of evaluation and critical stance in novice academic writers’ texts is a major concern that has been repeatedly voiced in the literature (e.g., Feak & Swales, 2009; Hart, 1998; Swales & Lindemann, 2002). Moreover, L2 novice writers themselves also perceive evaluation as a

E-mail address: zdqxjp@163.com.

challenging task in academic writing (Hood, 2004). Therefore, how L2 novice writers express evaluation in English academic writing is a topic worth studying. Drawing insights from Thompson and Hunston's (2000) definition and oriented to written academic discourse, this study defines *evaluation* in a broad sense as the writer's viewpoints on, emotions, attitudes, and positions towards the entities or propositions that are explicitly or implicitly encoded in the written academic texts.

The ways in which Chinese EFL learners express their evaluation in English academic writing have aroused tremendous interest among researchers inside and outside China in the past decades. One strand of studies looked into the rhetorical features in terms of directness or criticality that Chinese EFL learners display when expressing evaluation, and different results have been found. Some studies (e.g., Hinkel, 1997; Matalene, 1985; Scollon, 1991) suggested that Chinese students favor an indirect and less critical way to express evaluations in English essay writing. Chinese students also seem to be prone to conform with academic authority (e.g., O'Connell & Jin, 2001; Yang, 2001). However, there are also studies (e.g., Hu, Brown & Brown, 1982; Allison, 1995) indicating that Chinese EFL learners could be as direct and critical as native English-speakers (NS) in showing attitudes or opinions.

The other line of literature focused on Chinese EFL learners' employment of specific evaluative resources in English academic writing, among which hedging is intensively studied. Feng and Zhou (2007) compared the use of hedges in the abstracts of Chinese English-major undergraduates' theses and NS writers' research articles, and the results suggested that Chinese students tend to use only a restricted variety of hedging expressions and they appear assertive in claim-making. Similar findings were also found in other studies such as Milton and Hyland (1999) and Xu (2011). The category of stance markers is another popular resource in the literature. Chen's (2012) contrastive analysis of epistemic stance in argumentative essays between NS and Chinese EFL writers showed the latter employed a more limited range of devices to express epistemic modality and tended to make much stronger assertions. Wu (2011) found that Chinese students' assertiveness also resulted from their overuse of some stance modals like *can*, *must*, and *should* that are strong and forceful in tone. On the other hand, Chinese EFL learners tended to use more attitudinal stance markers than NS expert writers do (Jin, 2010; Xu, 2011), favoring direct and explicit constructions such as *I/we (ADV) + stance verb* and *I/we (ADV) be/seem/feel + stance adjective* (Zhao & Wei, 2010).

It is contended that evaluative meanings are not just encoded at the lexico-grammatical level of language but also at the discourse-semantic level that permeates in discourse, and a thorough understanding of evaluation can only be obtained by exploring at the both levels. Doubtlessly, previous research presents some features of Chinese EFL learners' evaluation in English academic writing, however, most of them explored the evaluative meanings carried at the lexico-grammatical level and neglected the implicitly encoded ones at the discourse level, thus revealing only partial, discrete, and inconsistent findings. From the literature, it is also obvious that most prior studies focused on the academic genres of argumentative essays, research articles, or undergraduate thesis abstracts, and generally neglected the subgenre of postgraduate literature reviews, in which evaluation plays a critical role in achieving the communicative purpose of convincing the reader of the worth of the writer's study (Bunton, 2002).

Therefore, this study investigates evaluation in MA thesis literature reviews written by mainland Chinese students of Applied English Linguistics. The main objective of this study is to achieve a comprehensive and thorough view of how advanced Chinese EFL learners express evaluation in English academic writing, hoping to shed light on the teaching of English academic writing.

2. Theoretical framework: appraisal theory

The theoretical framework applied in this study is appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005), which consists of three subsystems: *attitude*, *graduation*, and *engagement*.

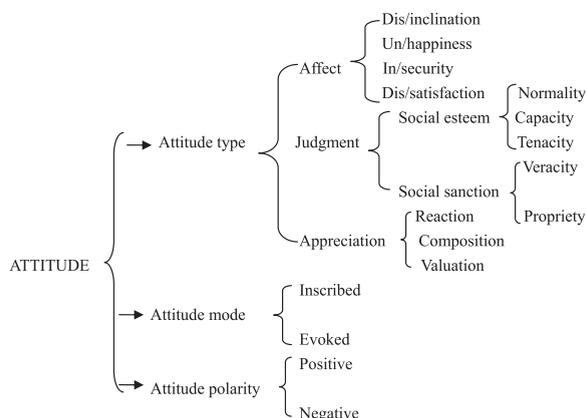


Fig. 1. The network of ATTITUDE (adapted from Martin & White, 2005).

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