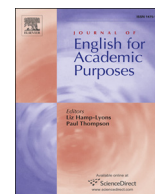


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Common words, uncommon uses: The most “discoursally significant” language edits in a corpus of Chinese medical manuscripts[☆]

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ABSTRACT

With developing countries publishing more research and with China poised to become the world leader in scholarly publications by 2020 (The Royal Society, 2011), there is a widespread pedagogical need for language learning and language editing services, especially for Chinese first-language (L1) researchers in the field of English for Research Publication (ERP). The purpose of this data-driven study was to compare an edited and unedited corpus of 52 medical research manuscripts prepared by Chinese-speaking doctors for journal submission, in order to produce a frequency wordlist for each corpus. A log likelihood goodness-of-fit statistic was first used to compare the two wordlists to compile a list of words representing the most significant differences in frequencies, followed by a qualitative analysis to determine the functions of these words. Apart from the most frequently underused words being function words like *the* and *of*, the majority of significant edits were made involving common words that could be categorized into three main discourse-level functions: register (*that*), stance (*can, has/have been*), and discourse organizers (*although, as, this*). It is thus important for materials and course developers as well as non-English speaking researchers to pay special attention to these simple words laden with discourse and rhetorical functions.

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1. Introduction

An indication of the intense competition in the globalized knowledge economy, mounting pressures are being placed on graduate students and academics to publish in “international” journals (typically in English), often as strict requirements for graduation, promotion and research funding (Li, 2014a; Lillis & Curry, 2010, ch. 4). In non-English speaking regions, this has led to the parallel increase in the (English) language editing industry, whose involvement in the research article (RA) production process is as occluded as it is essential, but has long remained unrecognized (Matarese, 2013a, p. 259). And with China currently the second largest publisher of research (Salager-Meyer, 2014) and projected to overtake the USA in scholarly publication before the year 2020 (The Royal Society, 2011, p. 43), a considerable amount of time and resources will be channeled into revising the language of Chinese native speaking researchers, which will impact on journal editors, language editors, as well as academic writing educators and trainers in both the public and private sectors. It is in this light that China

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has been described as a “‘market’ yet to be explored by EAP practitioners” where ERP writing training and editorial services are “sorely needed” (Li, 2014a).

Though several studies have been published on common problems with Non- Native Speaker language usage or the linguistic roles and traces of editors on research papers prior to journal submission, these studies tend to have relied on qualitative methodologies (e.g., Belcher, 2007; Dueñas, 2012; Li, 2006; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Martín, Rey-Rocha, Burgess, & Moreno, 2014; Okamura, 2006). Furthermore, while there has been substantial research on macro-level discourse features of research articles following Swales’ 1990 classic *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (e.g., Basturkmen, 2009; Bruce, 2008; Lim, 2012; Loi, 2010; Peacock, 2002; Samraj, 2002, 2013), there has been comparably little dealing with the micro-level features, as Lee and Chen (2009) point out. This study moves towards addressing this lacuna as the first corpus-based study quantifying the most frequent and most discursively “significant” language editing interventions to pre-submission medical research papers from Chinese researchers.

Specifically, this study employed corpus linguistic methods to determine and categorize the most frequent and most statistically significant edits made in a corpus of 52 medical research manuscripts, written by Chinese-speaking medical researchers in East Asia. By categorizing the emerging patterns of editing interventions in this small medical corpus, it is hoped that more refined data will be made available to help “forge the link” between English for Academic Purposes research and pedagogy (Chan, 2009) and contribute to the development of teaching materials and curricula for research writing to make science researchers, especially in the expanding Chinese sphere of scholarship, more proficient and independent in their research writing.

In one sense, this study follows in the tradition of error analysis (Corder, 1967) and contrastive linguistics (Lado, 1957), and relates to Selinker (1972) observation that the L2 learner’s language production in speech or writing can be seen to represent the state of development or “interlanguage” of the learner. An analysis of error types or nonstandard usage can thus help identify the learner’s developmental stage and help distinguish “mistakes” (random and performance-related) from “errors” that are systemic and indicative of the developmental stage (Corder, 1967). Although the writing analyzed in this study is not single-authored and does not represent a process of text formation or interlanguage development of a single individual, patterns of the most frequent edits across the texts and authors can be similarly attributed to factors such as (Chinese) L1 interference and a lack of awareness of the linguistic or rhetorical norms and standards of the discourse community, such as the use of vocabulary and phrasing for the highly formalized genre of medical research articles. The term “errors” will thus be replaced in this study with “edits”, unless specifically describing instances of incorrect usage (grammatical or lexical).

Nonetheless, the issues of “standard usage” and English as the dominant international language of scientific research are not without controversy. On the one hand, English as the common international language of research enables more people to contribute to and access this ever increasing bank of knowledge; on the other, there is the added time and economic burden for non-native speakers (NNS) to learn English and produce English manuscripts. It has long been recognized that the number of native speakers (NS) of English is rapidly being dwarfed by that of NNS (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 1997) and that non-standard varieties of English need to be both recognized and accepted by non-error-based approaches to understanding L2, such as Written English as a Lingua Franca, World Englishes, and translanguaging (Heng Hartse & Kubota, 2014). However, even though there have been calls for editorial tolerance and accommodation (Belcher, 2007; Benfield & Howard, 2000) and even though some well-known L2 scholars have implemented, or “codemeshed” (Canagarajah, 2012, p.125), non-standard varieties of English and expression into their published works, it is not at all clear when a wide-ranging loosening of language norms, especially for less well-known scholars, will happen (Kourilova-Urbanczik, 2012).

An increasing volume of literature has been shedding light on the linguistic difficulties and sometimes prejudices suffered by NNS researchers in their efforts to publish in international journals. This research has been published on both sides of the academic divide: in both the social sciences (e.g., applied linguistics) where the focus is on the sociological or linguistic analysis of texts and text production, as well as the hard sciences where the focus is on practical training of junior or NNS researchers. Specifically, studies relating to applied linguistics have focused on the collaborative networks of NNS researchers in the production of RAs (Burroughs-Boenisch, 2003; Lillis & Curry, 2006), author difficulties and strategies (Belcher, 2007; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005; Li, 2014b; Okamura, 2006), author education and training (Cargill & O’Connor, 2006; Cargill, O’Connor, & Li, 2012), journal editor and peer reviewer attitudes and comments (Hewings, 2006), language editors’ beliefs and practices (Harwood, Austin, & Macaulay, 2009; Willey & Tanimoto, 2013), as well as the interaction between language editors and authors (Lillis & Curry, 2010, 2006; Willey & Tanimoto, 2013). On the other hand, studies relating to the hard sciences have appeared in science journals written by either journal editors, seasoned science researchers or language professionals with the purpose of offering practical and instrumental advice to practicing researchers on RA language usage and presentation issues. Topics and areas of advice have included writing strategies (Benfield & Feak, 2006; Ludbrook, 2007; Sharp, 2002; Shashok, 2001), language use (Benfield & Howard, 2000; Gopen & Swan, 1990; Kourilova-Urbanczik, 2012), manuscript preparation and avoidance of common errors (Bordage, 2001; Byrne, 2000; Ezeala, Nweke, & Ezeala, 2013; Welch, 1999), as well as insight into the peer review process and reviewers’ perspectives (Garmel, 2010; Hoppin, 2002; Kourilova, 1998; Ortinou, 2011; Provenzale & Stanley, 2006; Shashok, 2008).

This study can also be situated within the growing research of language professionals contributing to the academic literature in both the social and hard sciences. Several descriptions can be found of specialists who help shape the language or content of RAs, such as “shapers”, “proofreaders”, “editors”, “language professionals”, “authors’ editors”, “professional editors” (Harwood et al., 2009, p. 182). The term preferred by Lillis and Curry (2010) is “literacy broker” as it captures the power and commercial senses of a mediator in the process of knowledge production and publication. An indication of the growing

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