



## Metadiscourse repertoire of L1 Mandarin undergraduates writing in English: A cross-contextual, cross-disciplinary study

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### A B S T R A C T

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This article presents a qualitative, comparative study of metadiscourse in the academic writing of two groups of undergraduate students working in two different disciplines. The groups of students were: 1) Native speakers of Mandarin studying in China through the medium of English; 2) Native speakers of Mandarin studying in the UK through the medium of English. For each group of students, we examined writing undertaken in two undergraduate disciplinary courses: Literary Criticism and Translation Studies. Our aim was to extend research into English writing by L1 Mandarin speakers, and to identify patterns of difference and similarity both between educational contexts and between disciplines. Results suggest that patterns of metadiscourse use in our corpus are associated with both disciplinary and contextual factors, but that contextual factors may have a stronger effect than disciplinary factors. For our data, local institutional culture seems to have a noticeable influence on student writers' use of metadiscourse.

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### 1. Introduction

Our study examines writing in two disciplines, Literary Criticism and Translation Studies.

The claim that writing in different disciplines varies systematically along a range of macro and micro dimensions of text is well established; Hyland (2000) and Silver (2006) are book length treatments of the issue. Becher and Trowler (2001) argue that "it is... through the medium of language that some of the more fundamental distinctions [between disciplines] emerge" (p. 46). Hyland (2009, p. 7) argues that "Overwhelmingly ... it is *disciplinary* variation which underlies most specificity [in academic texts]:". The reason suggested is that academic disciplines are language using communities which vary in their practices; texts produced by members of disciplinary communities are the concrete realisation of those varied practices.

Becher and Trowler (2001) offer a well-known framework for understanding similarities and differences between academic disciplines, using the two continua of Hard ↔ Soft and Pure ↔ Applied. Under such a scheme, Literary Criticism might be categorised as 'soft pure' and Translation Studies as 'soft applied'. The two disciplines are different enough for texts within them to show variation on the basis of discipline, but not so different as to make it impossible to obtain comparable samples of texts.

Various studies compare texts from disciplines which are similarly related. For example Bondi and Mazzi (2008) take a lexical approach, comparing the use of lexical items relating to epistemological constructs in Economics writing and History writing. Bruce (2010) takes a genre based approach, looking at undergraduate essays in Sociology and in English from social and cognitive perspectives. He finds differences in a range of textual resources used, for example that Sociology essays include more metadiscoursal mapping at the beginning of the essay, and that English essays make more use of direct quotation to

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express arguments (2010, p. 162). Samraj (2008) compares masters theses from a wider range of disciplines, looking first at macro organisation and then specifically at first person pronoun usage and at citations. She finds that first person pronoun usage is more frequent in Philosophy than in either Biology or Linguistics, and that its use tends to realise different functions in the writing of each discipline. For example, Philosophy writers tend to use it to present their arguments, whereas Biology writers seem to use it to portray themselves as an agent in a research process (2008, pp. 63–64).

These studies make clear arguments to the effect that academic writing varies systematically across disciplines, but seem to pay less attention to the possible effects of context. Our own study, in contrast, investigates context as a possible factor accounting for variation. Our writers share the same macro-cultural and linguistic background, but their undergraduate English writing in either discipline takes place in, and has developed in, different educational contexts: Bohai University, PRC, and Warwick University, UK. As we argue below, this would appear to have an influence on their writing.

Our model of context in this paper is a local one; we refer to the specific institutions and departments in which the writing of these undergraduates developed. Lea and Street (1999, 2006) argue that academic writing should be seen as a highly situated practice; it is important to note that they refer not only to situation within disciplines, but also within specific places, times, and micro-communities. They argue that tutors' expectations of student writing are shaped by departmental and institutional priorities as well as by disciplinary practices, and that these expectations are in turn likely to impact on the writing which students produce. Scholars investigating the writing needs of first year undergraduate students (e.g. Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Murray, 2010) argue that students and instructors should be explicit about (and, if necessary, critical towards) the literacy practices that are valued in the specific institutional contexts in which writing takes place.

The language analysis perspective that we use for our comparisons is that of Metadiscourse. We argue that this perspective is a highly suitable one to investigate both disciplinary and contextual variation in the writing of undergraduate students. The concept of metadiscourse offers "a broad perspective on the way that academic writers engage their readers; shaping their propositions to create convincing, coherent texts by making language choices in social contexts peopled by readers, prior experiences, and other texts" (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 167). Various researchers have argued that the management of such interaction is particularly challenging for undergraduate students (Ivanic & Simpson, 1992; Mitchell, 1994; White, 1998) and for second language writers (Cadman, 1997; Gao, 2007; Hu, 2005). Metadiscourse is a linguistic resource through which the writer may project their voice or, more deterministically, through which a writer's voice may find itself constructed. For a writer with a broad repertoire of metadiscourse at their disposal, we suggest that these linguistic resources permit an intentional manifestation of stance in text. Yet for a writer without such a repertoire, the fact of being constrained to limited resources may construct for them a stance and voice which they would not intentionally have chosen.

A number of studies have been conducted on metadiscourse in undergraduate essays written in English (Cheng, 1994; Cheng & Steffensen, 1996; Shi, 2004; Tang & John, 1999; Wu, 2007). However few studies focus specifically on the writing of Chinese students, and those which do (e.g. Deng, 2006; Jin, 2004; Liu, 2007; Luo, 2003; Xiong, 2007; Zhao, 2003) tend to concentrate specifically on textual conjunctions and transitions rather than on the full range of metadiscourse functions. Our own work, in contrast, is based on a model of metadiscourse which weights interpersonal features of metadiscourse equally with textual organisation features. This allows us to provide a fuller picture of the writing of Chinese English medium undergraduates than has tended to be shown by previous research.

A range of studies support the notion that metadiscourse, as a key indicator of author presence in text and author positioning within an academic community, is a useful perspective from which to investigate variation across disciplines. For example Hyland (2009) discusses a range of metadiscourse features which, he argues, are particularly fruitful to throw light on variation in disciplinary writing. He discusses each feature in turn, showing that they occur with different frequencies, in different positions, and realise different functions, in the writing of a range of disciplines. Lafuente Millan (2010) focuses very specifically on self mentions, comparing exclusive first person markers in the writing of four disciplines. He too argues not only that the frequency of this feature varies, but also its function varies across disciplines. He concludes that "the results presented here suggest that the way writers construct the authorial self varies according to the specific epistemological and social norms of their own disciplinary communities" (2010, p. 153).

In this paper, we use metadiscourse as a prism to examine variation in author voice in two disciplines and two contexts. We aim to contribute to both disciplinary and contextual research on student writing, but more importantly, to bring the two perspectives together.

## 2. Research questions

Our research questions were: 1. *What were the similarities and differences of metadiscourse use between writing in the two contexts studied?* and 2. *Within each context, what were the differences of metadiscourse use between the two disciplines studied?* Taken together, these questions not only allow an overall comparison between the two contexts, but also throw light on the relative importance of discipline and of educational context in influencing the writing of the students whose work we examined.

## 3. A corpus based approach

Our study takes a corpus based approach and is representative of two contemporary trends in corpus based work.

First, our work involves a small, specific purposes corpus. Early corpus research had the goal of gaining insight into the language as a whole and in order to do this constructed very large corpora (Sinclair, 1991, 1994). In more recent years, there

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