



An exploration of Chinese EFL learner's deployment of grammatical metaphor: Learning to make academically valued meanings

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Abstract

This article discusses the semiotic resources of incongruence that Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners use when writing academic texts. Using Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the theoretical framework, this study examines a cross-sectional sampling of Chinese EFL learners' deployment of grammatical metaphor (GM), a key linguistic resource for achieving academic discourse. Although GM occurs across languages, most research focuses on its use in English among first language learners and its effect on language through the reconstruction of dynamic meanings statically, through increased degrees of technicality, and logical reasoning within the clause. Furthermore, much of the research only accounts for full and appropriate deployment of GM, disregarding incomplete or intermediate realizations as 'mistakes' attributed to normal learning processes. The present study, however, aims to expand the theoretical understandings for mapping GM in second and foreign language learning contexts, seeking to identify how such 'mistakes' may contribute to and even achieve the linguistic effects of GM necessary for making meanings valued in academic discourse.

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Introduction

As students learn to make meanings in increasingly varied contexts, they must develop the tools for construing language appropriate to the discourse communities in which they wish to interact. One of the most critical discourses to which learners of English must gain access is that of the academy (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008). Academic discourse and, more specifically, academic written discourse, is distinct from the language of everyday social interactions. In general, academic writing is characterized as lexically dense and authoritative, with reasoning occurring within the clause rather than between the clauses (Halliday, 1998; Hyland, 2009; Martin, 1992; Schleppegrell, 2004). It is a move away from everyday spoken language that tends to describe events with the action focused in the verbal groups through a 'congruent' or natural representation of language (Halliday, 1998). Written discourse requires these dynamic sequences of events to be reconstructed incongruently as static, synoptic entities that can be systematically organized, compared, contrasted, and evaluated (Halliday, 2004).

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The emergence of incongruence in the ontogenesis of language typically occurs in late childhood and early adolescence for L1 users of English. This move from everyday, concrete language toward abstract, incongruent interactions coincides with shifts toward written modes of learning characteristic of this age group's educational curriculum (Christie, 2002; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Halliday, 1993, 1994, 1998). Systemic Functional Linguistics (hereinafter, SFL) research has been particularly concerned with this language shift and its impact on learner development and apprenticeship into increasingly sophisticated discourse communities.

SFL is a theoretical framework that views language as a semiotic system, describing grammar as functional rather than a formal set of rules to apply and restrict, thus foregrounding the idea that language is fundamentally about making meanings (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). By focusing on the tools necessary for construing language appropriate to various social contexts or genres, SFL has identified a key linguistic resource for construing academic, written language – that of *grammatical metaphor* (Christie, 2002; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Schleppegrell, 2004; Taverniers, 2003). Grammatical metaphor (hereafter, GM) acts as a kind of linguistic power tool that functions to complete multiple tasks through a careful repackaging of the grammar. GM has the power to transform dynamic, grammatically intricate language into static, lexically dense entities, relating those entities to one another by absorbing logical relations between clauses to within the clause, burying the reasoning to strengthen arguments by presenting them as ‘unassailable facts’ (Martin, 1985, p. 26; see also Chen & Foley, 2004; Halliday, 1998; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Martin, 1992; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Although the resource of GM is found across languages, most research has focused on its use within English among first language learners (e.g., Christie, 2002; Christie & Derewianka, 2008; Taverniers, 2003, 2006; Torr & Simpson, 2003). Recent studies have expanded beyond this context, examining its use in English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (Schleppegrell, 2004) and German as a Foreign Language learners (Byrnes, 2009; Ryshina-Pankova, 2010). These descriptions of learner development facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of how GM emerges in second and foreign language learning and in turn, how learner syllabi need to adjust to incorporate these critical markers of language development (see also Achugar & Colombi, 2008; Byrnes, 2011, 2012; Byrnes, Maxim, & Norris, 2010; Colombi, 2002, 2006; Ryshina-Pankova, 2011).

The present study aims to contribute to this field of research by examining Chinese EFL learner GM development. It seeks to expand current understandings of GM by examining how effectively learners deploy the resource to achieve academically valued texts. This article reports on a cross-sectional sampling of Chinese university learners, analyzing and comparing the effect and value of GM in the texts written by first and fourth year students as they seek to make meanings appropriate to the academic genre of Discussions.

Academic discourse through the lens of SFL

In viewing language as fundamentally about meaning-making, SFL builds on Saussure's (1916) understandings of paradigmatic and syntagmatic ordering of language by identifying patterns that express “what *goes together with* what” (i.e., syntagmatic relations) and the optional orderings that demonstrate “what *could go instead of* what” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 22, original emphasis). The unfolding of a series of paradigmatic and syntagmatic choices construes *texts* (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). Thus, as language users seek to make meanings and produce *texts* in increasingly varied contexts, their repertoire of paradigmatic and syntagmatic choices must continually expand.

The expanding semiotic choices inherent to language are understood in terms of stratification. The interplay and tensions made possible through this stratal relationship are significant for mapping learners' advancement into the more sophisticated, abstract language necessary for success in schooling. Similar to Hjelmslev's (1961) understandings, SFL conceives of language as being organized across strata of expression and content (Martin & Rose, 2008). The content plane can further be understood within layers of wordings (lexicogrammar) and meaning (semantics).

Across this stratified system of language, SFL identifies three general components of language or *metafunctions* that are used to construe and organize human experience (i.e., ideational), enact social relationships (i.e., interpersonal) and construct the text (i.e., textual) (Halliday, 2009; Martin & Rose, 2003). Following Martin and Rose's (2003, 2008) framework, this stratified model of language can further be examined in relationship to the two layers of context within which language occurs.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the inner context layer, referred to as the *context of situation*, is realized by the dimensions of language related to these three metafunctions of language: field (ideational), tenor (interpersonal), and mode (textual). This “constellation of lexical and grammatical features that characterize particular uses of language” comprises the

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