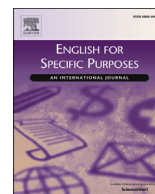




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Writing with attitude: Stance expression in learner and professional dentistry research reports



Peter Crosthwaite^{a,*}, Lisa Cheung^a, Feng (Kevin) Jiang^{b,1}

^a Centre for Applied English Studies, 6th Floor, Run Run Shaw Tower, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region

^b School of Foreign Language Education, Jilin University, China

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ABSTRACT

Medical students often lack key skills in academic writing, yet good academic writing is often a pre-requisite for employment, promotion and enculturation into the profession. This article focuses on the rhetorical strategies used for the presentation of academic stance by student writers of dentistry research reports. Adopting a contrastive, corpus-based approach, we compare student writing with that of comparable professionally-written research reports for evidence of hedging, boosting, self-mention and attitude markers. Our findings indicate that professional reports exhibit a narrower set of linguistic devices than used by student writers, who tend to use a much wider range of the four stance feature types analysed for discussion of both others' and their own personal stance, both across whole texts and by section. We discuss pedagogical implications for ESP professionals working to more closely align student writing with that of professional norms.

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1. Introduction

Successful academic texts are built not simply on the writers' plausible representation of external reality, but perhaps more importantly on their projection of authorial stance toward the issues they discuss, while persuading disciplinary readers of the relevance and value of their research. The ability to achieve these rhetorical ends is now acknowledged to be both a key feature of writing in the discipline and an important aspect of academic literacy (Hyland, 1999; Lancaster, 2016). Thus a large number of studies have examined how stance is conveyed through different linguistic means (e.g. Charles, 2004), across disciplines and genres (e.g. Hyland & Guinda, 2012), between student and expert writers (e.g. Hyland & Tse, 2005), and even along historical periods (e.g. Hyland & Jiang, 2016). Although Gross and Chesley (2012) and Yang, Zheng, and Ge (2015) are among the few who have looked at the stance-making practice in medical prose, little attention has been given to medical research reports. Our focus in this paper is on the dentistry discipline, and how undergraduate students of dentistry grapple with this professional research genre.

This study aims to highlight, via a corpus-based approach, how both professional practitioners and undergraduate students of dentistry epistemologically and rhetorically demonstrate the findings of research projects in a written report format.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: drprc80@hku.hk (P. Crosthwaite), lisa@hku.hk (L. Cheung), kevinjiangfeng@gmail.com (F.(Kevin) Jiang).

¹ #2699 Qianjin Street, Changchun, Jilin, China.

and how the metadiscourse used for these functions highlights students' awareness of and engagement with disciplinary specificity of writing in dentistry. It is implied in this process that efforts spent on 'learning to write' in professional genres such as research reports are to entail the additional benefits of 'writing to learn', as students' adoption of rhetorical norms as part of the instruction and writing process enculturates them into professional practice. We begin by exploring how writers express epistemic and rhetorical values (namely the writer's presentation of *stance*) in their research reports, then describing how this process is shaped by disciplinary practice. We then outline the potential of the writing process for teaching and learning before presenting our contrastive analysis of stance features in learner and professional dentistry reports.

2. Stance in academic writing: evidentiality, attitude and presence

For students studying in medical fields, the vast majority of their time at university is spent training their technical skills so as to be able to perform complex procedures after graduation, both in terms of practical activities and extensive academic reading. However, one area of their university lives that students often neglect is their academic writing, with students from non-native English speaking backgrounds at English-as-a-medium-of-instruction universities facing particular difficulties. To second (and even first) language users of academic English, academic writing is an 'alien form of literacy [...and] many students arriving at university think they have landed on Mars' (Hyland, 2016: 246).

While academic argument relies on a personal take on a claim or finding that matters to a discipline (Thompson & Hunston, 2000), stance is something of a catch-all yet elusive concept. For Biber (2006), stance expresses a writer's 'personal feelings and assessments', including 'attitudes that a speaker has about information, how certain they are about its veracity, how they obtained access to the information, and what perspective they are taking' (p. 87). The APPRAISAL framework (Martin & White, 2005) suggests writers position their stance through the employment of lexical resources for engagement (concerned with intersubjective positioning), attitude (concerned with the expression of emotions) and graduation (concerned with the strength of an evaluative position). More centrally, Hyland (2005) takes stance as 'writer-oriented features of interaction', which have three main components: *evidentiality*, *affect* and *presence* (p. 178). He further relates these to three important rhetorical questions that academic writers may bring to any statement about a text: how certain do I want to be about this?; what is my attitude towards it?; do I want to make myself prominent here? (Hyland, 2016, p. 248). In line with Biber (2006) and Hyland (2005), in this study, we see stance as the writer's expression of epistemic assessment, personal attitudes, and self-presence, by means of *hedges* and *boosters*, *attitude markers* and *self-mentions*.

Hedges, or 'words or phrases whose job it is to make things fuzzier' (Lakoff, 1972: 195), allow the writer to express his or her lack of commitment to the certainty of the information given, while boosters allow writers to express their confidence about the validity of a proposition (Holmes, 1988; Hu & Cao, 2015; Hyland, 2005). Hedges and boosters are not only crucial in academic discourse but are also seen as a central rhetorical device in science discourse to gain communal adherence to knowledge claims and build interpersonal solidarity with readers (Hyland, 1999; Lancaster, 2016). Although attitudinal markers and self-mentions project writers' explicit presence and effectuate affective persuasion, they are not highly expected in scientific writing, which may privilege cloaking authors as humble servants to scientific methods (Biber, 2006; Hyland, 2005; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012). Hedges, boosters and attitudinal markers may sometimes be based on shared implicit assumptions based on tacit knowledge between readers and writers, particularly in scientific texts (Thompson & Hunston, 2000), but they are most explicitly signalled by lexical verbs (e.g. *suggest*, *show*, *agree*), modal verbs (e.g. *could*, *must*), adjectives (e.g. *likely*, *undisputed*, *important*), adverbs (e.g. *perhaps*, *undoubtedly*, *surprisingly*), and nouns (e.g. *possibility*, *certainty*, *advantage*).

Although these four elements help to concretise the ways that writers intrude to project their authorial stance as to the material and audience, we must be simultaneously aware that authors' self-representations are constrained by culturally/disciplinarily available options (Bruce, 2016; Charles, 2004; Hu & Cao, 2015; Hyland, 1999, 2005). Epistemic assessment is found to be more commonly used than attitudinal affect in academic texts (Thompson & Hunston, 2000), but in Gross and Chesley's (2012) study, medical experts reduce the frequency of hedges used to persuade professional peers that what is said is objective truth, and to align with the industry-sponsored biomedical research community. Aull and Lancaster (2014) noted 'a general trend of more developing academic writers using more boosters and fewer hedges' (2014, p. 162), and professional medical writers use epistemic (modal) references in order to promote implicit/explicit objective orientations (Yang et al., 2015). Thus any stance not only represents the writer's own individual position, but it is also a choice which reflects the epistemological beliefs and values of a community.

Literature also shows that although writers in hard sciences tend to offer less personal interpretations than their peers in soft knowledge fields, they do step in and project interactional positioning or disguise their personal involvement at critical points to make their readers find what they said trustworthy, plausible and persuasive (Charles, 2004; Hyland, 2005; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012). Basturkmen (2012) found that dentistry authors persistently evaluated the results in the discussion section to 'register their opinions of certain results' and 'flag the importance or reliability of results' (Basturkmen, 2012, p. 142). Similarly, Salager-Meyer (1994) has reported that the discussion section of medical reports is the most heavily rhetorical division, where authors more often 'speculate, argue, contrast, and extrapolate from the described results' (1994, p. 163) and thus with this invested interactional viewpoint highlight the 'fertility' of the current work. However, she also noted that in the methods section regarding obtaining of the data, authors reduce their personal investment to the largest extent (Salager-Meyer, 1994, p. 161).

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