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Stance-taking as negotiating academic conflict in applied linguistics research article discussion sections

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ABSTRACT

While huge efforts were devoted to the identification of moves and steps in research article Discussion sections, how writers justify the value of the new research through conflict negotiation to transform empirical results into knowledge claims is left unnoticed. The purpose of this study is to show how writers negotiate academic conflict to demonstrate the legitimacy of their new research within the academic discipline. Based on analysis of 21 Applied Linguistics research articles, the present study conducted rhetorical analysis of academic conflict drawing on Hunston's (1993) framework and then applied Martin and White's (2005) engagement system to closely examine the use of interpersonal resources in representing and negotiating conflict. This study reveals that/how writers strategically vary their engagement tactics in relation to the functional components of academic conflict to activate readers' positive evaluation of the new knowledge. Most notably, although researchers represent the empirical discrepancies between their own findings and previous research, such conflict is generally not resolved by explicitly dismissing the opposing studies but by conferring authority and legitimation on the new findings. These results not only contribute to our understanding of knowledge construction processes through argumentation but also have important pedagogical implications for the writing practices of novice researchers.

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1. Introduction

Academic conflict, commonly referred to as "rival, contentious, or conflicting knowledge claims" (Salager-Meyer, 1999, p. 372), is a fundamental aspect of the knowledge construction process. To achieve scientific progress, researchers are required to correct or invalidate established knowledge in search for novelty (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Hunston, 1993; Kuhn, 1996; Kwan, Chan, & Lam, 2012; Lindeberg, 2004; Myers, 1989). The nature of the challenges to prior formulation of knowledge or paradigms opens up opportunities for original contribution and provides the persuasive force to promote the research (Kuhn, 1996; Lindeberg, 2004; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Swales, 1990). Yet, to negate validated knowledge for warranting one's contribution, researchers enter into a relationship of tension with the various literature and potentially damage rapport with the disciplinary community. How to manage professional disagreement in order to invite support from the target discourse community involves highly complex and subtle interpersonal strategies and imposes rhetorical

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challenges for novice scholars (Bazerman, 1988; Hunston, 1993; Hyland, 1998, 2004; Lindeberg, 2004; Myers, 1989, 1992; Salager-Meyer & Lewin, 2011).

Surprisingly, little empirical study on research article (RA) rhetorical structure has examined how academic conflict is represented and negotiated in the RA Discussion sections, in which researchers are required to transform the empirical findings to potential knowledge claims to be acknowledged by the academic community (Thompson, 1993). This communicative purpose has generally been achieved through managing and resolving academic conflict. Particularly, to confront previous studies and promote the value of one's research involves strategic manipulation of authorial stance to prior research and one's findings. That is, blunt criticism and overt assertion of novelty claims are generally avoided (Hyland, 1998, 2004). Writers are required to undertake more subtle argumentation strategies by taking different authorial stances on propositions in order to align readers to the writer's arguments. This highlights the importance of effective handling of interpersonal strategies. However, such authorial-stance taking in conflict negotiation has yet to be investigated in sufficient detail.

The present research fills this gap by conducting a two-level rhetorical analysis: identifying the constituent components of academic conflict and mapping interpersonal strategies employed to signal these components. The former analysis is based on revised Hunston's framework (1993) while the latter draws upon Martin and White's (2005) engagement framework. This study will shed light on the composition process of reporting scientific contributions by demonstrating how researchers in the Discussion sections argue that they have indeed made contributions promised in their Introductions. This knowledge can inform English for academic purposes (EAP) learners and international scholars about how to make informed judgments in crafting complicated relationships between their own findings and prior validated knowledge to warrant a trajectory for their contribution.

2. Academic conflict

The rhetorical practice of negotiating academic conflict (AC) in RAs has been broadly examined from two distinct lines of scholarship, by: 1) considering its enactment as an isolated phenomenon without connecting it to the larger RA structure; or 2) projecting its use as part of the move/step rhetorical scheme in different RA sections. The former research had made a commendable effort in uncovering a wide spectrum of rhetorical strategies, ranging from straightforward and blunt criticism to less overt and more implicit negative comments (Dahl & Fløttum, 2011; Giannoni, 2005; Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004; Myers, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1999; Salager-Meyer & Ariza, 2011). A series of studies conducted by Salager-Meyer and her colleagues (Salager-Meyer, 1999, 2001; Salager-Meyer, Ariza, & Zambrano, 2003; Salager-Meyer & Ariza, 2011) based on entire Medical RAs found that mitigated indirect criticism is more prevalent in modern English academic discourse diachronically and cross-linguistically, and overt criticism is relatively rare. A similar finding is also documented in the research on Linguistics and Psychology RA abstracts, showing a prevalence of more indirect and impersonal strategies in English than Spanish (Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004). However, Giannoni's study (2005) of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics RA Discussion sections across English and Italian reveals that overt criticism is more dominant cross-linguistically, though a relatively higher percentage of overt criticisms is exhibited in Italian Discussions. Likewise, Dahl and Fløttum (2011) also indicate the presence of personal and unhedged criticism is more common than impersonal or hedged expressions in Economics and Linguistics RA Introductions. As shown in these earlier studies, no conclusive findings can be made with regard to the use of academic criticism for the following reasons: 1) different parts of RAs across various disciplines and language were examined; 2) different criteria of overt and covert criticisms were used in different studies. More research is thus necessary to clarify the contradictory results and, most importantly, this line of research needs to be expanded by connecting AC to the move/step rhetorical scheme proposed in the EAP literature. The findings based on AC as a single unit disconnected from other rhetorical structures of RAs have less pedagogical value for academic writing instruction, since the rhetorical move/step scheme is strongly endorsed in the guidelines for designing EAP materials and instruction (e.g., Bitchner, 2010; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Swales & Feak, 2012).

Another line of research based on Swales' (1990) concept of a move/step analysis framework has conceived AC as part of a move/step scheme, for instance, the 'Indicating a gap' step of 'Move 2: Establishing niche' in RA Introductions, or 'Comparing/contrasting findings with prior literature' step of 'Move 4: Commenting on results' in Discussions. Although a substantial number of studies have uncovered its constituent components or linguistic realization in Introductions (e.g., Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014; Kwan et al., 2012; Lim, 2012; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997; Pho, Musgrave, & Bradshaw, 2011), the role and enactment of AC has received scant attention in Discussion sections. Despite its critical role in transforming knowledge, the prior literature has simply listed it as one of the constituent steps in the 'Comment on results' Move (e.g., Basturkmen, 2009, 2012; Le & Harrington, 2015; Lim, 2010; Yang & Allison, 2003), the 'Explain specific research' Move (Nwogu, 1997), or the 'Consolidating results' Move (Kanoksilapatham, 2005, 2015). Little has thus been reported about how researchers subvert or invalidate an established line of thought to textually construe opportunities for their original contribution when they discuss their findings.

To bridge this gap, this study will analyze the use of academic conflict in the RA Discussion sections by integrating these two lines of research. First of all, this study will follow Hunston's (1993) conceptualization of academic conflict as the writer's knowledge claims are formulated as "being in conflict with another researcher's knowledge claims" (p.115), and such conflict is resolved to justify the value of the writer's knowledge claims. As compared to the focuses of other studies on academic criticism, this conceptualization highlights an argumentative pattern involved in composing academic conflict, including not only the presentation of conflicting knowledge claims, but also conflict resolution. Since conflict management is not limited to

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