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# The use of metadiscourse for knowledge construction in Chinese and English research articles



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to compare the usage of metadiscourse in English and in Chinese research articles (RAs) published in applied linguistics journals and to investigate how metadiscourse may contribute to knowledge construction in RAs. A small corpus in each language was built consisting of 20 journal articles in English and another 20 in Chinese. In order to highlight metadiscourse features, an established model of metadiscourse was adopted to annotate both Chinese and English articles. It was found that there are generally more metadiscourse features in the English sub-corpus than in the Chinese sub-corpus. While both English sub-corpus and Chinese sub-corpus were found to use statistically significantly more interactive metadiscourse resources (organising discourse) than interactional metadiscourse resources (indicating writers' attitude and stance to themselves, text and audience), the English sub-corpus employed statistically significantly more interactional metadiscourse features than the Chinese sub-corpus. Implications of this study are discussed for both English and Chinese academic writing, including the teaching of English writing as a second language (L2).

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## 1. Introduction

In the past three decades there has been growing interest in the metadiscourse features of research articles (RAs) (e.g., Del Saz-Rubio, 2011; Hyland, 1998, 2005a, 2007; Loi & Lim, 2013; Mur-Dueñas, 2011; Peterlin, 2005). Metadiscourse refers to the devices or resources which writers use to organise the discourse, engage the audience, and signal the writer's attitude. We define metadiscourse by following Hyland (2005a), namely, it is “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community” (p. 37). Historically, metadiscourse has derived from Halliday's three macrofunctions of language: Ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Each text is an integrated expression of these three kinds of functions (Vande Kopple, 1985). Earlier researchers such as Crismore and Farnsworth (1989) and Vande Kopple (1985) divided metadiscourse into textual and interpersonal. Recently, Hyland and Tse (2004) argue that “all metadiscourse is interpersonal in that it takes account of the readers' knowledge,

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textual experience, and processing needs and that it provides writers with an armoury of rhetorical appeals to achieve this” (p. 161). Hyland and Tse divide metadiscourse resources into interactive and interactional dimensions based on their functions in the text. The former includes such sub-categories as transition markers, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses; and the latter includes hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. The significance of metadiscourse in academic writing is widely recognised, as it is the means of “facilitating the social interactions which contribute to knowledge production within academic disciplines” (Hyland, 1998, p. 438) and “reflecting writers’ attempts to negotiate academic knowledge in ways that are meaningful and appropriate to a particular disciplinary community” (Hyland, 1998, p. 440). Metadiscourse usage varies in different languages and different disciplines. For example, Dahl (2004) finds that English and Norwegian scholars employ much more metadiscourse features than their French counterparts when writing RAs in the fields of economics and linguistics. The different metadiscourse features demonstrate different rhetorical traditions. As Dahl (2004) indicates, the French tradition favours less visible and direct authorial presence in writing than the Anglo-Saxon and the Scandinavian tradition does. Thus, understanding metadiscourse features in RAs will be a useful approach to exploring how knowledge is constructed in research articles across languages and cultures.

In this paper, we focus on cross-linguistic metadiscourse features with specific reference to RAs published in English and in Chinese in the field of applied linguistics. To date, numerous studies have identified differences and similarities in the use of metadiscourse between different languages: English and Brazilian Portuguese (Hirano, 2009), English and Finnish (Mauranen, 1993), English and Spanish (Moreno, 1997; Mur-Dueñas, 2011; Soler, 2011; Vergaro, 2011), English and Iranian (Simin & Tavangar, 2009), English and Slovene (Peterlin, 2005), English and Persian (Zarei & Mansoori, 2007) and English, French and Norwegian (Dahl, 2004). Among these cross-linguistic studies of metadiscourse, the comparison between English and Spanish has been done relatively thoroughly. Less common, however, are cross-linguistic comparisons of metadiscourse features between English and Chinese RAs. Two recent exceptions are Hu and Cao (2011) and Loi and Lim (2013). While these two studies provide valuable information on specific aspects of metadiscourse features across English and Chinese RAs, their focus has been somewhat limited. For example, Hu and Cao (2011) only compared the use of hedging and boosting devices in the abstracts of applied linguistics articles, whereas Loi and Lim (2013) reported on the similarities and differences of metadiscourse usage in the introduction sections in English and Chinese RAs. By contrast, the present study systematically examines metadiscourse usage across English and Chinese RAs in their totality based on self-built corpora. This approach will significantly contribute to the field of cross-cultural research in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and second language writing.

We chose to examine RAs in the discipline of applied linguistics for the following reasons. First, the data used in Hu and Cao (2011) were collected from applied linguistics RA abstracts, so we do not know the extent to which metadiscourse features differ across English and Chinese Applied Linguistics RAs. Second, Chinese writers, especially applied linguists, have recently shown a strong tendency to publish RAs in international refereed journals in English in order to secure recruitment, reappointment, promotion or other employment-related benefits in China. Thus, we believe that studying cross-cultural differences in metadiscourse features will facilitate understanding the challenges that Chinese authors, especially applied linguists face when trying to publish in English in international journals. With these concerns in mind, we intend to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the use of metadiscourse between English and Chinese applied linguistics RAs?
2. How do international applied linguists and Chinese applied linguists choose interactional metadiscourse resources in their RAs?

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Knowledge construction and metadiscourse in RAs

There is consensus in the international discourse community that it is necessary to keep “a balance between objective information, subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation as a powerful persuasive factor in social construction of knowledge and gaining community acceptance for their claims” (Abdollahzadeh, 2011, p. 294). Writers of RAs need to present their claims carefully, precisely, and honestly to meet discourse community expectations and to gain acceptance for their statements (Hyland, 1996, p. 477) and they do not simply generate articles that discuss social or natural realities but use language to recognise, construct, and negotiate social relations. The view that RAs are simply factual and impersonal has changed, and writing is considered a “social engagement” in which writers interact with their readership, not only to convey messages, but to facilitate understanding (Amiryousefi & Rasekh, 2010; Hyland, 1998). Writers contribute actively to knowledge construction and “their choices regarding how propositional information should be presented connect them to the broad inquiry patterns and knowledge structures of their disciplines and reveal something of the ways that academic communities comprehend the things they probe and construct suitable writer–reader relation” (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 174). Therefore, by calling on the shared understandings of the discourse community, writers accord the reader a position of membership in their RAs. Writers articulate their individuality, authority, and concerns as well as their relationships to the

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