



Claiming centrality as promotion in applied linguistics research article introductions



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ABSTRACT

This study explores how promotion is realized in applied linguistics (AL) research article introductions (RAIs). We focus on one promotional strategy, claiming centrality, and examine what appeals and linguistic devices applied linguists (ALs) employ and how they deploy them in RAIs to achieve positive evaluation of the significance of the topic or the research area. Fifty-one RAIs from three top-tier journals in AL were selected for a corpus-based study. Qualitative analyses of the texts revealed four major types of appeals, that is, appeals to salience, magnitude, topicality, and problematization of the topic in either the research world or the real world, which ALs made in varied ways. Linguistic devices realizing these appeals were also analyzed with the tool of appraisal. Quantitative analyses further unveiled ALs' frequent use of appeals, their reliance on indirect over direct approaches to promotion, and their preferred patterns in appeal deployment. The pervasion of promotional elements is interpreted as indicative of academic marketization and as discipline-specific, and the indirect way of promotion is viewed as indicating a compromise between the need for promotion and the need to maintain objectivity.

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1. Introduction

Academic discourse has been unexceptionally infused with promotionism in a “market society” (Mautner, 2010) permeated by what Wernick (1991) defined as a “promotional culture”. Research articles (RAs), especially, have been written with much “boosterism” (Swales, 2004) as if they were products packaged for sale (e.g., Bhatia, 1993; Fairclough, 1995; Law & Williams, 1982). Given the extent of academic promotion, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) even remarked, “It is not so much the amount of news value that is remarkable in today's scientific journal arguments as it is the promoting of it” (p. 43).

Further knowledge on the realization of promotion in RAs can be derived from studies that have identified or analyzed some of the strategies/moves/steps and linguistic devices that serve or may serve this purpose (e.g., Afros & Schryer, 2009; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Cortes, 2013; Dahl, 2008, 2009; Haggan, 2004; Harwood, 2005; Hood, 2010; Hyland, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005a, 2005b; Hyland & Tse, 2005; Law & Williams, 1982; Lim, 2012; Lindeberg, 2004; Martín & León Pérez, 2014; Shaw, 2003; Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004; Thompson & Ye, 1991; see also Hunston & Thompson, 2000). These studies

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differ in their coverage of disciplines and/or features that are or may be promotional, and the extent of their interest in promotion, but as a whole demonstrate that promotional elements may have pervaded academic discourse when it is examined carefully. Just as Hyland (1999) has summarized, successfully published researchers seldom stop at displaying factual information of their research, but skillfully manipulate “various rhetorical and interactive features” to promote their work (p. 341).

The primary concerns of a number of these studies, however, are not specific investigations of the realization of promotion, despite the frameworks, lenses, instruments, or observations they have provided or utilized, for example, the rhetoric structures proposed by Swales, Hyland's metadiscourse theories, and the appraisal and evaluation systems (e.g., Martin & Rose, 2007; Martin & White, 2005; Thetela, 1997). Some of them are bound to certain aspects of linguistic features carrying promotional tenor (e.g., first-person pronouns, Harwood, 2005; reporting verbs, Thompson & Ye, 1991). Some are case studies observing how maximal attractiveness of papers was sought during composing processes (e.g., Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Law & Williams, 1982). Others bear relevance for exploring the realization of move-based persuasion (e.g., Lim, 2012) or a step-based function (e.g., *making new knowledge claims*, Dahl, 2009). Only a limited few, to our knowledge, are corpus-based, cross-disciplinary studies focusing on how promotion is realized strategically and linguistically in RAs (i.e., Afros & Schryer, 2009; Lindeberg, 2004; Martín & León Pérez, 2014; Shaw, 2003). Martín and León Pérez recently define what they term “persuasive promotional rhetoric as being realized by means of those linguistic choices that seek to change or affect the opinions or behaviors of an audience in terms of positively assessing the research contribution” (p. 1). However, none of these latter studies have examined how linguistic choices can bring about the promotional change or effect by revealing the attitudes encoded in these choices based on the appraisal and evaluation framework.

An analysis of linguistically encoded attitudinal tones in promotion research may hopefully help address the question of how the seemingly pervasive practice of promotion is fitted into RAs, whose socially recognized purpose is reporting research objectively (e.g., Barrass, 2002; Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987; Zobel, 2004). Overt promotion, which is expected and acknowledged in advertisements, may not be acceptable in the academic world. While RAs typically cannot be “dramatically self-justificatory” (Swales, 2004, p. 237), there may be a “hidden agenda”, as Bhatia put it (2004, p. 73), which handles promotional intentions. Studies on promotion, therefore, should not miss the opportunity to differentiate the subtle ways academic promotion is realized by scrutinizing the shades of attitudes expressed in RAs to elicit positive response.

2. Literature review

Research article introductions (RAIs) have been recognized as one of the vital sites where persuasive/promotional acts are likely to accumulate (Afros & Schryer, 2009; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bhatia, 2004; Law & Williams, 1982; Lindeberg, 2004; Myers, 1990; Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004). As to how promotion is realized in such a section, Swales (2004) suggested that his three-move (Move 1 *Establishing a territory*, Move 2 *Establishing a niche*, and Move 3 *Occupying the niche*) or Create a Research Space (CARS) model (Swales, 1990, 2004; see also Swales, 1981) represents a very promotional rhetorical structure in constructing RAs, where “originality (especially in theory) tends to be highly prized, competition tends to be fierce, and academic promotionalism and boosterism are strong” (p. 226). Later studies on promotion in RAs basically support such a claim (e.g., Afros & Schryer, 2009; Lindeberg, 2004). For example, Lindeberg (2004) showed that in Move 1, the research topic is promoted by strengthening its significance (*Claims of centrality*); in Move 2, the research gap is promoted by presenting previous research as deficient so as to open space for further research (*Statements of knowledge gaps*), and in Move 3, the current study is promoted for possible research contributions (*Boosts of writers' own contributions*).

The scarcity of investigation on the realization of *claiming centrality* (Move 1 Step 1, Swales, 1990) as a promotional strategy is noticeable in the literature. In studies which aimed to account for the generic structures of RAs across disciplines (e.g., Anthony, 1999; Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011; Dahl, 2008, 2009; Del Saz-Rubio, 2011; Fakhri, 2004; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Lim, 2008, 2012; Loi, 2010; Ozturk, 2007; Samraj, 2002, 2005; Shehzad, 2008, 2010; Sheldon, 2011; Swales & Najjar, 1987), there is indeed occasional mentioning that certain moves or steps in RAs carry promotional intentions. Of these mentions, however, quite a number concern Move 3 in Swales's model, for instance, *announcing the research purpose* (Swales & Najjar, 1987, p. 188), *positive evaluation of the research* (Anthony, 1999), or *previewing research findings in introductions* (e.g., Dahl, 2008, 2009; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Shehzad, 2010), whereas few are made about Move 1. Where there are longer discussions on move/step-specific promotion/persuasion or promotion/persuasion strategies, Move 2 and Move 3 have been elaborated exclusively (i.e., Lim, 2012; Martín & León Pérez, 2014; Shehzad, 2008, 2010), but Move 1 has been insufficiently, though insightfully, studied (e.g., Lindeberg, 2004; Shaw, 2003; Swales, 1990).

In fact, *claiming centrality* is the only step mentioned by Swales (1990) that carries an overt promotional flavor. Swales took centrality claims as “appeals” which intend to persuade readers that the research topic or research area is “lively, significant or well-established” (p. 144). To claim centrality, Swales suggested appeals possibly be made to “interest”, “importance” or “the central character” of a certain issue or topic (p. 144). Although he exemplified the realization of centrality claims, he did point out that the actual practices are related to a series of factors like “the disciplinary area itself”, “the particular journals” and “the nature of the research”, and that the “[p]ossible rationales for utilizing or avoiding a centrality claim remain an unexplored but interesting research area” (p. 144). Lindeberg (2004) took *claiming centrality* as a direct promotional strategy. Following Swales's concept of appeals, she identified six types of appeals economists often made to

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