Hedging and boosting in abstracts of applied linguistics articles: A comparative study of English- and Chinese-medium journals

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A B S T R A C T

Hedges and boosters are important metadiscursive resources for writers to mark their epistemic stance and position writer–reader relations. Building on previous research that suggests notable cross-cultural and cross-linguistic differences in the use of hedges and boosters in academic discourse, this comparative study investigates the use of such discourse markers in academic article abstracts. Based on a corpus of 649 abstracts collected from 8 journals of applied linguistics, this study examines if hedging and boosting strategies differ (a) between applied linguists publishing in Chinese- and English-medium journals and (b) between authors of empirical and non-empirical academic articles. Quantitative analyses indicated that abstracts published in English-medium journals featured markedly more hedges than those published in Chinese-medium journals and that abstracts of empirical research articles used significantly more boosters than those of non-empirical academic articles. Textual analyses further revealed that the distinct patterning of hedges and boosters in Chinese and English abstracts had a joint, interactive effect on the authorial certainty and confidence conveyed therein. These results are discussed in terms of culturally preferred rhetorical strategies, epistemological beliefs, lack of facility in English as a second/foreign language, and the nature of supporting evidence drawn on for knowledge claims in different types of academic writing.

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1. Introduction

This study examines the use of hedges and boosters as metadiscourse markers in the genre of the academic article abstract from a comparative perspective. According to an often-quoted definition, metadiscourse consists of "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" (Hyland, 2005a:37). As a repertoire of rhetorical resources deployed to manage the relations among the writer, the evolving text and the intended reader, metadiscourse has attracted increasing research attention in the past decade, especially from researchers of scientific and scholarly writing (e.g., Abdi, 2002; Abdi et al., 2010; Ädel, 2006; Dahl, 2004; Gillaerts and Van de Velde, 2010; Hyland, 2005a,b; Hyland and Tse, 2004; Lindeberg, 2004; Peterlin, 2005). This focus on metadiscourse has been motivated by the growing recognition that academic writers do not simply report their findings in an objective or impersonal way, but actively draw from a range of rhetorical strategies rooted in their own disciplines and socio-cultural milieus to organize arguments, provide evidence, and evaluate claims to convince their readers (Abdi et al., 2010; Bazerman, 1988; Crismore et al., 1993; Flowerdew, 1997;

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Hyland, 2005a; Vande Kopple, 1985). Metadiscursive resources are indispensable to such social and interpersonal engagements. This is most evident in the useful distinction between interactive and interactional metadiscourse drawn by Hyland and Tse (2004). While interactive metadiscourse organizes texts and guides readers through them, interactional metadiscourse engages and orients readers towards writers' perspectives on propositional content, their imagined audience and themselves (Hyland, 2005a; Hyland and Tse, 2004; Thompson and Thetela, 1995). Thus, in academic texts such as research articles, metadiscourse plays a key role in knowledge construction through managing the interactions between writers and readers who often come from the same discourse community with shared cultural, academic, and rhetorical practices. The strategic use of metadiscourse in academic writing not only increases the chances of knowledge claims being accepted, but also indexes a writer's competence as a participant in the discourse community involved (Hyland, 2005a).

Hedges and boosters constitute two categories of interactional metadiscourse strategies that are frequently employed in academic writing, particularly in the genre of the research article (Hyland, 2005b; Hyland and Tse, 2004). Hedges are self-reflective linguistic expressions (e.g., *might*, *suggest*, *probably*) employed to express epistemic modality and modify the illocutionary force of speech acts (Holmes, 1982, 1988). They can be used to qualify the writer's commitment to a proposition (Vande Kopple, 1985), to show uncertainty about the truth of an assertion (Crismore et al., 1993), to "withhold commitment and open dialogue" (Hyland, 2005a:49) by acknowledging alternative viewpoints or the subjectivity of one's own position, and/or "to mitigate the force of an utterance 'for the sake of politeness'" (Holmes, 1990:185). Boosters, on the other hand, are linguistic devices (e.g., *demonstrate*, *undoubtedly*, *it is clear that*) that increase the illocutionary force of speech acts (Holmes, 1984), emphasize certainty about a proposition or confidence in an assertion (Abdi et al., 2010; Holmes, 1988), express authorial commitment to a proposition (Crismore et al., 1993; Millan, 2008) or close off alternative viewpoints by strengthening the asserted position (Gillaerts and Van de Velde, 2010; Hyland, 1998a). As Hyland (2005a) puts it, "by closing down possible alternatives, boosters emphasize certainty and construct rapport by marking involvement with the topic and solidarity with an audience, taking a joint position against other voices" (p. 53). Thus, hedges and boosters are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin: they are metadiscursive resources that the writer can capitalize on to express uncertainty or certainty about a proposition, withhold or strengthen commitment to a position, entertain or dismiss alternatives, open or close dialogue with the reader, and attenuate or boost illocutionary force (Holmes, 1984; Millan, 2008). The skillful manipulation of hedges and boosters in academic texts not only signals a writer's epistemic stance towards propositional content and intended readers, but also marks him/herself as a competent member of the discourse community (Hyland, 1998a, 2005a).

It is clear from the characterization above that, distinct from and yet closely related to propositional discourse, metadiscourse allows writers to construct and organize their text in anticipation of the intended readers' knowledge, interests and expectations, and to project themselves into their text to manage interaction with the readers and influence their reactions (Dahl, 2004; Millan, 2008). Metadiscourse as such is likely to reflect "cultural norms, values, and belief systems prevailing in discourse communities which constitute social contexts of texts" (Golebiowski, 2002:59). As hedges and boosters are used by writers to "engage with the socially determined positions of others" (Hyland, 2005a:52) and to mark commitments, beliefs and attitudes which are often socioculturally situated, there is good reason to expect their use to vary across different cultural and language communities with their own communicative norms, discursive practices, rhetorical conventions, and power relations (Connor, 1996; Holmes, 1988).

This expectation has been largely supported by a growing body of research that has investigated the use of these metadiscourse strategies by members of different language, cultural, or disciplinary communities. Several studies (Fløttum et al., 2006; Kong, 2006; Martín-Martín, 2008; Martín-Martín and Burgess, 2004; Salager-Meyer et al., 2003; Vassileva, 2001; Vold, 2006b) have compared the use of hedges and/or boosters by academic writers from different culture/language groups and found cross-cultural/linguistic differences in the use of these metadiscourse markers to negotiate knowledge claims and construct scientific knowledge. Vassileva (2001), for instance, compared English research articles by Anglo-American linguists with Bulgarian and English research articles by Bulgarian linguists and identified considerable differences among the three sets of articles in the use of hedges and boosters to convey different degrees of commitment/detachment. In a similar vein, Vold (2006b) examined the use of selected epistemic modality markers as hedging devices in a corpus of 120 research articles written in English, French and Norwegian, and found evident cross-linguistic differences. Specifically, the English and Norwegian research articles used significantly more hedges than the French research articles did. Language- and culture-specific differences in using hedges were also observed in Kong's (2006) study on how other people's ideas were evaluated in 80 research articles written in Chinese and English in the humanities, social sciences, and hard sciences. Another group of studies (e.g., Abdi, 2002; Hyland, 1998a,b, 2005b; Millan, 2008; Vassileva, 2001; Vold, 2006a) examined the use of hedges and boosters across disciplines and found evidence of disciplinary influences. For example, Hyland (1998a) investigated the use of hedges and boosters in a corpus of 56 research articles from eight disciplines and found considerable differences in the use of these metadiscursive resources between the natural sciences on the one hand, and the humanities and social sciences on the other. Similarly, Abdi (2002) examined the use of interpersonal metadiscourse markers, including hedges and boosters, in 55 research articles from the natural and social sciences and found significant interdisciplinary differences in the use of hedges but no differences in the use of boosters. In a recent study based on a larger corpus of 240 research articles from the same eight disciplines, Hyland (2005b) corroborated his earlier finding that there were appreciable differences in the use of hedges and boosters between "soft" (social sciences and the humanities) and "hard" (natural sciences) disciplines. Clear disciplinary differences in the use of hedges and boosters were also identified in Millan's (2008) study of 96 research articles in two soft and two hard disciplines.