A Corpus-Based Study of Evaluative That-Clause in Abstracts of Chinese Learners’ Doctoral Dissertations

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ABSTRACT

Evaluative language is one of the key features in academic discourse, which might cause difficulties for L2 writers. Based on a corpus of 150 English abstracts of Chinese doctoral dissertations in five disciplines, this paper studies the frequency, form and distribution of the evaluative that-clause, and compares the results with those in previous studies. The results show that Chinese learners use this structure significantly less frequently than experienced writers, which might be caused by learners’ misunderstanding of the compositional feature of abstracts and lack of consciousness of the evaluative feature of abstracts. It is also demonstrated that verb-predicates occur most frequently in Chinese learners’ abstracts among the three frequent word classes which introduce the proposition, that the stance feature expressed is mainly to confirm the findings and credit the study, and that the evaluated entity is mostly concerned with the writer’s own research. We also design the feasible teaching procedures for pedagogical purposes.

Keywords: Abstracts, Academic Writing, Evaluative Language, L2 Learners’ Dissertation, That-Clause

INTRODUCTION

Utterances always convey a point of view and speakers can differently express the same meaning with different layers of illocutionary force by using different linguistic resources in the discourse, such as propositional information, modality, specific lexical choice and syntactic structures (Stubbs, 2006). The different layers of illocutionary force are realized by different linguistic resources which can show evaluative meaning of the speaker or writer. Evaluative meaning, i.e. personal feelings, attitudes or judgments, is commonly expressed by speakers and writers in the discourse, in addition to communicating propositional content.

Evaluative language is that language which indexes the act of evaluation or the act of stance-taking (Du Bois, 2007), and expresses the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards,
viewpoint on, or feeling about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about (Thompson & Hunston, 1999: 5). It expresses an attitude towards a person, situation or other entity, and is both subjective and located within a social value-system (Hunston, 1994: 210). The study on evaluative language is particularly concerned with the ways the values are introduced by various types of stance expressions, and with how viewpoints can be enhanced in the discourse.

The importance of studying evaluative language is that it indicates an attitude towards something, which is a crucial aspect of interaction between individuals and is important in socially significant speech acts such as persuasion and argumentation (Hunston, 2011). To be more specific, evaluation has three functions in a discourse: (1) to express the speaker’s or writer’s opinion, and in doing so to reflect the value system of that person and their community; (2) to construct and maintain relations between the speaker or writer and the hearer or reader; (3) to organize the discourse (Thompson & Hunston, 1999: 6).

There are generally two means used by writers to express evaluative meaning in written discourses: grammatical means and lexical means (Biber et al., 1999). Grammatical means involves the use of some grammatical device, e.g. adverbials and complements, to express evaluation related to a proposition. Lexical means involves the use of lexical choices to convey evaluative meaning, e.g. hate, nice. The words chosen are value-laden, and differ from grammatical devices in that they do not provide an attitudinal or evaluative frame for some other proposition.

In spite of its importance, evaluative language presents difficulties in analysis because there is no set of language forms, either grammatical or lexical, that encompass the range of expressions of evaluation (Hunston, 2011). The most obvious way is probably to study in detail the particular language resources that are used to convey evaluation: the words, collocation and phrases. This is first recommended by Stubbs (1986), and has been carried out in different contexts in terms of stance or metadiscourse (e.g. Biber, 2006; Charles, 2006; Hunston, 2007; Hyland, 2005; Hyland and Tse, 2004). This method is combined with the method of corpus linguistics, the tradition of which is to study the recurrent linguistic items as the study objectives.

By adopting this method, this study aims to find Chinese EFL learners’ difficulty in expressing evaluative meaning in their doctoral dissertation abstracts. To be more specific, we investigate the learners’ use of one of the evaluative structures, that-clause structure, in terms of the frequency, form and distribution.

ABSTRACTS AS A GENRE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Academic writing is always considered to be purely objective, impersonal and informational, designed to disguise the author and deal directly with facts. This objectivity in academic writing, however, has been challenged by researchers (Biber, 2006; Charles, 2006; Hunston, 1994, 2004; Hyland, 2000 & 2002; Hyland and Tse, 2004), because academic writing is obviously persuasive in presenting its propositional information. The arguments in academic discourse are rarely made without interpretive statements and assessments of their likely probability. These assessments necessarily involve personal or subjective judgments in order to make the discourse persuasive, which is typically proved in research abstracts.

Research article abstracts have thus become an increasingly important genre (Golebiowski, 2009; Huckin, 2006; Lorès, 2004; Samraj, 2002 & 2005; Stotesbury, 2003; Van Bonn & Swales, 2007), because they serve as a summary of a study’s research questions, methodology, and findings, to attract readers to continue reading by serving as screening devices and aids to indexing by professional indexers for large database services. Abstracts have become a tool of mastering and managing the ever increasing information flow in the scientific community, and members of the research community have
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