

Original Paper

Review on the Comparative Analysis of Stance Markers in Academic Discourse

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Abstract

Stance is related to the author's evaluative attitude towards the knowledge conveyed in academic discourse, which is an important criterion for judging the objectivity of knowledge expression. At present, previous reviews on stance markers in academic discourse have mainly focused on analyzing the current state of relevant research from multiple perspectives at a macro level, and there are few reviews of a particular research methodology. In view of this, this paper synthesizes the current research trends with a focus on the comparative study of stance markers in academic discourse so as to find out the research gap and then shed light on possible future research.

Keywords

stance marker, academic discourse, comparative analysis

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the deepening of the cognition of the communicative nature of academic paper, the research on stance has increasingly attracted the interest of researchers in linguistics. A considerable number of studies have shown that scholars mainly center on the topics, such as stance markers and authorial identity, in different fields, especially in academic discourse. Systematic reviews of the stance research have been published with a focus on the general evolution of stance research from different perspectives. However, there has been lack of reviews focusing on specific research perspectives such as comparative approach. It warrants a review focusing on both theory development and key findings from empirical studies based on comparative analysis. Therefore, This paper firstly summaries the definitions of stance and key research on stance markers, then reviews studies on stances in academic discourse.

2. Stance and Stance Markers

Over the past decades, there have been numerous studies on “stance”, but there is still no consensus on the exact meanings of the professional concepts of stance. Several scholars have proposed the definitions of stance from perspectives of semantic, sociocultural, textual function and sociolinguistics. In the semantic aspect, Biber and Finegan (1988) first mentioned that “stance refers to the overt expression of an authors’ or speakers’ attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the message”. They pointed out that the broad functions of stance including certainty, generalization and actuality, which all express the speakers’ or writers’ attitudes toward their message. Biber and Finegan (1988) selected 410 texts of written and spoken British English as the research objects and only focused on the use of adverbial marking of stance in the discourse. The adverbials marking stance are divided into six semantic categories, which are honestly adverbials, generally adverbials, surely adverbials, actually adverbials, maybe adverbials, and amazingly adverbials. Biber and Finegan (1989) refined the definition of stance as “lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message”. Different from previous study, they extended the research object to adjectival, verbal, and modal markers of stance. The stance markers are divided into 12 categories based on semantic and grammatical criteria. In this research, they classified the stance into evidentiality and affect in that they believe the essence of stance not only includes the attitude towards the proposition but the speakers’ or writers’ personal feelings.

Biber et al. (1999) made it clear that in addition to communicating propositional content, speakers and writers usually express personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments, or assessments. They studied stance markers from two aspects. One is the expression of stance markers, including lexical, grammatical and auxiliary language device, the other is the semantic functions of stance markers, which can be categorized into epistemic stance, attitudinal stance and style stance. The epistemic stance marker is the author’s perception of information in a proposition, including certainty, possibility or limitation; the attitudinal stance refers to the author’s evaluation and judgment of the meaning of the proposition as well as his / her expression of emotion; the style stance expresses the comment of the author or the manner of presentation in the text.

From the sociocultural perspective, Ochs (1990) believed that language relates to four dimensions of culture which contain stance, social act, social activity and social identity. Among these dimensions, she characterized stance as a socially recognized disposition, including epistemic stance and affective stance. In her view, epistemic stance is a socially accepted way of learning about a proposition, such as direct and indirect knowledge, degree of certainty and specificity, while the affective stance is a socially accepted feeling, attitude, mood or degree of emotion intensity.

Based on textual function theory in systematic functional linguistic, Hyland focuses on the metafunction aspect, and Hunston concentrates on language evaluation. Hunston and Thompson (2000) suggest that stance expressions are the author’s or speaker’s perceptions, attitudes and emotions towards a proposition that actually exists, and identified four parameters of stance expressions: good-bad,

certainty, expectancy and importance. Hyland (2005b) considers stance as a textual ‘voice’ or community recognized personality. He states stance can be seen as an attitudinal dimension and includes features which refer to the ways authors show themselves and express their judgments and opinions. In Hyland’s model, stance is related to writer-oriented features of interaction or refers to the ways that writers add their personal authority onto their arguments or attempt to make their involvement unnoticeable. Three main categories of stance are mentioned, which are evidentiality, affect and presence. Evidentiality refers to the writer’s commitment to the credibility of the propositions he or she presents and their potential impact on the reader; affect includes personal and professional attitudes toward the writer’s expression, including emotions, perspectives, and beliefs; and presence concerns the extent to which the author chooses to project him or herself in the text.

Hyland proposes a framework for classifying four types of stance expressions in terms of the author’s perceptions, judgments, emotions and involvement: hedges, boosters, attitude markers and self-mentions. Hedges are linguistic strategies used by authors to express a degree of uncertainty, which imply that a statement is based on plausible reasoning of the author rather than certain knowledge; boosters are linguistic devices used by authors to express a degree of certainty about a proposition and mark their involvement with the topic; attitude markers indicate the writers’ personal feeling toward propositions, expressing their own emotions and attitudes; self-mentions are first-person pronouns used to refer to the author, which help to express the author’s recognition of the information. According to Hyland (2005b), writers use ‘stance’ to express themselves in the discourse as well as predict the reflections and attitudes of the readers, reflecting the writer’s self-awareness and readership awareness. Hyland’s study of stance demonstrates how authors locate themselves in texts, highlighting the authorial orientation of stance markers in written discourse function.

Du Bois (2007), from the perspective of sociolinguistics, proposes that stance can be regarded as a social action realized by linguistic devices and the meaning of stance can be conceptualized under a broader scope involving language, interaction and sociocultural value. He puts forward the stance triangle theory, in which stance is defined as the public action of a social actor, realized linguistically by communicative approaches, to evaluate objects, position subjects, and align with other objects simultaneously.

Xu (2011) believes that stance markers in academic discourse refer to the various language resources employed by the writers to express the attitude, affection and judgment on the research proposition or towards the claims and research results demonstrated by other scholars. In his view, both the research proposition and other researchers are included in stance-taking. Based on Biber and Finegan’s (1988) stance classification, Xu Fang (2015) categorizes authorial stance markers into epistemic stance markers, attitudinal stance markers and authorial explicit markers.

Different scholars have their own focus, but the common point is that they all emphasize the evaluative and judgmental functions of stance. Biber and Finegan (1989) focus on the lexical and grammatical expressions of stance; Ochs (1990) underscores the culture dimension of stance; Hunston (2000) and

Hyland (2005b) emphasize the social communicative purpose and textual functions of stance; Du bois (2007) suggests that stance expression is a process of verbal interaction; Xu (2011) mainly stresses the object of stance. The next section reviews studies on stance markers in academic discourse.

3. Stance Markers in Academic Discourse

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of studies on stance in academic discourse. The academic discourse can be divided into two parts: essay writing and news writing (Zhang, 2021). Most scholars have focused on the distribution characteristics of stance markers in academic essay writing with comparative analysis. Therefore, the following literature review on stance markers is mainly based on comparative analysis, and the review is developed from four aspects, first across education degree, second across expertise, third across disciplines, and last talking about the research which compare the use of stance makers by native English speaker with those who study English as a foreign language.

3.1 Across Education Degree

This section discusses the research across education degree. Recently, the writing characteristics of EFL novice writer of different education levels have been widely concerned by researchers. Published articles mainly focus on how student writers employ stance items in academic discourse to express their attitudes of their paper. Researchers analyzed the stance-taking with different focuses such as students having a mixture of discipline backgrounds (Hyland, 2004) or a mixture of language backgrounds (Qiu & Ma, 2019), analyzing the student writers with same language background (Xu Fang, 2015; Wu & Paltridge, 2021).

Among the students with different level of education, researchers tend to pay more attention to the papers of master and doctor. Based on an interpersonal model of metadiscourse and stance markers theory, Hyland (2004) compared the use of metadiscourse features in master's and PhD dissertations in six disciplines written by Hong Kong Chinese students. In terms of the interactive categories, PhD students use far more evidential than masters in the dissertations. Hyland argued that it was due to the strong will of doctors to build a skilled writer identity and the weak desire of masters to establish their academic credentials. Similarly, doctoral students employ more stance and engagement features, especially more self-mentions than masters' dissertation. The reasons are partly attributed to PhD's length of text and their more sophisticated approaches to language, partly to the immature writing skills of masters.

Drawing on Hyland's (2005) categorization of stance resources in interactional metadiscourse, Qiu and Ma (2019) made a nuanced comparison of the stance features used by master's, doctoral, and expert writers in applied linguistics to explore the differences in writers' stance-taking at different stages of their disciplinary enculturation. The author found that master students employ more hedges, boosters, and attitude markers, but fewer self-mentions than doctoral and expert writers. To be more specific, "we" is the most frequent self-mention marker in master's dissertations which suggests master's students' intent to involve readers in their statements or arguments. They attributed the reason to master

students' limited academic knowledge and poor confidence in academic. However, this study mainly focused on the students of mixed linguistic background, including Japanese, Korean, American, thus the results may not be applicable to postgraduates' academic writing in other countries.

Unlike the students from different language backgrounds chosen by Qiu and Ma (2019), Wu and Paltridge (2021) investigated how student writers employ stance feature in Chinese students' MA dissertations and PhD theses and endeavored to capture the developmental trajectory from MA program to PhD study. The result shows that compared with MA dissertations, student writers with doctoral training employ fewer boosters, master a wider set of attitude markers and display an increased ability to assert positions and involve readers in their texts. For the MA dissertations and PhD theses this research analyzed in each case were written by the Chinese writer, thus it can reveal a developmental progression in the use of stance for masters and doctors. However, it limits on the data scope and the lack of the study on other factors which influence the stance-taking by students.

In addition, some scholars tend to concern the differences of stance markers among BA, MA and PhD groups of students. Centering on stance marker framework provided by Hyland and Xu (2015) further proposed three classifications which called epistemic marker, attitudinal marker and authorial explicit marker to analyze the use of stance of BA, MA and PhD dissertations by English majors. The result finds that doctoral learners intensify their use of attitudinal markers but decrease their use of authorial explicit markers which is contrary to the results of the data analyzed by Hyland (2004). The reason for this divergence is the different disciplines chosen by the researchers. Another important finding was that masters use authorial stance the most frequently, especially the epistemic stance. The author claimed that the awareness of authorial stance is the most prominent feature in MA stage. However, the author only gave a rough description without making a specific analysis about this phenomenon. Therefore, it warrants a more specific study of the masters' dissertation to demonstrate the deeper reason.

As can be seen, the few studies examining stance features in the papers written by student writers mainly concentrate on the masters' dissertations and doctoral theses. It should be noted that scholars examine the thesis as a whole rather than focusing on a specific section. Therefore, there is a great need to conduct research on how stance markers are constructed in the specific part of student writers in order to make suggestions for second language writing instruction.

3.2 Across Expertise

The above studies have compared the dissertations written by students with different educational levels, and the features of stance markers in their dissertations can be clearly demonstrated. In addition to different educational levels, researchers have found some differences between the novice writers and expert writers with their use of stance markers. Thus, the following reviews mainly focus on the comparison between novice writers and expert writers.

Under the guidance of Biber's (1999) stance theory, Xu (2011) compared the use of stance markers between Chinese PhD students and English experts in applied linguistics and he found that the

frequency of stance markers used by Chinese PhD students is less than English experts. It indicates that Chinese PhD try to make a strong commitment directly. In addition, the result shown that the choice of words used by Chinese PhD was relatively simple and lack of diversity, which was attributed to their weak vocabulary ability. This finding was also confirmed in Xu (2015). Therefore, the author concluded that Chinese advanced learners who major in English have basically developed an academic awareness of the use of stance markers in academic discourse, but they still have a long way to be mature expert writers. In the future, second language writing instruction should pay attention to improving student writers' awareness of professional writing. Synthesizing several scholars' theories of stance marker, Zhong and Guo (2020) conducted a study comparing the use of stance markers between masters' dissertations and international experts in Chemistry. It can be found that student writers are using cognitive markers much less frequently than scholars, which is consistent with Xu (2011). The author ascribed this phenomenon to the lack of knowledge and poor confidence in academic writing skills of student writers. Thus, they argued that the academic English teaching community should include the use of stance markers into their teaching contents.

Furthermore, some scholars have investigated the MA theses writers from different language background, for instance, Abdollahzadeh (2019) examined the employment of hedges in discussion sections of masters' dissertations written by Iranian MA students and research article discussions written by native English professional writers of applied linguistics. The research demonstrated that English professional writers produce more accuracy and reader-based hedges and use a more diverse range of hedging devices. Dahme and Sastre (2015) explored the academic register and stance markers in master's theses written in Catalan and published articles in English in immunology. The overall findings suggest that master students have not yet acquired academic writing proficiency either in academic register or in writer-reader interactions. Using Hyland's analytic model, Crosthwaite et al. (2017) analyzed the use of stance markers of undergraduate and specialist dissertations in dentistry. The findings indicated that professional reports exhibit a narrower set of linguistic devices than that used by student writers, who tend to use a much wider range of the four stance feature types analyzed for discussion of both others' and their own personal stance. This result is different from the previous study in that there are different subject requirements in theses writing.

Based on the studies above, we can see that basically novice writers have various problems in employing stance in theses writing regardless of their educational levels comparing with the expert writers. Accordingly, research articles written by expert writers are usually seen as a model for the discipline-specific writing.

3.3 Across Disciplines

Disciplines vary in the use of stance markers. Humanities, for example, emphasize on personal attitudes, thus using more attitude markers in academic writings. Science, in contrast, projecting a more objective perspective, uses fewer attitude markers. Thus, it is necessary to have a comparative analysis across disciplines to guide academic writing appropriately in different disciplines. The followings are

several studies which indicated that stance markers are discipline oriented.

Jiang (2016) comparatively studied the stance-taking affordances and interpersonal functions of shell nouns in applied linguistics, philosophy, biology, and electrical engineering papers. The study shown that authors in the humanities use shell nouns more frequently than those who in science and engineering disciplines. More specifically, the students in humanities disciplines often rely on cognitive understanding and theoretical constructs. That is why they tend to utilize cognitive shell nouns. However, the students in science and engineering disciplines usually derive their knowledge and information to a greater extent from scientific experiments and empirical evidence, thus they prefer to use event-based shell nouns more often. The author argued that the choice of vocabulary and stance in thesis writing reflects the requirements of academic purposes in different disciplines.

Based on the stance marking framework proposed by Hyland, He (2018) made a comparison between geology and linguistics dissertations in their use of stance makers in the introduction part. It can be found that students majored in pragmatics use more fuzzy qualifiers and intensifiers than students in geology, and students in geology uses more attitude markers than pragmatics. The reason why is that geology as a representative of natural disciplines requires a more precise and affirmative tone in its academic papers, while linguistics as a representative of social disciplines tends to leave room for readers to follow up the discussion, and at the same time it utilizes specific intonation enhancers to make its own viewpoints more credible.

In the other studies, Abdi (2002) compares the interpersonal meta-discourse including “hedges”, “emphatics” and “attitude markers” used in social science (SS) and natural science (NS). In his study, 55 academic articles are collected for comparison, and the result shows that NS authors use interpersonal meta-discourse less frequently than SS authors. While comparing each type of stance markers used in these two disciplines, he finds that there is a significant difference in the use of “hedges” and “attitude markers”. However, little difference is found in the use of “boosters”, and NS authors use slightly more boosters than SS writers. He explains that boosters are not only used to emphasize, but also to show the author’s modesty and the inadequacy of their study.

As mentioned before, Hyland (2002) collected 240 dissertations by L2 postgraduate writers in six disciplines (Electronic Engineering, Computer Science, Business Studies, Biology, Applied Linguistics, and Public Administration) written by Hong Kong Chinese students. In addition to examining the differences between master’s and doctoral articles, he also considered the impact of different disciplines on the use of stance markers. He found that social science subjects, applied linguistics in particular, used more stance markers, especially hedges and self-mentions, compared with natural science subjects. Besides, Computer Science tended to differ from the general picture of impersonality in scientific discourse, displaying relatively high frequencies of both self-mentions and engagement markers. Such a phenomenon was attributed to the purpose of the development of the Computer Science, which is to communicate with scholars within the discipline and practitioners outside the discipline, similar to the purpose of the field of soft sciences. As a result, even disciplines under the

same field show different styles of stance marker usage.

Hyland (2011) conducted a similar study that explored disciplinary differences in how research articles expressed their stance. He collects 240 articles from eight disciplines in both “soft” fields (sociology, philosophy, marketing and applied linguistics) and “hard fields” (molecular biology, mechanical engineer, electronic engineer, and magnetic physics). Hyland’s (2011) findings differ slightly from Abdi (2002). By comparing and analyzing the stance markers used in these eight disciplines, it was found that stance markers were used more frequently in the “soft” fields than in the “hard” fields. He explained that published articles are usually familiar to readers in the hard disciplines because they have been involved in this field of study for a longer period of time. Therefore, stance markers which play an interactive role between readers and authors are not as necessary for hard disciplines as they are for soft disciplines.

Finally, the study found no significant changes overall, but different disciplines showed different trends. The stance marker of applied sciences and applied liberal arts has increased over the last two decades, while the stance marker of pure liberal arts and pure sciences has decreased. In general, authors in the soft sciences tend to use more stance markers to express their position than authors in the hard sciences due to the different purposes of disciplinary development. In addition, there are some disciplines in the hard sciences that use stance markers frequently, such as the Computer Science discipline.

3.4 English as Native or Foreign Language

In addition to scholarly attention to comparative analyses of the use of stance markers across educational levels, academic levels and disciplines, scholars also compare stance markers used by English native learners with English Foreign Language learners (EFL) in academic articles, with the aim to figure out whether there are significant differences between these two groups of writers.

Li and Cheng (2020) collected 200 academic abstracts from core journals in environmental disciplines from 2013 to 2017 and analyzed the overall distribution and differences in the use of stance markers in the texts. It can be found that the frequency of stance markers used by Chinese and English native authors from high to low are hedges, boosters, self-mentions and attitude markers. More specifically, Chinese scholars use boosters and self-mentions significantly less than English native scholars. Li believes that a comparative study of Chinese and English journal stance markers can provide suggestions for Chinese authors to improve the quality of their English abstract writing. However, the authors did not further clarify the reasons for the differences between Chinese and native authors’ use of the two stance markers. Therefore, a more detailed analysis of the use of stance markers by English native writers and Chinese second language learners of English is necessary for future research.

Similarly, Yang and Leng (2023) also used English abstracts in Chinese and International academic papers as the object of their study to compare the use of stance markers by Chinese and English native authors in the field of chemistry. The study shows that the overall frequency of use by Chinese authors is lower than that of English native authors. More specifically, native authors use attitude markers and self-mentions significantly more than Chinese authors, while Chinese authors mostly use hedges to

convey academic results. At present, scholars of chemistry discipline in China can effectively use hedges in academic writing, which is a relatively mature academic discourse writing performance. The results of the study are analyzed with a view to enhancing the awareness of Chinese scholars in the discipline of chemistry in using stance markers in academic journal writing, and also to provide some reference for the relevant teaching of English for Special Purposes teachers in the discipline of chemistry.

Different from the previously mentioned research subjects, Liu and Chen (2020) made a comparative analysis of the characteristics of the use of stance markers in the master's theses of Chinese and American students. The results of the study show that Chinese students use stance markers less frequently than American students. In terms of the various types of stance markers, Chinese students use hedges, attitude marker and self-mentions less frequently than American students and use boosters more often. The authors concluded that the relatively high frequency of hedges in both the Chinese and American corpora indicated that students showed some caution in explaining the differences and credibility of their own research ideas. Meanwhile, Chinese students used fewer self-mentions than American students, partly because of Chinese cultural perceptions, partly of second-language writers are usually taught to avoid using first-person pronouns in presenting themselves because self-mention pronouns are perceived as informal, personal, and subjective in academic writing.

From the studies reviewed above, it can be seen that researchers make the comparative analysis across different groups of writers mainly focus on the contrast between English native writers and English as second language writers. The results indicated that both Chinese student authors and expert authors used fewer stance markers than native English writers, especially in self-mentions.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, previous studies reveals that the objects of existing research can be divided into four categories. First, scholars have focused on comparing differences in the use of stance markers by students at different levels of education (e.g., Hyland, 2004; Hyland, 2005; Qiu & Ma, 2019; Wu & Paltridge, 2021; Xu, 2015). Second, several studies have focused on the similarities and differences in the use of stance markers among novice writers and scholars (e.g., Xu, 2011; Dahme & Sastre 2015; Crosthwaite et al., 2017; Abdollahzadeh, 2019; Zhong & Guo, 2020). Third, since the findings of stance markers vary under different disciplines, some scholars claimed that stance markers are discipline-oriented (e.g., Hyland, 2002; Abdi, 2002; Hyland, 2011; Jiang, 2016; He, 2018). Fourth, it is essential to develop Chinese EFL writers' authentic English writing skills in writing instruction. Therefore, scholars compare the use of stance markers between native English speakers and Chinese EFL learners to identify the writing problems of Chinese writers (e.g., Li & Cheng, 2020; Yang & Leng, 2023; Liu & Chen, 2020).

The above review reveals the following noteworthy research trends in academic discourse stance research. First, current research related to EFL learners mainly focused on undergraduate, master's and

doctoral students. However, there is a lack of systematic examination of learners' competence development at various stages. Future research could expand the study group to find out the writing characters at other stages.

Second, scholars mostly focus on the similarities and differences in the use of stance devices by students at two different educational levels, and few scholars pay attention to students' learning growth trajectories. Therefore, there is a great need to present a rigorous study of the development of Chinese learners' second language stance expression ability so as to guide the second language writing instruction. For example, the similarities and differences of the use of stance skills in the growth stages among undergraduates, masters and doctoral students.

Third, most of the current studies are based on academic discourse such as academic journals, dissertations and textbooks. However, academic genres also include news discourse and academic science articles and other types of articles. It is warranted to expand the types of discourse in the future study.

Finally, most of the existing stance analysis frameworks are based on English language applications, which may not be suitable for Chinese discourse. Some scholars have already explored stance expression in Chinese discourse. However, given the complexity of Chinese language structure, the general applicability of the current stance theories still needs to be further tested. In the future, one of the necessary research directions is to build an analytic model applicable to Chinese discourse.

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