

The Stance Study of Evaluative *That* Clauses in English Abstracts of Chinese Master Theses

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Abstract

Employing the model of evaluative that-clause classification by Hyland and Tse (2005), this paper conducts a contrastive study of evaluative that-clauses and its stance functions between Chinese master theses and journal articles. The frequencies, evaluative entities, stance, stance resources, and expressions were explored in two corpora of 320 abstracts from master theses and published research articles. Analysis results show similarities and significant difference between Chinese postgraduate writers and experienced writers. Statistics indicate that Chinese postgraduate writers tend to write with more attitude stance and general writing characteristics. The poor stance constructions of Chinese postgraduate writers are attributed primarily to insufficient consciousness of the linguistic convention of “target community”.

Keywords: thesis, English abstract, evaluative that-clause, stance

1. Introduction

Scholars use “stance” or other synonyms as a language approach to describe the interpersonal functions in the academic discourse. The study of Thompson and Yi (1991) showed that teachers of English academic writing often fail to understand students’ stance when they use references. They are unable to determine whether the student accepts or opposes the viewpoints of the references. The study of Neff et al. (2003) found that for either native speaker learners or second language learners, the most difficult part in academic writing is how to properly use the stance marker to put forward their own views, and evaluate the researches of others.

Scholars attempt to explain difficulties in stance constructing for second language learners from different angles. Hinkel (1995, 1997) proposed that the native environment and cultural factors be the main causes that affected them to properly use modal verbs. Many foreign studies also explain the difficulties of stance constructing in academic writing with cultural factors. Some other scholars believe that language is not only an ordinary exchange, but an exchange among individuals or groups in a target community. Different “target communities” show different discourse characteristics in stance constructing. Politeness theory introduced by Brown and Levinson (1989) has also been widely applied to explain the differences of stance marker in academic discourse.

Postgraduates from 985 Project Series of Key Universities are the main force of future scientific researchers in China, whose level of academic writing no doubt represents the international exchange ability of China’s future researchers. How do these postgraduate writers express their positions in the English abstracts? Will they be affected by their native culture to use more indirect means of stance marking approach? Are they aware of the linguistic characteristics of the target communities? Are they in compliance with the Politeness Theory? Or does authors’ language ability have a direct impact on the stance constructing? These are the starting points of the current research.

2. Material Studied

Biber (1999) pointed out that stance adverbial and complement clauses (after adverb, verb, and adjective complements) are the most common means among five position markup syntax. According to the Quirk’s grammar, complement clauses with stance functions include *that* clauses, the *wh*- clauses, infinitive clauses and *-ing* clauses. In recent years, the stance function of *that* clauses in academic discourse has become a hot issue.

Hewings and Hewings (2002) found *that* clause with *it*-led extra-positioned subject is the main characteristics of commercial and scientific academic discourse. Hyland and Tse (2005) found that the frequency of evaluative *that*-clause is very high in the abstracts of Hong Kong master and PhD theses and that stances are more obviously shown in technological papers than the humanistic, social, and scientific papers. Studies of Charles (2006) found that *that*-clauses led by reporting verbs are the main language means to mark their stances.

In China, domestic studies on stance markers of academic discourse have just got started. Reviews found that study objects are mainly papers in English and Chinese Journals and academic discourse of their own language speakers, the majority of which are linguistic academic discourse. The vast majority of studies accounted focus on the lexical level, while it is almost blank at the syntax level. This study takes the English abstracts of outstanding Chinese postgraduate master theses as the starting point, comparing with the frequency differences on evaluative *that*-clause, in order to explore differences on stance constructing by Chinese postgraduates and international experienced authors.

Hyland and Tse (2005) classified evaluative *that*-clause from four aspects, i.e., the evaluation object, evaluation stance, source of stance, and syntax characteristics. Evaluative *that*-clause refers to the clauses embedded in the main clause, serving as a complement and describing specific stances and viewpoints of the authors. This study takes the classification method of evaluative *that*-clause by Hyland and Tse (2005) as the theoretical framework.

3. Research Design

3.1 Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) Is the frequency of evaluative *that*-clause in the Corpus of English Abstracts of Chinese Master Theses consistent with that of the Corpus of International Journal Abstracts?
- 2) How do the Chinese postgraduate writers of these construct their stances with evaluative *that*-clause? Compared with experienced authors, is it in an appropriate manner?
- 3) If Chinese postgraduate writers have difficulty with stance constructing in academic writing, is it due to cultural elements, weak awareness on target community statute, or authors' English language proficiency?

3.2 Data Collection and Data Retrieval

Two corpora were built for this study. In total, 160 English abstracts of master theses from China 985 Project universities were extracted from the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) network, and formed the Corpus of English Abstracts of Chinese Master Theses (hereinafter referred to as CEACMT) including 40 abstracts each in engineering, computing, economics, and linguistics. Meanwhile, 160 abstracts on the above four majors were extracted from international authoritative journals embodied by the EI, SCI and SSCI, and formed the Corpus of International Journal Abstracts (hereinafter referred to CIJA). To ensure the effectiveness of the two corpora, sources in both corpora were theses defended or published successfully and papers published in journals between 2007 and 2009. Data retrieval was done strictly in accordance with Hyland and Tse's (2005) definition of evaluative *that*-clause. AntConc was firstly used to retrieve all *that* clauses, which then were screened manually to exclude those without characteristics of evaluative *that*-clause, and finally counter-check was made to ensure the validity of identification.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Frequency Features of Evaluative *That*-Clauses

Table 1. Frequency distribution of evaluative *that*-clauses

Major	Chinese Postgraduate Authors CEACMT			Experienced Authors CIJA		
	Frequency	Frequency /Article	Frequency /1000 words	Frequency	Frequency /Article	Frequency /1000 words
Engineering	56	1.4	3.7	44	1.1	5.5
Computing	29	0.7	2.1	51	1.3	6.8
Economics	53	1.3	3.6	68	1.7	10.5
Linguistics	71	1.8	4.5	44	1.1	6.4
Total	209	1.3	3.5	207	1.3	7.2

Table 1 shows that the overall frequencies of evaluative *that-clause* are basically the same in the two corpora, including 209 in CEACMT and 207 in CIJA and the average frequency of 1.3 in each abstract. The result of this study confirms the result of Hyland and Tse (2005) as evaluative *that-clause* is widely used in academic writing to mark the author's stances. It is shown that not only are experienced scholars broadly using this grammatical structure in academic writing, but Chinese postgraduate writers are also actively using it to express their own attitudes and stances in English academic writing.

With further investigation on the frequency feature of evaluative *that-clause* per 1,000 words, we found that there are significant differences between the two corpora. For CIJA, the frequency is 7.2 per 1,000 words, twice the figure of CEACMT, which is 3.5 per 1,000 words. Horizontal comparison of four majors shows that data of CEACMT are all significantly lower than CIJA respectively. In the study of Hyland and Tse (2005), the parameter is 4.1 per 1000 words for Hong Kong master and PhD thesis abstract and 6.9 per 1000 words for journal articles. English is the first language in academic writing in Hong Kong, but the overall frequency of *that-clause* by Chinese postgraduate writers is only slightly lower than Hong Kong students.

According to the overall frequency of evaluative *tha-clause*, the ranking order of the four majors is, CEACMT: linguistics (4.5), engineering (3.7), economics (3.6), and computing (2.1); CIJA: economics (10.5), computing (6.8), linguistics (6.4), and engineering (5.5). The two corpora are utterly different. In CIJA, the frequency of evaluative *that-clause* in economic papers is twice of that in engineering papers. Computing is the second, with a frequency of 6.8, which is also significantly more than engineering. All along, papers in soft scientific areas are believed to contain more direct expressions, and have a better reflection of the interpersonal function of the discourse (Hyland, 2000). However, in Hyland and Tse (2005) study, the frequency in computing is higher than economics in journal articles. While computing is a new discipline, most of researches are experimental and demonstrations of new technology or new methods. Authors usually express their attitudes and stances straightforward. However, the frequency of computing in CEACMT is only 2.1 per 1,000 words, which falls far behind other disciplines in CEACMT, not to mention that in CIJA. Although penetration of computer and Internet is pretty high in China, the professional academic studies in computing is still in its infancy.

4.2 The Evaluation Object of Evaluative *That-Clauses*

Table 2. Evaluative object of evaluative *that-clauses* (%)

Major	Chinese Postgraduate Authors CEACMT				Experienced Authors CIJA			
	Author's findings	Other scholars' findings	Objectives	Methods	Author's findings	Other scholars' findings	Objectives	Methods
Engineering	3.2	0.4	0.1	0	4.7	0.5	0.1	0.1
Computing	1.5	0.6	0	0.1	5.7	0.5	0.1	0.4
Economics	2.6	1.0	0.1	0	9.3	0.9	0	0.3
Linguistics	3.2	1.2	0.1	0	5.9	0.4	0.1	0
Average	2.6	0.8	0.1	0	6.3	0.6	0.1	0.2
Total	74.6	22.5	2.4	0.5	87.4	8.2	1.5	2.9

By analyzing evaluation objects of *that* clauses, it was found that evaluative *that-clause* are mainly used to describe authors' discoveries by both experienced scholars and academic novices, a few to comment on other scholars' studies, and very minimal to describe the research objectives and methods. As seen in table 2, 74.6% of the clauses in CEACMT are used to describe authors' discovery, while 87.4% in CIJA. The proportion to describe the research of other scholars is 22.5% in CEACMT, but drops to 8.2 % in CIJA.

The engineering index has the following requirements for an English abstract: the abstract should be as concise as possible, without the commentary statement and citation, unless the paper is to confirm or deny a published paper; the background information of the research should be deleted as far as possible. However, this study found out that those evaluative *that-clauses* describing other scholars' studies in CEACMT are informative, personalized, and colloquial, which does not meet the requirements of academic English. Comments on other

scholars in the abstracts of master theses have very strong personal feelings and are quite subjective, which does not reflect the academic seriousness and subtlety. If authors' points of views are expressed too straightforward, it does not meet the politeness theory and gives people a feeling of imposing. In addition, in academic writing, quoted viewpoints should be specified with the source and object, rather than mentioned as vague allegations of "many scholars", which will be suspected to be subjective conjecture or speculation, and hence lack of credibility. Li Zhanzi's research on the dialogue characteristic of academic discourse (2001) also shows that propositions of the Chinese students are too definite, which weakens the credibility of the paper. Statement as the assertion of the author reflects rejections of the dialogue diversity of academic discourse. In the study about the stance constructing of Chinese and American undergraduates in academic writing, Hei Xueqin (2011) found that it shows more subjective judgments or highlights on the author's stance in undergraduates' academic writing, that there is lack of opposing perspectives and exact attribution objects, and that the voice of the other side is not obvious. The continuation of colloquial and subjective characteristics in postgraduate scholars' academic writing is because they are lack of awareness of statute in academic discourse. In other words, the lack of relevant trainings is the root cause.

4.3 Stance of Valuation *That*-Clauses

Table 3. Stance of evaluative *that*-clause (%)

Stance	Chinese Postgraduate Authors					Experienced Authors				
	CEACMT					CIJA				
	E	C	Economy	L	Total	E	C	Economy	L	Total
Attitude stance	2.4	1.9	2.4	3.8	10.5	0.4	0	0	0	0.4
Emotion	1.4	1.9	2.4	3.8	9.6	0.4	0	0	0	0.4
Obligation	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Knowledge stance	24.4	12.5	22.5	30.1	89.5	21.3	24.6	33.3	21.3	99.6
Affirmation	15.3	8.6	11	13.9	48.8	9.7	19.3	6.3	5.8	41.1
Question	4.3	1	3.8	8.6	17.7	6.8	2.9	16.4	12.1	38.2
Neutral	4.8	2.9	7.7	7.6	23	4.8	2.4	10.6	3.4	21.3

By analyzing stance markers in main clauses of evaluative *that*-clause, it was found that those with stance of knowledge expression in CEACMT and CIJA are 89.5% and 99.6% respectively. Knowledge stance marker is the most common stance marker in academic discourse. Table 3 shows that in this study, experienced scholars show rigorousness and objectiveness in writing academic papers. Almost all of them use the knowledge stance to express their views and attitudes, and give almost factual statements or ones with some degree of similarity with the facts and justified.

However, in CEACMT, it is found that 10.5% of evaluative *that*-clauses are used to mark the author's attitude stance by Chinese postgraduate authors. For example,

- 1) *It is the inexorable trend that* the flexible sucker rod replaces the steel sucker rod... (CEACMT, Engineering, No. 7)
- 2) Therefore, *we believed that* it is an effective way for resisting collusion attacks... (CEACMT, Engineering, No. 9)

The two examples above have both very strong attitude stance markers, such as "inexorable" and "believe". Most Chinese postgraduates just get started in academic writing, and they are eager to make their thoughts sound, which objectively leads to negative impact, such as opposing positions, imposing and threatening the readers. Therefore, we suggest that the root causes for Chinese postgraduates to use contrastive stance be more due to insufficient writing exercises and lack of effective guidance, especially the guidance of the academic discourse writing.

Further analysis of evaluative *that*-clause constructing knowledge stances suggests that, most of them in two corpora are using affirmative expressions. Affirmative expressions refer to those that authors hold a positive

attitude toward statement, reveal their commitments to the propositions, as well as the consonance with the readers. In contrast, the doubts and the neutralities rather take smaller proportions. An abstract is a highly condensed summary and refined elaboration of their academic research. The language should be concise, accurately tight, indicating the objective, methods, results, and conclusion. Determinate stance expressions prompt readers to quickly decide whether they would like to move on from the abstract to the main body of research.

4.4 The Stance Source of Evaluative *That*-Clauses

Table 4. The evaluation sources of evaluative *that*-clause (%)

Majors	Chinese Postgraduate Authors				Experienced Authors			
	CEACMT				CIJA			
	Inter-personal	Abstract entities	Hidden	Total	Inter-personal	Abstract entities	Hidden	Total
Engineering	7.1	58.9	33.9	100	0	59.1	40.9	100
Computing	10	70	20	100	37.3	37.2	25.5	100
Economics	30.8	42.3	26.9	100	51.4	47.1	1.5	100
Linguistics	22.5	57.7	19.7	100	11.4	75	13.6	100
Total	18.7	56	25.4	100	28.5	53.1	18.4	100

As exhibited in Table 4, it is noted that 56% and 53.1% of the propositions in CEACMT and CIJA respectively are derived from the abstract entities, such as results, findings, and so on. Abstract entities as an evaluation source could dispel the central position of the authors, enhance objective credibility of researches, and show the professional quality of the scholars (Hyland & Tse, 2005). Graduates have learned to use more abstract entities rather than the authors themselves as a stance source, which reflects the subtlety of academic discourse, but also embodies the politeness theory. From the perspective of pragmatics, as the authors do not elaborate on their own opinions, they will not fall into a passive position (or may leave room for themselves) even if there are mistakes in results, which shows respects to the readers in academic dialogues (Liu, 2005). For example:

- 1) *The results proved that* the access system can handle and push the traffic information efficiently. (CEACMT, computing, No. 30)
- 2) *The analysis showed* that faults make the vibration performances of the resonator changed in different levels ... (CEACMT, computing, No. 27)
- 3) *The findings show that* in the process of CET, the integration of collective meaning can help achieve the optimization of ... (CEACMT, linguistics, No. 16)

However, from Table 4, we found that there are apparent differences for interpersonal stance source ratio between the two corpora, 18.7% in CEACMT and 28.5% in CIJA. With further analysis on distributions of interpersonal stance sources, it is noted that there are significant differences in the means of stance markers.

The first-person singular marks, to express authors' authorities and responsibilities, are basically close (10.2%, 11.8%), while the obvious difference rests on the first person plural (38.5%, 81.4%). Of particular concern is the 51.3% of other non-first-person interpersonal stance sources that appear in CEACMT, but only 6.8% in CIJA.

The first person plural *we*, the ambiguous way to refer to oneself, is a humble way to express the author's views and positions, without completely hiding themselves, which illustrates the reliability of his/her findings by the power of the whole discourse community and makes it easier for readers to accept. Study of Wu Geqi (2010) found that English authors tend to use first person singular *I* in conclusions, while the Chinese authors tend to use the first person plural pronoun *we* to refer to the author himself/herself, and most *we* appear in the single-author papers. In this study, the first person plural usage in CEACMT is far less than CIJA. While the use of non-first-person by Chinese postgraduate authors is seemingly in line with scientific objectivity, in fact, it expands the distance between postgraduate writers and readers, highlights the risk and responsibility of the author, and cannot escape from the suspect of refusing to communicate with readers.

4.5 Analysis of Syntax Characteristics of Evaluative *That*-ClausesTable 5. Syntax characteristics of evaluative *that*-clause (%)

	Chinese Postgraduate Authors CEACMT					Experienced Authors CIJA				
	E	C	Economy	L	Total	E	C	Economy	L	Total
Non-verb predicate	14.3	13.3	30.8	18.3	19.6	13.6	17.6	11.8	15.9	14.5
Adj.	0	6.7	5.7	0	2.4	0	0	0	0	0
Noun.	14.3	6.7	25.1	18.3	17.2	13.6	17.6	11.8	15.9	14.5
Verb predicate	85.7	86.7	69.2	81.7	80.4	86.4	82.4	88.2	84.1	85.5
Research verbs	53.6	60	40.4	50.7	50.2	56.8	66.7	42.6	29.5	48.8
Discourse verbs	30.4	23.3	25	22.5	25.4	27.3	11.8	45.6	54.5	35.3
Cognitive verbs	1.7	3.3	3.8	8.5	4.8	2.3	3.9	0	0	1.4

Compared to other parts of speech, verbs are usually clearer to express the author's views and suggest his established position, and therefore frequency of verbs is significantly higher than other parts of speech in thesis abstracts (Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Tse, 2005; Thompson & Ye, 1991). In this study, we found evaluative *that*-clause led by verb predicates take 80.4% and 85.5%, in CEACMT and CIJA respectively, while those led by non-verb predicate only take 19.6% and 14.5% as demonstrated in Table 5. Both Chinese postgraduate writers and international experienced authors tend to choose verb predicates to lead *that* clauses to express their views.

Although most of verb predicates are research verbs (reporting verbs) which reflect the research processes and authors' attitudes. But the frequency of discourse verbs is also worthy of attention. It is noticed that discourse verbs are insufficiently used in CEACMT compared to CIJA (25.4%, 35.3%). The overall frequency of discourse verbs is significantly lower than CIJA. Discourse verbs contribute to the author's arguments and lobbying, so they appear at higher frequency in soft scientific papers (Hyland & Tse, 2005). In this study, the frequency of discourse verbs is much higher in Economics and Linguistics theses than Engineering and Computing in CIJA. For example:

- 1). *Our findings suggest that* pre-entry knowledge and management experience increase firm... (CIJA, Economics, No. 31)
- 2). *It is argued that* many of these criticisms stem from a fundamental misunderstanding... (CIJA, Linguistics, No. 30)

However, there are no discipline characteristics found in CEACMT. Chinese postgraduate writers have just begun academic writing, and hence are more following, or still confined to the principles of *scientific objectivity* in academic discourse. They are neither good at using the verbs to persuade readers indirectly to accept their views, nor show their identities, and they are also lack of responsibility and authority.

Observing non-verb predicate leading *that* clauses, we found that all non-verb predicates in CIJA are noun predicates, which is essentially similar in CEACMT, where *that* clauses led by noun predicates take the absolute proportion. Compared with adjectives, noun predicates are more indirect in the stance making, which will not give readers imposed emotion and hence will protect the positive feeling of the authors and readers. For example:

- 1). *This research is based on the assumption that* leaders are able to influence followers based on close... (CIJA, Economic, No. 18)
- 2). *The conclusion is that* the bridge is a conservative system, the adjusting from act... (CEACMT, Engineering, No. 16)

5. Conclusion and Significance

With comparison of frequency features and stance constructing differences of evaluative *that-clause* in English Abstracts of Chinese Master Theses and International Journals, this study finds that Chinese postgraduate writers are following the basic requirements of academic writing, but there are significant differences in stance constructing from experienced scholars. The viewpoints commented are usually not specified with sources and objects, but only a vague allegation which is lack of credibility. The subjective feelings are highlighted, which leads to opposing stances objectively, and is not in compliance with the politeness theory. The use of non-first person is seemingly in line with scientific objectivity, but it in fact surfaces the risks and responsibilities of the author.

Previous studies believe that it is the native cultural factors that influence the interpersonal stance constructing in second language learners' writing, and domestic scholars have also been stressing that it is the face concept in Chinese and euphemism and indirect style in Chinese culture that influence Chinese scholars' stance constructing in academic writing. Nonetheless, as Hinkel (1997) once pointed out, the use of modal words in English writings of second language learners whose native language is Mandarin Chinese, is much closer to the native English speakers. By comparing the characteristics of evaluative *that-clause* in the abstracts of the outstanding master theses and international journals, this study suggests that it is undeniable that native language is not necessarily the main factor that restricts the interpersonal stance function for second language learners in China's native cultures. The lack of guidance on language statute of "target community" is a more important cause of undergraduates' difficulties of stance constructing in academic writing.

Nowadays, the reformation of English teaching in colleges is deepening in China, and English for Academic Purpose (EAP) has once again become the hot topic in English education. Plentiful universities have opened courses of English academic writing for undergraduates and postgraduates. In an era of globalization, the English academic writing skills of graduates have to be improved, to adapt to the need of academic research and internationalization. The awareness training on academic writing of postgraduates should be strengthened in graduate teaching, to temper the thinking of academic writing and train the students to transform between academic writing and everyday writing.

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