

Cross-linguistic Study on Academic Writings in Creating Coherence

Textual Metadiscourse in Abstracts of Master's Thesis

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Abstract—What is essential to academic texts is coherence, which is acknowledged to be “difficult to teach and difficult to learn”. Metadiscourse, as features in the discourse which can help readers decode the message, functions in the construction of coherence. This study aims to investigate how coherence differs with cultural aspects and language facilities through the study of uses of textual metadiacourse in the abstracts of master's thesis written by English native speakers and Chinese speakers. The findings indicates that Genre conventions had a determining role in the writers' choice of some metadiscourse resources and lightly more instances of textual metadiscourse were observed in the writing samples of native speakers of English. It also discusses that the differences in the distribution and use of textual metadiscourse resources may be caused by different rhetorical strategies between English and Chinese, the lack of language facilities or the influences of original habits of organizing Chinese.

Keywords—*academic writings; coherence; textual metadiscourse*

I. INTRODUCTION

Text refers to “any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole” and is “best regarded as a semantic unit.” A text has “linguistic features which can be identified as contributing to its total unity and giving it texture”. In this way, what is Essential to academic texts is coherence, which is acknowledged to be “difficult to teach and difficult to learn”. For student's academic writing, content needs to be understood not only in terms of the meaning of individual ideas and pieces of information but also in terms of how the text develops and how ideas and information inter-relate. Coherence suggests that the ideas in the writing hold together. It means that “the reader can follow the overall position that the writer takes, the arguments that are given to support the writer's position, and the evidence that the writer provides in support of these arguments”.

Metadiscourse refers to those features which writers include to help readers decode the message, share the writer's views and reflect the particular conventions that are followed in a given culture. Hyland proposes that based on a view of writing as a social and communicative engagement

between writer and reader, metadiscourse focuses our attention on the ways writers project themselves into their discourse to signal their attitudes towards both the content and the audience of the text. So metadiscourse can gradually become tracing patterns of cohesion and coherence across texts. Vande Kopple(1997),also, define metadiscourse as discourse that people use not to expand referential material but to help the readers to connect, organize, interpret, evaluate and develop attitudes toward the material. Essentially metadiscourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just exchanging the information, goods or services.

According to Hyland, the interpersonal dimension of language has two elements which can be distinguished for analytical purposes. These can be called interactive and interactional resources. The former are concerned with ways of organizing discourse to anticipate reader's knowledge and reflect the writer's assessment of what needs to be made explicit to constrain and guide what can be recovered from the text. The devices are: transition markers, sequencers, code glosses, frame markers, evidentials and endophoric markers. The latter concern the writer's efforts to control the level of personality in a text and establish a suitable relationship to his or her data, arguments and audience, marking the degree of intimacy, the expression of attitude, the communication of commitments, and the extent of reader involvement. These include such categories as: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mentions.

These two categories proposed by Dafouz-Milne are generally distinguished in 2008. Metadiscourse is generally viewed as explicit in that it is realized by means of the use of linguistic devices

Fowler (1991) considers the text as co-produced by writer and reader, negotiating the nature and significance of a piece of language, on the basis of their more or less shared knowledge of the world, society and language itself. An author who articulates meaning must consider its social influence and the impact that it has on those who interpret the meaning, the readers who are the audiences for the communication. Metadiscourse is one of the main means which allows the author to accomplish this. It involves

writers and their readers in mutual acts of comprehension and involvement (Hyland, 2005).

Moreover, it is generally accepted that “writing is a cultural object” (Moreno, 1997:5). According to Robert Kaplan’s (1966) contrastive rhetoric, language and writing are cultural phenomena. A direct consequence of this idea is that each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it.

Given the importance accorded to coherence in academic writing, it is somewhat surprising that there has been relatively little research to describe features that may contribute to or detract from coherence in student writing. Moreover, to my knowledge, no study so far has sought to find how coherence differs in academic writings of native speakers and non-native speakers, which may not only be caused by the difference of facilities of English, but caused by different social cultures, rhetorical strategies and epistemological beliefs.

Contrastive approaches not only show a particular practice as specific to a group but also they allow the identification of universals. In other words, a contrastive stance is both a superlative way of gaining precise descriptive knowledge about individual languages and cultures and at the same time invaluable in general understanding of language-based communication (cited in Connor, 1996:6). Thus, contrastive analysis of metadiscourse provides a framework for understanding communication as social engagement and cross-cultural communication. A contrastive study was carried out in the use of hedgings and boostings in the abstracts of applied linguistics between Chinese and English academic articles by Hu & Cao (2011). They found significantly more hedges used in the English-medium abstracts and more boosters in the Chinese counterparts. The reason was attributed to the culturally preferred rhetorical strategies of English and Chinese.

In response to the issues identified above, this study aims to investigate how coherence differs between English native speaker and non-native speaker, which may be influenced by cultural aspects and language facilities. The present study attempts to study one particular feature which can contribute to coherence, textual metadiscourse, to examine the probable differences and/or similarities in the distribution and use of textual metadiscourse resources in these texts. Textual metadiscourse organizes the discourse for the reader by “pointing out topic shifts, signaling sequences, cross referencing, connecting ideas (and) previewing material. Furthermore, very few contrastive studies of abstracts in English and Chinese have examined this discipline, leaving an obvious lacuna to fill in. Thus, the corpus was consisted of abstracts from two sets of master’s thesis respectively written by English native speaker and Chinese.

The following set of questions guided our study: (1) Are there any differences/similarities in the use of textual metadiscourse between abstracts from two sets of master’s thesis respectively written by English native speaker and Chinese? (2) Which factors may contribute to these differences in the use of textual metadiscourse between abstracts, cultural aspects or the lack of language facility?

II. STUDY

20 samples of students’ academic writing were collected randomly from the abstracts of master’s thesis (10 written by native English speaker and 10 written by Chinese). The two groups of thesis were highly comparable in major respects including Arts, Engineering, Education and Business. The use of these samples allowed us to examine student writing of the same genre (argumentation), an important consideration given that ways of creating cohesive and coherent text may be genre specific. Jones (2011) compared the use of metadiscourse to create coherence in academic writing between a native English speaking university student and a non-native counterpart. This paper confronted a common and very significant challenge that such students (NNS) faced: difficulty with constructing a coherent argument.

In order to ensure that diachronic changes do not affect the selected editorials, all the abstracts were taken from the publication period of 2013–2015. The texts, a total of 20 (accounting for 6,815 words), have a similar length (approximately 300 words each) and were matched for topic in order to ensure comparability.

Based on Hyland’s metadiscourse model and Dafouz-Milne’s framework of seven categories of textual discourse, we identified a number of defining features of facilities in order to facilitate the data coding process.

After analyzing the data, a quantitative analysis was conducted to determine the frequency of different types of metadiscourse categories and to compare and contrast the two sets of data.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

All categories of textual metadiscourse suggested in Dafouz-Milne (2008) were observed. Announcements and logical markers were the most frequently used categories. Slightly more instances of textual metadiscourse were observed in the writing samples of native English speakers, and detailed observations on each category would be reported below in "Table I".

A. *Announcements and Illocutionary Markers*

Authors use evidences to add credit to their claims and basis of their research in academic writings. Abstracts are very important as brief pieces of writing with which authors introduce their work and its value. So the high frequency of the use of announcements was decided by the genre and functions of abstracts.

Markers to signal the illocutionary intent of the writer were rarely observed in Chinese writings. However, the writing of the native speakers had included announcements and markers to signal the illocutionary intent of the text. As in the culture of English speaking countries, they emphasize on the individuality and originality of ideas, while Chinese people do not.

Example 1: The research has not only identified the implications and barriers that require change but it has also

developed a more nuanced understanding of causes of the barriers to participation, from the perspective of DPOs.

B. Code Glosses

Code glosses, which enabled the reader to understand which arguments or information in the preceding discourse were being explained or illustrated, were particularly important when multiple ideas were combined as shown in the example.

As the abstracts were all collected from the master's thesis, the intended readers were taken as professional scholars or other specialist. Regarding the low number of code glosses in both sets of texts, these results suggest that writers are aware of the audience they are addressing and consequently needn't include a number of explicit reading cues as well as more exemplifications.

In Chinese writings, there was only 1 use of code glosses. Specific evidence (facts, statistics, examples) are preferred to be used in English writings to support arguments. While for

Chinese writers, explicit signals are not necessary, not necessarily specific.

C. Logical Markers

Logical markers clearly stand out as the most frequently used items in both native English writings and Chinese writings. While in the Chinese writings, the distribution of logical markers was imbalanced as a writing sample has 8 instances and some writing samples use only 1 logical marker. This may be influenced by their practices of writing Chinese. Another problem of Chinese writing is the overuse of logical markers. Although logical markers are highly important and frequently used in establishing idea relations, there is not much variety of logical markers use in the students' essays. Instead, they were limited to 'but' and 'and'. This may suggest that the students' knowledge of semantic relationship may be limited, or they are more open and comfortable using the more common ones rather than other alternative like 'moreover', 'furthermore', 'in addition' and other markers that create coherence.

TABLE I. TTG OF THE CAUSES OF THE BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF DPOs.

| | Total | Writing of Native English Speaker | Writing of Chinese Speaker |
|---|-------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Topicalisers Indicate shift in topic | 52 | 32 | 20 |
| Illocutionary markers Explicit naming of the act the writer performs | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Announcements Reference forward to future section in the text | 10 | 7 | 3 |
| Code glosses Explain, rephrase or illustrate textual material | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| Logical markers Express semantic relationships (additive, adversative, consecutive, conclusive) between stretches of discourse | 52 | 32 | 20 |
| Reminders Reference back to previous section in the text | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Sequencers Mark a particular position in a series | 5 | 3 | 2 |

D. Reminders and Topicalisers

Topicalisers and reminders are virtually few in this corpus; Abstract was used to make clear links in their arguments and also clearly distinguish their goals, methodological stages and finally their conclusions. However, since it is supposed to be succinct, there is often not enough space to make reference to other topics. Retrospective functions of these items are not necessary in such a short length as well.

E. Sequencers

Although there are slight differences in the frequency of both uses of sequences, the actual uses in writing samples shed light on how both differs in sequences of position.

Example 2: During the solution procedure, the dimensionless displacement governing equations in matrix form are derived firstly. Then...After that, ... Finally, several numerical examples are provided to prove the correctness of the present solution and investigate the features of one-dimensional transient response of single-layer unsaturated porous media.

Example above was selected from writing samples written by Chinese speaker, from which we can see high distribution of these sequencers in same texts. It is also in line with Chinese rhetorical strategies-heavy use of inductive reasoning (movement from the specific to the general).

IV. CONCLUSION

Metadiscourse has an important role in construction of coherence. This study has revealed several important cross-cultural and genre-related differences in the use of textual metadiscourse in creating coherence. Firstly, Genre conventions had a determining role in the writers' choice of some metadiscourse resources that contributed to some similarities in the use and distribution of metadiscourse resources across English and Chinese. Secondly, Announcements and logical markers were the most frequently used categories. Slightly more instances of textual metadiscourse were observed in the writing samples of native speakers of English. The differences in the distribution and use of textual metadiscourse resources in these texts contributed to the difference of coherence, which are caused by different rhetorical strategies between English

and Chinese, the lack of language facilities or the influences of original habits of organizing Chinese.

It is hoped that the terms and description in the present study, can have the implications to writing teaching, which can give some clear explanations of how to construct coherence. In academic writing, students could learn marking the illocutionary intent of the writer or writing, integrating logical markers into complex sentence structures and using all kinds of textual metadiscourse appropriately.

There are two important limitations in this study of persuasion: (a) the small-scale of the research data (b) only investigate one factor which contribute to coherence and only one type of genre of writing samples. Thus, further studies could offer more insight into coherence by using a larger corpus, focusing on different factors and genres and maybe involving some other research measures. The focus of the study was thus limited in scope. Despite these limitations, we hope the study has brought some implications to potential writers of English academic writings.

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