ЛИНГВИСТИКА/LINGUISTICS

Stancetaking in English-Medium Research Article Abstracts: A Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract. This paper, inspired by interest in semantics and pragmatics of academic discourse, focuses on English-medium research article abstracts by authors with native languages other than English. The study assumes that in order to convey an authorial stance and establish an effective relationship with the reader, representatives of different cultures use a repertoire of metadiscourse devices varying in terms of quality and quantity. The theoretical basis of the research is K. Hyland's taxonomy of stance markers. Hedging and boosting devices found in the corpus were analysed using the terminology proposed by K. Hyland and H. Zou. The analysis showed that hedges and boosters are important elements of academic discourse. They play a crucial role in authorial efforts to make claims tentative and avoid categorical statements or persuade readers of certainty and accuracy of research results. The study found that academic article abstracts by Latin American authors contain considerably more hedges than those written by their Russian counterparts, who make extensive use of boosters. Anticipating and acknowledging alternative points of view, Latin American authors are more careful when making claims, which is in compliance with the internationally accepted academic writing norms. The findings suggest that Russian novice academic writers should be taught stancetaking strategies in line with the academic writing norms.
Keywords: research article abstracts, academic discourse, stancetaking, cross-cultural differences, metadiscourse devices, hedging, boosting, K. Hyland

Научная статья

Экспликация авторской позиции в англоязычных аннотациях к научным статьям: сопоставительный анализ

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Аннотация. Настоящая статья, мотивированная интересом к прагматике и семантике академического дискурса, посвящена изучению англоязычных аннотаций к научным статьям, написанным авторами, не являющимися носителями английского языка. Делается попытка доказать или опровергнуть предположение о том, что с целью выражения авторской позиции и установления эффективных отношений с адресатом представители разных культур используют репертуар метадискурсивных средств, различающийся как качественно, так и количественно. Теоретической основой послужила таксономия средств экспликации авторской позиции, разработанная К. Хайландом. Кроме того, найденные в корпусе средства хеджирования и бустинга были исследованы с применением терминологии, предложенной К. Хайландом и Х. Цзоу. Анализ показал, что хеджи и бустеры являются важными элементами академического письма, помогая авторам смягчить категоричность высказываний или убедить читателей в правильности и точности представляемых результатов. Было установлено, что в отличие от российских авторов, которые отдавали предпочтение средствам усиления категоричности высказываний, латиноамериканские исследователи использовали большее количество хеджей и продуцировали более осторожные высказывания, предвосхищая и признавая альтернативные точки зрения, что соответствует общепринятой традиции академического письма. Результаты работы указывают на необходимость обучения начинающих российских исследователей средствам выражения авторской позиции в научных текстах в соответствии с нормами академического письма.

Ключевые слова: аннотации к научным статьям, академический дискурс, экспликация авторской позиции, межкультурное различие, метадискурсивные средства, хеджинг, бустинг, К. Хайланд

Introduction

The process of globalization has created the need to learn English in order to publish articles in international journals, to teach disciplines in English or to communicate with peers at academic conferences. This has prompted intensive research into non-native (L2) English academic writing with the aim to identify culture-specific linguistic structures and suggest ways of improving academic writing skills.

The interest in L2 academic discourse has inspired the current study, which focuses on the insufficiently explored academic prose by L2 writers from Latin America and Russia, who have only been actively using English in scholarly settings since the late 1960s.

The object of the study is research article (RA) abstracts, which have been comprehensively analysed from a variety of angles. However, despite the profusion of RA abstract studies [1–9], little research appears to have compared stance features such as hedging and boosting in academic texts of this genre produced by L2 writers with different cultural backgrounds. Most studies focus on comparing the epistemic and evaluative stancetaking in L1 and L2 academic prose and pay little attention to similarities and differences in the use of stance markers by L2 authors.

Thus, in an attempt to contribute to research into the stance features of L2 academic writing, the present study aims to reveal differences or similarities between Latin American- and Russian-authored RA abstracts in terms of frequencies and types of stance devices to identify the extent to which Latin American and Russian authors follow the Anglophone academic writing conventions. The practical significance of this study lies in the fact that it can enlighten teachers and course designers developing academic writing materials and offer suggestions to novice L2 authors in regard to writing English-medium article abstracts, particularly when constructing authorial stances.

Theoretical framework

As a product of social interaction, academic texts contain various stance features, which have been described as linguistic items used to increase persuasiveness of texts [10] or establish credibility [11, 12]. The term *stance* was introduced by Biber and Finegan, who defined it as "the overt expression of an author's or speaker's attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the message" [13, p. 1]. Since then, stance has been interpreted from diverse perspectives. Gray and Biber defined it as a tool used for encoding opinions and assessments [14]. According to K. Hyland, stance is a type of evaluation, conceptualizing it as an attitudinal dimension that includes features used by writers to present themselves and convey their judgements and opinions [15]. He distinguished between three components of stance: evidentiality, affect and presence. Evidentiality, as Hyland put it, refers to the writer's expressed commitment to the reliability of the proposition and its potential impact on the reader; affect involves a wide range of attitudes towards what is being said; presence concerns the extent to which the writer projects him/herself into the text. These three components are realized in the four stance features:

(1) hedges, used to withhold complete commitment to a proposition,

(2) boosters, helping to express certainty about what is being said and mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with the audience,

(3) attitude markers, used to indicate the writer's affective attitude to propositions, and

(4) self-mentions, which manifest the explicitness of author presence [15].

Since the focus of this article is boosting and hedging, let us briefly describe these stancetaking categories.

The study has adopted Hyland's pragmatically-oriented definition of hedging as a phenomenon contributing to the interactional function of language, used to moderate the degree of authorial commitment to the propositional content [16]. In contrast to hedges, which mitigate authorial claims, boosters are utilized to "suppress alternatives, presenting the proposition with conviction while marking involvement, solidarity and engagement with readers" [16, p. 145], create an impression of certainty and assurance, show strong conviction for propositional content and strengthen its illocutionary force. The balance between these stance features indicates to what extent the writer is willing to entertain alternatives and convey commitment to the propositional content and respect for readers [16].

Methodology

The present study was conducted on a corpus of 204 RA abstracts derived from 12 Scopus-indexed Latin American and Russian social science journals. The abstracts were divided into two sub-corpora: sub-corpus 1 (SC1), containing abstracts from six Latin American journals (*Tempo Social*, *Eure*, *Revista Brasileira de Linguística Aplicada*, *Íkala*, *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, and *Estudos Avançados*), and sub-corpus 2 (SC2), containing abstracts from six Russian journals (*Educational Studies*, *The Journal of Social Policy Studies*, *Journal of Language and Education*, *Russian Journal of Linguistics*, *Issues of Cognitive Linguistics*, and *RUDN Journal of Sociology*).

Social sciences were chosen for the analysis based on the assumption that academic prose in this field is more culturally determined than that in hard sciences. The motivation behind the selection of RA abstracts by Latin American and Russian scholars for a contrastive analysis was both significant differences in the historical context, in which the Slavic and Latin American academic communities have been developing, and similarities associated with the recent use of English as a lingua franca in academia. In neither cultural context, English has been used as a language of science and education. However, due to the process of globalization of education, English has been gaining influence in the countries in question, which is confirmed by a growing number of English-medium publications by Latin American and Russian scholars in international journals. It is therefore of interest to analyse the ways these authors use hedging and boosting devices in RA abstracts, in order to shed light on possible cross-cultural differences. The corpus was compiled in a way that ensures comparability in terms of genre

(RA abstracts), authors' origin (Latin America and Russia) and field (social sciences).

Hyland's taxonomy of stance features presented earlier was employed as the theoretical framework. In addition, hedging and boosting devices found in the corpus were analysed using Hyland and Zou's terminology [17]. The authors identified three ways of conveying respect for peers' views and three ways of shutting down alternative voices. The taxonomies adopted in the current study are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Types of hedges

Type	Function
Plausibility hedges	Signal that a claim is based on plausible assumptions rather than evidence
Downtoners	Mitigate the intensity of a statement
Rounders	Indicate an (often numerical) approximation

Table 2

Types of boosters

Type	Function
Certainty markers	Indicate the writer's epistemic conviction
Extremity markers	Emphasize the upper edge of a continuum
Intensity markers	Amplify the emotive strength of a statement

The RA abstracts were downloaded from the journals' websites, converted to the Microsoft DOC format and analysed. First, the abstracts were manually scanned for boosting and hedging markers. AntConc 3.5 was then used to search the frequency of boosters and hedges in the two sub-corpora. Every occurrence of a lexical item was manually double-checked in context to verify that it served the stancetaking function. Once it was determined that a given item qualified as a booster or a hedge, it was assigned to one of the groups of

hedges (plausibility hedge, rounder or downtoner) or boosters (certainty marker, extremity marker or intensity marker). An inter-group (Latin American *versus* Russian authors) contrastive analysis was conducted to find potential similarities and differences between the groups. The frequencies of each stance feature were normalized to 1000 words and calculated. The frequencies of the types of hedges and boosters were summarized in a table format.

Results

Frequencies of hedges and boosters in the sub-corpora. The results suggest that researchers from both cultural backgrounds are conscious of the need to engage with the content and readers. However, in absolute terms, the differences between the total number of hedges and boosters were quite significant. The share of stance features was slightly different across the two cultures, with hedging markers predominating in SC1 and boosters outweighing hedges in SC2 (see Table 3).

Table 3

Frequency of hedges and boosters in the corpus (per 1000 words)

Category of metadiscourse	SC1	SC2
Hedges	21.1	16.1
Boosters	17.3	27.0
Total	38.4	43.1

Table 3 summarizes the results of the quantitative analysis of hedges and boosters occurring in the two sub-corpora. Overall, 937 hedges and boosters were found in the two sub-corpora (464 in SC1 and 473 in SC2). When normed for text length, SC1 showed a higher degree of detachment, while SC2 featured more boosters. The frequency of hedges per 1000 words differed significantly: 21.1 in SC1 and 16.1 in SC2. The normalized frequencies of boosters were also significantly different: 17.3 in SC1 and 27.0 in SC2.

Further, the types of hedges and boosters were analysed in terms of frequency. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

**Frequency of the types of hedges
in the corpus (per 1000 words)**

Type	SC1	SC2
Plausibility hedges	12.9	10.3
Downtoners	5.1	4.9
Rounders	3.1	0.9
Total	21.1	16.1

Table 5

**Frequency of the types of boosters
in the corpus (per 1000 words)**

Type	SC1	SC2
Certainty markers	11.8	16.1
Extremity markers	1.8	2.7
Intensity markers	3.7	8.2
Total	17.3	27.0

Rhetorical functions of hedges and boosters in the sub-corpora. Hedges downplay a writer's commitment to a proposition, modifying its relevance or certainty and opening space for alternative viewpoints. Table 4 manifests that hedging devices used in the two sub-corpora not only differed in frequency, but were also employed differently in terms of their types. As can be seen from the table, however, the general trends in the types of hedges were similar. Plausibility hedges clearly prevailed in both sub-corpora and were used to recognize the limitations of claims. However, in SC1, plausibility hedges were employed slightly more frequently, which indicates that Latin American writers more actively show their reservations about the accuracy of statements by moderating the way of expressing ideas. Here is an example of plausibility hedges indicating that the statement is based on an assumption rather than facts:

SC1: *Moreover, the findings* **suggest** *that this network* **may** *have contributed to the "normalisation" of digital technology use*[1].

The verbal hedges *suggest* and *may* signal an awareness of alternative viewpoints and seek to avoid potential criticism.

The frequency of downtoners was slightly different in the two sub-corpora, which indicates that Latin American and Russian writers tend to show some professional modesty and soften claims in a similar way. The example below features a downtowner used to protect the writer against inaccuracy of research results and mitigate the intensity of the authorial claim:

SC1: *For women engineers, there is also gender harassment, which is characterized by explicit situations of discrimination and violence, which* **tend** *to negatively influence their greater inclusion in construction sites*[2].

In the following example, the downtoner *usually* conveys a certain qualification with regard to the degree of accuracy of the conclusion, demonstrating that the statement might be inaccurate:

SC2: *Thus, in Russian such forms* **usually** *convey the future, as in* napishu *'I will write'*[3].

Rounders indicating an approximation were rather scarce in both sub-corpora. Here is an example:

SC2: **Approximately** *seventy place names cited in this article were selected due to their lingua-cultural, geographical, associative, and commemorative significance*[4].

[1]Braga J., Martins A.C.S., Racilan M. *The Elephant in the (Class)Room: Emergency Remote Teaching in an Ecological Perspective*. Available at: https://www.scielo.br/j/rbla/a/gZ3B63wPwmfDVfNXFMGTpzr/?lang=en (accessed: 12 March 2023).

[2]Lombardi M.R. *Women Engineers in Construction Industry: The Feminization Possible and Gender Discrimination*. Available at: https://publicacoes.fcc.org.br/cp/article/view/3619 (accessed: 10 March 2023).

[3]Plungian V.A., Rakhilina E.V., Reznikova T.I. *Perfective, Performative and Present: Some Non-Standard Combinations in Slavic and Beyond*. Available at: https://journals.rudn.ru/linguistics/article/view/32954 (accessed: 1 September 2023).

[4]Chesnokova O.S., Talavera-Ibarra P.L., Bolotina K.E. *New World Basque Toponymy in the Dialogue of Languages and Cultures*. Available at: https://journals.rudn.ru/linguistics/article/view/18586 (accessed: 1 September 2023).

Apparently, "by making numbers a little fuzzy, rounders take the edge off what might otherwise be regarded as an exaggeratedly exact and fussy meticulousness, thereby contributing to making the argument more accessible and persuasive" [17, p. 6].

It seems that the higher frequency of plausibility hedges and downtoners compared to rounders might be a disciplinary-specific feature: rounders are often employed in hard science articles, where they contribute to a compromise between the need for accuracy with numerical data and careful argumentation.

In contrast to hedges, boosters function by "presenting the proposition with conviction while marking involvement, solidarity and engagement with readers" [16, p. 145]. The analysis revealed a higher normalized frequency of these devices in SC2, which indicates that Russian writers tend to adopt a stronger stance and are keener to express their conviction and highlight the significance of their work:

SC2: *The limitations of the early feminist project, in particular the reproduction of class hierarchies and the stigmatization of women who engage in commercial sex, have become **apparent**[5].*

The booster used in the above example removes doubts about the claim, closing down potential opposition. It indicates involvement with the topic and helps the author to express strong belief with which he communicates the findings.

Similar to hedges, the types of boosters differed numerically. Table 5 illustrates that certainty markers were used more frequently in the Russian sub-corpus. In the Latin American sub-corpus, certainty markers predominated as well, but their normalized frequency was lower. Intensity markers ranked second in both sub-corpora; however, their normalized frequency in SC2 was about three times

greater than that in SC1. Extremity boosters rarely occurred in both sub-corpora, and their normalized frequencies were almost identical.

Let us consider the functions of boosting in more detail. According to Hyland and Zou, certainty boosters indicate the writer's epistemic conviction [17, p. 7]. In addition to claiming the accuracy of research results, authors employ these devices to emphasize the importance of the study and avoid alternative views from readers:

SC1: *The results **show** that this practice has increased in the last five years due to the expansion of video on demand[6].*

Unlike hedges, boosters allow authors to express their certainty in what is being stated. In the above example, the writer anticipates possible responses from the reader but chooses to prevent them. The boosting verb *to show* is used to claim that the results obtained by the author are accurate.

Intensity boosters function by amplifying the emotive strength of a statement. In contrast to certainty boosters, they add emotional colour to claims rather than indicate epistemic conviction:

SC2: *The research findings show that at the stage of the transition from school to university, there is a **very** heterogeneous student inflow by quality and forms of training[7].*

The writers consider the issue being discussed fundamental and make an attempt to encourage the audience to perceive it in the same vein.

Finally, extremity boosters were less important both to the Latin American and Russian writers. They mark the upper edge of a continuum, thus helping remove any doubts about the claims, as in here:

SC1: *This work sought to identify **the most important** needs for family members of adult critical patients as described in the literature pursuant to the dimensions established in the*

[5]Zhaivoronok D. *Victorian Feminist Interventions in Commercial Sex in the Middle of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*. Available at: https://jsps.hse.ru/index.php/jsps/article/view/10603 (accessed: 1 February 2023).

[6]Carrero Martín J.F., Reverter Oliver B. *English as a Pivot Language in Audiovisual Translation: Industry and Profession in Spain*. Available at: https://revistas.udea.edu.co/index.php/ikala/article/view/349246 (accessed: 12 March 2023).

[7]Aleshkovski I.A., Gasparishvili A.T., Krukhmaleva O.V., Narbut N.P., Savina N.E. *Starting Positions of University Applicants and Features of Their Further Education: A Sociological Analysis*. Available at: https://journals.rudn.ru/sociology/article/view/32039 (accessed: 12 March 2023).

"Critical Care Family Needs Inventory" (CCFNI) by Molter and Leske[8].

By using the extremity marker that helps upgrade the statement, the author emphasizes the importance of the needs without having to elaborate.

Discussion and conclusion

The intent of this research was to provide an answer to the question of how culture manifests itself in academic communication. Conducted from a cross-cultural perspective, the study aimed to explore variation in the employment of hedges and boosters in a corpus of English RA abstracts written by Latin American and Russian authors, which had been largely overlooked by researchers. A comparison of the RA abstracts showed that the Latin American and Russian academic communities manifest both similar and different stancetaking preferences. While Latin American writers often turn to hedges to mitigate claims, their Russian counterparts assume less tentative authorial stances through a more frequent use of boosters. RA abstracts written by Latin American authors contain more hedges but fewer boosters than abstracts written by Russian scholars. Presumably, the differences in the employment of hedges and boosters identified in the study reflect culture-specific writing patterns of the Latin American and Russian academic communities, which favour slightly different stancetaking strategies. It seems that Russian authors produce their academic texts relying on previously written ones, thus following some well-established standards that are hard to overcome. The language of RA abstracts by Latin American scholars is more detached due to a greater influence of the Anglophone style and a wish to sound more tentative and less categorical.

To conclude, this study attempted to demonstrate the existence of cross-cultural differences in the use of hedges and boosters by L2 writers in academic texts. The findings show that RA abstract authors hedge and boost frequently using a variety of lexical items; however, there are distinct cross-cultural differences in hedge and booster frequencies and types. Although boosters are an important rhetorical tool in academic writing, I would suggest Russian authors use more hedges, which assist in making authorial claims more tentative as well as facilitating discussion and showing politeness [18]. In addition, the findings indicate that it is necessary to teach stance-constructing strategies to Russian novice academic authors and raise their awareness of disciplinary and generic differences in the use of interactional devices in academic prose. Stancetaking conventions are not always easily understood by L2 writers due to a lack of explicit practice. Thus, stancetaking deserves a prominent place in courses in English for Academic Purposes.

It should be admitted that the research results presented here are limited due to a small corpus of RA abstracts. Generalization of the results requires more support from other cultural contexts. Moreover, it is essential to continue this research using data from hard disciplines. Diachronic variation in the employment of stance features in RA abstracts by culturally diverse academic writers deserves consideration as well. In addition, it might be of interest to study how expert academic writers with different cultural backgrounds know when to use stance devices in their English texts or how stancetaking affects editors and reviewers. Further empirical research could look into other types of stance features in academic prose.

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