Discursive Construction of Authorial Voice in English Book Reviews: A Contrastive Analysis

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Abstract

Adopting a mixed-methods approach and Hyland’s (2000a, 2005a) model of “metadiscourse”, this comparative study examines the textual construction of authorial voice in academic unpublished book reviews (BRs) by a group of Chinese scholars and published reviews by a group of international scholars. The textual analysis presented a rather mixed picture: the Chinese writers used significantly fewer hedges and more self-mentions in their texts than the international scholars, but there were important similarities in the approaches of the two groups of reviewers to the rhetorical construction of authorial voice. On the basis of this analysis we conclude that the construction of authorial voice is a complex and socio-culturally situated process. We also call for greater awareness and acceptance of the rhetorical particularities of texts produced respectively by different groups of writers on the part of the English academic community. This research aims to complicate views about the construction of authorial voice in the relatively under-researched genre of academic BRs and to highlight the critical importance of an academic literacy perspective.

Keywords: authorial voice, book review, novice academic writers, identity, second language writing

Introduction

The growing status of English as an international lingua franca and the processes of globalization have lent great weight and importance to practices and products of academic writing in English (Hyland, 2009), and this has precipitated a major drive among scholars from countries in the so-called “expanding circle” (B. B. Kachru, 1989), such as China, to expand their publication records in English-medium journals (Flowerdew & Li, 2009). In this background, we should perhaps look afresh at the place in academic writing of English book reviews (BRs), which may be seen to provide an entry point into further academic publishing; as a rather tightly prescribed and, in terms of content and structure, somewhat scaffolded form of writing, the BR may serve as an accessible doorway to the English-language academic publishing arena by providing a platform for peripheral scholars—identified as such here by their limited participation in English-medium scholarly discourse—as well as those more established scholars (Motta-Roth, 1995).

As yet, the increasing significance of BRs, especially the question of how authorial voice may be constructed in BRs, has not been fully acknowledged, as indicated by a scarcity of reported research (Hyland, 2009; Tse & Hyland, 2008). This gap in the research literature is all the more salient when one recognizes that the issue of voice in academic writing has long been a topic of considerable scholarly interest.
The present study begins to address this perceived gap by examining the use of an array of linguistic features, i.e., hedges, boosters, self mentions, attitude markers, and engagement markers (Hyland, 2000a, 2005a; Tse & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b) in two small corpora of BRs written respectively by a group of international scholars and a group of Chinese university lecturers with minimal exposure to English academic discourse—including comparatively little familiarity with practices and conventions of academic writing in English—but advanced-level general proficiency in spoken and written English.

Through quantitative and qualitative textual analysis triangulated with coded interview data, we sought to answer three principal research questions: 1) What patterns, if any, are evident in the Chinese writers’ use of each aforementioned textual device in their construction of authorial voice? 2) Are there any similarities and differences in the discursive patterns that may be evident in each of the two corpora of BRs? 3) What factors (personal, sociocultural, linguistic, epistemological) may account for any such observable differences?

Since we are generally concerned with issues of English language learning and teaching, our particular research focus is on the work and experiences of the Chinese writers, with the intention of stimulating new dialogue on the nature and roles of English academic writing among Chinese learners and in Chinese contexts.

**Literature Review**

**Theoretical Understandings of “Voice”**

The notion of “voice” is receiving growing attention in the academic writing literature, possibly due to the growing importance attributed to the interpersonal dimension of academic writing (Gillaerts & Velde, 2010; Hyland, 2009; Molino, 2010; Sheldon, 2009; Tang, 2006). However, the construct of “voice” itself is complex and debatable (Elbow, 2007). Scholars present divided opinions about, for example, whether there exists a strong association of “voice” with the western idea of “individualism”. Some hold the view that the expression of an individual voice may be a fundamentally problematic notion for writers from cultures characterized by collectivism, such as China (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; also see Shen, 1989). Still others dispute this cultural relativist interpretation, arguing that the expression of the inner self should not be hindered by differences in ways of expression corresponding to different language systems; notably, Matsuda (2001) makes such a case in relation to Japanese.

Voice is also described differently in accordance with their research purposes (Elbow, 2007). Based on their recent study of voice development in the writing of a group of Chinese teachers of English, Spalding, Wang, Lin and Hu (2009, p. 23) define “voice” as the “distinctive, individual way in which a writer speaks to a reader”. From a sociocultural, Bakhtinian view (Bakhtin, 1981), all utterances, including
written texts, are “heteroglossic”, i.e., constituted by multiple voices. New and original meanings come about as a result of the dynamic tensions between these different voices and the struggle to make these shared words conveyers of one’s own expressive intent (c.f. Author, 2008; Lillis, 2003; Valdes, 2004). Ivanič (1998, p. 27) further understands “voice” as the discursive realization of “writer identity”, differentiated into four interrelated aspects in the socio-cultural and institutional context: autobiographical self, discoursal self, self as author and possibilities for self-hood.

Voice-related Studies about Academic Writing

Ivanič (1998) persuasively argues that academic writing is actually a form of identity work. Based on her concept of a discoursal self, or the authorial representation a writer projects in the writing (Tang and John, 1999), a few studies on writer identity and authorial presence have been conducted. For instance, Lee (2010) explores the issue of identity through a comparative analysis of differences in university students’ use of interactional resources in high-graded and low-graded expository essays. Other studies focus on the use of first personal pronouns in exploring construction of authorial voice (Hyland, 2002a, 2002b; Lores Sanz, 2011; Millán, 2010; Sheldon, 2009; Tang & John, 1999). For example, Tang and John (1999) cogently argue that the use of “I” can bring different degrees of authorial presence into writing and propose a typology of six different identities associated with the use of the first personal pronoun; these include “I” as representative, guide, architect, recounter of research process, opinion-holder and originator. Applying that framework, the researchers observed that their Singaporean undergraduate students used surprisingly few instances of “I” as opinion-holder and originator in their essays, the possible result of viewing themselves as occupying “one of the lowest rungs of the academic ladder” (Tang & John, 1999, p. 534). In a similar vein, Hyland (2002a, p. 1106), in his comparative investigation of the writing of Hong Kong undergraduate writers, and a corpus of published research articles concluded that the projection of authorial persona through the use of “I” may pose difficulty for some student writers in the sense that those student writers may be inclined to “hide themselves” by using first person pronouns with “the more innocuous functions”, such as explaining a research procedure, a kind of rhetorical practice possibly shaped by certain ideologies within Asian cultures. In another contrastive study examining intercultural differences associated with the distribution of “I” in published journal articles by Spanish and English writers, Sheldon (2009) also found that the different cultural backgrounds might lead to heterogeneous constructions of self-representation in writing.

This body of literature paints a fairly clear picture about how first personal pronouns were used by different writers to express an authorial voice. Yet, still to be considered are writers from Mainland China who have attained advanced-level English language proficiency (spoken and written), but are new to English-language academic discourse and the international research community. The particular situation of these writers is the focus of the present study, and a comparison between those writers and published international writers could shed light on academic writing pedagogy by providing “information about the expectations of native-English-speaking readers” (Connor, 1996, p. 169), therefore also offering guidance to teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) like ourselves.
Empirical Studies on Book Reviews

Scholarship specifically concerned with the genre of the academic BR appears to be rather limited. As far as the available literature is concerned, this genre of academic writing has been approached from just a few perspectives (Hyland, 2000a, 2009; Liu, 2005; H. M. Li, 2007; Motta-Roth, 1995; Suárez-Tejerina, 2005; Tse & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Wang & Cheng, 2008). From a structural point of view, for instance, Motta-Roth (1995) identified four typical moves, i.e., rhetorical structures, based on the different functions performed within the genre—1. introducing the book, 2. giving an outline of the book, 3. highlighting specific parts of the book, and 4. “providing closing evaluation of the book” (p. 8)—and highlighted some variations across disciplinary boundaries. Building on Motta-Roth’s (1995) four-move model and taking a more evaluation-focused viewpoint, Suárez-Tejerina (2005, p. 130) argues that moves 3 and 4 are “the most highly evaluative”, although instances of evaluation pervaded the English and Spanish BRs she examined.

Tse and Hyland (2006a, 2006b, 2008) also examined BRs within different disciplinary cultures, yet they were concerned with the mediating function of discipline in uses of “metadiscourse”, or textual devices supporting a writer’s position and signaling a writers’ relationship to an argument or audience (Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004). Their textual analysis, triangulated with interview data, indicates the importance of metadiscourse in the academic BR and suggests that expectations of different discourse communities can have imprint on writers’ discursive choices.

In terms of intercultural differences in academic BRs, Moreno and Suárez (2008, p. 24) identify cross-cultural variations in degree of criticality in English and Spanish L1 expert writing and conclude that the English-users, compared to their Spanish counterparts, were “in a better position to provide their opinion more freely and objectively”. Similarly, Liu (2005) found that Chinese BRs tended to be less direct and less critical than English BRs, largely attributable to the different cultural values shaping the generic norms in each case.

This body of literature is revealing in the sense that both disciplinary cultures and conventions of different discourse communities may have an impact on discursive practices in the genre of BRs. However, the issue of authorial voice seems only to have been treated implicitly. Therefore, through researching how writers expressed authorial voice by making use of an array of metadiscourse features, consciously or subconsciously, in English BRs, we hope to extend the current academic dialogue around voice in written communication and give further attention to the genre of BRs.

Emerging Understanding of Authorial Voice and Book Reviews

The above discussion forms the baseline of our emerging understanding of “authorial voice”, which we describe here as a metaphorical expression of writer identity and discursive realization of self as author — a definition that appears to be narrower than that of Spalding and colleagues (2009) and concerned more with individual attitudes and stance towards claims and statements and the writer’s engagement with the reader. Based on this understanding, a BR may be seen as a genre with multiple layers of voices: its writer is usually required to critically evaluate
an established researcher’s book (voice of book review writers) while faithfully describing the original ideas of the book writer (voice of the author of the reviewed book). To further complicate matters, a BR will most often also integrate the voices of other scholars and researchers within and beyond a given field and culture.

This multiplicity of authorial voices in a BR is speculated to pose a challenge for writers who are relative novices, particularly those new to the conventions of the English “academic discourse community” (Clark, 1992; Swales, 1990) and who are from “Confucius heritage cultures” that seem to highly value conformity and harmony (Watkins & Biggs, 1996). This is a hypothesis that we tested in this investigation.

**Methodology**

In this study, we applied a mixed-methods approach, firstly employing frequency counts and textual analysis, which we expected would facilitate the discovery of patterns of use of rhetoric devices in BRs (Liu, 2005; Sheldon, 2009). Retrospective semi-structured and discourse-based interviews were conducted, a practice inspired by previous research by Hyland and colleagues, which integrated interviews and textual analysis in order to tap into underlying factors mediating writers’ discourse practice (see Hyland, 2001; Tse & Hyland, 2006a, 2006b).

**Data Collection**

The textual data were all single-authored reviews in English of monographs and edited volumes in the field of Applied Linguistics. The set comprised 17 unpublished BRs, each written by one of the 17 Chinese lecturers (BR_CL), and 20 BRs written by 20 different reviewers and published in international English-language journals (BR_EJ) (See Appendix 1).

**Table 1**

*Information about the two collections of English book reviews*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corpus written/published</th>
<th>Average length</th>
<th>Total length</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR_CL</td>
<td>1,490</td>
<td>23,848</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BR_EJ</td>
<td>1,376</td>
<td>27,523</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2008–2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 17 BR_CL were written in satisfaction of an assignment for “Digital Literacy”, a course offered as part of the abovementioned year-long postgraduate diploma program at a university in Singapore. The Chinese participants were asked to “write a thoughtful, careful review of one recent book dealing both with language and technology or a digital technology—supported resource for language/literacy teaching/learning” (Assignment Instructions, 2009) in 1400 to 1500 words. This was the first time that this particular assignment had been set, so no examples of work by participants in preceding iterations of the course could be shown. The only particular guidance given to the course participants was in the form of a brief in-class discussion of the typical structure of an academic BR, referring to one published exemplar written by the instructor; questions of voice, rhetorical style, authorial positioning, etc. were not addressed. The first author of this article is herself a former participant
in the Singapore program, and in the Digital Literacy course. The second author was the Digital Literacy course instructor.

The 20 BR_EJ were selected, with five from each of the four international journals. We take the successful publication of these BRs in esteemed English-language professional journals as positive evidence of these authors’ legitimation and participation within the international English-dominant academic discourse community. The determination to include 20 BR_EJ was based on our original intention to include 20 BR_CL. We were ultimately only permitted to include 17 BR_CL, however.

To ensure comparability in contrastive studies (Connor, 1996; Connor & Moreno, 2005), the selection of these published BRs took several possible confounding factors into consideration, including discipline, impact factor, text length and time of publication. For instance, the BR_EJ are all published BRs from Applied Linguistics journals, though they do not necessarily focus on the more specialized area of Digital Literacy. The five included journals were chosen based on their high levels of visibility and impact within the field, as well as their regular features of a book review. Also, as the BR_CL were written in 2009, only BRs published during 2008–2010 were included in BR_EJ for cross comparison. Only reviews of a similar length were considered; the average length of the BR_EJ is 1376 words, relatively equivalent to the average length of the BR_CL, which is 1490 words.

The second principal data source is seven roughly 40-minute interviews, following both semi-structured (Cohen & Manion, 1994) and discourse-based formats (Odell, Goswami & Herrington, 1983). We interviewed the informants by following general interview prompts (see Appendix 2) and referring to uses of certain textual features in their BRs for their interpretations. The interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese which the interviewees feel most comfortable with, recorded, transcribed and translated into English. We used pseudonyms in reporting the interview data for ethical considerations.

**Participants**

After the textual analysis had been completed, seven of the Chinese book review writers (BR_CL) were chosen to be interviewed from among a larger group of 17. Three of them had at that point returned to China and were interviewed via Skype; the other four were pursuing their master’s degree in Singapore and were interviewed at a discussion room of the library in the university. All were female English lecturers at tertiary institutions throughout the Chinese nation. These participants were chosen on the basis of their stated aspiration to pursue a doctoral degree and a research career. None of them had had any work published in international English-language journals.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

To concretize and operationalize the rather abstract notion of authorial voice, we drew upon and examined an array of linguistic features of interactional metadiscourse as included in Hyland’s (2000a, 2005a) model of metadiscourse, which is defined as “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage
Discursive construction of authorial voice

with readers as members of a particular community” (Hyland, 2000a, p. 37). These expressions can help the writer convey interactional meanings, articulate evaluative attitudes and stances towards claims, and build up writer-reader solidarity (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Thus, metadiscourse may be considered a textual strategy for the projection of a *discoursal self* in academic writing (Ivanič, 1998). Though there are two types of metadiscourse in the model, we confined our study to the analysis of *interactional* metadiscourse, which involves “the reader more overtly in the text by commenting on and evaluating the text material” (Gillaerts & Velde, 2010, p. 130; also see Hyland, 2000a) and thus seems to be particularly related to the notion of authorial voice. The five subcategories of interactional metadiscourse are explained in Table 2.

### Table 2

*Subcategories of interactional metadiscourse (from Hyland & Tse, 2004, p.169)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td><em>involves the reader in the argument</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>withhold the writer’s full commitment to a proposition</td>
<td>might/perhaps/possible/about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>emphasize force or certainty in proposition</td>
<td>in fact/definitely/it is clear that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td>express the writer’s attitude to a proposition</td>
<td>unfortunately/I agree/ surprisingly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement markers</td>
<td>explicitly refer to or build relationship with the reader</td>
<td>consider/note that/you can see that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self mentions</td>
<td>explicit reference to the book reviewer</td>
<td>I/we/my/our</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using Hyland’s (2000a, 2005a) list of potential linguistic items of metadiscourse as an initial coding scheme, each potential linguistic item was identified and examined in context (see Appendix 3 for a coded sample). To enhance the reliability of coding, an intra-coding procedure (Goh, 2002) was implemented.

The coding procedure comprised three rounds. In the first round, a PhD student and the first author of this article each coded randomly selected texts and then compared their work. Discussion and negotiation helped to refine and standardize the process. For example, the analysts agreed to exclude the word “can” from the subcategory of “hedges” for the reason that in many cases, it is hard to tell clearly whether this word indicates “ability” or “possibility”. In the second round, six randomly selected texts were analyzed again by each coder, according to the adapted list. Again, disagreements were resolved through negotiation. The agreement rates (85.3% and 96.2% in the first and second coding respectively) indicated the achievement of relatively high inter-rater reliability. Then the rest of BR_CL were coded together. Additional consultation and negotiation were sought in ambiguous cases.
Total raw frequencies of each linguistic feature in each BR were counted and normalized by dividing the raw frequencies by the total word number of each BR for cross comparison. The statistics were then processed through SPSS software. To compare the two sets of data based on their ranks below and above the median, we used the Mann-Whitney U Test, a non-parametric test deemed more robust than its corresponding parametric t test when the sample size is small and the interval data turn out to be abnormally distributed (Fløttum, Dahl & Kinn, 2006; Hinkel, 2005).

Findings and Discussion

*Uses of Textual Devices in BR_CL*

Altogether, 1,397 (58.58 per thousand) occurrences of the target features were identified. This is a frequency of approximately one every 20 words, suggesting the importance of metadiscourse in academic writing (see Hyland, 2004, 2005a). Among the five linguistic features, attitudinal markers were most frequently used in BR_CL (M = 36.49 per thousand), which may not be a surprise due to the generally highly evaluative nature of BRs (Suárez-Tejerina, 2005); the use of self-mentions is least frequent (M = 3.35 per thousand), suggesting that the Chinese reviewers perhaps did not merely rely on a single feature to express an authorial stance.

*A comparison of Textual Uses in BR_CL vs. BR_EJ*

On the whole, the internationally published reviewers tended to use the target features slightly more often (1,714 instances/ 62.28 per thousand). However, as the results show, the use of the specific target features in BR_CL presented a somewhat mixed picture (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linguistic features</th>
<th>BR_EJ</th>
<th>BR_CL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>22.50</td>
<td>14.88**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>18.10</td>
<td>20.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-mentions</td>
<td>15.95</td>
<td>22.59*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudinal markers</td>
<td>21.05</td>
<td>16.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement markers</td>
<td>17.33</td>
<td>20.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** 2-tailed p < .05    * 2-tailed p < .10

On the one hand, it revealed that significantly fewer hedges and more self-mentions were encountered in BR_CL. The Mann-Whitney U test indicates that the Chinese writers’ BRs included hedges at very significantly lower median rates (MD = 14.88, n = 17) at the level of alpha value = .05 (MD = 22.50, n = 20), z = -2.133, p = .033 < .05) with a medium effect size (r = .35) as compared with the internationally published writers. This confirmed our expectation, as prior studies have also indicated, that the academic writing of Chinese writers is inclined to seem less qualified and more assertive than that of their western counterparts (Cao, 2009; Flowerdew, 1999; Hinkel, 2005; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hyland, 2000b; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Liu, 2005).
Our analysis also indicated a significantly higher number of self-mentions encountered in BR_CL, at the level of alpha value = .10 (MD = 22.59, n = 17), than in BR_EJ (MD = 15.95, n = 20), z = -1.877, p = .06 < .10, r = .31. This was rather surprising, as some studies have indicated that Chinese L2 writers tend to hide themselves in the midst of other voices and make their own authorial presence rhetorically invisible in their academic writing, specifically in academic essays (Hyland, 2002a).

Still, these results may also provide disconfirming evidence, suggesting great similarities in the textual construction of authorial voice by the two groups of BR writers in terms of their uses of the other three types of textual features. As Table 3 demonstrates, the median rates of boosters (MD = 20.06), attitudinal markers (MD = 16.59) and engagement markers (MD = 20.97) in the BRs of the Chinese writers are largely similar to those (MD = 18.10, 21.0, 17.33, respectively) in the BRs of the published writers. These statistical results were also somewhat surprising, as it appeared to be inconsistent with findings in previous contrastive studies which suggest that non-native speakers of English seem to prefer to use “I” less frequently in academic research articles (Hyland, 2002a; Pérez-Llantada, 2007; Sheldon, 2009). Indeed, the differences could be genre-related, as so many differences in academic/scientific writing seem to be. Rather differently, the Chinese reviewers appeared to project a salient authorial persona into their writing through self-mention, as illustrated below.

(1) I cannot see any reason why another body of the relevant literature should not be touched upon … (BR_CL1)
(2) I believe this theory-based, yet easy-to-follow handbook will definitely not only contribute towards the building and refinement of educational theories and practices, but also … (BR_CL2)
(3) Holding a critical perspective, I strongly feel a need to analyze digital stories in a more integrated way (BR_CL3)

However, it is also noteworthy that a qualitative analysis of the textual data indicated that the level of risk implied in the use of self-mentioning might vary across all instances. For example, the Chinese reviewers used approximately 25 instances (occupying 30% of the total) of the use of “I” and other forms of first-person pronouns (like me, my) with less authorial visibility, just to reveal their identity as university English teachers from China or their personal feelings as a reader and used “I” (7 out of 17 BRs) in move 4—which, again, involved recommending the book under review to specific groups of readers (Motta-Roth, 1995). In contrast, the data in BR_EJ showed that the published reviewers seldom did so:

BR_CL
(4) Among all these chapters in the book, Chapter two and six especially attract me, in the light of my particular interests as a teacher (BR_CL4).
(5) I highly recommend this book to all teachers in that the book is not just about technology, but about … (BR_CL5)
(6) So I strongly recommend teachers who … to read this insightful book (BR_CL6)

BR_EJ
(7) Not only should this book be read by all those …, but also by teachers ….
(8) It is useful for novice LP researchers, and it is suitable for an introductory course ….

The somewhat mixed picture presented in our analysis warrants further explanation, which points to our third research question above.

Potential Factors

Drawing together insights from professional literature and our own analysis, we speculate that the writing behavior of these Chinese writers may have been mediated by factors related to their English language proficiency, Chinese socio-cultural ideologies, level of academic participation, personal academic literacy experiences and instructional scaffolding.

Language Factor

With regard to the significantly lower frequencies of hedges in the Chinese writers’ BRs, limited English language proficiency could be one mediating factor, as also suggested by Cao (2009), Flowerdew (1999) and Hinkel (2005). For instance, Hinkel (2005) has argued that partly due to their rather limited English competence, Chinese non-native English speakers may use fewer hedging devices in their writing than their English-speaking counterparts, thus appearing more committed to their knowledge-claims. For the group of Chinese writers in our study, even though they were all tertiary English lecturers with advanced language proficiency, they were also writers from an “expanding circle” (B. B. Kachru, 1989) country, one where English is still a language learned through formal schooling. English language proficiency could still be a barrier that shaped to a significant extent their textual expression of authorial voice and affected their use of hedging devices. One writer explained,

“One difficulty that I confronted came from my English writing ability. I was quite worried that my book review lacked clarity. After all, English is a foreign language for me.” (He Yan)

However, we wish to add here that that there is indeed individual variance in this respect and not all informants considered language to be a limiting factor, as the following Chinese writer’s response suggests:

“Language perhaps had no influence. I read some related books to try to get familiar with how some words and expressions were used in this particular field. I don’t think it was a kind of difficulty.” (Qi Yijing)

Chinese Socio-cultural Ideologies

Apart from the language factor, another plausible explanation for the use of significantly fewer hedges by the Chinese reviewers could involve Chinese rhetorical conventions and epistemological beliefs, both deeply engrained in traditional Chinese society and culture (c.f. Cadman, 1997). It is commonly understood that the Chinese traditional culture seems to favor consensus rather than criticism and discord (Hyland, 2002a; Watkins & Biggs, 1996). Accordingly, some informants expressed the idea that hedges may not be needed because the evaluation they made about the book under review was fairly favorable. In Jiang Shan’s own words,
“I feel that it is unnecessary to use hedges here. If I use too many hedges, my readers would not clearly understand my idea, that is, my evaluation about this book. Moreover, I feel my evaluation about this book is very positive.” (Jiang Shan)

Also, Chinese writing is argued to be “reader-responsible”, suggesting a different degree of reader involvement in comparison with English writing, which is said to be “writer-responsible” (Hinds, 2001). This writing convention in the Chinese academic discourse community might mediate the Chinese writers’ textual practice; as Ivanič (1998, p. 83) cogently argues, “... each individual takes on an identity in relation to the communities they come into contact with.” We might surmise that, comparatively speaking, Chinese writers keep their readership in mind to a lesser degree and are less ready to open up a “space for dialogic alternatives” (White, 2003, p. 259) by asserting a tone of tentativeness in their writing through hedging.

Moreover, an even more fundamental socio-culturally situated factor could have influenced these Chinese writers’ BRs: epistemological beliefs about knowledge (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). In the Chinese Confucian heritage culture—which is strongly influenced by Confucian values, traditionally believed to consist of the five main elements of Ren (Humanity), Yi (Righteousness), Li (Ritual), Zhi (Knowledge) and Xin (Integrity)—the writer may presumably be the authority in the sense that “by virtue of writing the text, the author is assumed to have authority, credibility, and knowledge” (Hinkel, 1999, p. 92).

The root of this assumed high level of respect for knowledge might also be traced back to what some people call “scientism”, i.e., great enthusiasm for science, which was believed to be able to enhance the modern scientific power of China in the early and mid-20th century (Kwok, 1971). From such a perspective, a tone of uncertainty brought about by the use of hedges in a written text may be considered unnecessary. Recent empirical evidence has also suggested that hedging devices tend to be less frequently encountered in abstracts written by Chinese scholars than those by international scholars possibly due to the influence of Chinese epistemological beliefs about knowledge (Cao, 2009; Hu & Cao, 2011). This potential influence of culturally based epistemologies could be implicit and hard to articulate; however, the interview data may prove enlightening:

“In literature, some viewpoints are already certain. People can talk about them very certainly .... This is an agreed view and (in this case) I will not use any hedges. Without using hedges, (I) can then enhance the persuasive power of my writing.” (Qi Yijing)

Level of Academic Writing Expertise

To make things even more complex, the Chinese reviewers’ construction of their textual voices might be interfered with by their relatively lower degree of academic writing expertise, in terms of less familiarity with knowledge about the particular area of digital literacy, the genre of BRs and perhaps more importantly, English academic discourse conventions, or commonly accepted social practices of the Anglo-Saxon discourse community. Here, one informant expressed her lack of confidence in reviewing a book written by an expert academic writer due to her insufficient knowledge about the related disciplinary field:
“… another difficulty is perhaps because I dare not evaluate (the book). I was afraid that my evaluation would be wrong, because I did not have much knowledge about this field as I had only read a few books about it.” (Jiang Shan)

Even though some informants believed that critical evaluation characterizes a good English BR, they seemed to have incomplete confidence in challenging the authoritative “voices” of established academic writers.

These writers, still lingering at the entrance to the English academic discourse community, were not well familiar with the academic discourse culture, in which the use of hedges may be considered an important rhetorical convention (Chandrasegaran & Schaetzel, 2004; Hinkel, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2004). Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that writers with less experience with English-medium academic communication might be inclined to make their claims more forcefully, compared to those with more experience participating in English academic discourse (Hyland, 2004).

**Personal Academic Literacy Experience and Instructional Scaffolding**

In interpreting the similarities of features in the two sets of BRs, personal academic experience and instructional scaffolding are also possibly relevant. For some informants, their *Singaporean* academic learning journey was helpful in familiarizing themselves with English rhetorical conventions and cultivating critical thinking habits, due to the facts that in Singapore, English is dominantly used in instructional settings, a “*Thinking Schools, Learning Nation*” Vision—within which students’ engagement in learning and development of critical and creative thinking skills are highly valued—is purportedly embraced (Kramer-Dahl, Teo & Chia, 2007, p. 169):

“Reviewing a book needs some critical thinking. Before my academic literacy experience at Singapore, I was less aware of critical thinking and didn’t know very well about its importance. Now I feel it is highly important.” (Jiang Shan)

Moreover, some informants noted that the Digital Literacy course instructor’s brief introduction to the BR genre was helpful in increasing their genre awareness and “genre mastery” (Hammouda, 2008). Meng Zitian, for example, explains,

“Students like to learn from their teachers. So when I noticed that (the tutor’s name) used some instances of ‘I’ in his BR, I just followed suit. In effect, based on my previous learning, in a BR the third personal pronoun rather than the first personal pronoun should be used so as to sound more objective.” (Meng Zitian)

These factors could thus, to some extent, have prompted the Chinese writers to construct a fairly confident “disciplinary voice” (Hammouda, 2008) and position them to “construct a credible representation of themselves and their work” (Hyland, 2009, p. 1091). This could also partially account for the relatively higher instances of self-mentions in their BRs.
The Specific Use of Self-mentioning

The reasons for the use of self-mentions are no doubt varied and complex, and thus deserving of attention. Our analysis suggests that these instances may have been motivated by the authors’ intention to express various identities through their writing. During our interview conversation, Xin Yi opined,

“What is most important for a good BR is that it should have its own idea … which can be explored from various perspectives. When I wrote my own BR, as I remember, I expressed my own opinion and related it to my own teaching context and personal experience as a student.” (Xin Yi)

Another influence might have been their increasing understanding about the genre they were expected to produce. As Xin Yi went on to say, “This is a BR. I need to voice my own attitudes. So surely ‘I’ would be frequently used. I think ‘I’ should undoubtedly be used.”

Self-mentioning, particularly the use of “I”, could be “the most visible expression of a writer’s presence in a text” (Hyland, 2002b, p. 351), and recent years have seen an increasing use of “I” in English academic publications. The fairly higher frequencies of the use of “I” in BRs of the Chinese reviewers may perhaps indicate their increasing awareness of the necessity of writing their authorial persona into texts and developing their authorial voice by highlighting individual attitudes and stances towards their claims and statements. This increasing awareness could be facilitated by the Chinese book reviewers’ overseas experience which, as mentioned in the previous section, helps them to gain familiarity with English rhetorical conventions and cultivate critical thinking habits.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explores a rhetorical practice of a group of Chinese academic writers, weaving their voices into their English academic BRs, and examines some potentially important, interconnected influences on that writing practice. We conclude that these Chinese writers seem to have been able to project their writer identities into their writing through their use of boosters, attitudinal markers and engagement markers, in a way quite close to the published writers with whom they were compared. This could thus challenge the idea of relating “voice” solely to cultural ideologies and the notion that expressing an individual voice may be problematic for writers coming from collectivist cultures (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996) in the sense that these ideas run the risk of stereotyping and oversimplification (Kenney & Lee, 2008; Matsuda, 2001; Spalding et al., 2009). Our study may also provide counter evidence to the claim that Chinese students are inclined to avoid free expression of individual views (Cai, 1993). However, there is also the likelihood that “free expression of individual views” by the Chinese writers is due to the very nature of the BR, arguably among the most evaluative genres of academic writing.

Meanwhile, the process of textual construction of authorial voice in the BR genre may be understood as “complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes” (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369). These Chinese reviewers unavoidably express their “socio-cultural voices” and their voices
as new initiates within the English academic discourse community. Relating Bakhtin’s (1981) inspiring conception of how centripetal and centrifugal forces shape the individual expression of voice, we may recognize a tension between the centripetal forces that create conformity with common textual conventions of the English discourse community and the centrifugal forces that promote variation and the projection of the discoursal self. In this sense, we believe that the gatekeepers of any discourse community, English or Chinese, must be more accepting of the rhetorical features used by global academic writers in the process of constructing their disciplinary identities and authorial voices (Vassileva, 2001), so as to include and empower voices from the “periphery” of the academic discourse community (Canagarajah, 2002). A spirit of “dialogism” (Bakhtin, 1981) between different cultures and discourse communities must be fostered in today’s globalized society, within which the nature and affordances of English, as a lingua franca, are openly tested, negotiated, and expanded (cf. B. B. Kachru, 2005; Y. Kachru & Smith, 2008). This is one potentially important way to enable peripheral writers, such as academic writers in English from China, to gain “full participation” in the mainstream academic conversation and community (Y. Y. Li, 2007, p. 57).

Though this exploratory study has yielded some intriguing findings, there are limitations to acknowledge. We excluded from our analysis direct quotations from the reviewed texts that appeared in the BRs. Including these might allow a fuller view of the multiplicity of layers of voices, since such direct quotations are themselves heteroglossic and may equally reflect the attitudes of the reviewer and her/his authorial voice. We are also aware of the importance of accounting for the possible influence of other factors on the use of metadiscourse, e.g., potential relationships between gender and the use of hedges and boosters. We also see the obvious methodological advantages of a larger sample size. All of these considerations will be accommodated in our designs for succeeding research.

In sum, we hope that this study serves to deepen understandings of the issue of authorial voice in the sense that its textual construction, especially in highly evaluative English academic discourse such as BRs, appears indeed a complex enterprise, mediated by a range of factors. Moreover, we hope that our work contributes to an expansion of knowledge about the deceptively simple genre of a BR, which may evidence a diversity of complexly layered voices, signaling the general importance of attention to “dialogicality” and “multivoicedness” in textual meaning making (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1993). This may also hopefully inform novice academic writers who wish to write English BRs to have their “voices” heard in the English academia (Motta-Roth, 1995).

This study could be a springboard for future larger-scale research. One potential direction is to zoom in on qualitative uses of attitudinal markers as a way of constructing authorial voice by English book reviewers. We suspect that attitudinal markers may be used by Chinese writers along a continuum (Thompson & Hunston, 2000), which means that there might be qualitative differences in the use of this textual feature by different groups of writers. It could be equally interesting to examine how authorial voice can be textually constructed in relation to different rhetorical moves in BRs for the reason that evaluation might be structurally-bound (Suárez-Tejerina, 2005).
Discursive construction of authorial voice

Pedagogically, this research may benefit writing tutors, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students and instructors, and novice academic writers in highlighting the critical importance of L2 novice academic writers’ awareness of authorial identity and promoting the construction of authorial voices that both conform with and innovatively depart from English writing conventions (Sheldon, 2009). We hope that this work is itself seen as one voice within a larger call to move beyond the “skills-based” model of literacy in academic contexts and toward a more solidly “academic literacies perspective”, which views writing as social practices situated in different communities and highlights interactions between writing and epistemology (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006).

We also hope to foreground the importance of genre mastery, “cultivating a critical edge” in novice academic writers (Y. Y. Li, 2007, p. 74; Tang & John, 1999), as well as the significance of an orchestration of an array of linguistic features in the discoursal construction of authorial voice. Thus instructional scaffolding is needed in academic literacy pedagogy to enhance student writers’ critical thinking ability, e.g., by writing a BR, and to expand student writers’ genre knowledge and linguistic repertoires for academic purposes (Hinkel, 2004).

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References


Millán, E. L. (2010). ‘Extending this claim, we propose…’ The writer’s presence in research articles from different disciplines. *Ibéric, 20*, 35–56.


Appendix 1    Sources of BRs in BR_EJ

TESOL Quarterly (impact factor: 1.92)
2009, 43, 2, 377–379
2009, 43, 2, 380–382
2009, 43, 2, 382–385
2009, 43, 3, 557–560

International Journal of Applied Linguistics (impact factor: 1.17)
2008, 18, 1, 103–106
2008, 18, 2, 212–217
2008, 18, 2, 218–221
2008, 18, 3, 299–302
2008, 18, 3, 302–306

System (impact factor: 0.44)
2009, 27, 750–752.
2009, 37, 540–541
2009, 37, 741–743
2009, 37, 743–745
2009, 37, 749–750

ELT Journal (impact factor: 1.66)
2009, 63, 4, 418–419
2010, 64, 1, 98–100
2010, 64, 103–105
2010, 64, 111–113
2010, 64, 116–118

Note: The impact factors of the above four journals are cited from http://www.asian-efl-journal.com/Impact_Factor_Second_Language_Learning_Journals(2).php
Appendix 2 General Elicitation Prompts for Interviews

Understandings about the genre

What do you think a book review is?
Have you read any book reviews before writing your book reviews?
Have you written any book reviews before you wrote your book reviews?
Do you think English and Chinese book reviews are different or similar? In what ways?
What do you think a well-written book review is?

The writing process of the book review

Do you think the sample provided by the tutor is a helpful guidance in the writing of your book reviews? Did you follow it strictly during your writing?
In the writing of your book reviews, did you come across some difficulties? If so, what were they?
What do you think you could do and you couldn’t do during the writing process? For what reasons?
If you were asked to write the book reviews in Chinese, would you write it differently?

Academic literacy experience at Singapore

Do you think the course of Academic Writing you took in the first semester of your PGDELT studies have helped you in your writing of book reviews? In what ways?
What academic experience at Singapore do you think might have impacted the writing of your book reviews?
Appendix 3  A Sample of Coded Textual Data from BR_CL

Apparently, this book should be attractive to course designers and tutors who are engaged in blended learning and online tutoring at either distance or campus-based institutions. For newcomers to the field, this book houses practical advice on how to choose the appropriate media in designing a blended learning activity. If they are experienced, this book provides them with an opportunity to evaluate their own practice and restart their journey with more pedagogical considerations of the functions of various online tools.

One thing I come with regret, however, is that I would like more resources to have been provided in several chapters when a new topic is introduced as a claim, e.g., ‘[t]here is a rich and extensive literature on the potential contribution of asynchronous online support to student learning’ (Chapter 5, p. 45). Since much effort has been made to include a comprehensive bibliography such as conference papers, book chapters, and journal articles, I cannot see any reason why another body of the relevant literature should not be touched upon for the ease of those readers who hope to enjoy the wider landscape of the subject by accessing more studies mentioned in each chapter.

hedges
boosters
self-mentions
attitudinal markers
reader engagement markers