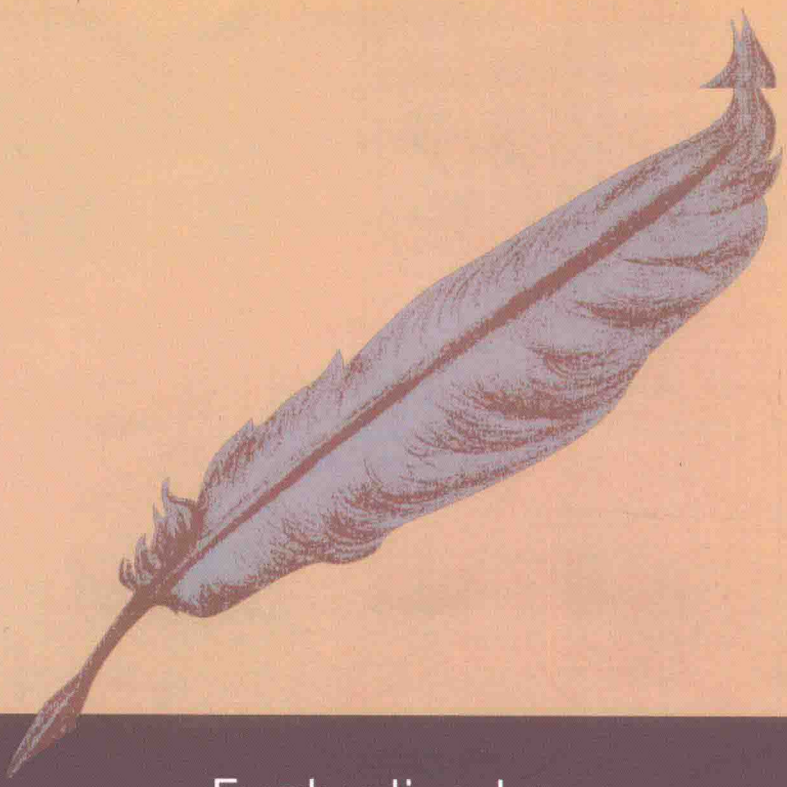

Evaluative Language in Chinese EFL Learner's English Writing

中国学习者英语写作评价语言特征研究

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Preface

It is noticeable that the focus of the previous studies on Chinese EFL learners' writings has been chiefly on errors in spelling and grammar rather than on the way language construes their subjective attitude, stance or judgement towards what is expressed in their compositions that can make writings more powerful. It is this focus that should have been given more observation. Therefore it is necessary and significant to carry out studies on how certain lexical choices or how evaluative language resources are used by Chinese EFL learners to achieve their writing purposes.

The present research is an attempt to explore the evaluative language features of Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writing (AW). The research was conducted within the theoretical framework of Appraisal which includes the three main systems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. The focus is on how the Chinese EFL learners, by employing the evaluative language resources, construct emotion, judge behavior in ethical terms and value objects aesthetically, manage and negotiate intersubjective positions, and intensify attitudinal meaning, thus creating greater or lesser degrees of positivity or negativity associated with the Attitude.

This research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods so as to fully elaborate holistic nature of EFL learners' evaluative language features. Three corpora were built for this study. The first group of data CNSC (corpus of native speakers of Chinese) comprises 2000 student argumentative essays (AEs) written by English majors at Chinese universities. These essays are randomly retrieved from argumentation part of WECCL (The Written English Corpus of Chinese Learners) and self-built corpus by the author of this present study in which AEs written by Chinese English majors are collected. CNSC is used to identify the structure patterns of Attitude used by Chinese students, particularly those grammatical factors dominating evaluation process.

The second group of data AEs corpus of Chinese students (CS) consists of

40 AEs randomly extracted from CNSC. This corpus is used to reveal the features of Appraisal values in AEs. The third group of data AEs corpus of American students (AS) comprises 40 American student AEs. Among them 20 essays are randomly retrieved from the corpus of LOCNESS (Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays), the rest of essays are collected from the writing assignments written by American students. This group of data is used to reveal the differences between AEs written by CS and AS writers in their use of Attitude, Engagement and Graduation resources.

First of all, lexical realizations of Attitude proposed by Martin and White have been applied to the identification of evaluation patterns at the sentential level in AEs written by Chinese students. Seven typical patterns of Affect, four patterns of Judgement and two patterns of Appreciation are identified. The patterns reveal that writers are more freely to express their own Attitude other than the Attitude of a third party. This observation leads to a generalization of Authorial and Non-authorial Attitude. The identification of Authorial and Non-authorial Attitude is useful for tracing the source of evaluation. This classification offers us a way to understand the pedagogical implications of teaching patterns in EFL writing.

Secondly, a detailed analysis of the evaluative features (Attitude, Engagement and Graduation) of AEs written by Chinese students has been conducted. Take the attitude subsystem for example, the features to be analyzed include which evaluators and targets of evaluation are involved, the coordination between explicit and implicit attitudes, the coordination between positive and negative attitudes, and so on. Besides, frequencies of the subcategories of attitude, engagement and graduation are calculated and interpreted.

Thirdly, differences between AEs written by CS and those by AS writers in their choices of evaluative expressions have been compared. The results indicate American student writers tend to use more inscribed Affect than Chinese student writers. AS texts encode a significantly high number of Attitude items in their argument. In addition, these texts are constructed using a much higher

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proportion of multi-coding, while CS texts are constructed with a single coding. This reflects the fact that AS' writing is highly nominalized in a way that is characterized by multiple Attitude. AS writers are better skilled at orchestrating the multiple voices within their own discourse, showing Extragloss. AS texts strategically range from monoglossic cline to heteroglossic cline, from Averral to Attribution values, and from Close on the one hand to Open values on the other. In contrast, CS writers fail to show this pattern. AS writers tend to exploit Graduation resources much more quantitatively by using of a higher volume of Graduation than CS writers. AS also show a high volume of implicit Graduation of Attitude and Engagement.

Finally, this thesis points out that the patterns of Attitude provide EFL learners with a description of English that is useful for the development of both accuracy and fluency. The differences between Chinese and American student writers regarding their expressions of evaluation have pedagogical implications for the teaching of argumentative writing in China. A more extensive discussion and examination of evaluation should be promoted in the EFL writing courses for Chinese writers.

Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction 1

1.1 Purposes of the study 1

1.2 Significances of the study 2

1.2.1 Methodological significance 2

1.2.2 Pedagogical significance 3

1.2.3 Theoretical significance 4

1.3 Organization of the thesis 5

Chapter 2 Literature review 6

2.1 Positioning the study in a pedagogic and linguistic landscape 6

2.2 L2 Writing research 7

2.2.1 L2 Writing research abroad 7

2.2.2 EFL writing research in China 12

2.3 Theoretical considerations 14

2.3.1 A systemic functional approach to language use 14

2.3.2 Evaluation from a linguistic perspective 18

2.3.3 Appraisal theory 19

Chapter 3 Research design and methodology 31

3.1 Samples for the study 31

3.2 Research questions 32

3.3 Research method for ATTITUDE frames investigation 33

3.3.1 Research instrument 33

3.3.2 Data collection procedures 34

3.3.3 Analytical method 35

3.4 Research method for Appraisal values analysis 35

3.4.1 Procedures for analyzing the appraisal values of the texts 36

3.4.2 Principles for identification of appraisal instances 37

Chapter 4 Patterns of Attitude 42
4.1 Patterns of AFFECT 42
4.1.1 Patterns of affective adjectives 43
4.1.2 Patterns of affective verbs 52
4.1.3 Patterns of affective adverbs 54
4.2 Patterns of JUDGEMENT 55
4.2.1 Pattern 1: it + be + adj. + *to*-infinitive 56
4.2.2 Pattern 2: It + be + adj. + of sb. + *to*-infinitive 56
4.2.3 Pattern 3: It + be + adj. + for sb. + *to*-infinitive 57
4.2.4 Pattern 4: It + be + adj. + *that*-clause 57
4.3 Patterns of APPRECIATION 58
4.3.1 Pattern 1: PS + consider + it + adj. 59
4.3.2 Pattern 2: PS + see + it + as 59
4.4 Summary 59

Chapter 5 Attitude—Ways of feelings in student texts 60
5.1 Revisiting Attitude, a synopsis of the system 60
5.1.1 Affect 61
5.1.2 Judgement 65
5.1.3 Appreciation 73
5.2 Overviews of Attitudinal resources 78
5.3 Subjective positioning 79
5.3.1 Affect 79
5.3.2 Judgement 85
5.3.3 Appreciation 93
5.4 Summary of findings 97

Chapter 6 Engagement—Ways of interaction in student texts 100
6.1 Revisiting Engagement, a synopsis of the system 100
6.1.1 Monogloss 102
6.1.2 Heterogloss 103

6.2 Overviews of Engagement resources 110
6.3 Intersubjective positioning 111
6.3.1 Monogloss: Bare assertion 111
6.3.2 Heterogloss 113
6.4 Summary of findings 128

Chapter 7 Graduation—Ways of gradability in student texts 131
7.1 Revisiting Graduation, a synopsis of the system 131
7.2 Quantitative overview of Graduation 134
7.3 Analyses of Graduation 134
7.4 Summary of findings 143

Chapter 8 Conclusions 146
8.1 Summary of major research findings 146
8.1.1 Attitude 147
8.1.2 Engagement 148
8.1.3 Graduation 152
8.1.4 Interaction among three main appraisal resources 153
8.2 Educational implications for approaches to tertiary writing pedagogy 154
8.2.1 Social interaction in writing 154
8.2.2 Solidarity relationship over the power relationship 156
8.2.3 The dialogic nature of argumentative writing 157
8.2.4 Suggestion for tertiary writing pedagogy in relation to appraisal resources 158
8.3 Limitation of the study 159
8.4 Suggestions for further research 159

References 161

List of Tables

Table 2.1	Three main categories and sub-categories of AFFECT	20
Table 2.2	A framework for analyzing JUDGEMENT in English	22
Table 2.3	Examples of sub-categories of APPRECIATION	24
Table 2.4	Relationship between sub-categories of APPRECIATION and metafunction	26
Table 3.1	Three corpora under study	32
Table 3.2	Example query result	35
Table 3.3	An example of multiple coding	39
Table 3.4	An example of multiple coding	40
Table 4.1	Affective adjective pattern 1	44
Table 4.2	Frequency of AFFECT Pattern 1a	44
Table 4.3	Adjective occurrence in feel-pattern 1a	45
Table 4.4	Adjective occurrence in be-pattern 1a	47
Table 4.5	Affective adjective pattern 2	51
Table 4.6	Affective verb pattern 1	52
Table 4.7	Affective verb pattern 2	53
Table 4.8	Affective verb pattern 3	53
Table 4.9	Affective adverb pattern 1	54
Table 4.10	Affective adverb pattern 2	55
Table 4.11	JUDGEMENT Pattern 1	56
Table 4.12	JUDGEMENT Pattern 2	56
Table 4.13	Adjective occurrence in JUDEGEMENT Pattern 2	57
Table 4.14	JUDGEMENT Pattern 3	57
Table 4.15	JUDGEMENT Pattern 4	58
Table 5.1	Examples of incongruent formulations of APPRECIATION and JUDGEMENT	70
Table 5.2	Distinguishing between JUDGEMENT and APPRECIATION	71
Table 5.3	Examples of some incongruent formulations from data	72

Table 5.4	Examples of sub-categories of Valuation	74
Table 5.5	Differences in ATTITUDE system in CS and AS texts	78
Table 5.6	Differences in AFFECT	79
Table 5.7	Differences in JUDGEMENT in CS and AS texts	86
Table 5.8	Differences in implicit vs. explicit Propriety	86
Table 5.9	Differences in APPRECIATION	94
Table 5.10	Differences in APPRECIATION-invoking JUDGEMENT	94
Table 5.11	Summary of findings in ATTITUDE between AS texts and CS texts	98
Table 6.1	Differences in two main ENGAGEMENT systems	111
Table 7.1	The gradability of attitudinal meanings	132
Table 7.2	Differences in GRADUATION	134
Table 8.1	Iedema's (2004) two different faces of emotivity	148

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List of Figures

Figure 2.1	Language as the realization of social context	15
Figure 2.2	Language, register and genre	17
Figure 2.3	The Engagement system	27
Figure 2.4	System network for Graduation: force and focus	28
Figure 4.1	Distribution of Authorial and Non-authorial AFFECT in *feel*-pattern 1	50
Figure 4.2	Distribution of Authorial and Non-authorial AFFECT in *be*-pattern 1	50

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Purposes of the study

The present research is an expository study on the evaluative language of Chinese English majors' argumentative writings. The focus of the study is on the particular distinguishing features of their writings in comparisons with those of native speakers of English. This research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods so as to fully elaborate on the accuracy and holistic nature of L2 learners' evaluative language features.

This thesis situates its research focus on the intersection between education and linguistics. It takes its starting point in a foreign language teaching (FLT) context and the results from the investigation are ultimately aimed at contribution to a pedagogical discussion of L2 student writing. The focus of this research is on language and therefore linguistics. More specifically the focus is on writing with an attitude or the use of evaluative language in texts written by Chinese English majors.

There has been a focus on errors in spelling, grammar in students' texts rather than on the way language construes their subjective attitude, stance or judgement towards what is expressed in their compositions. Writing tasks are furthermore assigned without clear guideline for how a particular text type can be structured or how certain lexical choices make one text more powerful than another (Rothery, 1996; Schleppegrell, 2004)

The discussion in this thesis will focus on exploring in what contexts, by what linguistic means and to what rhetorical ends student writers pass

emotions, value judgements, attribute their propositions to outside sources or modalize their utterances. If an understanding is to be reached of the way in which a text goes about constructing evaluative or ideological contact with prospective readerships, it is necessary to explore how the evaluative positions are constructed.

The present study will investigate the use of evaluative language in Chinese EFL learner writing for the purpose of (1) exploring the distinct nature of evaluative language in L2 writing, (2) understanding the role of evaluation in L2 writing, and (3) exploring and extending the Appraisal framework as an analytical tool for discussing evaluation in student writing of foreign language context.

1.2 Significances of the study

1.2.1 Methodological significance

From a methodological perspective, the present study is significant in that it integrates three research methods into one study. Many studies on evaluative language in the literature more often than not adopt a single method, which is either qualitative or quantitative method. Some (Precht, 2003; Biber et al. 1999) tackle the issue with a quantitative method. Others (Coffin, 2000; Painter, 2003; Macken-Horarik, 2003; Martin, 2004) study the issue with a qualitative method. However, due to the complicated nature of the evaluative language, the picture of EFL learners' evaluative language is far from complete. More studies based on integrative methods can deepen our understanding of this complicated phenomenon in L2 writing.

The present study combines corpus approach supported by the text analysis of individual learners' compositions. The corpus approach and text studies provide information and evidence at the micro-level about the evaluative language features in EFL learners' writing. In terms of the methodology, no research of the same kind has been conducted before. If such

integrative approach proves to be effective for the evaluation study, this will offer evaluation as well as L2 writing research a new option of methodology.

1.2.2 Pedagogical significance

The present study attempts to depict how students write with an attitude and how they manifest their emotions, judgment of behavior and values of objects in their texts. Researches in literature have already addressed the significance of this aspect of writing. On a more general level, language and writing can be said to define our social selves. This is discussed by Roz Ivani (1998: 32) who states that: writing is an act of identity in which people align themselves with socioculturally shaped possibilities for self-hood, playing their part in reproducing or challenging dominant practices and discourses, and the values, beliefs and interests which they embody.

When we write a text we not only communicate a subject matter but also an impression of ourselves. Writing is in this respect a most important part of the shaping of a student's identity and the expression of one's own voice is considered of the utmost importance for a student. However, this has always been neglected in EFL writing context. In a pedagogical setting, it therefore becomes important to address questions of how the wordings of a text position us. Through expressed thoughts and feelings, students relate to the world around them and to the social norms that are part of the culture in which they live. Focusing on evaluative language thus not only includes issues of how students *communicate* with other people but also how *social development* for the individual can be discussed through acknowledging and interpreting the expressions of feeling in student texts. It is also believed that finding one's own voice is important for critical awareness and critical participation.

The linguistic resources of Appraisal according to White (2003a) enable us to investigate a list of questions, including firstly different linguistic resources by which a writer/speaker expresses attitudes and positions himself dialogically, secondly the underlying value systems that determine and are reflected by a writer's utterances. At least these two points are useful for both teachers and

students in their understanding of writing. As writing is an active process, which involves the interaction between writer and reader, it is advisable for writers to be aware that readers are ready to challenge the author's views and to voice their own point of views.

Moreover, the possible findings of this study which focus the preference in the corpus for the realizations of evaluation might be helpful to language learners because it focus on the surface behaviour of individual words. The coding of the surface behavior, with a minimum of interpretation into categories, is intended to be transparent and therefore accessible to learners. A pattern-based approach to word usage is likely to be useful to teachers devising consciousness-raising activities.

1.2.3 Theoretical significance

The major investigations of this study will be accommodated within the theoretical framework of Appraisal. This interpersonal theorizing has provided useful insights into the understanding of evaluative language and has proved to be functional also for the description of student writing in the present thesis. As a consequence, a more nuanced picture will be given of the use of evaluative language in student writing and the potential rhetorical effect of such language choices. The contribution of this study to the system has primarily concerned the more fine-tuned analysis of sub-categorization within Affect, Judgement and Appreciation in Chinese student writing context. This can also be seen as a general contribution to the analysis of the lexical resources used in this specific context to express attitude. Although previous studies have recognized certain preferences and patterns in the encoding of Attitude (Lundholt, 2003; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Rothery & Stenglin, 2000; Coffin, 2000), those studies have primarily concerned patterns within certain genres such as biographical recounts, informal conversational exchange or fairy tales rather than observed differences in Chinese EFL student writing.

1.3 Organization of the thesis

This study investigates argumentative writing written by Chinese English majors. More specifically, it explores how these students utilize interpersonal aspects of English grammar and discourse in their writing and the extent to which these aspects contribute to their relative success in the assessment of their argumentative writing. The whole thesis is made up of seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the purposes and the significances of the study. Chapter 2 deals with the theoretical framework of SFL and sets up an analytical framework based on further relevant literature reviews within SFL and 'interaction in writing'. Chapter 3 is concerned with the research design, research questions and methodology. Chapter 4 identifies the structure patterns of Attitude used by Chinese students, particularly those grammatical factors dominating evaluation process. Chapter 5 analyzes how attitudinal meanings of students' texts are construed in the chosen data. Chapter 6 addresses how the students deploy the Engagement resources in their construction of arguability. Chapter 7 analyzes the features of the students' texts in their choices of a Graduation system which involves the use of language to graduate the relative forcefulness and precision of their evaluations. Based on the findings, Chapter 8 will discuss possible pedagogical implications for the study and also include limitations of the study and further research areas.

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