A genre-based analysis of English research article abstracts and the linguistic feature of personal pronouns for financial economics

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Abstract: This paper presents an empirical study of move structures and personal pronouns of fifty English RA (research article) abstracts based on the model of Bhatia (1990). It revealed that three other move patterns were ascertained besides ten out of the analyzed abstracts following his move order. The analysis of personal pronouns showed that first-person plural pronouns are used far more frequently than other types of personal pronouns and no presence of the second-person and the third-person pronouns were detected in the abstracts. A further analysis suggests that first-person plural pronouns can perform multiple functions in abstracts. ESP (English as Special Purpose) teachers may benefit from the study to guide students to explore the discourse conventions of the RA abstracts in their own texts.

Key words: RA abstract for financial economics; genre analysis; move; personal pronouns

1. Introduction

With the recognition of the role English plays in the world language, researchers need to read English research articles to keep abreast with the latest development of a relevant field and exchange academic information. "An abstract, as commonly understood, is a description or factual summary of the much longer report, and is meant to give the reader an exact and concise knowledge of the full article" (Bhatia, 1993, p. 78). It is, therefore, the urgent need that Chinese researchers and students obtain a comprehensive understanding of the genre knowledge about RA abstracts.

Over the last 20 years, a large number of studies on academic writing have focused on research articles, in particular, its structure, social construction and historical evolution (Samraj, 2002). Swales (1990, p. 132), in an overview of completed textual studies of the genre of the research article (RA), says that "it is easy to see that some fields are much less well represented than others; for example, there is very little on disciplines such as economics or sociology". Therefore, financial economics was chosen as the discipline of the present study to fill the gap. A further justification for the present study is that it will be a contribution to the comprehensive and global research in genre analysis of research articles.

2. Method

2.1 General principles and procedures of data collection

In order to ensure reliability of the results as well as eliminate writer's biases, data collection should strictly follow the scientific method of sampling. Principles suggested by Nwogu (1997, p. 121) as to the selection of

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journal were adopted in the study—representativity, reputation, accessibility. Following the principles above, the journals of English published by Elsevier Science (http: //www.elsevier.com) were chosen[1]. The publications are innovative, experienced and uniquely positioned. Following the guidance on Elsevier Science, the ten English journals of core publications in financial economics were selected. Five articles were randomly selected from each journal based on the stratified sampling. Accordingly, fifty articles were obtained as the English corpus.

2.2 Move analysis

The move identification of the present study followed the four-move model of Bhatia (1993): (1) Move 1—Introducing purpose; (2) Move 2—Describing methodology; (3) Move 3—Summarizing results; (4) Move 4—Presenting conclusions.

As to the identification of schematic structures, the process of analysis followed the procedures proposed by Nwogu (1997, pp. 123-124). A move was identified by inferring from context as well as by reference to linguistic clues in the discourse. More significant was the question of boundary markers. When there were no boundary markers, the notion of topic counted. A sentence or sentences in an abstract was categorized as a move based on its/their salient function. Where a sentence served two functions, it was assigned to the move that seemed to be more salient.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Move structure

According to Bhatia's model (1993), only ten out of them follow his structure: introducing purpose, describing methodology, summarizing results and presenting conclusions. However, there are forty abstracts which do not follow Bhatia's order. We find three more move patterns: significant reordering of moves, missing of move, insertion of unconventional moves and embedded subordinate move structure. The results show that, among the fifty abstracts, eight abstracts have the missing of one move and four have the missing of two moves, eighteen abstracts are in significant reordering, and ten abstracts have the insertion of unconventional moves. The following is an example that has the missing of two moves.

> (Sentence 1) This study examines whether the book-to-market ratio consistently explains the cross- section of stock returns through time. (Sentence 2) The results reveal that the book-to-market ratio is positive and significantly related to return which is only 43% of the monthly regressions. (Sentence 3) Other value/growth variables such as "Cash Flow", "Sales Growth" and "Size" perform even more erratically than the book-to-market ratio, and are thus less likely to be viewed as legitimate risk proxies.

In this abstract, the author first presents the purpose of the study directly. Then the results of the study are showed respectively in sentence 2 and sentence 3. However, there are no corresponding description as to the methodology and the conclusion of the research.

3.2 Linguistic features of the fifty English abstracts—personal pronouns

3.2.1 Frequency of personal pronouns

The differences in frequency among the categories of first-person, second-person, third-person and indefinite pronouns is substantial (see Table 1).

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[1] Ten English Journals of Core Publications in Financial Economics (http://www.elsevier.com): (1) Financial Services Review, (2) Global Finance Journal, (3) International Review of Economics & Finance, (4) International Review of Financial Analysis, (5) Journal of Banking & Finance, (6) Journal of Corporate Finance, (7) Journal of Financial Economics, (8) Journal of Financial Markets, (9) Journal of Multinational Financial Management, (10) Review of Financial Economics.

Table 1   Significant frequencies of personal pronouns in the fifty abstracts

Personal pronouns	Move 1	Move 2	Move 3	Move 4
First-person plural (total)	3	6	6	2
We	2	5	5	1
Us	1	0	0	0
Our	0	1	1	1
Total	6	12	12	4

First-person plural pronouns, including the subjective, objective, and possessive cases (i.e. we, us, and our) occur far more frequently than other types of personal singular pronoun *I*, and its other cases (*me and my*) do not occur at all in the abstract. The third-person singular and plural pronouns have no occurrences in total; there are no occurrences of the second-person singular and plural pronouns in the analyzed abstracts. No definite pronouns *one* and *one's* are found to refer to either any researcher in the discipline in general, or to reduce personal attributes when giving an opinion.

As part of the reason of the non-presence of first-person singular, we find that even in the six single-authored texts, the writer refers to himself/herself as *we.* The fact that the writer of a single-authored abstract uses *we,* instead of *I*, as he/she is referring to himself/herself, may suggest an intention to reduce personal attributions.

Besides, first person plural pronoun can have either inclusive or exclusive semantic reference. An inclusive first-person plural pronoun includes both speaker-writer and hearer-reader, while an exclusive one excludes hearer-reader. In example below, the writers are explaining a definition to readers. They use inclusive *we* and *us* to invite readers into their arguments and presuppose readers' knowledge.

> We tested for financial integration among the major European Union countries using a new test, developed by Im, Pesaran, and Shin (1997), that allowed us to confirm or reject covered interest rate parity developing on whether a panel data set comprising covered interest differentials is stationary or not.

3.2.2 Semantic references and discourse functions of *we, us* and *our*

First-person plural pronouns may also perform a wide variety of discourse functions linked with different semantic references. A discourse function is defined as the function that a sentence containing a personal pronoun performs in the discourse context of a journal abstract. For the determination of the semantic reference and discourse function of each occurrence, we invited one of our colleagues who has the relevant academic background to be the rater.

Table 2   Semantic references of *we, us, our* on relation to discourse functions

Discourse functions	We	Us	Our
Stating a goal or purpose	20		
Explaining what was done	32	4	
Showing results or findings	24		4
Showing commitment or conclusion	5		
Proposing a theory or approach	8		8
Total	89	4	12
Percentage	76.47	11.06	17.64

Table 2 shows that *we* is most frequently used to refer to writers themselves (89 occurrences, 84.76%). With this semantic reference, *we* performs a wide variety of discourse functions, among which, the function of "explaining what was done" occurs most frequently. Besides, exclusive *we* also performs a number of other

discourse functions, such as proposing a theory or approach, stating a goal or purpose, showing results or findings, showing commitment or contribution to research, comparing approaches or viewpoints etc., as illustrated in the following example.

> We tested for financial integration among the major European Union countries using a new test, developed by Im, Pesaran, and Shin (1997), that allowed us to confirm or reject covered interest rate parity depending on whether a panel data set comprising covered interest differentials is stationary or not (The example of we explains what was done.).

A possible explanation of the much greater use of first person pronouns in the present study may be that finance falls into what is called the "soft" science. Generally speaking, issues in the soft disciplines tend to be relatively diverse. Therefore, in a soft discipline, it is justifiable and valuable for the author to maintain an effective degree of personal engagement with his/her audience. On the other hand, researchers in hard science tend to adopt a less personal style in order to strengthen the objectivity of their study.

4. Conclusion

Viewing written text as interaction, we examine the move patterns and the use of personal pronouns in research article abstracts. Quantitatively, it is shown that the frequency of personal pronoun use varies considerably. To sum up, knowledge of generic structures and the strategic use of personal pronouns is of great value to journal abstract writers. They must know, in the process of writing an abstract for publication, how to emphasize their personal contributions to their field of research and how to seek cooperation and acceptability with expected readers and their disciplines.

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