

First Person Pronoun in English Medical RAs: A Cross-cultural Study*

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Abstract: Based on both a quantitative and qualitative study of 40 medical research articles (RAs) written by Chinese and Anglo-American professionals respectively, this paper is an attempt to describe how first-person pronouns are used in medical RAs and bring out any differences between the two groups of writers in this respect.

The major findings are: both groups of writers use first-person plurals in more or less the same contexts, mainly to stress their contributions to the field of research, marking their confidence as members of their disciplinary community. However, native writers are far more likely to use first-person pronouns to show direct involvement, constructing a more confident and responsible writer persona.

Key words: medical research articles (RAs) first-person pronoun

I. Introduction

Research articles (RAs) are often perceived as passive reports of research activities and the use of first-person pronouns is regarded as something negative to the objectivity of the report. However, Kuo (1999), based on his empirical study of RAs, reveals that first person pronouns are used in RAs and they perform multiple discourse functions.

In the present study, we intend to find out how first-person pronouns are used in medical RAs written by Chinese professionals and Anglo-American professionals respectively. The major questions to be addressed are:

(1) How frequently are first-person pronouns used in medical RAs, both in an RA as a whole as well as in different sections of an RA?

(2) What discourse functions do they perform?

(3) Are there any differences in the above aspects between RAs written by Anglo-American professionals and Chinese professionals? If there are any, what are they and what do they reveal?

II. Material and Method

2.1 Corpora

Corpus A consists of twenty experimental RAs written by Anglo-Americans, with five out of each of the four international journals: *the Lancet*, *New England Journal of Medicine*, *British Medical Journal (BMJ)*, and *the Journal of American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Corpus B consists of twenty experimental RAs written by Chinese, with five out of each of the four Chinese journals: *Chinese Medical Journal*, *Chinese Medical Sciences Journal*, *Journal of Nanjing Medical University*, and *Journal of Medical Colleges of PLA*. These 40 full-length, randomly chosen RAs are of the apparent macrostructure of Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion (I-M-R-D). Abstracts, which function as “distillation” (Swales, 1990: 179) of associated texts, were excluded in the corpora. Titles, tables and charts, and notes were also excluded. With such exclusions, the corpora have a total of 94,404

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running words, with 59,017 in Corpus A and 35,387 in Corpus B.

2.2 Method

A corpus-based approach and a context-based approach were used in the quantitative and qualitative analyses. First by using Microsoft Word, we counted the frequencies of first-person pronouns in each section and in the whole of each RA. In order to discover the discourse functions performed by them, we also examined each occurrence against its context. To assess whether the observed differences were meaningful or not, t-test packed in the SPSS was run to analyze the data.

III. Results

3.1 Overall use

There is no occurrence of first-person singular in both corpora, since all the RAs are multi-authored. First-person plurals occur in both corpora; however, their frequencies are quite different, as is shown in Table 3.1. The statistical analysis reveals that the differences between the two groups of writers concerning the use of first person plurals are significant (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.1 First-person pronouns in the corpora

	we		our		us		total	
	Occ.	Freq.	Occ.	Freq.	Occ.	Freq.	Occ.	Freq.
Corpus A	261	44.2	160	27.1	3	0.5	424	71.8
Corpus B	87	24.6	43	12.2	5	1.4	135	38.2

1. "Total" refers to first-person plural pronouns as a whole
2. Occ.: raw numbers of the occurrences of related items in the corpora
3. Freq.: frequencies counted per 10,000 words

Table 3.2 Statistical analysis results of first-person pronouns

pair	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
we[a]-we[b]	2.294	19	0.033*
our[a]-our[b]	3.007	19	0.007**
us[a]-us[b]	-0.741	19	0.486
total[a]-total[b]	3.402	19	0.003**

* significant (p<0.05) ** remarkably significant (p<0.01)

[a]: Corpus A [b]: Corpus B

Analyses of the semantic reference and discourse functions of "we" and "our" reveal that all the occurrences of "we" are exclusive, that is, only referring to the writers themselves and not including others. Table 3.3 shows the number of occurrences of each discourse functions of "we" identified in the corpora.

Table 3.3 Discourse functions of "we"

Discourse functions	occurrences		percentage	
	A	B	A	B
<i>Explaining what was done</i>	131	54	50.2%	62.1%
<i>Showing results or findings</i>	69	12	26.4%	13.8%
<i>Making a claim</i>	27	10	10.3%	11.5%
<i>Making justifications</i>	13	5	5.0%	5.7%
<i>Making a suggestion</i>	13	4	5.0%	4.6%
<i>Showing contribution</i>	8	3	3.1%	3.4%

Almost all the occurrences of "our" are exclusive, referring to the writers themselves only. There are also three occurrences in Corpus B of two collocations of "in our country" and "in our hospital", in which, "our" includes others except the writers themselves and thus are inclusive. Table 3.4 shows the discourse functions of

those exclusive “our”.

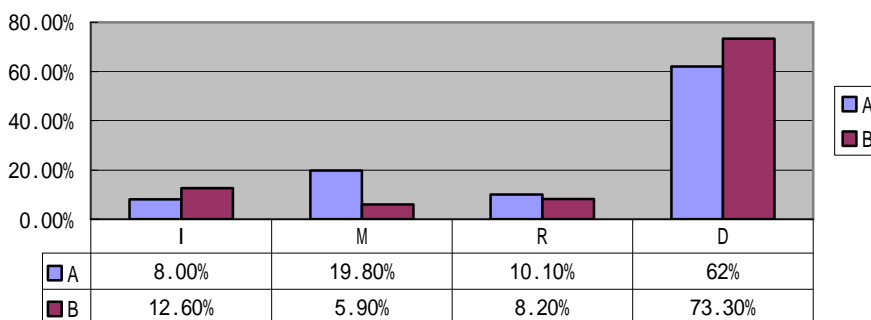
Table 3.4 Discourse functions of exclusive “our”

Discourse functions	occurrences		percentage	
	A	B	A	B
<i>Showing contributions</i>	51	11	31.9%	27.5%
<i>Making comparisons</i>	42	10	26.3%	25.0%
<i>Stating results/findings</i>	37	9	23.1%	22.5%
<i>Explaining the procedure</i>	9	3	5.6%	7.5%
<i>Making justifications</i>	6	2	3.8%	5.0%
<i>Stating the goal/purpose</i>	5	5	3.2%	12.5%

3.2 Cross-sectional variations

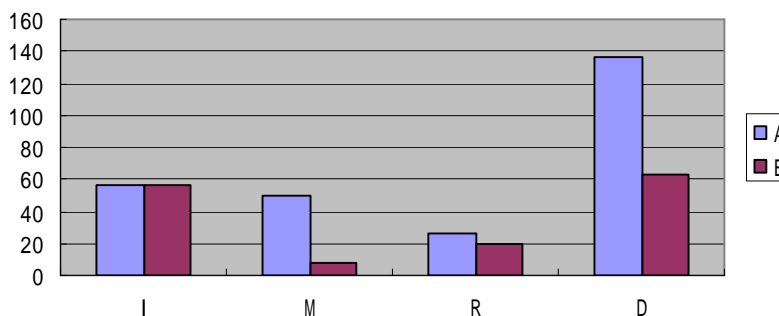
To study cross-sectional variations, the occurrences of first-person plurals in the four sections of each RA were recorded and their frequencies counted (see Fig. 3.1). In both corpora, the Discussion section saw most occurrences of them.

Fig. 3.1 Distribution of first-person plurals across sections



Since different sections are of different length, the densities of first-plurals per 10,000 words were also counted (see Fig. 3.2). Anglo-Americans used first-person plurals far more frequently than Chinese writers did in Method and Discussion sections, the former usually a straightforward report of the subjects and procedures while the latter the section where hypotheses and claims are made.

Fig. 3.2 Density of first-person pronouns across sections



IV. Discussion

In RAs, the use of first-person pronouns may give readers the feeling that the writers, though invisible, were talking to them and engaging in an interaction with them. Pragmatically, on one hand, writers who are willing to identify themselves with their research by using first-person pronouns are eager to stress their involvement in the

research, confident in showing their contributions; on the other hand, they are also likely to accept personal responsibility for what they did and claimed. We may say that first-person pronouns help to construct a confident and responsible writer persona.

Concerning the semantic reference and rhetorical functions of *we* and *our*, there is not much difference between the two groups of writers. As members of the medical community, both groups of writers show a similar understanding of the disciplinary conventions concerning how and where to use first person pronouns. However, Anglo-Americans use far more first-person plurals than Chinese L2 writers do, which seems to reveal that the former are far more willing to align themselves with their research and claim, and appear more confident than the latter. We may also say that Anglo-American medical professionals are more willing to take up responsibilities for what they did and what they have claimed.

One possible reason for such difference might be cultural factors. With modesty and humbleness highly valued and individualism denied in the Chinese culture, Chinese writers are less willing to make appearance in their writing, taking up the role of “humble servants of the discipline” (Myers, 1989). Another reason might be Chinese writers’ misunderstanding of scientific writing, where objectivity stands as the rule. Chinese writers seem to take for granted that the use of first-person pronouns conveys high degree of subjectivity and the only way to achieve objectivity is through passive voice.

V. Conclusion

The present study shows that both Anglo-American and Chinese medical RA writers overtly mark their presence and direct involvement through the use of first-person pronouns. It provides evidence to support the functional view that RAs are interactive in nature (Hyland, 2000). However, the extent to which writers mark their overt involvement and commitment is quite different between the two groups, with Anglo-American writers far more likely to show their presence and thus appear more confident than Chinese writers do.

The study has some implications for Chinese medical students or professionals to write an RA: they can be much bolder in using first-person pronouns to show their presence, explain what they have done, present their results or claims, state their goals or purposes, justify their arguments, show their commitment or contribution to research, etc.

Although we have been very careful in designing and conducting the research, it still has some limitations. The semantic analyses are somewhat subjective. Just as Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finnegan (1999/2000) point out, “the meaning of first person plural is often vague” (p. 329). In the study, it’s impossible for us to discuss with the writers about their decisions on the choice of certain linguistic forms, so the exact intentions behind linguistic choices are unknown. Without such kind of introspective reports, we could only interpret them on the basis of our understanding.

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