Chapter 2

The Use of Engagement Resources in English, Arabic, and EFL Applied Linguistics Research:
A Contrastive Study Within an Appraisal Theoretic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how academics from different cultural backgrounds and levels of expertise use engagement resources to align themselves and their readers towards text-external voices. Using the appraisal theory engagement model, the introduction sections of three sets of texts from Applied Linguistics were analyzed: (1) research articles published in English, (2) research articles published in Modern Standard Arabic, and (3) Master's theses of Saudi EFL students. Results revealed that English- and Arabic-speaking writers prefer different resources due to the impact of culture. Also, Arabic-based patterns appeared in EFL writing supporting the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis at the interpersonal dimension of discourse. The patterns identified had different effects on the type of authorial voice and the nature of reader power-status. The study makes implications for novice EFL academics and for tertiary academic institutions. Explicit instruction of engagement strategies can enculturate student writers into their discipline-specific rhetorical conventions.

INTRODUCTION

The need to understand engagement in written academic discourse – that is how writers use interpersonal resources to align themselves and their readers in relation to different points of view– has been gaining increasing interest (e.g., Thompson, 2001; Mei & Allison, 2003; Hood, 2012; Lee, 2017; Xu & Nesi, 2019). This importance stems partly from recognizing that knowledge is a social consensus reached as a result of writer-reader interaction, disciplinary argument and agreement-making (Kuhn, 1962). In academic discourse, writers make new claims and challenge established knowledge. In order to demonstrate the significance of these contributions, writers do not only depend on the validity of the ideational content that they provide, but they also draw on rhetorical tactics to achieve persuasive ends. By engaging readers, writers are able to construct different types of authorial positioning including tentative, cautious, or assertive stances. These reader-engagement strategies are conventional and community-recognized and are also discipline- and genre-specific. Thus, divergence from the normal use of these strategies in their correct context would violate the expectations of the target discourse community and would eventually result in the failure to achieve the persuasive function of the text.

Among the academic genres that involve the use of rhetorical and reader-engagement devices is the introduction to research papers. Introductions are said to be "probably the best locus for investigating rhetorical strategies" (Fakhri, 2009, p. 23). That is because they shape readers' initial impression of the work (ibid.), while convincing readers of the need for the proposed research via the use of evaluative resources (Hood, 2004; Lee, 2006).

A number of scholars have suggested that such rhetorical strategies are culture-specific (e.g., Miller, 1994; Duszack, 1997; Koutsantoni, 2005) and are also transferable through negative interference from the first language to the second language (Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis by Kaplan, 1966). In contrast, other researchers maintain that there is a universal rhetoric of academic writing that "imposes a conformity on members of the scientific community no matter what language they happen to use" (Widdowson, 1979, p. 61). Some researchers argue that the discipline exerts a more powerful effect than culture on the shaping of academic rhetorical practices. Flottum, et al., (2007, p. 15), for example, write, "We may say that authors of research articles tend to write more like their disciplinary colleagues writing in other languages than like their language-community co-members writing in other disciplines." Yakhontova (2006) explains this uniformity by suggesting that globalization and the development of electronic media and other forms of cross-cultural exchange have led to the rapid importation of English academic writing patterns and their implantation in other cultures.

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