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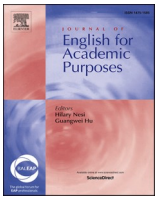

A corpus-based comparison study of first-person pronoun *we* in English-language abstracts

Ning Zhao

Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, 555 Liutai Avenue, Wenjiang District, Chengdu, Sichuan, PR China

A B S T R A C T

This paper offers a corpus-based study of how the first-person plural pronoun *we* is used in English-language RA abstracts published in Chinese-language journals in comparison to corresponding RA abstracts published in English-language journals in the fields of Finance and Accounting. Using a range of corpus-based methods of investigation, this study finds that abstracts written by the two groups of writers display characteristic differences in the usage of this first-person pronoun, such as its phraseological patterns. In general, the study demonstrates that the uses of *we* in RA abstracts written by Chinese Finance and Accounting academic writers diverge in a substantial number of important ways from those written by their international peers. The study also discusses some reasons for such differences. This paper identifies a number of points of difference that could be devoted to the teaching of RA abstract writing skills in English for Academic Purposes course.

1. Introduction

One of the richest strands of EAP writing research in recent decades is that examining construction of academic identity. In an influential series of studies, Ivanic (1994, 1998) usefully proposed that academic writer identity construction can be studied from four perspectives. Amongst them, the "self as author"perspective reflects the writer's active involvement within the texts (Ivanic, 1998, p. 23). And in this paper, it is one salient identity representation means of "self as author" (ibid) – the use of first-person pronouns in academic writing, that I will be mainly concerned with.

As the importance of this rhetorical device in academic writing has become increasingly well recognized, research on first-person pronouns has steadily increased in recent decades. Important early examples include Graetz's study (1985; quoted in Swales, 1990) of personal pronoun usage in 87 abstracts, while more recent studies include Tang and John (1999) and Leedham and Fernandez-Parra's (2017) study of authorial identity, Hyland's (2002) study of discourse functions, and Cao and Xiao's (2013a) study based on Multi-dimensional Analysis (MDA) approach.

Generally, the first-person pronouns have been the focus of an increasing amount of research in both international and Chinese EAP communities (Cao & Xiao, 2013a). However, few studies have focused on this specific linguistic feature in the genre of RA abstract. In addition, most previous studies have focused on a relatively narrow selection of disciplines; and this is particularly true for the fields of Finance and Economics, with which I am involved as an EAP teacher at a Chinese university specialising in these fields. There is also a clear need for more comparative studies, especially for the genre of abstract. Internationally, there have thus far been quite few studies of this comparative nature; and while this perspective has been more popular among Chinese researchers, the studies carried out to date have been lacking in depth and sophistication.

This present study reports on a large-scale comparative corpus study of English-language abstracts, taken from English-language and Chinese-language academic journals respectively. This research intends to find out to what extent and how Chinese abstract writers use the first-person pronoun – *we*, in ways that are consistent with, and thus likely to be deemed acceptable by, their

E-mail address: zn8314@swufe.edu.cn.

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international academic peers; especially for the disciplines of Finance and Accounting (the two most important sub-disciplines in the Social Science disciplines of Economics and Business). Particularly, this study will focus on the phraseological patterns of the first-person pronoun – *we*. Several studies (Charles, 2006; Gledhill, 2000a, 2000b; Myers, 1992; Oakey, 2002) have already demonstrated that academic discourses often have quite conventional phraseology, while "miscollocations or collocations uncommon for the genre may affect the intelligibility of the paper and may reduce its effectiveness" (Howarth, 1998, quoted in Martinez, 2005, p. 187). If first-person pronoun usage among Chinese Finance and Accounting academics is indeed found to be different from international norms, as indirectly measured by patterns in major English-language journals, the qualitative perspective provided by my analysis of Chinese and English-language usage patterns may be of considerable pedagogic as well as theoretical value to Chinese Finance and Accounting academic writers.

2. Review of related literature

Amongst the numerous ways in which writers can express themselves to readers (cf. Hyland, 1999; Huston & Thompson, 2000), perhaps the most obvious and significant way is through the use of first-person pronouns (Hyland, 2001, 2002; Kuo, 1999; Tang & John, 1999). By their very definition, personal pronouns are explicit markers of the identity roles that writers assume in their texts.

Previous research on the use of first-person pronouns in English academic writing has primarily focused on their usage and discourse functions in genres such as research articles and/or students' theses (e.g. Kuo,1999; Hyland, 2001, 2002; Harwood, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c; Martinez, 2005; Samraj, 2008; Leedham and Fernandez-Parra, 2017). Some of these studies have centered around one single discipline, such as Harwood's (2005a) focus on computing science and Martinez's (2005) focus on biology; others are comparative studies across different academic disciplines (e.g. Harwood, 2005b, 2005c; Hyland, 2001; McGrath, 2016; Samraj, 2008).

These studies have provided important insights in four main areas: discourse function (e.g. Harwood, 2005a, 2005b; Hyland, 2002; Kuo, 1999), authorial identity (e.g. Leedham & Fernandez-Parra, 2017; Tang & John, 1999), semantic reference (e.g. Harwood, 2005c; Kuo, 1999; Molino, 2010) and/or distributional frequency (e.g. Hyland, 2002; Leedham & Fernandez-Parra, 2017).

About the discourse function studies, Hyland (2002) has proposed five discourse functions in the rhetorical devices accompanying first-person pronouns. These include "explaining a procedure, stating results/claims, elaborating an argument, stating a goal/purpose (and) expressing self-benefits" (ibid, p.1100). Tang and John (1999) have set up a scale with six categories evaluating the singular pronoun *I* from having the "least powerful to most powerful authorial presence" (p. S29) in students' academic essays. Along somewhat similar lines, Leedham and Fernandez-Parra (2017) examined the authorial identities of *we* and *I* across Chinese, Greek and British students' Engineering assignments. In semantic reference studies, most scholars have distinguished the semantic referents of *we* and/or *our* in simple binary terms as either 'inclusive' or 'exclusive' (e.g. Harwood, 2005c; Zhang, 2008). However, a more sophisticated approach has been developed by Kuo (1999), who distinguishes five referent identities for the plural pronouns *we*, *our* and *us*, each of which has at least one distinct discourse function. In distributional studies, L2 writers of English have been found to under use or even entirely avoid using first-person pronouns in their academic writing, in comparison with the L1 writers of English (Hyland, 2002; Martinez, 2005). However, other studies focusing on EFL students have produced contrasting results (Leedham and Fernandez-Parra, 2017; McCrostie, 2008), that English L2 student writers seem to use more first-person pronouns and that their 'self as author' identities are therefore much more overtly present in their writings" (Luzon, 2009, p. 194).

While less attention has been paid to first-person pronoun usage in abstracts, there have been a few noteworthy studies over the last two decades. Stotesbury (2003), for example, has studied and compared reporting verbs collocating with the plural pronoun *we* in abstracts across three academic disciplinary domains. Another study of abstracts in the Chinese Applied Linguistics community is Zhang's (2008) comparative study of English abstracts written by L1 and L2 English (Chinese) writers. Zhang found that L1 writers of English tended to use both the singular pronoun *I* and the plural pronoun *we* more frequently than Chinese writers did. Zhang also found that there were significant differences in the discourse functions of these pronouns, especially in terms of the usage of the plural first-person pronoun *we*.

In summary, previous research presents a mixed picture regarding first-person pronoun use in English academic writing in general and more specifically in relation to RA abstract writing. This uncertainty is reflected in the fact that there are some very conflicting views about pronoun usage in academic writing currently in circulation. The traditionalist view is that academic writing should always be "author-evacuated", in Geertz's (1988) terms. Likewise, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI, 1979) suggests that it is unnecessary for writers to refer to themselves in abstracts. Even Graetz (1985) states directly that the abstract genre "is characterized by the use of … third person, …" (p.125).

On the other hand, some other academic discourse scholars have pointed out that such prescriptive advice is routinely contradicted by academic writers across the disciplines – a frequently-cited case in point being the first sentence of arguably the most famous scientific research paper ever published (Waston & Crick, 1953, p.737): "We wish to suggest a structure for the salt of deoxyribose nucleic acid (D.N.A.)" – and argue against the prescriptivist view that using personal pronouns makes academic texts sound inappropriately 'casual' or 'informal' in tone (Mills & Water, 1986). As Swales and Feak (1994, p. 20) put it:

> … most of our recommendations are designed to help you maintain a scholarly and objective tone in your writing. This does not mean (and we have not said) that you should never use I or we in your writing. The use of I or we does not make a piece of writing informal.

Hence, while a few recent studies (e.g. Hyland 2002; Luzon, 2009) have shown that there is considerable variation in conventions for pronoun use across disciplines, there is nevertheless a growing consensus among EAP researchers that the traditional view of academic prose as 'author-evacuated' is far too simplistic. It is increasingly recognized, for example by Hyland (2002, p. 1094), that the

use of first-person pronoun "is a powerful means by which writers express an identity by asserting their claim to speak as an authority". In particular, English professional writers are increasingly using first-person pronouns as a self-promotional means, to induce readers to continue reading their research articles or persuade journal editors to accept their articles in an ever-increasing fierce publication environment (Alharbi & Swales, 2011; Harwood, 2005b; Yakhontova, 2002, 2006).

However, Hyland (2002) also points out that making effective and appropriate use of this rhetorical resource may pose particular difficulties for scholars from L2 English speaking backgrounds, "whose rhetorical identities may be shaped by very different traditions of literacy." (ibid: 1092).

The hypothesis that Chinese abstract writers will thus for various reasons be likely to avoid first-person pronouns, especially the plural one – *we*, in their abstracts seems to be well supported by previous research; Zhang (2008), Ding (2009), Zhao (2011), Cao and Xiao (2013a, 2013b) and Peng and Zhang (2017) among others, have all found that in English language abstract writing, Chinese writers use fewer first-person pronouns than their English-language peers do regardless of the discipline. Therefore, this paper, as a corpus-based study, intends to find out whether Chinese writers, like their Chinese academic peers from other academic disciplines, also circumvent the usage of *we* in their abstract writing. Specifically, this research will go into more qualitative detail, exploring and comparing this pronoun in terms of its collocates and the commonly used phraseological patterns in which they participate across two corpora.

In this study, I focus my examination of the first person-pronoun based on the genre of abstract. In addition to the above-mentioned reason, there are actually two other important reasons. First, "it is not unusual for journals published in languages other than English to expect the author to write an English abstract of their article" (Lores, 2004, p. 281), and this is certainly the case in the Chinese academic context[1] and the context that the present study focuses on. Second, English written abstracts are crucial in determining a research article's readability as well as its acceptability among its target audience (Hyland, 2004); in this sense, the English abstract is significant in helping to "guarantee that the reported results of scientific work will circulate worldwide" (Ventola, 1994, quoted in Lores, 2004, p.281). Since 2012, the Chinese National Social Science Fund has attempted to promote the internationalization of some top Humanities and Social Sciences academic journals.[2] One of the most important aspects of this process is the English-language abstracts in Chinese-language journal articles published in national academic journals (Salager-Meyer, 2014; Shen et al., 2010). While the presence of English-language abstracts in non-Anglophone journals is nothing new in itself, it has been given a massive boost in recent years by the ever-widening online access to academic texts provided by retrieval systems such as EI Compendex (Salager-Meyer, 2014). It is also, through these platforms that Chinese scientific achievements can be discovered by international academics who might otherwise be totally unaware of them (Jin et al., 2004). As Swales (1990, p. 7) points out, "publication can be seen as documentary evidence that the writer qualifies for membership in the target discourse community". There is now growing evidence that Chinese academics and institutions have a much more internationally-oriented view of what academic discourse communities they wish to be regarded as members of than was the case in the past.

As an academic writing teacher in a top Chinese Finance and Economics university, I am keen to help Chinese Finance and Accounting academic writers (beginning from my colleagues) to improve their English abstracts writing proficiency, with the ultimate aim of raising their awareness about how the abstract writing practices can be brought more into line with the expectations of international audiences, enhancing the potential for their work to be disseminated to worldwide audiences. Given the rapid development of Chinese economic strength in recent years, I hope that such empirical research would help match the internationalization process of Chinese Finance and Accounting acknowledgement and academic publication.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data

As mentioned above, I compiled two corpora for the current research, and these two corpora will be referred to as the English-language Journals Corpus (henceforth EJC) and the Chinese-language Journals Corpus (henceforth CJC). I fully understand that the writers who have published research articles in the English-language journals studied in this paper are not all L1 writers of English, as my research is not intended to compare between the 'L1 users of English' and 'L2 users of English'.[3] Rather, my interest lies solely in comparing the usage of *we* in RA abstracts from English-language journals with English abstracts in Chinese-language journals.

The EJC and CJC contains 400 abstract texts each, selected randomly from a representative range of English-language and Chinese-language journals in the fields of Accounting and Finance. For the selection and confirmation of source journals used in this study, I consulted a series of primary bibliographic databases and journals official websites. I then selected and collected the most prestigious English-language Accounting and Finance academic journals. With these journals, I believe that these researchers' writing conventions are positively associated with the academic journals' qualities and that they can therefore be regarded as a valid international 'norm'

[1] For the internationalization promotion, over 75% of Chinese core academic journals now require authors to submit an English-language abstract (Lu, 2009; Shen et al., 2010).

[2] http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0821/c107503-22636178.html.

[3] As the process of data collection is random, I did not collect/remove the abstracts with Chinese L1 writers from EJC on purpose. Also, as I believe in these top English-language journals' high standard for and these English professional writers' high level of academic English writing, I then still decided to include Chinese L1 writers' abstracts in the final EJC. In this case, I believe that it would not have such homogenous comparison and I could find out the usage similarities and differences between English writers and Chinese L1 writers to the greatest extent.

for comparison (cf. Cao & Xiao, 2013a; 2013b). As for the Chinese journals selection, I verified indexed Chinese Finance and Accounting academic journals using three authoritative Chinese guidebooks.[4] At last I decided to select Finance (twelve journals altogether, with 200 abstract texts) and Accounting (six journals altogether, with 200 abstract texts) journals with various impact factors (cf. Cao & Xiao, 2013a), so as to represent the full range of academic English writing levels amongst Chinese writers (A full list of the journals can be found in Appendix A).

Having identified a selection of relevant journals, I then randomly selected English abstracts for my corpus. From the publication years of 2013 and 2014 (assuming that there would be no great change of academic writing style in Finance and Accounting in recent years), I had a relatively balanced selection of abstracts from the journals' original research articles. The total number of abstracts for EJC and CJC sub-corpus was 400 respectively. The final dataset contains total 102, 203 word tokens, almost equally distributed between the EJC and CJC, as can be seen in Table 1.

3.2. Methods

Of the full range of first-person pronouns in English (i.e. *I*, *me*, *mine, my*, *myself*, *we*, *us*, *our, ours* and ourselves), the first-person pronouns *we* and *our* are most frequent in my data. The others either occur infrequently (and well below statistical significance according to a log-likelihood test), or do not occur at all. In EJC, there is no instance of *me*, *myself* or *ourselves*, *my* occurs only 14 times, and there are mere 3 instances for *us*. Similarly, in CJC, there is no instance of *me*, *my*, or *myself*, 7 instances of *I*[5] and *us*, and only 1 instance of *ourselves*). These results are in line with previous studies by Hyland (2001, 2002) and Martinez (2005). As for the possessive pronoun *our*, though the frequency of occurrence is higher than other first-person pronouns, it is still much lower than *we*: there are only 194 instances in EJC and 109 in CJC. Such low frequency leads to a much less significant disparity in terms of overall frequency comparison; at the same time, there is nothing particularly important and noteworthy about the phraseological patterns in the EJC versus CJC comparison. Taking these into consideration, in the research, I will limit myself to examining and comparing the first-person pronoun *we* only.

Considering that the comparative and contrasting analyses of *we* are between EJC and CJC journal abstracts, I then conducted a Mann-Whitney *U* test to determine and ensure whether the similarities/differences, especially the frequency of this pronoun, is caused by any specific journal and/or groups of writers. After the statistical comparison of data, the final results[6] turned out to be that the p-value of contrasting between the two groups of writers (EJC versus CJC) is significant, which means that this variation is language specific, rather than journal specific.

The analysis of *we* will be based on three separate forms of comparison: a rank and frequency comparison, a comparison of statistical collocates,[7] and a comparison of the phraseological patterns most commonly used by English and Chinese academic writers in the corpus. For all of the three comparative and contrasting studies, I used the corpus tool of AntConc 3.5.7 (Anthony, 2018).

Here, I want to further explain the search of phraseological patterns in my study. As both the EJC and CJC were small corpora in terms of word tokens (see Table 1 above), they are not amenable to some popular approaches to phraseological analysis, notably lexical bundle analysis (e.g. Biber & Barbieri, 2007; Cortes, 2004), which looks for exact repetitions of multi-word strings and thus requires much larger corpora than mine to yield sufficient results for the purposes of meaningful analysis. Therefore, in this study, I decided to adopt Gledhill's (2000a, 2000b) alternative approach to phraseological analysis to examine the patterns. Gledhill's approach involves identifying collocations of grammatical words, which of course occur frequently even in very small corpora. Basing searches on grammatical words is not just a matter of quantitative convenience, however; as Gledhill (ibid) points out, grammatical words are also interesting in their own right as they have a particularly significant role in the construction of idioms, sentence frames and collocations: "high frequency items … are embedded in set phrases which have rhetorical force" (Moon, 1992; quoted in Gledhill, 2000b, p. 117). Therefore, though there is a widely-held belief that grammatical words are not as fruitful as lexical words as a starting point for phraseological research, Gledhill (ibid) was still able to identify a very large number of interesting and noteworthy lexico-grammatical characteristics by means of a phraseological description of a set of grammatical words found to be statistically associated with different moves in scientific research articles. On essentially the same basis, I was able to examine and identify some interesting phraseological patterns based on *we*, in my corpora of abstract texts.

Prior to this study, I completed a rhetorical move analysis of all the English-language abstracts in EJC and CJC. Each abstract was manually annotated with the help of the UAM corpus tool (version 2.8; O'Donnell, 2012), following Swales and Feak's (2009) abstract five-move model.[8] This rhetorical move analysis lays a foundation for the current study of phraseological patterns of *we* as well, mainly in terms of their move distribution and discourse functions.

[4] The three guidebooks are: Comprehensive List of Chinese Core Journals (2014), the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (2014) (hereafter referred to as CSSCI) and the Academic Journal Classification and Ranking Category 2013.

[5] Although there are 93 instances of *I* in EJC, the frequency in CJC is low. Thus, we cannot make the comparison of *I* in this research.

[6] As for the frequency of *we*, the p-value <0.01.

[7] As I was interested in this pronoun's usage as the subject of declarative clauses, I set a narrow "Window Span" of 0–3R for *we*, in order to identify the first ten most frequently collocating words.

[8] This model contains five moves, and they could be simplified as 'background', 'purpose', 'methodology', 'result' and 'conclusion/recommendation'.

Table 1
Overview of EJC and CJC.

Corpus	# texts	# word tokens	Av. text length
English-language Journals (EJC)	400	51020	127.55
Chinese-language Journals (CJC)	400	51183	128

4. Analysis of *we* in EJC and CJC abstracts

4.1. Rank and frequency comparison

Table 2 shows that *we* is the 8th most frequently occurring word in the EJC (N = 792). This word is almost evenly distributed across 333 abstract texts among the 400 abstracts written by English Finance and Accounting writers. In the 400 Finance and Accounting research articles in EJC, 64 of them are single-authored and 336 are multi-authored. Thus, from above mentioned raw frequency and distribution observations, we can tell that multiple-authored articles are more common than single-authored articles in the English-language academic journals. However, for the greater use of *we* in the EJC RA abstracts, it may also indicate a tendency among the EJC writers to use this pronoun in a more general sense – the use of inclusive *we*, to state their research ideas.[9] The inclusive *we*, as Harwood (2005c, p. 365) argues, could help "create a positively polite tenor of solidarity" in the discourse community. The inclusive *we* is thus employed in EJC to set up readers' involvement: the research as joint efforts by both the writer(s) and the readers seemingly. Due to the same reason, such utilization could also better promote writer(s)' claims and/or findings to putative readers and/or members of Accounting and Finance academic community.

Turning now to the data for the CJC, the most obvious point to note is that the rank position of this pronoun is lower than its EJC counterpart. *We* appears in only 151 out of the 400 RA abstracts in the CJC, and with a total frequency of occurrence of 259, it occurs almost three times less frequently than it does in EJC[10]. In other words, the vast majority (about 85%) of English writers in EJC choose *we* to represent their authorial selves in their abstracts and on average, *we* appears twice in each abstract text. In contrast, only 40% of Chinese writers in CJC ever use *we* in their abstract writing, and this pronoun only appears in the CJC at a rate of 0.65 occurrences per abstract text. Similar to the research articles in EJC, there are 98 single-authored and 302 multiple-authored articles in CJC. We might assume that with almost the same number of multiple-authored abstracts, Chinese academic writers could use similar number of this pronoun *we* (or only a little less) to represent themselves in their abstract writing; however, quite different from our previous assumption, it seems that Chinese Finance and Accounting writers use much less this plural pronoun, regardless of multiple- or single-authored written articles. Instead, they would adopt some other writing skills (e.g. passive voice) to circumvent this pronoun, whether it is in a general sense or a specific sense.

In summary, then, from the perspectives of word frequency and ranking, we are able to deduce that present-day Chinese academic writers in the fields of Finance and Accounting are – as hypothesized earlier in this paper – reluctant to use the pronoun – *we*, to represent themselves in their abstract texts, in comparison to their English-language academic peers. This is despite the fact that some (perhaps even a substantial number) of these researchers have come to the knowledge that it is perfectly permissible to use the pronoun and to represent their own identities explicitly when writing for audiences in a much broader academic community.

This result is also in line with previous findings in comparative studies of research articles in general (e.g. Molino, 2010), and of the genre of the abstract in particular (e.g. Van Bonn & Swales, 2007; Zhang, 2008; Friginal & Mustafa 2017; Peng & Zhang, 2017). Previous studies have also offered various reasons for this apparent dispreference. These include the desire to maintain objectivity in scientific writing (Cao & Xiao, 2013a; 2013b), an adherence to outdated academic writing guidelines (Zhang, 2008; Peng & Zhang, 2017), a culturally-motivated aversion to self-promotion in academic writing (Hyland, 2002), and/or the local preferences of particular academic disciplinary communities and/or of the specific genres in which academic writers are composing (cf. Luzon, 2009). A more detailed discussion of the possible reasons for this and other discrepancies relating to the use of *we* will be provided later in this paper, after we have looked in more detail at the collocates and phraseological patterns associated with this pronoun.

4.2. Collocates and phraseological patterns with we

The top ten raw frequency 0–3R collocates[11] of *we* are given in Table 3.

Although these data are, strictly speaking, nothing more than single word co-occurrence observations, they could provide some basic information for further understanding about the phraseological behaviour of *we* in the EJC and CJC. In both the two disciplines of Finance and Accounting, academic writers in EJC and CJC share the first three collocates as *that*, *find* and *the*, and their collocation strengths are also strong, which indicate that these three words have close connection with *we*. Specifically, in EJC, the presence of the words *that* and *whether* indicates that *we* is frequently followed by a finite subordinate clause in Finance and Accounting abstracts written by English academic writers, as listed in Table 4.

[9] EJC writers attempt to use inclusive *we*; yet, for both EJC and CJC writers, they adopt far more exclusive *we* than inclusive *we* in their abstract writings.
[10] in both raw frequency and normalized frequency per 10,000 words.
[11] collocates up to three words to the right of *we*.

Table 2
Rank and frequency data for *we* in EJC and CJC.

Word	EJC			CJC		
	# Rank	# Raw frequency	Frequency (per10,000 words)	# Rank	# Raw frequency	Frequency (per10,000 words)
We	8	792	155	18	259	51

Table 3
Top ten collocates for *we* in EJC and CJC.

Rank	EJC				CJC			
	# Collocate	#Frequency	#Collocation Strength (LL[a])	#Range	#Collocate	#Frequency	#Collocation Strength (LL)	#Range
1	that	362	848.460	248	that	103	336.432	83
2	find	316	1364.593	224	the	96	15.234	77
3	the	166	24.830	134	find	90	591.294	77
4	examine	75	298.822	69	also	19	61.329	19
5	show	73	259.577	62	a	16	5.507	15
6	a	69	20.476	66	use	15	65.174	14
7	also	57	158.885	55	found	14	57.608	11
8	evidence	52	121.421	47	investigate	11	62.625	11
9	whether	45	135.274	44	test	8	23.844	8
10	provide	28	67.262	25	examine	8	35.022	8

[a] For the collocation strength, I used the Log-Likelihood as the means for statistical significance test.

I set a minimum Log-likelihood threshold confidence level of $p < 0.05$, which meant that any item with a score below the critical value of 3.84 would fail the statistical significance test.

Table 4
Two finite clause phraseological patterns in EJC.

we	we [VERB] that …
	we [VERB] whether …

The verbs that most frequently follow *we* are *find*, *show*, *examine* and *provide*, all of which are in the present tense. Thus, from these verbs collocates, we might presume that frequently used phraseological patterns in EJC could be ***we*** + ***find/show/examine/provide*** + ***that/whether***. Except for such clause patterns, the presence of the determiners *the* and *a* indicate that direct objects also frequently follow *we* in EJC. Another interesting and noteworthy word is the only noun in the top ten collocates – *evidence*. And later in this section, I will examine and discuss this specific collocate in more detail.

Turning now to the top ten collocates of *we* in the CJC, the most immediately striking observation is that the frequencies and range for all collocates are much lower than in the case for the EJC data. However, this is only to be expected, given our previous observation that *we* is itself much less frequent in CJC than it is in EJC. On looking at the data in more detail, I note first of all the prevalent co-occurrence of *that*, once again indicating that *we* is most commonly followed by a finite subordinate clause. However, the word *whether*, which in EJC appears 45 times to the right of *we*, does not even figure in the top 10 for CJC. This suggests that while Chinese abstract writers in Finance and Accounting journals do know and use the pattern ***we [VERB] that …*** as their English-language peers, they hardly ever use another finite subordinate clause pattern.

From a comparison of verb collocates, it would seem that Chinese writers make a wider range of choices than do their English-language peers, at least at the top ten of the frequency range and collocation strength for each group as shown here. However, compared with their English-language peers, Chinese Finance and Accounting researchers hardly use the collocate *show* with *we*, and this issue needs further exploration in order to find out whether there are phraseological pattern differences.

Similar to EJC abstract writers, Chinese writers in our corpus employ the same phraseological pattern as **we [VERB] a/the**, which shows a preference for *we* followed by direct objects. The same as in EJC, I will also pay special attention to the verb selections in this pattern in CJC, to see whether 1) the verb selections are confined to the above mentioned six verb collocates, 2) there are some similarities/differences in the verb selections between EJC and CJC.

I now turn to specific phraseological patterns that accompany *we*. The five most commonly used phraseological patterns for *we* in the EJC are presented in Table 5[12]

From Table 5, we note that the first and the third most common patterns for the usage of *we* are ***we*** + ***(also/do not/further/generally) find*** + ***that*** and ***we*** + ***(also/further/then)*** + ***show*** + ***that***. These two patterns appear 291 times in total. These two phraseological patterns appear primarily in the 'result' move in EJC abstract texts, and are both used to state the writers' empirical

[12] All of the top five most commonly used phraseological patterns in both EJC and CJC were subjected to a log-likelihood test and found to be statistically significant at $p < 0.0001$.

Table 5
Five most common phraseological patterns for *we* in EJC.

we	we (also/do not/further/generally) find that
	we (also/then) examine whether/the/how
	we (also/further/then) show that
	we study/investigate/analyze/test/propose
	we find/provide evidence that/of/for/consistent with

results, as shown in Example 1. Accounting writers seem to have a particular strong preference for the pattern ***we*** + ***find*** + ***that***, while Finance writers use both of the two. These two patterns reflect the brevity of abstract writing (Swales & Feak, 2009): professional writers use *we* to represent their stance, and the following finite subordinate clause states their research findings in a compact and direct way.

Example 1.

> ... **we find that** changes in efficiency are positively associated with changes in current and future profitability.
>
> 16 (2013)/Contemporary Accounting Research/Accounting in EJC

When stating the research results, the pattern ***we find/provide*** and the noun *evidence* are also prevalent. This pattern has two main variants as: ***we*** + ***find/provide*** + ***(little/some/substantial/strong) evidence*** + ***that*** and ***we*** + ***find/provide*** + ***evidence of/for/consistent with/on***. These are shown in Examples 2a-b.

Example 2a.

> ... **we find some evidence that** income-increasing tax accrual decisions are related to characteristics generally associated with weak corporate governance.
>
> 6 (2014)/Review of Accounting Studies/Accounting in EJC

Example 2b.

> **We find evidence consistent with** each of the model's five central predictions:
>
> 11 (2014)/Journal of Financial Economics/Finance in EJC

Drawing on the first-person pronoun discourse function classification schemes proposed by Kuo (1999) and Hyland (2002), the above-mentioned phraseological patterns found in the EJC can be classified as relatively typical examples of "stating/showing results or findings" in academic discourse (Kuo, 1999, p. 130; Hyland, 2002, p. 1099). According to Hyland (2002: 1104), "[p]ledging your personal conviction in your results with a first-person commitment is a risky strategy", but apparently, writers who publish their research articles in the most prestigious English language academic journals have such confidence in their ideas and control of their arguments, and hence "they are best able to explicitly foreground their distinctive contribution and commitment" (Hyland, 2002, p. 1103). An important part of this, I would argue, involves using self-reference statements such as ***we find/show that …***, ***we find/provide evidence that*** …

Returning to Table 5 above, we note that there are two other phraseological patterns featuring *we* that are frequently used by EJC abstract writers: ***we (also/then) examine whether/the/how*** and ***we study/investigate/analyze/test/propose***. These are the most

frequently used patterns in the 'purpose' move in EJC abstracts. These patterns have the discourse function of "stating a goal or purpose" (Kuo, 1999, p. 130; Hyland, 2002, p. 1099). In both of these patterns, the EJC writers are quite flexible in their verb selection, so long as these verbs can briefly and positively express their research intentions. We also note that English Finance and Accounting writers use the signal words *whether* and/or *how* as well as *that* with verbs such as *examine* and/or *investigate* in subordinate clauses (as seen in Example 3).

Example 3.

We examine whether corporate social responsibility (CSR) creates value for acquiring firms' shareholders.

8 (2013)/Journal of Financial Economics/Finance in EJC

Let us now compare and contrast these phraseological observations with those obtained from the CJC. Similar to EJC academics, Chinese Accounting and Finance academics use *we* most frequently in 'result' and 'purpose' moves (as 140 and 65 times). However, there are significant differences in the phraseological patterns. Table 6 shows the most commonly occurring patterns featuring *we* in the CJC.

The first and the fourth phraseological patterns in Table 6 (***we (also/can't/further) find/found that*** and ***we (also/only) find/found a/the/out/evidence***) are the most commonly used patterns featuring *we* in Chinese writers' 'result' moves. However, in comparison with the EJC patterns shown in Table 5, we note that there is one missing pattern from the EJC. This pattern is ***we (also/further/then) show that***, which is the second most common pattern adopted by English academic writers in the 'result' moves. In the entire CJC, there are only two instances of this pattern. These are ***we show that …*** and ***we innovatively showed the …***.

On closer investigation, however, it turns out that Chinese writers do use this phraseological pattern, but with different collocates – or more specifically, with other subjects instead of *we*. When stating their research results, Chinese academics prefer not to express their own agency or identity, instead using the noun *result(s)* as the subject of the clause: "***result(s) show(s/ed) that …***". There are 97 such samples in the CJC,[13] even with a higher frequency than the pattern ***we find that*** in the CJC. This contrasts very strongly with Finance and Accounting researchers in EJC; when the English academic writers do opt to use *result(s)* instead of *we* as the subject of their result-reporting clause, they are more likely to co-select the verb SUGGEST than SHOW, i.e. ***results suggest that … ,***[14] rather than the CJC-preferred ***result(s) show(s/ed) that …***.

It would therefore seem that the Chinese writers in our corpus mix two common and popular phraseological patterns in their academic abstract writing. Although the two patterns of ***result(s) show(s/ed) that …*** and ***results suggest that …*** are completely appropriate in academic writing, the two reporting verbs exhibit some certain differences: practically, the word ***show*** is a more assertive reporting verb, while ***suggest*** is a more hedged expression. This Chinese writers' mix and preference may be attributed to their unfamiliarity with hedges and boosters, and also reporting verbs' collocates with different sentence subjects. Alternatively, this phraseological preference could be due to first language influence; in Chinese, the two words 表明(*Biǎomíng*) and/or 显示 (*Xiǎnshì*) both share the meaning of *show* and usually collocate with the word 结果(*Jiéguǒ*), meaning *result*. Some Chinese writers in CJC may directly translate their abstracts from Chinese into English, and hence would choose the corresponding word *show* rather than some perhaps more internationally commonplace collocates.

Meanwhile, from another perspective, we note that Chinese writers are reluctant to use the first-person possessive pronoun *our*, even with such an evaluatively neutral collocate "result(s)". Again, a contrast with EJC is instructive here: there are 28 instances of ***our results suggest that …*** in the EJC, but only 8 instances of this phraseological sequence in the CJC.

Example 4a.

The empirical results show that tangible information and intangible information both significantly affect the four forecasting items, ...

9 (2013)/China Accounting Review/Accounting in CJC

[13] The 97 instances exclude the pattern "*our result(s) show(s/ed) that …*"; actually, in CJC, there are only five instances of such pattern as "*our result(s) show(s/ed) that …*".

[14] Most instances of such phraseological pattern appear in the 'conclusion/recommendation' move, rather than 'result' move in the EJC.

Table 6
Five most common phraseological patterns for *we* in CJC.

we	we (also/can't/further) find/found that
	we (also/empirically) investigate/examine the/whether/how
	we use/used
	we (also/only) find/found a/the/out/evidence
	we (also) study (studied)/explore/test/analyze (have analyzed) the/whether

Example 4b.

> **Our results suggest that** insiders of foreign firms believe that the regulation makes the extraction of value from minority investors more difficult and costly for them.
>
> 12 (2014)/Review of Finance/Finance in EJC

Examination and comparison of collocates and commonly-used phraseological patterns of *our* in EJC and CJC also verifies above mentioned phenomenon. The most commonly used pattern revealed by the phraseological analysis of *our* in EJC features one of the nouns *result(s)/findings/evidence*, followed by *suggest* and a finite subordinate clause, as ***our result(s)/findings/evidence suggest(s) that***. In addition, the second frequently used phraseological patterns with *our* in EJC finds that these professional writers tend to have their own set patterns. For example, ***our results are robust***, usually appears as the last sentence in 'result' moves and functions as an alternative form of verification of research results. The pattern ***our findings are consistent with*** performs primarily as a connection between 'purpose' and 'result' moves. In contrast, Chinese writers prefer definite article *the* or zero article to the possessive pronoun *our*: the phraseological patterns of *our* in CJC are insufficient in both the frequency and the use.

From both the *we* and *our* phraseological pattern comparison, we could see that there is a distinction between promoting the researcher (as ***we show that*** and/or ***our results suggest that***) versus promoting the research itself (as ***results show that***). It may be the case that Chinese writers are inclined to be less overtly 'self-promotional' in their abstracts, and are thus attempting to make a more implicit case for their research. However, as self-promotional strategies are becoming an essential part of contemporary academic communication (Hyland, 2002), Chinese writers should attempt to overcome any aversion they might have towards personal forms of expression.

Let us now consider the fourth commonly used pattern among Chinese writers listed in Table 6 above, ***we (also/only) find/found a/the/out/evidence***. This pattern tends to feature nouns or noun phrases as direct objects. While two commonly used phraseological patterns in 'result' move in EJC, namely, ***we find/provide evidence that*** and ***we find/provide evidence of/for/consistent with/on***, are not found at all in the CJC. Once again, Chinese writers appear to be drawing on a relatively narrower range of lexico-grammatical resources to express their stances, especially so when it entails using this first-person pronoun as the sentence subject.

In relation to 'purpose' move, it would seem that Chinese writers share similar writing conventions with their English-language peers. Both prefer to use the phraseological patterns ***we investigate*** and ***we examine***, and both are quite flexible in their selection of verbs (in addition to the words *investigate* and *examine*, Chinese writers also used verbs such as *test*, *study* and *analyze*). Luzon (2009) showed that expert writers used highly conventionalized patterns based on ***we*** + ***verbs*** to state their research purposes, and that the most frequently chosen verbs in this pattern are *study*, *analyze*, *propose* and *identify*. It would seem that on this occasion, Chinese writers in CJC follow closely high frequency phraseological patterns in stating their research purposes. However, the English writers in EJC have a statistically significant preference for the pattern ***we examine whether/the/how***.[15] They only used the verb *investigate* as a supplement (following an initial verb selection such as *study*, *analyze*, etc.). In comparison, Chinese writers seem to treat ***we investigate*** and ***we examine*** as interchangeable in 'purpose' move statements. While this may not actually seem incorrect or 'unidiomatic' to an international or L1 English reader, my analysis does show that such lexical co-selections are divergent from the English-language writing convention, and may thus contribute – even if in a small and imperceptible way – to an overall impression on the part of an international or L1 English reader that Chinese abstracts are written in a different and unusual way.

Another difference lies in the grammatical objects typically following these verbs. English writers in EJC either select ***the*** + ***noun/noun phrase*** or ***whether/how*** + ***subordinate clause***, depending on the level of detail they wish to present in their statements relating to their research purposes, as shown in Example 3 above. Chinese writers, in contrast, use ***the*** + ***noun/noun phrase*** following those verbs principally.

[15] Statistics show that log likelihood of this pattern $p < 0.0001$.

Example 5.

> And then **we investigate** the value premium in these three emerging markets, ...
>
> 1 (2013)/Studies of International Finance/Finance in CJC

Before moving on, there is another significant difference revealed by the phraseological analysis of *we*. In all of the five patterns identified in Table 6, Chinese writers tend to a greater variety of verb tenses than English-language peers do. In particular, I find a mixture of simple present, simple past and even present perfect forms distributed fairly evenly across abstract moves. While English writers in EJC may also use verbs in the present, past and present perfect tenses in abstract writing, they do not normally use verbs in either the past or the present perfect tense in opening statements. Instead, they tend to use verbs in an assortment of tenses to describe events that happened in the past, such as a financial crisis happened in the past. This form of usage resonates with some findings from previous comparative studies of learners and expert writers (e.g. Luzon, 2009), which found that while expert writers keep to one kind of verb tense according to the specific genre/move they are writing in, learner writers tend to drift almost randomly between tenses.

Example 6.

> This paper empirically **examines** how the market environment **affects**… We **found** that the market environment **has** significantly **affected** corporation's vertical integration. Specifically, the degree of corporation's vertical integration **increases** with the deterioration…
>
> 6 (2013)/Accounting Research/Accounting in CJC

5. Probable reasons for writing differences

One explanation put forward by Cao and Xiao (2013a, 2013b) for the Chinese writers' reluctance to use first person pronouns lies in the "rules for abstracts and abstracting" (GB6447-1986), which is the Chinese national guidelines for writing academic abstracts. In this set of rules, the emphasis is on the objectivity of the material presented in abstract, and there are explicit requirements to use the third person pronouns wherever possible.

> Abstracts should be written in the third-person tone. Descriptive approaches should be adopted to indicate the nature of the primary document and the document subject, such as "research has been carried out …", "the status of … has been reported", and "investigation has been conducted to …" etc. (rules for abstracts and abstracting, GB6447-1986, 6. considerations for abstracts writing)

While this explanation is difficult to prove directly, the analysis presented here more generally has provided empirical evidence that Chinese writers in our corpus use self-reference forms much less frequently than do their English-language peers in EJC.

Another possible explanation is that Chinese Finance and Accounting academic writers seem to be unaware (or at least insufficiently aware) of the increasingly promotional role that the first-person pronouns are starting to play in contemporary academic discourse (Hyland 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2005; Van Bonn & Swales, 2007). To borrow terms from Yakhontova (2002), Chinese writers seem to prefer 'telling' to 'selling' by their abstracts. However, the 'pressure to sell' is far greater in the international academic writing and publishing context. Under such circumstances, languages utilized in English abstracts should be instrumental in 'hooking' (or failing to hook) their readers (Hyland, 2004). It seems that when Chinese writers write English abstracts, they do not always bear in mind that they are no longer writing solely for local readers.

This might also explain that in their Chinese-written abstracts, they usually adopt "this research", "this paper", and "researcher(s)" such kind of subjects to refer to the Chinese writers themselves. These writing conventions have remained when transferring to their English-written abstracts; hence, we seldom see the Chinese L1 influences on the adoption (and/or non-adoption) of *we* in their English abstract writing (even, sometimes Chinese writers would adopt the passive forms, such as *it is presented in this paper*, rather than

adoption of active voice *we*). However, when it comes to the collocates and phraseological patterns of *we*, there are actually some influences from the Chinese language, such as Chinese writers' interchangeable use of *investigate* and *examine*, and the mixed two phraseological patterns as ***we (also/further/then) show that*** and ***result(s) show(s/ed) that***. When it refers to direct translation (or combination of writing and translation) of abstracts, some Chinese writers would select corresponding words, rather than internationally accepted collocates and/or phraseological patterns. And this kind of first language influence may provide certain explanation for Chinese Finance and Accounting academics' different phraseological patterns from their English-language academic peers.

In recent years, some Chinese linguists have begun to realize the positive value of using first-person pronouns in academic abstract writing, as practiced in international academic discourse communities. These scholars have argued in particular that first-person pronouns can make abstract texts more concise yet more convincing and persuasive (e.g. Teng & Tan, 2004; Zhang, 2008); yet such opinion holders are few in number. And my study here suggests that in the international Finance and Accounting academic communities at least, English academic writers are certainly more inclined to use first-person pronouns to express their views. Thus, I hope that my study could help raise more Chinese academics' language awareness of the first-person pronoun usage in their English academic writing.

Editors in some Chinese Finance and Accounting journals might not realize themselves and/or indicate to the academic writers about English language writing conventions, and indirectly causing such salient differences as discussed in this paper. Thus, it is equally important to raise Chinese journal editors' English language awareness, upon detailed insights and descriptions provided by corpus-based research such as that carried out for this paper. They, together with academic writers, should understand that self-promotional strategies are an essential part of contemporary academic communication. By now, some English editors in prestigious Chinese academic journals have realized this issue and would help examine and edit the English abstracts.

While the last probable explanation could be that EAP writing training is inadequate, and that there is thus an urgent need to acquaint Chinese academics with the writing conventions now practiced and accepted by international academic communities. There therefore it needs to be proactive and explicit encouragement for Chinese academics to adopt current first-person pronoun usage patterns and to make correspondingly less use of passive and impersonal constructions in academic writing. Yet, as Salager-Meyer (2014, p. 81) has argued, academics working in non-anglophone countries should not be expected to figure out how to write abstracts by themselves; rather, "universities should … be responsible for training researchers … to become acquainted with the culture of academic publishing and written communication skills … both in the scholars' L1 and in English." Given this, EAP writing teachers need to help their students to develop a better awareness of such lexico-grammatical usage and patterns, and to write in a manner that adheres to abstract writing conventions. One feasible solution might be appropriate revision and adoption of *we* and *we*-statements based on Chinese writers' initial writing/translation versions (based on the advancement of on-line translation tools). EAP writing teachers thus need to undertake and/or draw inspiration from investigations, assimilate their findings and come to some form of consensus in formulating ways and means of writing updating among Chinese academic writers. Generally, I do hope that the detailed picture presented by researches such as this one could be of practical interests to EAP practitioners whose task is to help their students write abstracts in ways which will help them to participate fully in their international disciplinary discourse communities.

6. Concluding remarks

In this research I have conducted a corpus-based comparative study of first-person pronoun – *we*, in English language abstracts published in English and Chinese-language journals. The aim has been to investigate whether and to what extent the usage of this first-person pronoun by Chinese abstract writers correspond to English-language conventions in the fields of Accounting and Finance.

Overall, I found that Finance and Accounting academics in EJC not only adopted larger numbers of this pronoun than did Chinese counterparts, but they also utilized more varied and sophisticated collocates and phraseological patterns associated with the word *we*.

In the last section, I have also briefly discussed and offered some possible reasons for the differences that my research has found. Some of these reasons have been from a macro perspective, noting such things as the possible influence of national abstract writing conventions; others have been from a more micro perspective. I do concede that these discussions have been brief and speculative and do not in themselves answer the underlying question of why Chinese writers write abstracts as they do, but I hope that these discussions will act as a catalyst for further research into these issues. Specifically, further research extending analysis scope to English abstract writing from other academic disciplines, which could help find out whether there exist disciplinary differences for the first-person pronoun use; and/or even beyond the genre of abstract, to other English written sections from the whole academic texts, which could help find out whether there exists consistency/alteration in Chinese writers' usage of the *we* pronoun. In such cases, I do hope that these future exploration and investigation will also contribute to the goal of improving Chinese writers' academic English writing.

In general, this paper has contributed new knowledge to the now burgeoning sub-field of EAP study focusing on the research article abstract genre. This study still has a number of limitations, such as only one language feature focused specifically. Nevertheless, given the rapid development of Chinese academic research in recent years, I believe that my research findings could help to raise Chinese academics' language awareness and then familiarize them as well as journal editors, EAP teachers the internationally accepted norms and conventions in academic abstract writing, may play a role in helping Chinese academics to disseminate their research more widely, and then to become more fully integrated into their international academic discourse communities.

Authorship statement

Category 1.

Conception and design of study: N. ZHAO; Acquisition of data: N. ZHAO;A nalysis and/or interpretation of data: N. ZHAO.

Category 2.
Drafting the manuscript: N. ZHAO; Revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content: N. ZHAO.
Category 3.
Approval of the version of the manuscript to be published: N. ZHAO.

Appendix AList of Journals included in CJC and EJC

CJC

Accounting:

Accounting Forum.
Accounting Research.
China Accounting Review.
Communication of Finance and Accounting.
Contemporary Accounting Review.
Journal of Accounting and Economics.

Finance:

Chinese Review of Financial Studies.
Finance Forum.
Financial Economics Research.
Financial Theory and Practice.
Journal of Financial Development Research.
Journal of Financial Research.
Journal of Regional Financial Research.
Journal of Shanghai Finance University.
Quarterly Journal of Finance.
Shanghai Finance.
South China Finance.
Studies of International Finance.

EJC

Accounting:

Contemporary Accounting Research (Canadian-based, English-language).
Journal of Accounting and Economics.
Journal of Accounting Research.
Review of Accounting Studies.
The Accounting Review.

Finance:

Journal of Finance.
Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis.
Journal of Financial Economics.
Review of Finance.
Review of Financial Studies.

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Ning Zhao received her MA and PhD degrees in English Applied Linguistics from the University of Birmingham and is currently a lecturer at Southwestern University of Finance and Economics. She is interested in English academic writing, with application from genre analysis theoretically, and corpus linguistics methodologically.

Address for correspondence: Faculty of International Studies, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Liutai Avenue, 555, Wenjiang District, Chengdu, Sichuan, P. R. China. Email: zn8314@swufe.edu.cn.