Tentativeness vs Assertiveness: Metadiscourse Choices of Russian Engineering Writers

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Abstract

The communicative features of academic discourse have been explored from different perspectives. However, these studies have been predominantly carried out on English-language material. Little is known of how rhetorical elements, including stancetaking markers, are used in Russian academic prose. The current study assumed that in order to ensure effective communication academic writers use a repertoire of stancetaking features. The theoretical basis of the study is Hyland's model of stance markers which is frequently used in studying interactional strategies found in academic discourse. As research material the articles by Russian engineering scholars derived from six academic journals were used. The analysis revealed a large number of stance items with a predominance of boosters in the article introductions selected to build the corpus. It is suggested that the differences in the employment of stance markers identified in the study reflect discipline-specific writing peculiarities of the engineering academic community, while the discursive choices made by engineering writers are constrained by discursive conventions and depend on the level of the writers' language proficiency. Despite some data limitations, the research results can be seen as a starting point for the future research of stancetaking in Russian research articles from different perspectives.

Keywords

stancetaking, research article, academic discourse, engineering, interaction, introduction, hedging, boosting

Осторожность vs категоричность: метадискурсивный выбор авторов научно-технических статей

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Аннотация

Коммуникативные особенности академического дискурса получили освещение в работах огромного количества исследователей. Однако большинство данных исследований были проведены на материале английского

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языка. Метадискурсивные маркеры русскоязычного академического дискурса являются малоизученной областью в лингвистике. В основе настоящего исследования лежит гипотеза о том, что эффективное взаимодействие в академической среде предполагает использование авторами различных стратегий представления информации и выражения отношения к пропозициональному содержанию. Теоретической основой исследования является модель интеракциональных маркеров, разработанная К. Хайлендом и регулярно используемая при анализе академического дискурса. Объектом исследования выступают две интеракциональные категории – хеджирование (ослабление иллокутивной силы высказывания) и бустинг (увеличение иллокутивной силы высказывания). В качестве материала были выбраны научные статьи ученых-инженеров, опубликованные в шести российских журналах. Анализ выявил преобладание бустеров, способствующих увеличению силы утверждения, подчеркивающих уверенность автора в истинности выдвигаемых положений и демонстрирующих приверженность собственной точке зрения. Выявленные различия в процентном соотношении бустеров и хеджей отражают присущие точным дисциплинам особенности академического письма, а дискурсивный выбор авторов ограничен дисциплинарными академическими конвенциями и предопределен уровнем владения ими письменной академической речью.

Ключевые слова

позиционирование, научная статья, академический дискурс, инженерные науки, взаимодействие, введение, хеджирование, бустинг

Introduction

Stance markers offer an interesting insight into academic discourse as rhetorical features employed to present authorial claims and enter into a dialogue with the reader. Stancetaking in research articles has been examined in a large number of studies [Alonso-Almeida, 2014; Aull, Lancaster, 2014; Belyakova, 2017; Boginskaya, 2022; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016; Gorina, Khrabrova, 2017; Hyland, 1998; Kozubikova, 2021; Takimoto, 2015; Varttala, 2001] being one of the most explored issues. T. Varttala, for example, explored the status of hedges in popularized articles as opposed to research papers from three disciplines [Varttala, 2001]. From the same cross-disciplinary perspective, M. Takimoto analyzed research articles to measure the frequencies of hedges in humanities, social and natural sciences [Takimoto, 2015]. L. Aull and Z. Lancaster compared undergraduate research papers and research articles to reveal stancetaking changes as researchers gain experience in academic writing [Aull & Lancaster, 2014]. O. Dontcheva-Navratilova explored cross-cultural variation in the use of hedges and boosters to identify ways in which native and non-native English writers express different degrees of commitment when presenting arguments in favour of their claims [Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016]. M. Belyakova carried out a cross-cultural comparison of RA abstracts by Russian and Anglophone writers in geoscience to identify their stance features and found that Russian authors tend to disguise themselves to a larger extent [Belyakova, 2017]. The studies conducted on English-language materials identified discipline- and culture-specific differences in the use of stance features. It has been found that different linguistic cultures and disciplinary communities use different functional categories to create a stance in academic discourse.

While these works are valuable, there is still a complementary contribution to be made by a corpus-based study that explores the process of stancetaking in Russian academic discourse. Thus, in an attempt to contribute to literature on the rhetorical aspect of academic texts written by Russian engineering scholars, the current study focuses on the employment of stance items in Russian research article (RA) introductions written by engineering scholars. The research seeks answers to the following questions:

(1) Which stance features – boosters or hedges – do Russian engineering authors prefer to create a stance in RA introductions?

(2) What is the frequency of these features in the corpus?

(3) What rhetorical functions do these features perform?

Hedging and boosting as stancetaking categories

Stance has been conceptualized as the expression of the speaker/writer's attitudes or assessments and studied in a large number of works contrasting stance features in expert and non-expert-authored articles [Barton, 1993], exploring the types of stance markers [Conrad, Biber, 2000], developing taxonomies of stance items [Hyland, 1999], and investigating lexico-grammatical categories used to express stance [Conrad, Biber, 2000; Thompson, Ye, 1991].

Previous research has shown that stance is a crucial feature of persuasive discourse, and speakers make choices about using these rhetorical devices to interact with an audience in different genres. Crismore and Farnsworth claimed that the employment of stance features such as hedges and boosters increase the persuasiveness of academic texts [Crismore, Farnsworth, 1990]. Abdi argued that stance features help establish credibility [Abdi, 2002]. The same conclusions were made by Hyland who had found that stance in CEO letters serves a persuasive function [Hyland, 1998].

Interestingly, in literature one can find a variety of other terms to describe this interactional feature. For example, S. Hunston and G. Thompson label it 'evaluation' [Hunston & Thompson, 2000], P. Martin refers to writer's viewpoints as appraisal [Martin, 2001], while A. Crismore and M. Takimoto describe them as metadiscourse [Crismore, 1989; Takimoto, 2015].

In Russian linguistics stance as a discursive strategy has been analysed with regard to the communicative category of *categoricality/assertiveness* which includes linguistic items used to indicate the degree of the speaker's/writer's confidence and certainty [Gushchina, Nikitina, 2008; Malyshkin, 2015; Panchenko, Volkova, 2021]. Categoricality is conceptualized by linguists through semantically related concepts such as unconditional, unambiguous, decisive, ultimatum, etc.) [Aleksandrova, 2011]. An interesting interpretative analysis of the category has been presented by N. Panchenko and Ya. Volkova who have shown the relation between assertiveness and some other categories such as politeness, authority, confidence, subjectivity, and emotionality. They have convincingly proven that Russian academic discourse is characterized by a high level of assertiveness which makes it prone to conflict [Ibid.]. E. Andreeva, who explored this category as a reflection of cultural norms, indicated the relationship between this category and the categories of persuasiveness, imperativeness and evaluation [Andreeva, 2008]. The analysis of the results obtained by the Russian researchers suggested the existence of two vectors of this category — strengthening and mitigating associated with the speaker's assessment of accuracy and reliability of the propositional content. These vectors appear to be two types of stancetaking — boosting and hedging.

The term 'stance' was introduced by D. Biber and E. Finegan who defined it as "the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message" [Biber, Finegan 1989. P. 12]. In his later study, D. Biber referred personal feelings, attitudes, value judgments, and assessments to this category [Biber et al., 2004]. One more definition of stance was provided by R. Englebretson who described stance as speakers/writers' attempts to build relations with their readers through the articulation of their views and selection of linguistic resources [Englebretson, 2007].

One of the most comprehensive definitions of stance, however, has been offered by K. Hyland who distinguishes between two dimensions of evaluation: stance and engagement [Hyland, 2005b]. Stance was conceptualized as an attitudinal dimension that includes features used by writers to present themselves and convey their judgements and opinions while engagement was referred to "an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations" [Hyland, 2005b. P. 176]. While stance concerns writer-oriented features and refers to the ways writers commit themselves to a proposition or convey to a proposition or the reader, engagement deals with reader-oriented features used to draw reader's attention. K. Hyland distinguishes between three components of stance: evidentiality, affect, and presence. Evidentiality, as K. Hyland put it, refers to

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the writer's expressed commitment to the reliability of the proposition and its potential impact on the reader; affect involves a wide range of attitudes towards what is said; and presence concerns the extent to which the writer projects him/herself into the text [Hyland, 2005a].

The focus of the current study is two stancetaking categories described by K. Hyland as the types of evidentiality – hedges and boosters. The former are used to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact, while the latter allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience. In contrast to hedges that mitigate authorial claims, boosters help "suppress alternatives, presenting the proposition with conviction while marking involvement, solidarity and engagement with readers" (Hyland, 2005. P. 145). In persuasive texts, they help the writer create an impression of certainty, conviction and assurance, instil trust and confidence in readers. Boosters are therefore a crucial phenomenon in the construction of rhetorical style and production of persuasive texts. Unlike boosters, hedges are linguistic devices that convey the writer's uncertain attitude towards the respective statement and help avoid responsibility toward the utterance [Hyland, 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1994]. A. Crismore and W. Vande Kopple define hedges as elements that "signal a tentative or cautious assessment of the truth of referential information" and allow the author to reduce his/her responsibility toward the information presented [Crismore, Vande Kopple, 1988. P. 185].

Corpus and methods

The present study was conducted on a corpus of research article introductions derived from six Russian engineering journals: *IPolytech Journal, Frontier Materials & Technology, Non-Ferrous Metals, Advanced Engineering Research, Materials. Technology. Design, and Master's Journal*.

Having identified the target journals, 68 research article introductions ($N = 68$) were randomly selected to ensure a high degree of objectivity and comparability of texts. To eliminate the impact of publication period, only the RAs from the most recent issues of each journal published between 2017 and 2022 were selected in order to exhibit the rhetorical features of present-day Russian academic discourse. Only one RA introduction from every author was selected in order to control the impact of an individual writer's style. The size of the corpus is 45,654 words.

Thus, the corpus was built so as to ensure comparability in terms of genre (RAs), language (Russian), field (engineering), currency, and RA section (introduction).

Since the study aims to analyze and compare the use of stance features in Russian RA introductions written by engineering authors, the methods of quantitative and qualitative analyses were applied. The RA introductions were downloaded from the journals' websites, converted to the Microsoft DOCS format and analysed. The quantitative analysis assisted with WordSmith Tools 5 was conducted to reveal the frequency of stance features in RA introductions selected to build the corpus. The contrastive analysis of stancetaking categories was conducted to find potential similarities and differences between the groups.

The frequencies of **each marker** occurrence were normalized to 1,000 words, calculated, and presented in a table format.

A careful analysis of the context was conducted to interpret differences in the booster and hedge occurrence frequencies in the corpus. To ensure an in-depth exploration into stancetaking, examples from the corpus **were** studied and followed by the description of the hedge and booster rhetorical functions.

Results and discussion
Quantitative analysis of stance features in RA introductions

The outcome of the quantitative analysis shows similarities and differences in the use of the two categories of stance (boosters and hedges) by Russian engineering authors in terms of frequencies.

The results suggest that researchers seem conscious of the need to engage with the content. However, in absolute terms, the differences between the two stance categories were quite significant with boosting markers representing the majority of the features. The details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Frequency of hedges and boosters in the corpus

Таблица 1

Частотность использования хеджей и бустеров в корпусе текстов

Stance features	Normalized frequency and %
Hedges	11.1 (36.6)
Boosters	19.2 (63.4)
Total	30.3 (100)

Overall, 1,381 boosters and hedges have been found in the corpus. When considered for text length, the RA introductions showed a high degree of certainty. Boosters were the most frequent in the texts. Their share in the total number of occurrences was 63.4 %. The frequency of hedge occurrence per 1,000 words differed significantly. It was 11.1 compared to 19.2 boosters.

Tables 2 and 3 manifest the distribution of hedging and boosting devices by the types suggested by K. Hyland and H. Zou [Hyland, Zou, 2021]. For the purposes of this study, we slightly modified the taxonomy of boosting devices by adding one more type — solidarity markers — which also seem to enhance the degree of commitment to the propositional content.

Table 2

Hedging type frequency

Таблица 2

Частотность типов хеджирования

Hedges	Normalized frequency and %
Plausibility hedges	6.8 (61.2)
Downtoners	3.2 (28.8)
Rounders	1.1 (10)
Total	11.1 (100)

Table 3

Boosting type frequency

Таблица 3

Частотность типов бустинга

Boosters	Normalized frequency and %
Certainty markers	8.9 (46.4)
Extremity markers	2.9 (15.1)
Intensity markers	5.3 (27.6)
Solidarity markers	2.1 (10.9)
Total	19.2 (100)

In the following sub-section, the functions of hedging and boosting in the analyzed texts will be explained.

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Qualitative analysis of stance features in RA introductions

Hedges

Hedges downplay "a writer's commitment to a proposition, modifying its scope, relevance or certainty" [Hyland, 2005. P. 176] and helping to acknowledge alternative viewpoints. They withhold commitment to the presented proposition and are used to steer the reader to the conclusion or reasoning of the writer's choice.

Table 2 shows that the types of hedging found in the corpus differed in the occurrence frequencies. As can be seen from the table, plausibility hedges clearly prevail. They were employed to recognize the limitations of claims and to show the authors' reservations about the accuracy of their statements by moderating the way of expressing ideas. Here is an example of the plausibility hedges that indicate that the statement is based on an assumption rather than facts.

> *Современные тенденции развития строительного гидропривода **предполагают** повышение его эффективности за счет применения объемных регулируемых машин с гидравлическим управлением.* 'Modern trends in the development of a construction hydraulic drive **suggest** an increase in its efficiency through the use of volumetric adjustable machines with hydraulic control.'

The hedge signals an awareness of alternative viewpoints and seeks to avoid potential criticism. In the following example, the plausibility hedge also signals that the claim is based on the author's assumptions:

> *Двухфазная мостовая схема **может** быть использована и с другими электронными приборами.* 'The two-phase bridge circuit **can be** used with other electronic devices.'

The frequency of downtoners was not significant compared to the plausibility hedges, which indicates that the writers tended to protect themselves against inaccuracy of research results to a lesser extent. In the following example, *достаточно* 'rather' as a downtoner mitigates the intensity of the statement.

> *Однако получение композитов Мо-Си с **достаточно** высокой плотностью является трудной задачей.* 'However, obtaining Mo-Cu composites with **a sufficiently** high density is a difficult task.'

The downtoners used in this example lessens the certainty of the authorial claim.

In the below-cited example, the downtoner обычно 'usually' might convey a certain qualification with regard to the degree of accuracy of the claim, demonstrating that the statement might be inaccurate [Hyland, 1998].

> *К достоинствам УЗС относится и высокая производительность процесса: **обычно** длительность ультразвукового воздействия не превышает нескольких секунд.* 'The advantages of USS include its high productivity: the duration of ultrasonic exposure does not **usually** exceed a few seconds.'

One more type of hedging — rounders indicating an approximation — was rather scarce. Such low frequency can be explained by the fact that results of the numerical assessment are usually described in other sections of the RA, while the Introduction aims to arouse the reader's interest and orient him/her as to the importance of the research problem. However, several instances of this type of hedging were found. Here is an example from the corpus:

> *Использование метода ионного уноса материала ... позволяет повысить износостойкость детали **приблизительно** в три раза.* The ionic bleed material method … increases wear resistance of the part by **approximately** three times.

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By making the number a little fuzzy, the adverb employed as a rounder expresses approximation, thereby making the claim less persuasive.

Boosters

In contrast to hedges, boosters function by "presenting the proposition with conviction while marking involvement, solidarity and engagement with readers" [Hyland, 2005a. P. 145]. The analysis has revealed the highest frequency of these devices per 1,000 words in the corpus. The higher frequency of boosters might be attributed to the disciplinary belief that truth is self-evident without the need for argument. Experiential knowledge and empirical evidence are crucial in reasoning, while possible counterarguments are given less attention. The frequent use of boosters by engineering authors indicates that they tend to occupy a stronger stance and are more keen to express their convictions and highlight the significance of their studies. As K. Hyland claims, writers use boosters to emphasize the strength and suggest the efficacy of the relationship between data and claims which is relevant to hard sciences [Hyland, 1998].

Similar to hedges, the types of boosting differ numerically. Table 3 shows that certainty markers were the most frequent type followed by intensity markers. Extremity and solidarity markers were rarely employed in the corpus.

Certainty markers are used to indicate the writer's epistemic conviction. In addition to claiming the accuracy of research results, writers employ these devices to emphasize the importance of the study and exclude alternative views from the readers.

> *Анализ зарубежных источников [12–14]* **показал** *высокий интерес к указанной проблеме.* 'An analysis of foreign sources [12–14] **showed** a high interest in this issue.'

In the above example, the authors anticipate possible responses from the reader but choose to prevent them. The boosting verb *показал* 'showed' is used to claim that the truth the authors are discussing is evidential.

Intensity markers function by amplifying the emotive strength of a statement. In contrast to certainty items, they give affective colour rather than epistemic assurance to the authorial claims.

> *Доменные газы имеют* **очень** *низкую теплотворную способность.* 'Blast furnace gases have a very low calorific value'.

The frequency and percentage use of solidarity markers show that they are scarce in the corpus with only 10.9 % of all the boosters found. These markers contribute to the persuasiveness of authorial claims through the appeal to shared knowledge. The use of these boosting resources demonstrates that authors expect the audience to be familiar with certain facts and feel solidarity thus taking the audience's knowledge for granted. Here is an example from the corpus.

> ***Известно, что*** технология ПЭО позволяет управлять фазовым составом и свойствами оксидных слоев. '**It is common knowledge that** PEO technology makes it possible to control the phase composition and properties of oxide layers.'

Finally, extremity markers "emphasize the upper edge of a continuum" [Ibid. P. 8], as in here:

> *Теплотворная способность является основной и* **самой важной** *характеристикой топлива.* 'Calorific value is the main and **most important** characteristic of fuel'.

By upgrading the proposition, the writers emphasize the importance of the property without the need for elaboration.

Discussion and Conclusions

The intent of the present study was to contribute to a better understanding of disciplinary aspects of academic discourse and to provide an answer to the question of how writers in engineering present

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themselves and the propositional content in academic communication. This study aimed to explore variation in the employment of two stancetaking categories — boosters and hedges — in a corpus of RA introductions written by Russian authors which previously did not attract much attention of linguists. The analysis of the RA introductions has shown that the Russian authors widely engage readers in a kind of dialogue and leave authorial traces in their texts taking explicitly involved positions.

The RA introductions contained 1,381 stance markers with boosters being the most frequent stance feature. The frequency of hedge occurrence differed significantly. It was 11.1 compared to 19.2 boosters.

The differences in the employment of the two types of stance marker identified in the study reflect discipline-specific writing peculiarities of the engineering academic community. We can assume that Russian engineering authors seem to produce their academic texts relying on previously written texts thus following some well-established standards that are difficult to overlook. According to C. Berkenkotter and T. Huckin, academic writers are social actors who are familiar with disciplinary conventions [Berkenkotter, Huckin, 1995]. In the same vein, K. Hyland argues that the scholars need to ratify their claims in order to obtain collective agreement that their data represent facts rather than opinions [Hyland, 2008]. The rhetorical choices made by academic writers are typically constrained by the discursive conventions and rhetorical styles of each discipline [Takimoto, 2015]. The compliance with discipline norms is required for authorial claims to be accepted by the disciplinary community. "Discoursal decisions are influenced by, and embedded in, the epistemological and interactional conventions of their discipline" [Hyland, 1998. P. 349].

The differences in the use of the two types of stance by the Russian engineering scientists might be also due to poorly developed academic writing skills. In a slightly different context, Hyland suggests that non-native English speakers tend to use boosters, while native English speakers prefer to soften the illocutionary force of a proposition [Hyland, 1998]. I can assume that the level of language proficiency has a direct impact on the choice of stancetaking patterns. The ways of producing new knowledge in the engineering science influence the level of written language proficiency, including the academic style. Representatives of hard sciences rely on the word to a lesser extent, mainly exploiting quantitative indicators. Hedging is considered to be a sign of highly developed language proficiency.

One more reason for the extensive use of boosters as linguistic items creating a stance in academic discourse is Russian academic writing style described by T. Larina and D. Ponton as categorical/assertive [Larina, Ponton, 2022]. The researchers emphasize that mitigating tools are usually non-existent in Russian language reviews being replaced by means of imperative modality, which adds a categorical tone to the statements.

It should be admitted that the research results presented here are limited due to a comparatively small corpus of RA introductions. The generalization of the research results requires more support from a larger number of research articles. We find it essential to continue this research using data from other disciplines. Diachronic variation in the employment of stance features could be also of interest. It is of great interest to study how expert academic writers know when to use stance items in their texts or how stance affects reviewers.

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