

Research on the Stance Markers by Comparing the International Websites of Universities between China and the United Kingdom

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Abstract: In the increasingly globalized world, interaction and cooperation between different countries are promoted in various fields, especially in the field of international education. This study adopts the stance mark theory proposed by K. Hyland, applying the corpus linguistics method to compare the similarities and differences between the websites of universities in China and Britain. Taking 150 news from the English websites of three universities in China and Britain as the research objects, the study analyzes the differences through Hofstede's model of cultural dimensions. The result shows that British universities use significantly more stance markers than Chinese universities and that Chinese universities' stances are affected by the cultural dimension of power distance, uncertainty avoidance and collectivism, which needs to be further optimized. The study provides Chinese universities with practical reference for enhancing the internationalization of their English websites.

1. Introduction

In the increasingly globalized world, interaction and cooperation among countries have been promoted in various fields, especially international education. To construct a tight bond, share academic discoveries among the global scientific community, and promote educational communication, Chinese universities build up their English websites for international students deepen their understanding of the Chinese educational system, and attract the globe to hear the Chinese academic voice.

An internationalized website is an organization's window to the world. In recent years, Chinese scholars have paid attention to the internationalized communication of higher education. Previous studies elaborated on the challenges faced by the English websites of Chinese universities and looked forward to the internationalization of Chinese universities in various aspects. Starting from the comparison of English websites to analyze the influence of discourse characteristics on the construction of university identity, scholars adopt cross-disciplinary research on the construction of institutional websites using cross-cultural communication, psychology, business management, and other interdisciplinary studies, and analyze them in conjunction with the theories of management,

linguistics, psychology, and communication. The research provides theoretical support for corporate and institutional website constructs, confirms the role of cultural adaptation on website promotion and image construction overseas, and helps institutional workers localize their internationalized websites.

Most of the related studies investigate the website design and discourse features of internationalized websites from the perspectives of cybernetics, librarianship, and translation; nevertheless, fewer studies are comparing the language level of websites from the perspective of linguistic communication. Regarding linguistic and intercultural research, some scholars focus on the comparative analysis of business websites. These studies analyze the discourse of Chinese and American enterprises from the perspective of pragmatics and compare the discourse construction strategies of Chinese and American enterprises' institutional identities in terms of denotative strategies. Other scholars focus on the analysis of high-frequency words as the focus of discourse construction and take the distribution of vocabulary and their usage characteristics as the starting point of the study, such as personal pronouns, quantifiers, verbs, etc. ^[16]

Based on the different cultural backgrounds of China and the UK as elaborated in Hofstede's^[7] cultural dimensions theory, this study will analyze the different stances of Chinese and British universities' English websites by comparing the differences in vocabulary usage, trying to compare the differences between the two countries from the perspective of cultural differences. This research adopts the theory of stance markers put forth by K. Hyland^[11] to compare the similarities and difficulties the universities' websites between England and China, indicating the promotion of Chinese International websites by comparing them with the websites built by native speakers.

2. Literature Review

International scholars widely apply Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions to analyze the characteristics of English websites, focusing on the page settings, languages, and pictures of the websites to conduct cross-cultural research or comparative studies. To begin with, Singh^[20] based on the linguistic characteristics of multinational corporations' websites, analyzes whether the differences in national cultures are obvious. The objects selected for the study are from European, American, and Asian countries, such as Britain, the United States, Japan, Italy, Norway, etc. The study compares the number of languages presented on their web pages, page settings, etc., and elaborates on the cultural dimensions of the countries in which these websites are located, including five sub-dimensions, namely, power distance, masculinity/femininity, individualism/collectivism, avoidance of uncertainty, and long-term or short-term tendencies, which further proves Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions to have validity. Singh ^[19] conducted a comparative analysis of the English-language and Chinese-language websites of U.S. multinational corporations and proposed a framework for measuring online cultural adaptation. A sample of 40 U.S. Fortune 500 companies was selected to investigate the cultural adaptation of their Chinese websites. Using Hofstede's^[9] cultural dimensions and Hall's high-low context theory, a content analysis of these companies' domestic U.S. and Chinese websites showed that their Chinese websites did not reflect the high power distance and collectivist characteristics of Chinese culture. In recent years, Shi^{[17][18]} creatively used Hofstede's^[5] cultural dimensions theory combined with corpus research methods to extract semantic domains representing Hofstede's^[10] cultural dimensions and compares the linguistic and cultural features and similarities and differences expressed in the websites of Chinese and American Fortune 500 companies through quantitative statistics and business discourse analysis and further explored the level of cross-cultural adaptation of the English websites of Chinese companies.

English websites are the medium of identity construction for universities, not only as a business

card to the outside world but also as a touchstone to reflect the internationalization level of university education. In the existing studies, most of the research objects are comprehensive institutions such as Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Renmin University of China, and fewer studies are focusing on universities and the corpus used for the analysis of the existing studies are all selected from the school profiles and overviews formally released on the official websites of the schools. Compared with other columns of universities' websites, the column of news is the medium for each university to disseminate its educational image, and academic activities to the public, reflecting the information and values of the university. However, few studies use stance markers to discuss the linguistic characteristics of Chinese and English universities. Therefore, this study will adopt corpus instruments to analyze the differences and similarities in the lexical level in the English websites of Chinese and English universities.

The concepts of Stance markers^[15] witnessed a complicated development. To begin with, Biber^[2] defined stance as the personal emotion, attitude, and evaluation of a proposition, classifying it as epistemic, attitudinal, and style of speaking. Hunston & Thompson^[3] indicated that stance expresses the attitudes, cognition, and emotion of a proposition, while they mentioned four dimensions, including the good-bad, level of certainty, expensiveness, and importance. Following the previous research, the stance can be seen as an attitudinal dimension and includes features that refer to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgments, opinions, and commitments.^[13] Meanwhile, the framework of stance marker is comprised of Hedges, Boosters, Self-mention, and Attitude Markers. To sum up, even though the stance marker framework has been focused on by plenty of previous studies, there are significant differences in the focus of research topics and the rationality and practicality of disciplinary distribution. Up to now, few intercultural communication studies have compared the English websites among the United Kingdom and Chinese colleges to examine the differences in the extent of the stance.

This article focuses on the four stance markers based on the word-list put forward by Hyland^[12]. These types of stance markers are connected to Hofstede's^[11] cultural dimensions, including Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Individualism or Collectivism. By using Hyland's stance markers, this research will analyze the lexical differences and similarities of the international websites of universities in England and China. The universities selected in the research depend on the QS World Universities Ranking, including the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, and Imperial College London from the United Kingdom, Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Zhejiang University from China, mainland.

The current research combines the stance marker theory and cultural dimension theory, which are rarely adopted by previous research. On top of that, this research analyzes the different stances stated by the universities of the two countries, while previous studies explore the cultural differences by analyzing the international websites of cooperation. To sum up, this study helps to enrich cross-cultural research on cross-cultural communication on college websites, based on corpus and text analysis methods to understand the construction of identity discourse in Chinese and English college websites.

3. Research Design

3.1 Samples

The current investigation involved sampling and analyzing stance markers of the column "News" on the websites of universities in China and Britain. The sample was selected from three England universities, including the University of Cambridge, University of Oxford, and Imperial College London, and three Chinese universities including Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Zhejiang University based on the QS Ranking 2023. The six universities' websites display various

school activities, academic achievements, and conferences, allowing the public to understand various aspects of the top institutions. This study analyzes the stance markers used by the international websites between two countries, so two parallel corpora have been constructed, including 450 news collected by English Universities and 450 news in Chinese. To ensure reliability, this research selects 150 news in random from 2021 to 2023, in other words, 50 news in six universities each year. The corpus of the Chinese international websites has 217,429 tokens, and the corpus of the websites from the United Kingdom has 229,405 tokens. Relative previous studies built up a corpus including 56886 and 55780 tokens (Shi& Cheng, 2021) or 57610 and 56510 tokens^[18]. Therefore, the quantity of the current research is reliable and plausible.

3.2 Research Design

This study will focus on the stance of Chinese universities' international websites and the stance of UK universities' websites to explore the influence of cultural context on discourse to compare the usage of international websites in two countries. It combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, utilizing a parallel corpus of Chinese and English universities for comparison for the following reasons. Firstly, to study the construction of English websites of Chinese universities and examine their cross-cultural factors, they should be compared with English native websites, whose linguistic and cultural characteristics are of value. Secondly, in Hofstede's^[5] measurements of the cultural dimension index in China and Britain, there are relatively significant differences in the dimensions of individual or collectivism, power distance, and similarity in the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Thirdly, by comparing the vocabulary differences between the websites of Chinese and British universities, Chinese universities are more inclined to enhance their ability to publicize to the globe and to strengthen external communication.

The data analysis of this study will be divided into three steps. First, this paper uses the Antconc 4.2.4 corpus research tool to retrieve the number and frequency of use of each type of stance marker. Based on the stance marker word list proposed by Hyland, the researcher will manually count the frequency of use of stance markers, making lexical judgments and subdivisions of the four types of stance markers. Secondly, this paper applies SPSS to analyze whether there is a significant difference in the specific frequency of each type of stance marker and to ensure the accuracy of the data, this paper standardizes the lexical frequency of the corpus, i.e., it reports the retrieval results in units of 100,000 words, which is effectively used by previous scholars. Subsequently, this study will apply content analysis to qualitatively analyze and interpret the findings to get the similarities and differences in the use of stance markers on English websites of Chinese and English universities, which will provide an optimizing strategy for the outreach of English websites of Chinese universities.

4. The Comparison of Stance Markers

4.1 The usage of Stance Markers

In terms of the overall features of Chinese and British universities, the two self-constructed corpora contain 229,405 stance markers of the British corpus and 229,930 stance markers of the Chinese corpus, so there is no significant difference in the number of stance markers between the two parallel corpora. According to Hyland's word list of stance markers, there are 152 stance markers with a total frequency of 5,616 in the self-built Chinese corpus and 149 stance markers with a total frequency of 9,714 in the self-built British corpus. The richness of stance markers used in the UK is slightly lower than that in China, but the frequency of stance markers used on the official websites of UK universities is significantly higher than that on the internationalized

websites of Chinese universities. The < Table 1> is a detailed description and presentation of the result.

Table 1: The types of stance markers

	China	Britain
Hedges	56	58
Boosters	50	47
Self-mention	7	7
Attitude Markers	39	42

In terms of the distribution characteristics of the overall use of stance markers by Chinese and British universities, the number of hedges used by Chinese and British universities is the largest, which may stem from the fact that China and Britain have similarities in the uncertainty avoidance dimension, so they are more inclined to use hedges to express their stance and to report the news of their schools. In addition, both universities use boosters more frequently, since the boosters reflect the commonality of the universities in China and the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, both sides of the attitudinal markers are used the least number of times, which reflects the need for news discourse to be relatively objective to introduce the real situation of the university's scientific research achievements, international exchanges, and academic conferences, thus it will avoid the frequent use of subjective attitudes.

As for the differences, the use of self-mention is significantly higher in the UK than in China, and the high frequency of it is a way for universities to show their stance as the main subject of expression and the image of the university, which, on the other hand, indicates that the UK universities are more aware of and can intentionally show their identity in news discourse, which is important for the construction of their stance. <Table 2> is a detailed analysis of the results.

Table 2: The Comparison of Stance Markers

	Chinese		U.K.		p
	Freq.	SF	Freq.	SF	
Hedges	1886	820.25	3772	1469.89	.000
Boosters	1775	771.97	1989	867.03	.002
Self-mention	1385	602.36	3311	1443.30	.000
Attitude marker	570	247.90	858	374.01	.000
Total	5616	2442.48	9714	4234.43	.000

4.2 The usage of Sub-category

By the statistical results of the corpus tool, it is shown that the number of stance markers used in British universities is significantly higher than that in Chinese universities. Although the English websites of Chinese universities use English as the medium to report information about academic exchanges, campus activities, and international cooperation, their stance construction features are significantly different from those of British universities due to the influence of Chinese culture and language. To verify the difference in the use of the four stance markers between Chinese and British websites, this paper will use SPSS to conduct a chi-square test on the frequency of words. According to the P value, it can be found that there are significant differences in the use of four types of stance markers, namely, hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention ($P < 0.05$). Four types of stance markers will be analyzed.

4.2.1 Hedges

Hedges reduce the writer's certainty about the expression of propositional content, to negotiate the posture of the conversation, with ease of interpersonal relations. Hyland (2005) depicts hedges are devices like *possible, might, and perhaps*, which indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than an accredited fact.

Chinese and British universities use hedges to construct a rigorous and reflect their uncertainty avoidance. Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree of threat felt by members of society in a particular culture in the face of uncertainty or unknown situations, as well as the tendency to eliminate uncertainty and ambiguous situations. Based on Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, the higher the value of the index, the stronger the tendency of uncertainty avoidance, and vice versa, the weaker it is. The uncertainty avoidance index of the UK is 35 and the index of China is 30, indicating that both countries have a more cautious attitude towards uncertainty avoidance, and therefore use ambiguities extensively to express their positions and opinions.

Although both China and the UK use hedges at a high frequency, there are significant differences in the specific use of high-frequency words. The five most commonly used words in Chinese universities are *can, about, could, would, and may*, of which the other four words except about are modal verbs, and the use of modal verbs reflects the cautious attitudes of the universities, which is similar to the results of Shi and Niu's (2022) study on the hedges of Chinese enterprises, suggesting that both Chinese enterprises and universities have a stance constructs both tend to use ambiguities such as the modal verbs *could* and *would* to show the rigor and objectivity of their discourse. The high-frequency words in the UK are *can, about, across, could, and around*. In addition to the modal verbs that are common to the Chinese side, the British universities prefer to use *about, across, and around*, which are hedges that are categorized by Hyland^[6] in 2021 as rounders and indicate that such words lack precision revealing an approximation.

The news of international websites in British universities covered various fields, including school activities, academic research, and the latest achievements. The research selects the most frequent hedges used in the corpus. Universities in the United Kingdom and China frequently use hedges to convey messages to the public, establish their academic stance in the news of research achievements, and approach their website visitors. Proper amounts of hedges reduce subjectivity and mitigate relationships. Therefore, the use of an appropriate number of hedges can reflect the attitude of the universities, enhancing the interaction with the website visitors. The table shows the frequency of hedges.^[14]

4.2.2 Boosters

Boosters, which emphasize and highlight information, reflect the authenticity and reliability of academic communication and academic conference reporting in the news discourse of universities' websites and strengthen the public's trust in the university. Overall, there is a significant difference in the number of boosters used in the English websites of Chinese universities, indicating that both China and Britain tend to use boosters to construct a clear and firm position. Although in the power distance dimension put forth by Hofstede, China's power distance index is much higher than that of the UK, the use of boosters is lower than that of the UK, indicating that UK universities use strong words with high frequency to elaborate relatively objective expressions of their positions and utilize objective and rigorous discourses using news reports on the English language websites of universities.

The Chinese side's high-frequency use of boosters includes *first, only, most, should, and established*, while the British universities use *first, most, found, very, and only*, which shows an

overlap in the use of high-frequency words. They are both widely used *first* to express the pioneering spirit of universities, *only* to reveal the uniqueness of their academic achievements and international exchanges, and *most* to express their excellence at the highest level of adjectives. The difference is that the Chinese side prefers to use verbs such as *established* in news reports to express the establishment and composition of campuses and colleges, reflecting their creativity.

4.2.3 Attitude Markers

Attitude markers are used to convey the subject's values and hope to reach a consensus with the reader on the value and emotional level^[4]. Chinese and British universities use attitude markers to discuss the academic values and educational concepts of higher education, highlighting the stance and value orientation of higher education. British universities use significantly more attitude markers than Chinese. In addition, Chinese universities demonstrate a higher power distance index, tending to widen the distance between the universities and their audiences to show their authority. Attitude markers tend to express emotion, so the frequency of Chinese universities is significantly lower than the British.

Specifically, the high-frequency attitude markers used in China are *important*, *support*, *even*, *remarkable*, and *essential*, while the high-frequency attitude markers used in the UK are *support*, *important*, *even*, *essential*, and *amazing*. Similarly, the four words *important*, *even*, *support*, and *essential* appear frequently in the news discourse of universities in both countries, and the Chinese side also frequently uses the word *remarkable*, which is different from the word *amazing* used in the UK. In terms of the use of attitude markers, the Chinese and the British sides use a small number of these words, which is based on the construction of an objective and rigorous stance in the news discourse. In terms of the use of attitude markers, the Chinese and British sides use fewer of them overall, based on the objective and rigorous position construction of the news discourse, and the attitude markers that are used frequently, such as *essential*, are also attitude expressions expressing importance, while there are fewer attitudes conveying subjective emotions.

4.2.4 Self-mention

Self-mention refers to the use of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives to present propositional, affective, and interpersonal information. To emphasize a personal or organizational point of view, self-mention reinforces the interaction with readers and texts by showing the extent to which the author consciously projects himself or herself into the discourse. It can be further classified into two types, first-person markers and referential markers. Specifically, first-person pronouns (I, we) and adjective possessive pronouns (my, ours), which construct the author's stance and show identity, are first-person markers. Apart from these, Hyland^[12] also classified self-referential markers into self-mention categories, such as the speaker and the institution. By the depiction of self-mention in previous studies, self-mention mediates the relationship between the author's argument and the reader's expectation. <Table 3> is a detailed presentation of the First-person markers.

Table 3: The First-person Markers Used by International Websites

	Frequency in Universities of England	Frequency in Universities of China
we	1333	338
our	639	310
I	704	370
my	253	149

As shown in the table, first-person plural pronouns are used more often than first-person singular

pronouns, as the first-person marker “we” makes the reader feel as if they are with the author, increasing their sense of involvement and enabling them to agree with the author's point of view to create empathy. In addition, for first-person pronouns, both Chinese and English universities' websites prefer to use first-person plural pronouns, engaging readers in the news and thus enhancing the interaction between website builders and visitors. Meanwhile, it can be observed that the website constructed by native speakers more frequently uses first-person markers to show their stances and identify themselves. <Table 4> is the detailed presentation of self-referential markers.

Table 4: The Self-referential Markers Used by International Websites

Self-referential Markers	Frequency in Universities of England	Self-referential Markers	Frequency in Universities of China
University of Oxford	33	Tsinghua University	331
University of Cambridge	224	Peking University	202
Imperial College	184	Zhejiang University	164

Self-mention indicates the content can be enriched continuously through learning and the learning can enhance the efficiency and level of operation of the enterprise and become the core of corporate culture construction. Self-referential markers mainly include the universities' names to show their identities. According to the corpus, Chinese websites are more likely to use the institutions' names to identify and show their stance. Chinese academic institutions tend to use self-referential markers, especially their names to refer to themselves to maintain a sense of distance and authority, which is under the cultural dimension theory put forward by Hofstede^[8], indicating that China owns a high power distance. As far as Chinese top universities, use self-referential markers more often, which can make the news published by the universities more formal to some extent; nevertheless, the long power distance makes it difficult for the reader to get involved in the context of the universities. Contrary to the Chinese universities, the universities in the United Kingdom use less self-referential markers, showing a sense of proximity and reflecting a close power distance of the universities to their website visitors. As a result, less use of such personalized pronouns leads to news discourse in Chinese universities being more inclined to report on the actual situation, creating a greater distance from the website's readers, whereas in the UK, it draws closer to the website's readers and uses more self-referential terms to display the website's subject image.

5. Conclusion

Based on a self-constructed corpus, this paper compares and analyzes the distribution characteristics, usage features, and similarities and differences of stance markers in the news section of English websites of Chinese and British universities. Specifically, the English websites of Chinese universities appropriately enhance the frequency of the use of attitude markers. As far as hedges are concerned, Chinese universities can consider strengthening the use of hedges that express precision, such as *about*, *around*, and *across*, to express a rigorous attitude. In terms of boosters, the number of boosters used by Chinese universities is somewhat different from that of British universities, the frequency is slightly less than that of British universities, so the use of boosters can be further improved to enhance the credibility and reliability of the news articles in the website. In terms of attitude markers, Chinese universities can increase the use of such markers in the future to strengthen the communication and interaction between universities and readers. In terms of self-referring words, Chinese universities can consider using more first-person plural pronouns in the future to bring the distance between universities and their audiences closer.

In the current study, the differences between the two countries are due to the power distance and uncertainty avoidance, which follows the research conclusion of Shi & Shan's research that the power distance and uncertainty avoidance can be significantly shown in international websites. To sum up, the frequent appearance of self-referential markers and less first-person markers shows the high power-distance index, meanwhile, the hedges present a partly uncertain stance, showing a lower power distance.

Comparing the differences in the news published by English universities, Chinese universities can construct and maintain international websites, making them localized and achieving cross-cultural adaptation. On one hand, Chinese websites tend to adopt the content word *development* and present advanced higher education. To convey international images of Chinese universities, the websites should use more hedges that show academic cautiousness in the news. On the other hand, owing to the cultural context with high power distance, the authority is presented by Chinese education, influenced by rhetorical devices, to show a tone of certainty which is necessary to convey authority and credibility. However, to close the distance with the website visitors, Chinese websites should use more first-person markers to convey the meanings instead of self-referential.

English websites of Chinese universities spread the voice of Chinese higher education, publicize academic frontiers, and build a platform for communication with international teachers and students, so they need to know whether their stance and language expressions are in line with the language and culture of the local audience. This research provides a practical guidance for Chinese universities to further spread the voice of Chinese higher education, publicize academic frontiers, and build a platform for communication with international teachers and students.

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