Subjectivity and Objectivity in Chinese Academic Discourse:
How Attribution Hedges Indicate Authorial Stance*

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Hedges can be used to show a speaker’s less than full commitment to the truth of a proposition in spoken discourse or to strengthen an author’s argument in academic discourse. Attribution hedges are hedges used by writers to qualify their claims by relating their arguments to a given source of information. This paper explores authorial stance in attribution hedges in Chinese academic discourse and their disciplinary variation. The disciplines investigated include the pure humanities, the social sciences and the hard sciences. The results show that writers in the pure humanities and social sciences use more attribution hedges in their writing. Furthermore, these writers reveal a greater tendency to use subjective accounts when they seek support for their claims, with social science writers reflecting a lesser degree of subjectivity. Specifically, writing in the pure humanities are characterized by hedges which display more individuality and which involve readers in the argument. Hard science writers, by contrast, reflect an objective stance with attribution hedges that imply the author’s detachment from the argument. In short, pure humanity writing reveals a rhetorical style that is closer to interactively oriented spoken register. The incorporation of more informal elements may arise from the uncertain nature of findings in the pure humanities, where claims or propositions are mainly based on subjective evaluation or interpretation of data.

Key words: Chinese, academic discourse, attribution hedges, disciplinary variation, subjectivity, objectivity

* This research project has been funded by the National Science Council, Taiwan, R.O.C., under grant Number NSC 99-2410-H-003-095-. We would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Special thanks go to Dr. Chichun Hsu for providing statistical support. The authors are solely responsible for any errors contained herein.