

# The evaluative know-how of Chinese scholars: A contrastive corpus analysis of evaluative *it* patterns in research articles

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, evaluative *it* patterns have attracted broad attention in the literature. It is a prevalent language phenomenon in academic discourse (Biber et al., 1999; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Peacock, 2011), and part of the defining code of research articles (RAs hereafter) (Williams, 2002). It allows writers to present their evaluation explicitly while giving them the appearance of generality and objectivity (Herriman, 2000) and is thus a powerful and effective construction for expressing attitudinal meanings.

Evaluative *it* patterns have been explored across populations, genres and disciplines (e.g., Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Peacock, 2011; Zhang, 2015). Yet, scant attention is paid to the characteristic patterns and their characteristic meanings in academic texts. Characteristic patterns (CPs hereafter) refer to the high-frequency patterns in a specific set of texts, while characteristic meanings (CMs hereafter) are the meanings expressed by the CPs. CMs generally reveal the typical meanings and functions of the texts, i.e., “what is often said” in the texts (Hunston, 2011). Francis et al. (1998) proposes 9 high-frequency evaluative *it* patterns in general English texts, including **it v-link ADJ to**, **it v-link ADJ that**, **it v-link ADJ wh-**, **it v-link ADJ for n that**, **it v-link ADJ of n that**, **it v-link ADJ to n that**, **it v-link ADJ for n to**, **it v-link ADJ of n to** and **it v-link ADJ v-ing**. However, whether these patterns are CPs in academic texts or not and what are the CMs of *it* patterns remain unanswered. Besides, the majority of the existing literature focuses on the practices of native speakers, while how the patterns are used in non-native speaker writers’ academic texts, in Chinese scholars’ texts especially, and whether the usage of *it* patterns by Chinese scholars varies from that by Western scholars are still under-researched.

We thus set out to explore how Chinese scholars use evaluative *it* patterns to express attitudinal meanings and compare their practices with those of Western scholars. The following research questions are addressed:

- (1) What are the characteristic evaluative *it* patterns and their characteristic meanings in academic texts?
- (2) What similarities and differences exist in the use of characteristic *it* patterns by Chinese scholars and Western scholars in terms of frequency and characteristic meanings?

## 2. Method

The data for this study comes from Beijing Collections of Academic Research Essays (Beijing CARE). Beijing CARE consists of two comparable sub-corpora: the first one comprising 2,249 RAs produced by Chinese scholars (CHC), totaling 10,794,193 tokens, and the second one comprising 3,923 RAs by English native-speaker scholars (NSC), totaling 22,636,925 tokens. The RAs in the corpus were collected from English-

medium international leading journals in 23 fields in the period 2000 to 2014. Authors in CHC are based at a university in mainland, China, while those in NSC are affiliated with institutions of English inner circle countries, including United Kingdom, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Kachru, 2003). Two versions of Beijing CARE are provided: one with plain texts and one with POS-tagged texts.

We adopted the Pattern Grammar (Hunston & Francis 2000) approach in this study. The target patterns were **it v-link ADJ to**, **it v-link ADJ that**, **it v-link ADJ wh-**, **it v-link ADJ for n that**, **it v-link ADJ of n that**, **it v-link ADJ to n that**, **it v-link ADJ for n to**, **it v-link ADJ of n to** and **it v-link ADJ v-ing**. All variants of the linking verbs were included, including *is*, *was*, *seems*, *appears*, *would be*, *may be*, *might be*, etc., as well as their corresponding negative forms. WordSmith Tools (v. 6.0, Scott, 2012) were first used to retrieve and count all occurrences of the *it* patterns in the tagged version of Beijing CARE. Tagged sequences (e.g., *it\_pph1 is\_vbz \*\_jj to\_to*) were used to concordance the lexical sequences (e.g., *it is possible to*) of specific patterns (e.g., *it is ADJ to*). Next was a search for the high-frequency adjectives in the patterns through the plain text corpus. The cut-off frequency was set at 10 per million words. Based on Francis et al. (1998), we categorized the high-frequency adjectives into meaning groups according to their semantic features. Then the evaluative meanings of *it* patterns across sub-corpora were analyzed and compared. As the two sub-corpora are of different size, normed figures (calculated per million words) are used to report the frequency data. Statistical significance ( $p < 0.05$ ) was tested with the loglikelihood-ratio test.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Distribution of evaluative *it* patterns

Table 1 reports the distribution of the evaluative *it* patterns in the corpus.

Table 1. The distribution of evaluative *it* patterns in Beijing CARE

| <i>it</i> patterns              | CHC   |        | NSC    |        | Loglikelihood ratio | p value |
|---------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|---------------------|---------|
|                                 | Raw   | Normed | Raw    | Normed |                     |         |
| <b>it v-link ADJ to</b>         | 3,575 | 331    | 8,834  | 390    | -70.06              | 0.000   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ that</b>       | 1,741 | 161    | 5,004  | 221    | -134.65             | 0.000   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ for n to</b>   | 296   | 26     | 454    | 19     | 16.92               | 0.000   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ wh-</b>        | 139   | 13     | 476    | 21     | -28.13              | 0.000   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ to n that</b>  | 3     | 0      | 17     | 1      | -3.14               | 0.076   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ for n that</b> | 1     | 0      | 6      | 0      | -1.20               | 0.273   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ of n that</b>  | 0     | 0      | 6      | 0      | -4.69               | 0.030   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ of n to</b>    | 0     | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0.00                | 1.000   |
| <b>it v-link ADJ v-ing</b>      | 0     | 0      | 0      | 0      | 0.00                | 1.000   |
| Total                           | 5,755 | 533    | 14,797 | 654    | -177.07             | 0.000   |

As can be seen in Table 2, there are four high-frequency evaluative *it* patterns in both

sets of texts: **it v-link ADJ to**, **it v-link ADJ that**, **it v-link ADJ for n to** and **it v-link ADJ wh-**. The distribution trend of evaluative *it* patterns in academic texts found in this study differs greatly from that in general English texts, where, as Francis et al. (1998) notes, 9 *it* patterns figure prominently as the major evaluation devices. Yet, our study suggests that there are only four dominant *it* patterns in academic texts. These four patterns are the CPs in academic texts.

Striking differences are observed between the two sub-corpora. The occurrence of *it* patterns in NSC significantly outnumbers that in CHC. Also, in CHC, the frequencies of **it v-link ADJ to**, **it v-link ADJ that** and **it v-link ADJ wh-** are significantly lower than those in NSC. It is not surprising to find this trend, given that the overall frequency of evaluative *it* patterns in CHC is much lower. Yet, interestingly, CHC displays a significantly higher frequency of **it v-link ADJ for n to**.

### 3.2 CMs of **it v-link ADJ to** and **it v-link ADJ that**

Figure 1 presents the meaning groups associated with **it v-link ADJ to** pattern across sub-corpora. The two groups of scholars employ the pattern to convey similar evaluative meanings, that is, to assess the importance, likelihood, difficulty, desirability and usefulness of acts or procedures. These attitudinal meanings, constituting the common traits of both data sets, are CMs in academic discourse.

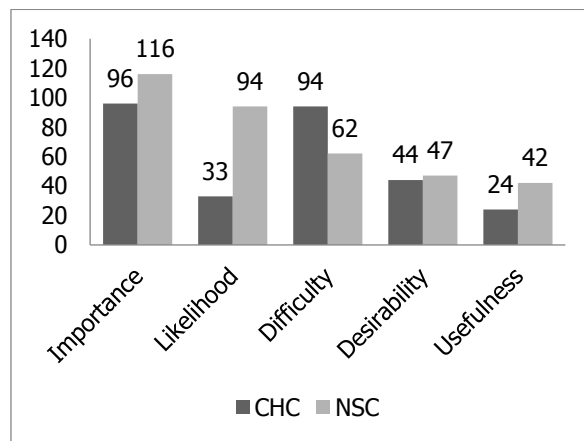


Figure 1. The meaning groups of **it v-link ADJ to** pattern

Besides, Chinese scholars differ from Western scholars as regards the semantic preferences of this pattern. Western scholars evaluate the importance, likelihood and usefulness with significantly greater frequency. Among these evaluative meanings, difference in the likelihood group is found to be most statistically significant (LL=-417.20,  $p < 0.001$ ); Western scholars are on average three times more likely to indicate the likelihood of acts. Chinese scholars, by contrast, express difficulty more frequently (LL=100.53,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Figure 2 gives the meaning groups of **it v-link ADJ that** across sub-corpora. Both Chinese scholars and Western scholars use this pattern to evaluate the certainty, likelihood, importance and expectation of propositions. Certainty and likelihood are the two dominant meaning groups in both sets of texts. The preference for the certainty and likelihood meanings is a commonality of academic writing.

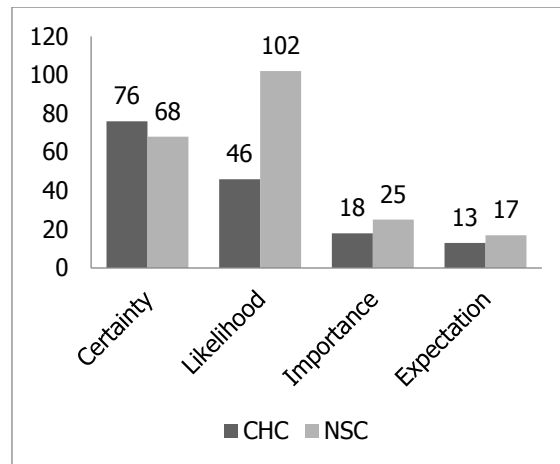


Figure 2. The meaning groups of **it v-link ADJ that** pattern

While the two sub-corpora contain similarities, there are considerable variations in the distribution pattern of the meaning groups. In contrast with Western scholars, Chinese scholars use this pattern less frequently to express meanings of likelihood, importance and expectation, but more often to indicate the certainty of their propositions. All differences were found to be statistically significant, among which difference in the likelihood group is the most remarkable one ( $LL=-311.42$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

#### 4. Discussion

Our results reveal a number of features of evaluative *it* patterns in RAs produced by Chinese scholars and their Western counterparts. The commonly used CPs and CMs in the two sets of data are indicative of the shared ideology and academic conventions of the academic community. The differences between the two groups of writers, however, can be possibly attributed to a series of factors. First, the deficiency in pragmatic competence and L2 knowledge may hinder Chinese scholars from expressing attitudinal meanings appropriately. Second, culturally preferred epistemological beliefs and rhetorical conventions may be an influencing factor of the rhetorical choices of the writers.

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