A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF HEDGES BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICAN COMPANY PROFILES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADAPTATION THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This study makes a contrastive analysis of hedges between Chinese and American company profiles by building two corpora consisting of 30 Chinese company profiles (CCP) and 30 American company profiles (ACP) respectively and using the analytical tool AntConc4.0.5 and Chi-square test. The major findings are as follows. Overall, hedges occur in both Chinese and American company profiles, but are used more frequently in ACP than CCP. Specifically, in both CCP and ACP, approximators are adopted significantly more often than shields; rounders are the most frequent type of hedges; compared with CCP, rounders and plausibility shields appear more frequently in ACP. The reasons for the similarities and differences are described from the perspective of Adaptation Theory. These findings enrich the present studies of hedges in company profiles and provide good guidance for Chinese companies to write profiles in a more objective and credible way.

KEYWORDS: Company profiles, Hedges, Adaptation Theory, Contrastive analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, as English has become a universal language and the trend of globalization has been immensely deepened, English has played a critical role in foreign economic activities. Meanwhile, with the rapid growth of China's foreign economic and trade activities, it is essential for Chinese companies to promote international cooperation in order to better seize the historical opportunities and implement a gambit in the global market.

To some extent, successful commercial cooperation largely depends on attracting and retaining business partners or customers, who can be captured by an excellent company image and reputation of their potential partners. An efficient way for companies to enhance corporate reputation is to be equipped with high-quality company profiles, especially those written in English. Besides, for customers, prior to trade and collaboration with a company, learning its background information is a prerequisite. In order to collect the corresponding information, the most efficient way is to visit the company's official website to browse the profile, which can function as a resume with the description of company history, business philosophy, products and services, corporate social performance,

reputation, investor information, etc. Therefore, an English company profile is of great importance in delivering corporate information to the public. As a consequence, for the sake of international commercial cooperation, companies from non-native English-speaking countries have to write an English version of their company profiles.

In order to convey information effectively in a limited space, a company profile should share the following characteristics – objectivity, brevity and credibility. Writers can achieve those rules from two perspectives, namely, the lexical and syntactic perspective. At the lexical perspective, writers employ a range of linguistic devices which generally go under the rubric of "hedges" [1]. They can function and perform effectively in conveying vagueness and delivering information appropriately to readers.

Hedges has been a major focus of research from the pragmatic perspective since the 1980s [2]-[6]. There has been a widespread interest in analyzing hedges in various avenues of discourse, such as academic discourse [7]-[8] and news discourse [6]. However, there is a paucity of hedges literature on corporate discourse, and company profiles in particular.

In view of the great importance of company profiles in establishing company image and the scarcity of the relevant study, the current study aims to conduct a contrastive analysis of hedges in Chinese and American company profiles. It offers practical insights for Chinese companies to implement the going out policy and provides educational insights for teachers to improve the teaching of Business English.

2. HEDGES IN COMPANY PROFILES

The notion of "hedge" was proposed by Lakoff [9] and was defined as the linguistic resources that can make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. Holmes [10]-[11] regarded hedging as the pragmatic phenomenon that expresses writers' epistemic modality and modifies the illocutionary force of the utterances. As Hyland [4] pointed out, hedges can enhance fuzziness and weaken the commitment to the truthfulness of a proposition.

Researches on hedges from the pragmatic perspective originated in the early 1980s. Fraser [12] proposed a term "hedges performative" and suggested that the illocutionary force can be added to the utterances through the use of performative verbs and modal verbs. Kasper [13] regarded hedges as down-graders and suggested that the purpose of the use of hedges is to show politeness, which can save face and reduce negative influence. Levinson [14] noted that hedges function as a tool to avoid disagreement and impoliteness in negative politeness strategy.

Due to the significant pragmatic values of hedges, companies can employ hedges to manage their corporate image and relations with stakeholders. An important way to present corporate image and construct company-stakeholder relationships is to compile a high-quality company profile.

A company profile can function as a resume with the description of company history, business philosophy, products and services, corporate social performance, reputation, investor information, etc. It can be considered as a direct and primary communication channel between companies and stakeholders. In addition, as a promotional discourse, a company profile has its own characteristics – objectivity, brevity and credibility. Hence, writers of company profiles tend to seek linguistic devices to modify the statements, which is conducive to building reliability and conveying messages appropriately to the readers. Therefore, hedges are an indispensable part in company profiles in achieving the communicative goals.

Studies on company profiles are relatively rare. Scholars usually focus on a certain element in company webpages, such as corporate social performance, corporate governance and corporate reputation and image [15]-[17]. Scant attention has been paid to the use of hedges in company profiles. Therefore, this study embraces this perspective by conducting a contrastive analysis of hedges in Chinese and American company profiles and delving into the underlying reasons from the perspective of Adaptation Theory.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Hedges
This study draws on the classification of hedges proposed by Prince et al. [8]. Hedges are divided into two categories, namely approximators and shields. Approximators can alter the truth conditions of the utterances, and can be further divided into adaptors (e.g., a bit, kind of, sort of) and rounders (e.g., around, approximately, roughly). Shields don't change the truth value of a proposition, but affect the degree of speakers' commitment. Shields can be further grouped into plausibility shields (e.g., I think, pleased to say, in my opinion, perhaps) and attribution shields (e.g., according to, it's believed that, as it said).

3.2 Adaptation Theory
From the perspective of Adaptation Theory [18], language use requires the continuous making of linguistic choice. In the process of linguistic choice making, three key notions are embedded, namely variability, negotiability and adaptability. Adaptability allows language users to selectively make linguistic choices from a variable set of alternatives to meet the communicative goals. In other words, linguistic choice making must adapt to the context of language use. The context contains three different worlds: the mental world (e.g., personalities, beliefs, emotions), the social world (e.g., social settings, institutions, culture), and the physical world (e.g., time, space, biological property).

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Data collection

The present study is based on two corpora – Chinese Company Profiles (CCP) and American Company Profiles (ACP), which are comprised of 30 Chinese company profiles and 30 American company profiles respectively. Companies selected in this study have to satisfy three criteria. Firstly, both Chinese and American companies are required to be listed in Fortune 2021 Global 500. As is known to all, Fortune, one of the world's most influential financial magazines, annually ranks 500 top corporations worldwide measured by revenues. Therefore, companies listed in the list are the most well-known and successful companies in the world and their company profiles are considerably instructive and representative. Besides, Chinese and American companies predominate in the list of Fortune 500. The amount of Chinese mainland companies reaches up to 124, slightly more than that of America's (121).

Secondly, both Chinese and American companies listed in Fortune 500 are required to be companies belonging to manufacturing industry. For one thing, manufacturing sector is the backbone of a country's economic development. It embodies a country's productivity levels and accounts for a substantial part in the national economy, conducive to national security and living standard improvement. Meanwhile, a company's export of high-quality manufactured goods can enhance its international market popularity. For another, according to statistics reported by Ministry of Industry and Information Technology in 2021, China, a manufacturing giant, has been ranked number one in the world's manufacturing industry for 11 consecutive years. What's more, America is a country in the old seats of wealth and power in the world and also has a powerful manufacturing industry. As a result, Chinese and American companies from manufacturing industry were chosen in this study.

Thirdly, in order to eliminate the influence of foreign investment, both Chinese and American companies listed in Fortune 500 are required to be sole proprietorship or have no foreign investment.

To be specific, based on industrial classification for national economic activities, companies from the manufacturing industry were selected from the list of Fortune 500. Then, through surfing companies' official websites, the author figured out which Fortune 500 companies were the enterprises with sole proprietorship or without foreign investment and made a list of them. Finally, the texts, under the title of "general information", "who we are", "overview", "company profile", "about us", "about our company", "at a glance", etc., were extracted from each company's official website, thereby two corpora consisting of altogether 60 samples were established. The files selected were saved in plain text format, totalling 12,153 and 10,203 tokens respectively. In this way, a contrastive analysis of the two corpora can be conducted.

4.2 Data processing

Based on the classification of hedges proposed by Prince et al. [8], this study employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze the collected data. Quantitative analysis was adopted to identify the frequency and distribution of hedges in CCP and ACP through the analytical tool AntConc4.0.5 [19] and Chi-square test, while qualitative analysis was used to examine the detailed examples of hedges used in the two corpora and delve into the underlying reasons of the use of hedges.

Specifically, for a start, the author selected hedge items based on the of Prince et al. [8]. Then, all collected company profiles were copied and pasted onto Antconc4.0.5 [19] to count the number of hedges. After calculating the frequency of all possible hedges by the software, the author carefully combed the full texts to further identify and count the frequency of four subtypes of hedges in the two corpora in case some hedges were missed or miscounted through digital means.

Two criteria were employed in the manual marking of hedges. Firstly, there may be words that can be considered as hedges in some contexts but not in other contexts. Based on the context, words that did not belong to hedges were excluded. For instance, the fuzzy word about can function as an adverb indicating approximation. However, it can also be a preposition concerning relatedness. Instances of about functioning as an adverb were excluded in this study as they only introduce something concerned. Secondly, based on previous research on hedges, hedging devices in this analysis were manually identified and supplemented. Next, corresponding tables were drawn to have a better understanding of the usage of hedges in both Chinese and American company profiles. Meanwhile, the raw frequencies of hedges were converted into the normalized frequencies (per 1,000 words) for comparison. Chi-square test was utilized to test whether there are significant differences in the use of hedges across the two corpora. The significant level was set at $p < .05$.

As for the qualitative analysis, detailed examples of hedges from the two corpora were cited to examine how the four types of hedges are utilized. Then, this study explored the similarities and differences and the underlying reasons from the perspective of Adaptation Theory contributing to them in the use of hedges.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Distribution of Hedges in Chinese and American Company Profiles

As is shown in Table 1, in both CCP and ACP approximators are used far more frequently than shields. Besides, rounders are adopted significantly more often than other types of hedges. What's more, non-significant difference is found in the use of adaptors and attribution shields between Chinese and American company profiles. There were also some differences between CCP and ACP. Compared with CCP, hedges are used more frequently in ACP. Specifically, the ACP corpus favors more rounders and plausibility shields.

Table 1: Distribution of hedges in CCP and ACP

Hedges		CCP		ACP		Sig.
		Raw	Per 1,000	Raw	Per 1,000	
Approximators	Adaptors	129	1.06	124	1.22	.308
	Rounders	444	3.65	560	5.49	.000
	Subtotal	573	4.71	684	6.70	.000
Shields	Plausibility shields	28	0.23	63	0.62	.000
	Attribution shields	19	0.16	10	0.10	.308
	Subtotal	47	0.39	73	0.72	.001
Total		620	5.10	757	7.42	.000

5.2 Functional Analysis of Hedges in Chinese and American Company Profiles

5.2.1 Adaptors

Adaptors can adjust the degree of the prototypical proposition, such as a little, somewhat, dramatically. Writers often use them to make their statements more tactful. There is a minor difference found in the use of adaptors between CCP and ACP. Results show that both CCP and ACP are inclined to use adaptors to show vagueness and express a deeper degree to embellish corporate performance, thus enhancing corporate image and reputation, as shown in (1) and (2). Through the use of such adaptors, writers try to make their statements more flexible and tactful and thus make it difficult for readers to decide the exact extent of the modified content. The information needed is properly conveyed to readers. In (1), the use of greatly shows CASC's great achievements in the development of space services. In (2), dramatically expresses Intel's significant influence for all walks of life.

(1) CASC also greatly develops space services… (CCP¬_CASC)
(2) We believe that data is dramatically shaping the future of all humankind. (ACP_Intel)

5.2.2. Rounders

Another type of approximators is rounders. According to Prince et al. [8], rounders commonly occur in measurements. They can be used to modify numbers and other exact words, making the original exact meaning ambiguous. Rounders allow some room for fluctuation in the range of quantities they

refer to, getting closer to the truth and avoiding gaps in expression. Rounders also serve to make the whole statement more intuitive.

Rounders are the most frequent hedges among four types surveyed, but occur significantly more frequently in ACP. Both of them favor comparative and superlative adjectives and numerical rounders to indicate range and quantity. As in (3), comparative or superlative degrees are used to show companies' size and business performance. Besides, as illustrated in (4), numerical rounders accommodate some room for variation to make up for the lack of clarity and make the language more rigorous and less prone to errors, avoiding embarrassment and criticism for inaccurate information.

(3) CNAF has become the largest aviation fuel supplier in Asia. (CCP_CNAF)

(4) Aeronautics, with approximately \$23.7 billion in 2019 sales… (ACP_Lockheed Martin)

5.2.3 Plausibility shields

Plausibility shields can make writers less fully committed to the truthfulness of the proposition. They are mainly used to protect writers from criticism for conveying something doubtful. Results show that plausibility shields are used significantly more frequently in ACP than CCP, which indicates the rigorousness of American company profiles.

In both CCP and ACP plausibility shields take the form of modal verbs. Halliday [20] classified modal verbs into three types, including the high modality (e.g., must, need), the median modality (e.g., would, will, should) and the low modality (e.g., can, may, could). Modals in CCP and ACP primarily belong to low and median modality. It suggests that companies take a low profile and polite manner in their profiles, which can bridge the distance between writers and readers and elicit readers' approval. As shown in example (5), may is used to show the possibility that Merck's products benefit people around the world. Besides, in ACP, there are some epistemic verbs combined with first person pronouns to indicate the uncertainty of the writers to the truth of the messages conveyed. As in (6), the epistemic verb know is employed to explicitly acknowledge the role people play in J&J's business activities and demonstrate empathy to readers.

(5) We focus on scientific innovation to deliver medicines and vaccines that may help millions of people around the world. (ACP_Merck)

(6) We know that every breakthrough we've brought to human health and well-being has been powered by people. (ACP_Johnson & Johnson)

5.2.4 Attribution shields

Attribution shields are used to quote opinions or data from a third party instead of presenting the writers' own opinions, thus making the statements more objective. In fact, through the use of attribution shields, writers can influence the readers' interpretation of the quotation which implicitly contains their own views. The choice of attribution shields can mould readers' imagination and understanding of the content, and the different emotional tones attribution shields convey can affect readers' judgment and perception of the company.

Results show that CCP prefers using more evidential to show the source of information and thus enhance credibility towards the information presented, while ACP tends to use more positive reporting verbs to show their reliability and competence. In (7), the writer expresses his view resorting to the plan made by others. It is used to shift the main responsibilities for these statements from the company itself to a third party. In example (8), passive voice can enhance objectivity. It seems that through the use of be known the company is recognized by the public.

(7) Based on the vision of globalization and full industrial chain, HBIS has promoted the transformation… (CCP_HBIS)

(8) Today, GE is best known for its work in the Power, Renewable Energy… (ACP_GE)

6. DISCUSSION

Based on the statistics and analysis above, it is obvious that both Chinese and American company profiles employ a large number of hedges, including adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields and attribution shields. Approximators are adopted much more often than shields. Rounders are adopted significantly more often than other types of hedges to show companies' strength. However, there are also some differences in the hedging patterns between CCP and ACP. Compared with CCP, hedges are used more frequently in ACP, especially rounders and plausibility shields, to show rigorousness. Besides, CCP tends to use more evidential to enhance credibility, while ACP is more likely to use positive reporting verbs to show competence. These similarities and differences can be explained from the perspective of Adaptation Theory.

The mental world shows the participants' state of mind, including beliefs, wishes, motivations and so on. The writers' motivation for seeking safety can be ascribed to the frequent use of hedges in both CCP and ACP. In order to establish sensitive and caring image and reduce the risk of criticism for inaccurate information, writers use hedges to expand the dialogic space and allow alternative interpretations, not only defending the interests of the company but also according with the truth. Meanwhile, the different thinking patterns should be taken into account. American mode of thinking is linearity, whereas Chinese thinking pattern is curvilinearity. The American thinking pattern endows Americans with more rigorousness in their use of language. As a result, American profiles rely much more on vagueness to realize the rigorousness of their expressions.

The social world concerns the properties of social settings or institutions. The similarities of the use of hedges can be ascribed to the same communication and politeness goal. For one thing, company profiles, as an important communicative channel between companies and stakeholders, are responsible for conveying corporate messages to the outside world. Consequently, writers of company profiles write in a prudent and thoughtful way to avoid absolute expressions, and hedges are extensively utilized to enhance the persuasiveness of the profiles and build company image. For another, every culture often shares a common core element that can always be passed on by people – politeness. According to Channel [3], politeness can be achieved by resorting to vague language for a specific occasion, and hedges are part of vague language. The employment of hedges can leave room for

readers to speculate and guess, and thus avoid negative consequences of inaccurate messages which may threaten the company's face. It is the vagueness that can be applied not only to protect the corporate image, but also to maintain good interpersonal relationships with other partners. Besides, culture has always influenced the linguistic choices. According to Hofstede et al. [21], America is a low-power-distance country and thus has a smaller emotional distance between companies and stakeholders, whereas China is a high-power-distance country and consequently has a larger emotional distance between companies and stakeholders. Hedges can help companies maintain a harmonious relationship with stakeholders. As a result, ACP has far more hedges than CCP. Besides, China has a collectivist culture where people rarely put forward their own viewpoints but leave it to readers or the third party. Therefore, by citing other experts and authorities' statistics or statements, writers of Chinese company profiles employ more evidential to express their views or attitudes, weakening the power of personal thoughts. Compared with Chinese collectivism values, American culture tends to be individualism. As a result, plausibility shields which can bluntly convey writers' attitudes are utilized more frequently in ACP.

The physical world mainly studies temporal deixis and spatial deixis. In company profiles, writers of both CCP and ACP use hedges to bridge the distance between the company and the public, so as to attract the readers' attention and persuade them to cooperate. Hedges are applied to engage with the readers, establish empathy and negotiate alignment.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated the use of hedges in Chinese and American company profiles. It has revealed significant similarities and differences in the distribution and function of hedges in Chinese and American company profiles. The findings support the view that hedges in company profiles have a huge importance in corporate image construction.

This study contributes to shed some light on the impression management work performed by companies in their company profiles. Besides, it also increases our knowledge of company profiles by providing a systematic analysis of hedges, and of cultural differences by highlighting the striking differences in the use of hedges between Chinese and American company profiles. Further, this study also provides significant insights for enterprises who want to go overseas under the prevailing trend of globalization to realize their communicative goals in company profiles.

There are also some limitations in this study. Firstly, it only focuses on manufacturing industry. Future work could take more industries into consideration. Secondly, manual marking of hedges may be relatively subjective. Future work might focus efforts on automatizing hedge identification to improve the efficiency and preciseness of the method.

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