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Self-promotion in Research Articles: A Review of Five Studies

Ichiro KOGUCHI

1. Introduction

Promoting one's own research in an academic article is a legitimate practice as long as it is sensibly conducted within the bounds of common sense. Recent trends, however, seem to have gone too far. So much so that a 2017 editorial of *ACS Catalysis*, a journal published by the American Chemical Society, spends its entire length of 1,700 words describing, criticising and warning of the current practice of making the results of research “appear more important than they likely are” (Scott & Jones, 2017: 2218). Referring to some of the words “flagged” by the journal, the authors, Scott and Jones, advise prospective contributors to take an exceptional care when, for example, using such adjectives as “*new/novel*,” “*outstanding, excellent, unprecedented, exceptional, sustainable*,” and “*green*” (2219). The authors then go as far as to say, “The editor may . . . require removal or revision of some or all of these words prior to publication” (2219). Behind this editorial rigour is a concern that “the misrepresentation of research findings through exaggeration or hype is a grave matter for scientific integrity” (2219). Their apprehension is not an isolated instance. A similar view is stated by Denys Wheatley, the editor of *Cell Biology International*. He refers to the recent use in research articles of unnecessarily emotive, dramatic expressions and proposes that scientists consider “sensible and more appropriate alternatives” to such rhetorical excesses (Wheatley, 2014: 14).

Self-promotionalism in academic language is itself an interesting linguistic phenomenon, especially for applied linguists as they are concerned with language use and its application in education. It will be linguistically significant to describe and analyse academic “hype” expressions. It should be further meaningful if linguistics can systematise their semantic features and propose a feasible way to tell permissible from impermissible in usage. Such studies will also shed light on interactions occurring within academic text in that the practice of showing oneself in a better light involves the author's awareness of the perception of their audience. Anticipating readers' response is an important factor for building up an effective argument and supporting it by appropriate rhetorical devices. Unsurprisingly, self-promotional language in published academic writing has been a subject of investigation in recent years.

Given the importance of this subject, the current paper reviews recent studies that discuss self-promotion in academic articles. It will first examine a 2021 article by Ken Hyland and Feng Kevin Jiang. By tracing their research findings and insights it will establish a perspective to understand the status quo of this area of study. This will be followed by discussion of the

research by Afros and Schryer (2009), Martín and León Pérez (2014), Wang and Yang (2015), and McGrath (2016). As these articles are varied in approach and targeted disciplines, the current review will contribute to a multi-dimensional understanding of the current state of research on the academic use of promotional language.

2. Recent literature on academic “hype”

2.1 The vantage point: Hyland and Jiang (2021)

Hyland and Jiang (2021) presents an overview of academic promotional language from the vantage point of the early third decade of the twenty-first century. Their approach is to investigate a multiplicity of disciplines from a diachronic perspective. It also combines quantitative and qualitative analysis, the latter being the close reading of the immediate context of each promotional expression.

The authors’ objectives are four-fold. They focus on how widely hype is used in research articles; what are the most common hyping devices; what aspects of research are targeted by promotional language; and whether the trend of hyping has changed during the past half century. For these purposes, they compiled three corpora, one of them composed of 1965 articles, another 1990 and the last consisting of 2015 publications. Each corpus, comprising applied linguistics, sociology, biology and electrical engineering, covers the four principal academic areas of the humanities, social studies, science and engineering. Promotional devices investigated were boosters, positive attitude markers, positive words, superlatives, and other hyperbolic terms.

The authors’ quantitative analysis has demonstrated a clear chronological trend. There were large differences in 1965 in the numbers of promotional expressions between the humanities-social studies fields and the scientific-engineering fields. However, these two contrastive areas have converged in 2015. Six decades ago, the frequencies of promotional language in biology and electrical engineering were lower than 120 occurrences per 10,000 words. In contrast, those for applied linguistics and sociology were close to 150 per 10,000. This 30-occurrence gap has been decimated in the next half century period, as the numbers of hype expressions used by the four disciplines in 2015 became contained in a narrow range 5 occurrences between 154 to 159. Overall, the use of academic hype has increased 18.9%, with the “hard sciences” rising “dramatically to reach the levels of the social science fields” (192). Indeed, the use of attitude markers for self-promotion has risen 37% and 46% in biology and electrical engineering respectively, whereas slight decreases are observed for applied linguistics and sociology.

The most used promotional vocabulary items are similar across the four disciplines: *important*, *very*, *new* and *significant*. It is observed that in sociology and applied linguistics new items tend to emerge and replace existing usages. The authors infer that in such “soft knowledge

fields . . . hyping has had a longer history of prominence, and presumably new items are needed to replace those which have lost their impact over the years” (194). Hyland and Jiang also find four broad categories in hyping: certainty (*significant, important, strong, crucial*); contribution (*necessary, essential, effective, useful*); novelty (*first, timely, novel, new, unique*); and potential (*promising, potential, apparent*).

With regard to the second research question, i.e. what aspects of research are targeted, the authors set six aspects: Broad Research Area, Specific Research Topic, Authors’ Prior Research, Method, Research Outcomes, and Research Primacy. All these categories, with the exception of Broad Research Area, have shown significant growth over the past half century. Understandably, the category of Research Primacy, the claiming of the excellence of one’s research, has increased by far the most. It was claimed 22 times per 10,000 words in 1965, but in 2015 the frequency well exceeded the boundary of 30, reaching 31.6. Thus Research Primacy has left behind the other aspects by seven to 10 occurrences per 10,000 words. All the other aspects have shown significant increase, but Specific Research Topic and Research Outcomes show the least growth, probably because these areas have traditionally been strongly emphasised leaving little margin for increase.

Different disciplines have different patterns of the occurrence of self-promotion. Research Primacy is conspicuously hyped in the two applied disciplines: applied linguistics and electrical engineering. One possible reason for this is that these disciplines need to convince a wide range of audiences including “the academia, commerce, and industry” (199). Applied linguistics has another characteristic: more frequent use of promotion in Research Outcomes and Specific Research Topics than the three other long-established studies. This is because a significant proportion of its readership is made up of language teachers, who are interested in the direct relevance of the research to teaching and in the practical applicability of research outcomes. Authors’ Prior Research in applied linguistics has also witnessed a rapid increase in promotional expressions. This may have to do with its recent flourishing as a discipline and resultant growth in the number of publications. It also tends to promote itself in the Method section as the range and complexity of methodology have been growing. Like applied linguistics, electrical engineering promotes itself frequently in Authors’ Prior Research, probably because its position as an applied field necessitates it to impress diverse audiences: assessors of research, peers and people in commerce and industry. Sociologist, working in a “soft” field where methodological options are widely open, seek to establish the reliability of the method they adopt. Hence they are the most frequent users of hype in the Method section. Biology does not show particularly strong tendencies relative to the other fields investigated.

In conclusion Hyland and Jiang remark that there have been an unquestionable shift in academic studies from objective and neutral towards more partial and rhetorical. Self-promotion

is now more prevalent than ever probably in response to “external funders, commercial sponsors and the attention of other non-specialists” (201). By examining academic hype from a 2021 perspective, this article has established a vantage point to place the findings of earlier studies in perspective.

2.2 Language and literary studies: Afros and Schryer (2009)

Afros and Schryer (2009) focuses on language and literary studies. In this sense, theirs is a unique contribution in academic self-promotion studies, as, according to the authors, “very few studies investigate the humanities in connection with self-promotion” (58). Their analytical framework is also unique, as they propose abstract categories to investigate self-promotion: a tripartite system of logos, ethos and pathos. Logos means rational argumentation, while ethos is an appeal to the writer’s trustworthiness, and pathos is an invocation of sympathetic feelings from readers. Afros and Schryer, in addition, lay emphasis on the diversity of self-promotional devices as they acknowledge that meaning arises holistically from text, and not just from directly evaluative expressions. Thus their analysis examines individual phrases and sentences as well as their textual context and contextual functions. As their analytical framework is thus to conduct a close reading of academic discourse, they have decided chiefly to conduct qualitative analysis, leaving quantitative aspects to other researchers who are differently motivated.

The authors begin by examining specific discursal examples. Their overall observations are that logos, or rational, appeals are most often used both for language and literary studies. It is also found that many academic writers make use of ethos appeals by referring to established scholars’ claims and, in linguistics in particular, citing their own earlier studies. In contrast, pathos, or inviting sympathies from readers, is more often used in literary studies, typically in the use of inclusive personal pronouns such as *us*, *our*, *you*, and *your*, and of interrogatives.

The authors go on to explore different strategies of self-promotion in different parts of articles: Abstracts, Introductions, Discussions, Conclusions and Footnotes/Endnotes. Abstracts mostly rely on logos. Their use of evaluative vocabulary is reinforced by rational logic and lexical cohesion. Promotionalism in Abstracts, however, is not universal as it is less frequently observed in literary studies than in linguistics. The “Establishing a Niche” section of an Introduction, as defined by Swales (1990), frequently utilises logical argumentation for self-promotion and evaluative vocabulary. In this section, the central importance of the research, its applicability, significance and novelty are logically emphasised. Citations play a significant role in Discussions in both literary and language studies. Existing research is often referred to in order to justify the author’s own research, serving to reinforce ethos appeals. Linguistics often uses self-citations, while literary studies do not employ them as frequently. In fact, literary scholars are users of logos

and pathos appeals in Discussions rather than ethos. In Conclusions, some literary scholars are found to make use of logos and ethos appeals by employing repetitions of the central thesis of the article together with an address to the reader by the use of inclusive *we*. Other literary researchers stress future potentialities of their study in a rational argument. It is customary that the Conclusion of linguistic articles refers to the research's future potentialities in the form of "recommendations for further research," but, in contrast to literary articles, it is much less assertive so that self-promotionalism is weaker here. Moreover, Afros and Schryer have detected promotional elements in Footnotes and Endnotes in both literary studies and linguistics. The degree of assertiveness in these sections is found generally similar to the main body of the article.

Afros and Schryer have not shown a precise quantitative picture, but they have identified a variety of techniques for asserting the value of research employed by linguists and literary scholars. Through their analytical devices of logos, ethos and pathos, they have shed light on complex and sophisticated combinations of promotional expressions used in the humanities.

2.3 Promotion across languages: Martín and Pérez (2014)

As shown in the studies investigated above, promotional rhetoric varies among different disciplines. With this assumption, Martín and Pérez's 2014 study probes health sciences (Psychology and Dermatology) and the humanities and social sciences (Political Philosophy and Political Science) in two different languages: English and Spanish. Their specific focus is on Move 3s, "Occupying the Niche," in Introductions. Unlike Afros and Schryer (2009), Martín and Pérez investigate both quantitative and qualitative aspects of academic self-promotional language use.

English articles in health sciences utilise sometimes similar and at other times different rhetorical strategies as compared to Spanish examples from the same field. When citing the article authors' previous publications, for instance, English authors employ the first person subject *We* along with a strong verb, *demonstrated*, and an emphatic *indeed*. In contrast, Spanish texts tend to use inanimate nouns (e.g. *los resultados* [*the results*], *los análisis* [*the analyses*]) and weaker verbs such as *mostrar* [*show*], *indicar* [*indicate*] and *revelar* [*reveal*]. However, when claiming the novelty or significance of their work, English and Spanish scholars show similar vocabulary choices. Authors in both languages highlight the value of their work by comparing their current research to earlier studies in the field. A notable difference between the two languages is that some Spanish authors do not follow the established structure of the Introduction as defined by Swales (1990).

Differences and similarities are observed between the humanities and social sciences as well. When describing their present research in Move 3 of the Introduction, English researchers often use first person singular pronoun *I*, followed by assertive verbs (e.g. *demonstrate*, *contend*

and *argue*). The Spanish texts tend to use either inclusive *we* or impersonal constructions using the passive voice (e.g. *se ofrece* [*is offered*], *se presenta* [*is presented*] and *se muestra* [*is shown*]). When Spanish writers employ the first person singular for the subject position, they moderate the nuance by hedging. Some English authors use the sophisticated technique of emphasising their research's originality by acknowledging the limitations of the study. By saying, for example, "my focus will be much more limited," the author demarcates the scope of research, suggesting the clear perspective and accuracy of the research.

Martín and Pérez have thus pointed out several interesting linguistic choices made by English and Spanish researchers in arts and sciences. The authors close their study by briefly alluding to their quantitative findings. It is shown that, overall, the English corpus shows higher degrees of self-promotion than Spanish. Also, the health sciences present a higher degree of promotion than the humanities and social sciences. The frequency counts indicate that the English articles in the health sciences come in the top positions in self-promotion, followed by the Spanish health sciences, and then by the English humanities and social sciences. Authors operating in the humanities and social sciences in Spanish show the least level of self-promotion.

2.4 Nuances in promotional appeals: Wand and Yang (2015)

As has been evinced in the current article, promotionalism is quite popular in academic writing. However, the kind of promotion used in commercial advertisement is obviously not acceptable. Academics are most likely to be using subtle strategies to make their promotional language acceptable to the community that they address. Wang and Yang (2015) is a study which pays attention to "a hidden agenda" and "shades of attitudes" (162) in connection with the claim of value in research articles in applied linguistics. Especially highlighted is the section that comes first in the Introduction. Called "Move 1, Claiming of Centrality" by Swales (1990), the section is expected to abound with promotional expressions, owing to the very function assigned to it. Wang and Yang's objective is three-fold: it is to clarify what types of promotional appeals are used, how the attitudes of these appeals are linguistically realised, and how frequently such appeals are made.

For these goals, these authors have designed complex sets of analytical devices. They first proposed two categories of types investigated: those of values highlighted by promotional language and of entities that are assigned such values. Entities or things are subdivided into research world entities and real world entities. The former refer to the research itself or the researcher, while the latter signify real-life phenomena or people affected by the phenomena. Values assigned to these entities are then categorised. For instance, values measured by prevalence, amount, duration or depth, typically expressed in linguistic forms such as *numerous studies*, *widely documented*, and *for several decades*, are classified as of magnitude. The authors

also consider three semantic dimensions: attitude, graduation and engagement. Attitude is self-explanatory, but graduation signifies the degree of strength in expressing attitudes, and engagement is one's position in relation to other people. Attitude is then subdivided into two sub-categories: inscribed attitude and invoked attitude. Inscribed attitude is what is directly expressed as in the participle *concerned*. Invoked attitude is added to usually non-attitudinal meanings. For example, nearness in time expressed by *in recent literature* can assume positive attitudinal significance. Wang and Yang then tested these devices in a trial analysis of a 400-word text extract from an applied linguistic article. This showed a satisfactory effectiveness of their analytical apparatus.

For specific qualitative analysis, the authors set four types of promotional appeals: appeals to salience, magnitude, topicality and problemativity. These are related to the research world or to the real world (or to both). In an extract from a research article, appeals to salience are observed in a variety of linguistic forms: e.g. *an important aspect of . . . ; improve . . . accuracy; and aids fluency* (166). As the analysed text is concerned with the effectiveness of the learning of collocations, these appeals are related to real world entities. In different extracts, appeals to magnitude are linked both to the research world and real world. Languages as the topic of discussion are sometimes referred to as real world entities appealed in terms of magnitude. Spanish for instance, is described in an article as the “most frequently spoken” (167) language in the world. Promotion of English learning is also claimed to be important in “many Asian countries” (167). The appeal to topicality can also be related to the real world or the research world. When the author of an article remarks that “a number of studies have recently been conducted” on a particular topic, the author is making a research world appeal of magnitude. In the next statement, the popularity of a particular technique in translation is indicated: “more and more translators are now choosing to retain a degree of ‘foreignness’ in their translations” (168). This is a case of real world topicality. Appeals to problemativity can work effectively by consciously exposing conflicting views: “much research has identified . . . instructional limitations. . . . Nonetheless, others have argued that . . . important benefits can be derived from. . .” (168). Wang and Yang also analyse a longer textual extract in which a combination of different appeals are employed to realise rhetorical diversity.

The authors then conducted a brief quantitative investigation. Out of a total of 226 appeals, those linked to indirect (or “invoked”) attitude account for more than 70%. The ratios of real world and research world appeals are very similar: 48.7% vs 51.3%. Topicality is used in the research world category more frequently than in the real world (85.4% versus 14.6%). In salience, the real world is referred to more frequently than the research world (77.6% versus 22.4%). In magnitude, the research world is more frequent but the difference is small (57.3% versus 42.7%). In problemativity, the research world and real world are referred to in similar frequencies (53.5%

versus 46.5%). The vast majority of appeals are made in the first two-third portions of Introductions (91.6%), and more than half (58.0%) of them occur in the first third. Nearly half of appeals to problemat�city appear in the middle third portion (48.8%), while appeals of the other three categories are most frequently occur in the first third portion (salience: 52.2%, magnitude: 68.8%, and topicality: 66.7%).

Wang and Yang draw conclusions. Academic writers use indirect, invoked attitudes, which are softer methods, more often than direct, inscribed attitudes. Appeals are most often made in the first third portion of the Introduction, or Move 1, “Claiming centrality,” reflecting the move’s inherently promotional nature. Applied linguists use promotional appeals extensively. This is probably because the discipline belongs to social science. As they cannot use a perfectly established system of knowledge, applied linguists often have to build an ad hoc framework and ask readers to agree with it using promotional appeals. While applied linguists’ appeals to topicality, magnitude and problemat�city are often associated with the research world, their appeals to salience are more frequently related to the real world. This has something to do with the discipline’s nature of dealing with issues of the real world such as language teaching. This nature motivates authors to emphasise the importance of society-related topics.

2.5 Variation between and inside humanities disciplines: McGrath (2016)

Studies of self-promotion tend to compare science and the humanities as contrastive disciplines. To rectify this tendency, more studies are needed that compare fields which are closer to each other and the use of promotion within the same field. To meet this research need, Lisa McGrath (2016) worked on the two humanistic disciplines of anthropology and history. Her particular attention is drawn to the use of the first-person pronouns, their roles and genre conventions.

Through examination of the literature, the author posited the following four roles that first-person singular pronouns can assume: 1) “*I* as the guide or architect,” 2) “methodological *I*,” 3) “*I* as opinion holder or claim maker,” and 4) “reflexive *I* or narrative *I*.” *I* as the guide or architect is a discourse organiser as observed in such expressions as “I aim to fill this gap by studying . . .” and “I use the . . . term *racial* to mean . . .” (89). Methodological *I* performs its role by action verbs: e.g. *work*, *read*, *interview*, *collect*, and *select* (90). *I* as opinion holder uses mental verbs: *think*, *believe*, *assume* and *suppose*. *I* as originator or *I* as claim maker is signalled by stance verbs: *claim*, *suggest*, and *argue* (90). By adopting reflexive *I*, researchers explicitly positions themselves in research making it possible to reflect critically on their research. Narrative *I* expresses the researcher’s engagement with the research but does not explicitly show critical reflection.

Between anthropology and history, quantitative differences are observed. Anthropology used first-person pronouns, *I* and *we*, more frequently than history. As most of the anthropology

research articles describe experiences during fieldwork, they use narrative *I*. The most frequent in history is *I* as originator-claim maker. Very low numbers are observed for *I* as opinion holder both in history and anthropology. Reflexive *I*, too, is infrequent both in anthropology and history. Unlike science articles, neither the history articles nor the anthropology articles have a separate Methods section; still, both disciplines use methodological *I* quite often.

Each discipline has its features. A majority of history authors, for example, took on the role of guide or architect, originator-claim maker and methodological *I*. Reflexive *I* was used in three history articles, one of which was regarded as a “new humanities” study, a category of research that tends to convey the author’s personal involvement in the project. This article, therefore, does not follow the usual objective method of historiography.

Anthropology was characterised by variation in styles. There are considerable differences in frequencies in which a particular role of *I* is featured. A high frequency of methodological *I* in some articles is probably due to their complex data gathering procedures. As stated, a pattern in anthropology was the frequent use of narrative *I*, but some articles have very few instances of it. In such articles, instead of using narrative *I*, the researcher’s lived experience is created through descriptive accounts involving actors and events. An inter-disciplinary article has markedly fewer narrative *I* as its discourse is more objective and close to history articles. An article has many self-mentions using narrative *I*, but its Introduction is narrated by an abstract speaker, making a clear contrast to the frequency of *I* in the body that describes the author’s activities in the field. This separates interpretation from field description, the analytical from the biographic.

There are clear tendencies both in history and anthropology. The most conspicuous is the use of narrative *I* in anthropology. As stated, this is due to the discipline’s involvement in field work and the resultant use of re-telling of author experience. However, some authors do not conform to conventions. A history article related to environmental sciences and policy-making avoids self-mentions in order to be accepted by a hard-science oriented audience. A history article has both reflexive *I* and narrative *I*, placing itself halfway between history and anthropology.

Rather than clear norms, the use of first-person pronouns does not indicate fixed norms but “family resemblance” within the discipline. It is advisable that students understand rhetorical options rather than regulatory standards.

3. Conclusion

Interest in academic promotionalism and self-mention appeared early in the first decade of the twenty-first century. One of the pioneering studies is Hyland (2002), which indicated the existence of self-promotion as part of the construction of authorial identity. Promotionalism has since been investigated variously by applied linguists. Afros and Schryer (2009) is one of the small number

of studies that concern themselves to the humanities. The use of self-promotional devices across languages was probed by Martín and Pérez (2014). Subtle nuances in promotional appeals were studied by Wand and Yang (2015). They also contributed to sophisticating the analytical methodology to describe linguistic devices for self-assertion. McGrath (2016) was a fresh approach that concerned promotional features in closely related disciplines in the humanities.

While applied linguistics was making these research efforts, academic hype became a grave issue that might undermine the foundation of scientific research. This led to the appearance of editorial pieces signalling serious apprehension by professional scientists. Hyland and Jiang's recent study of 2021, partly motivated by such grave concerns, reasserts the seriousness of the issue as well as the significant role of applied linguistics in analysing it from a multiplicity of perspectives. Moving forward, such research effort will no doubt contribute to a better understanding of academic promotional language and may show the academia a more acceptable way of employing such language.

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