

Features that may Influence the Intelligibility of English Abstracts in Chinese PhD Dissertations

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ABSTRACT

Since abstract may be the only part furnished with the English version in Chinese PhD dissertations, intelligibility is of importance in sharing research findings to interested international readers unable to read the dissertation in Chinese. The study attempts to examine the intelligibility of the English abstracts in Chinese PhD dissertations. Based on the corpus of 21 English abstracts of Chinese PhD dissertations on the same topic---the Dai people in southwest Asian countries---across six related disciplines, the study identifies the features that may influence the intelligibility at three levels. At the lexical level, the naming chaos is found in that a variety of words such as “DAI nationality” and “daizu” are used to refer to the Dai people. At the sentential level, there are ungrammatical finite null-subject sentences in the abstracts. At the discursal level, two features are found, one being the vague use of exclusive and inclusive “we”, the other being the employment of the downplaying statement apparently reducing the research credibility without a ground for such remarks. Possible causes for the features are also explored. Finally, three implications are discussed. First, the intelligibility of the abstracts seems to reveal a weak awareness of international research exchange among Chinese dissertation writers in some disciplines. Second, the intelligibility of the abstracts shows an urgent need for a number of Chinese dissertation writers to improve their English language proficiency. Third, the fact that the dissertations have been successfully defended with the English abstract containing prominent problems reflects the loose requirement on the quality of English abstract in some Chinese universities.

Keywords: intelligibility, lexical, sentential, discursal, Chinese dissertation

INTRODUCTION

There is an excerpt of an abstract in *Research of Chinese Literature*, one of the core journals in China:

The “Go Home” implication is a important part in many life implication which stored in chinese Classical poems and lyries. Especialy, the sentimetal lyricists in Tang and Song Dynaty intoned “Go Home” more, The thes is not only examres the “Go Home” implieation in lyrics inlented the related implication of former literature works, but also reveals the “Go Home” feeling had been altered and blazed new trals. Ot obviously desalinated the relative feeling such as filial feeling and father’s love, but strerythened the love affair mis sing wife and cocubine or lovers. The emergenceof this abnormal phenomena had intiniate relation with the lynes' speciality and many “cotemporaneons minds” which the lyricists had. By analyzing the “Go Home” implication in

lyrics, we can sense that the whole implication inherited and altered the former works. (Research of Chinese Literature, 75(1), 53-57)

A reader of the above excerpt, if he could finish the reading, may doubt whether it is a piece of English writing. The answer is "yes": it is an English abstract in a national core journal of China. This randomly chosen abstract triggers the concern over the intelligibility of the English abstract in academic writing in China.

Abstract is a specific genre in academic writing, for the abstract is a self-contained statement of its larger work and "it can be the case that the abstract is the only piece of published writing done in English" (Swales, 1990, p.179). The importance of English abstract deserves particular attention and recognition in mainland China, where English is used as foreign language. A considerable amount of valuable research is reported in Chinese, and an English abstract is only required by prestigious journals, master's theses and PhD dissertations. Thus, the English abstract may be the only accessible reference to the researchers who are not able to read Chinese. An intelligible abstract helps the international reader determine whether the abstract is worth citing or the research is worth further consulting by translating the larger work. In this sense, the quality of the English abstract promotes or demotes the research for international academic exchange.

The weight and contribution of PhD dissertations are beyond doubt, and dissertation abstract (DA) is an important sub-genre in academic writing (Swales, 2009). Mu (2006) investigated three Chinese post-graduate students' (one MS candidate and two PHD candidates in an Australian higher education institution) English writing strategies. Silva (1992) investigated graduate students' perceptions of L1 and L2 writing. The studies verify that L2 writing is a difficult task for the language users. A series of research on PhD dissertations has been conducted (Bunton, 2005, 2002; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Dudley-Evans, 1986), mainly dwelling on the structure of the introduction, discussion and/or conclusion sections rather than on DA.

Meanwhile, researchers have investigated the English used by Chinese learners, which is named as China English, Chinglish or Chinese English. Pinkham (2000) explored the features of China English in two levels: word choice and sentence structure. In the oral discourse level, Gao (2000) found that Chinese English majors used more reduction strategy than achievement strategies. Also, translation studies (He, 1994; Zhou, 1990; Huang & Xie, 1990) discussed how to use English in the three levels to represent the meaning in the Chinese version.

The review of literature suggests an insufficient study on the DA writing in the EFL context in China. On the other hand, statistics from the Ministry of Education shows that over 40,000 graduates in China obtained the doctoral degree each year between 2007 and 2009, and the number is still growing. Obviously, the English writing of the Chinese DAs is not merely an interest of language study; it is of great significance in sharing research findings and achievements in the international academia. Since little research has been conducted on the English writing of Chinese DAs, the study aims to fill this gap. Based on the examination of the English abstract in the Chinese PhD dissertations, the features that may influence the intelligibility are explored. The study follows the U.S. terminology --- Master's theses and PhD dissertations (Swales & Feak, 2009, p.67).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions are to be answered by the study:

1. What are the lexical features that may influence the intelligibility of English abstract in the Chinese dissertations?
2. What are the sentential features that may influence the intelligibility of English abstract in the Chinese PhD dissertations?
3. What are the discursal features that may influence the intelligibility of English abstract in the Chinese PhD dissertations?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is informed by the notion of intelligibility proposed by Smith & Nelson (2006, 1985) and developed by Dayag (2007).

As English is used in a number of varieties around the world, the concern arises: how intelligible are English users of different varieties in international situations? Smith and Nelson (2006, 1985) propose three levels of understanding, or “intelligibility” in a broad sense: intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability. Intelligibility in the first sense refers to the listener’s/reader’s recognition of individual words, in the sense of comprehensibility the listener’s/reader’s understanding of the word/utterance meaning, i.e. the locutionary force, and in the interpretability sense the listener’s/reader’s understanding of the meaning behind the word/utterance, i.e. illocutionary force.

Due to the unclear distinction of the tripartite definition of intelligibility-comprehensibility-interpretability in the practical analysis, Dayag (2007) proposes the examination of intelligibility in a broader sense, i.e. a context-sensitive/dependent comprehension or understanding of an utterance, thus projecting the crucial role that context plays in understanding a text or an utterance. Therefore, the study attempts to locate the research on English writing of Chinese DAs in a specific context, in which the dissertations are studies on the same issue yet in different disciplines. The ground for the location of the context is the assumption that the researcher on a certain issue may conduct literature review across disciplines.

While informed by the tripartite levels and the role of context, the study follows Kirkpatrick, Deterding & Wong’s (2008) use of the term intelligibility in the broad sense, which entails intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability and refers to the ability of people to “understand” (p. 361).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study is basically qualitative and descriptive. The central interest of the study is to explore the features that may influence intelligibility of the English abstract of the Chinese dissertations. Frequencies and percentages were employed to express the data gathered.

Data collection and corpus

Four criteria were followed in the data collection. First, the dissertations had to be the research on the same issue, i.e. the Dai people for the purpose of the study. As a cross-border ethnic group, the Dai

people, together with their relative groups in Thailand, the Laos, Myanmar and even India where they get other names such as “the Shan”, is an academic interest of Chinese and international researchers. Yet, in China, most research findings on the Dai people are published in Chinese, which projects the importance of the English abstract of the studies. Second, the fields of the dissertations had to be social sciences. Third, the abstract had to be the only part furnished with an English version in the dissertation. Fourth, the dissertations had to be authored by mainland Chinese so as to ensure that the data reflect the academic writing of Chinese EFL learners.

Following the criteria, the corpus consists of 21 English abstracts of Chinese dissertations on the Dai people in social sciences. The DAs were downloaded from the Internet to produce the corpus of 18,701 words. The English titles and keywords were excluded from the corpus, as they were unavailable in a part of the DAs. The dissertations were successfully defended in five leading universities on the Dai studies in mainland China between 2000 and 2010: Minzu University of China (12 out of the 21 dissertations), Nankai University (3), Yunnan University (3), Southwest University (2), and Sichuan University (1). Six research fields were included: Linguistics (8 out of the 21 dissertations), History (5), Anthropology (4), Education (2), Art (1) and Religion (1). The 21 DAs had been all those accessible online as free academic resources by the time the study was conducted in December, 2011. It is a fact that some dissertation authors may resort to translation services or other writing services. Yet, since the author is the one who is responsible for the dissertation, it is assumed in the study that the English version has been written, examined or approved by the author and thus reflects the author’s utmost English language proficiency. In the coding, the letter E stands for the English abstract, so E-1 refers to the English abstract number 1 (see Appendix).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The features that may influence the intelligibility of the English abstract are explored in the lexical, sentential and discoursal levels, which involve either vague or ungrammatical English use explainable by the Chinese language or culture.

The lexical feature

Researchers have identified a number of lexical features in Chinese English. For example, Pinkham (2000) reported the use of unnecessary nouns, verbs and modifiers, redundant twins, and repeated references to the same thing. Although these problems are also found in the corpus and may influence the intelligibility of the abstracts, the study is to dwell on the feature identified in the corpus: the chaotic references to the same thing.

The Dai people in China is officially referred to as “傣 (daizu)”, but there is no official English reference. While the official reference is consistently followed in the Chinese abstract of the 21 dissertations, the English abstracts employ different references of the Dai people as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. English References of the Dai People (傣族 daizu) in the Corpus.

Name	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Identity Marker	Frequency	Percentage (&)
Dai	16	76.2	nationality	11	52.4
DAI	1	4.8	race	2	9.5
Tai	1	4.8	ethnic	4	19.0
Daizu	1	4.8	(no marker)	4	19.0
Thai	1	4.8			
(huayao)dai	1	4.8			
Total	21	100	Total	21	100

Table 1 demonstrates a variety of the reference of the Dai people. An examination in the context as well as in the Chinese version of the abstract ensures that the references are used in the meaning of the Dai people who live in Yunnan province of China. The historical names of the Dai people such as “Baiyi” are excluded from the variety presented in Table 1. There are six ways of naming the people and four ways of indicating their identity. This variety is remarkable for a small-scale corpus of 21 DAs. Moreover, in Table 1, “Dai” is the most frequently adopted name and “nationality” is the most often used identity marker. “No marker” means that none of the three markers, i.e. “nationality”, “race” and “ethnic group”, is adopted following the name of “Dai”, “Tai”, etc. Accordingly, different references are found such as “the Dai nationality” (E-2), “the DAI nationality” (E-14), “the huayaodai people” (E-18), “the Daizu people” (E-20) and even “the Thai ethnic group” (E-21). The variety of references may influence the intelligibility of the abstract in three ways. First, some of the references are problematic and even provide false information. Take example 1 (words for discussion are underline thereafter).

Example 1:

In the first part, the author made a brief introduction of Hinayana Buddhism and Thai ethnic group in Yunnan Province. (E-21)

It has been widely acknowledged that the term “Thai” refers to the citizens of Thailand, a bordering country of China. In the abstract, no attempt is found to claim that these Thai citizens reside in Yunnan province, China; nor is any intention found of challenging the Chinese official reference of the Dai people. Thus, the term Thai in the abstract is highly possibly misused. The problematic reference may turn away researchers who are searching studies on the Dai people rather than on the Thai people.

Second, some references seem unnecessarily “novel”, as seen in the above examples (quoted here again for ease of reading): “the DAI nationality” (E-14), “the huayaodai people” (E-18) and “the Daizu people” (E-20). Since the English abstract is assumed to be the translation of or L2 writing based on the Chinese abstract in the study, it is necessary to analyze the Chinese official reference so as to find out the possible causes for these “novel” terms. The Chinese word “傣族(daizu)” consists of two characters, “dai” and “zu”. The former “dai” is not capitalized, since capitalizing the initial of proper nouns is not the convention in Chinese pinyin spelling system; the latter “zu” marks the identity category, literally meaning “nationality” or “ethnic group”. There is a clear chaos in capitalization among the terms in the corpus. Besides, the space between the two syllables “dai” and “zu” is not mandatory for the monosyllabic nature of Chinese words. Thus, both “daizu” and “dai zu” in the pinyin form are comprehensible to a Chinese reader. By contrast, capitalization and space are not arbitrary in English. It seems that the leeway allowed in the pinyin system is improperly applied in the English references.

Third, some references seem incomprehensible unless the reader knows Chinese. While “the huayaodai people” (E-18) and “the Daizu people” (E-20) reflect the Chinese arbitrariness in space and capitalization, the word “huayaodai” and “daizu” are directly borrowed terms from the pinyin form. One more example:

Example 2:

The second part regards the people's life style and mental characteristics of the Daizu. (E-20)

Different from “the huayaodai people” and “the Daizu people” in which the structure “the ... people” may provide lexical cues, the reference “Daizu” in example 2 lacks any such clue. It is doubted whether the term “Daizu” could be associated with the Dai people by an international reader.

So far, there has been no official English reference of the Dai people, and it is true that academic views on the issue may get presented by different yet well-grounded references. However, based on the examination of the references in the context, it seems that the variety of these references of the Dai people may be more attributed to inadequate English proficiency rather than academic considerations. Therefore, the dissertations may be missed by interested researchers on the Dai people studies due to the low intelligibility of the references.

The sentential feature

Sentence structure in Chinese English is examined in Pinkham’s (2000) study, where she identified features such as the noun plague and dangling modifiers. This study is to present a special type of ungrammatical sentence structure: non-subject sentences (i.e. null-subject sentences).

The subject and the predicate are essential components in English declarative sentences (Halliday, 1994). In the academic writing, it is hardly acceptable that a declarative could go without the subject. Yet, non-subject sentences are found in the corpus, which is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of Non-subject Declarative Sentences in the Corpus

DA No.	Frequency	Percentage (%)
E-1	1	11.1
E-3	3	33.3
E-13	3	33.3
E-20	1	11.1
E-21	1	11.1

Table 2 shows the frequency of declarative sentences without the subject. Of the 21 DAs, 5 abstracts are found with this ungrammatical structure, which is hardly ignorable. According to the position of the sentence in the context, there are two types of non-subject sentences: one being the topic sentence of the paragraph, and the other being the sentence in the paragraph. The first type is seen in the example below (with several sentences omitted for the purpose of the study).

Example 3:

The whole paper except the introduction is divided into eight parts.

Introduction: include the significance of selecting such a topic and carrying out the study, present situation of the study, the methodology and sources of material for the paper as well as the self-evaluation.

Chapter One: culture and ideas. Present a general introduction on the history, ethnical culture and change of the Dai nationality in Xishuangbanna and also elaborate on the interaction between the culture and ideas so as to provide cultural background for studying the ideas of women and relevant changes. ...

Chapter Four: idea of family. Elaborate on the formation and change of women's family idea by ... (E-3)

Example 3 provides a part of the English abstract of DA-3. The non-subject sentences are found in the paragraphs beginning with "Introduction", "Chapter One" and "Chapter Four". Taking the full stop as sentence marker, there are three non-subject sentences in the example, and they share the similarity in that they appear as the topic sentence of the paragraph. The feature is also found in E-13. The examination of the Chinese versions of DA-3 and DA-13 reveals that the correspondent Chinese sentences are non-subject. It is inferred that the non-subject sentences may be related to the Chinese versions. In order to take a complete view of the two types of non-subject sentences, the second type is presented in example 4 before the causes for the non-subject sentences are explored.

Example 4:

Buddhism tries it's best to develop people's utmost wisdom, and to cast all bad elements. Thus need all people to be kind, merciful, and helpful. (E-21)

The meaning of the second "sentence" in example 4 would be clearer had the subject of the sentence been added in the way that reads "thus Buddhism requires all people to be kind, merciful and helpful".

The two types of non-subject sentences are ungrammatical in English, and the reader may get confused what the sentence is trying to express. However, non-subject sentences are accepted by Chinese grammatical rules, and the officially issued *National Standards* encourages using non-subject sentences by leaving out the subject "the paper" and "the author" in the abstracts (GB 6447-86). Since the English abstracts are assumed to be the translation of or L2 writing based on the Chinese abstracts, it seems safe to infer that the above non-subject sentences in the English abstracts may be much influenced by the Chinese sentence structure.

The Discoursal features

Studies on L2 writing at the discoursal level usually focus on the pragmatic functions or metadiscourse, among which Hinkel (2003) investigated the adverbial markers and tone in L1 and L2 students' writing and discussed the features Chinese students demonstrated in this regard. This study is to present two discoursal features found in the corpus that may result in some comprehensibility problems, one being the vague use of inclusive we and exclusive we, and the other being the employment of the downplaying statement.

Vague use of inclusive "we/our" and exclusive "we/our"

The plural first person pronoun "we" in the corpus is used in two functions: inclusive and exclusive. The inclusive "we" refers to the author and the reader together, while exclusive "we" refers to the author(s)

only. Although the dissertations are supposed to be single-authored, it is not rare that the plural pronouns “we/us/our” are used as self-mentions (Hyland, 2001). In the corpus, the employment of “us” is not found, and the use of “we” and “us” is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of Exclusive “We/Our” and Inclusive “We/Our” in the Corpus

DA No.	Exclusive	Inclusive
E-6	2	2
E-7	0	1
E-8	15	0
E-9	0	2
E-13	3	0
E-15	2	2
E-19	2	8
E-20	0	2
Total	24 (58.5%)	17 (41.5%)

As seen in Table 3, 8 out of the 21 English abstracts employ “we/our”, which indicates that the plural first person pronouns are rather frequently employed in the English abstracts of the Chinese dissertations. Then, about two thirds of the plural first person pronouns are exclusive, while one third are inclusive, which suggests a preference of the exclusive use in the corpus. Moreover, both inclusive and exclusive “we/our” are used in 3 out of the 8 abstracts, which may lead to misinterpretation if the reader failed to discriminate between the two types of use.

Examples of the exclusive and inclusive “we/our” are offered as follows.

Example 5:

In the first chapter, we introduce the basic theory of toponymy, Dai race history and culture and organizational system of Dai history. (E-8)

Example 6:

Through the recording of ancient documents, we can understand the ancient Bai Yue lived in regions of rivers and lakes.

Example 5 illustrates the exclusive use of “we” in that the personal pronoun clearly refers to the researcher(s)/author only. As Hyland (2002) points out, self-mentions help inform the reader of how the author presents the study. In example 6, the plural first person pronoun refers to the reader and the author together; otherwise the past tense would be adopted or the modal auxiliary “can” would not be used.

Besides, “exclusive” and “inclusive” are relative terms. Take example 7.

Example 7:

Daizu, which culture is representative in our country, is one of the special minorities in Yunnan province. (E-20)

Apart from the questionable intelligibility of the Chinese pinyin form “Daizu” and the ungrammatical use of “which”, it remains problematic to whom the pronoun “our” refers. Based on the fact that the author is a Chinese in the study, it is inferred that “our” may be inclusive to Chinese readers and exclusive to non-Chinese. However, it is rare that the reader would keep the author’s nationality in mind while reading the DA.

Regardless of the reader’s nationality, there are DAs in which it is hard to determine whether “we/our” are intended to project the authorial presence. This can be seen in example 8.

Example 8:

- a) To solve the problems of the education in ethnic area, we should analyze the problems from politics, economy and culture, avoiding single-factor analysis and cultural determinism tendency ... (E-19)

- b) By fieldwork to monastic education and school education of The Dai in Xishuang Banna, we find that the main reasons ... are the cultural self-confidence caused by the economic advantages and the rejection to other cultures, ...(E-19)

Examples (5)-(8) are individual sentences. In the context, the reader may get even more confused, as shown in example 9.

Example 9:

The Zhuang-Dai branch, also called Tai branch is a group of languages well known in the world. To this languages belong the Dai, Zhuang and Buyi languages of our country and the languages of the Thai, Laotian etc and the Indian Ahong language ...in the sixth chapter the author links his own fieldwork material and discusses the function of Hinayana Buddhism in the succession of the Dai language. He states that Hinayana Buddhism ... has an active promoting function in the succession of Dai language. (E-6)

In example 9, the pronoun “our” seems to be inclusive of the author and Chinese readers. However, the subsequent occurrence of “the author” and “he” contradicts the position of first person; hence the question: who is writing?

Based on the analysis of the data in the context, it seems that the use of “we/our” may be rather vague, thus confusing the reader. Since the authorial stance is an important clue to the reader, the vague use of “we/our” may influence the intelligibility of the English abstracts.

The employment of downplaying statement

The other feature to be discussed is the employment of downplaying statement on the dissertation. Ren (2011) studied the rhetorical moves of abstracts of the Chinese master’s foreign-language thesis and found a higher frequency of presenting the research limitations than that of projecting the research strengths (p.165). Presenting research limitations and downplaying the research differ in that the former objectively discusses the research constraints and the latter apparently reduces the research credibility or significance without a ground for such remarks.

Of the 21 DAs, 2 employ the downplaying statement, taking up over 10 percent of the data. This finding deserves attention, since it seems that the feature has been rarely reported in studies on intelligibility of academic writing. See the examples from the two DAs below:

Example 10:

- a) Through field work and ascertaining documents, the author explored the origin of Dai water culture, argued material and spiritual factors of Dai water culture, inquired into symbolism of water in Dai people's eyes, and reached a tentative view that the Dai water culture is an original culture of Dai, then probed into the prospects of Dai water culture in the development of modernization...
- b) The fifth part is divided into two levels. On the first level, the author reached a tentative view that water culture was original culture of Dai according to the former four parts...
- c) These five parts composed a whole think of author on Dai water culture. Please experts criticize the paper. (E-9)

Example 11:

Of course, the concept of symbiosis as well as various related strategies proposed in this study mainly base on the situation of temple education and school education in Xishuang Banna. They are pertinent, but still have their limitation; although they can offer references to policy making for local government, it is only a preliminary idea. Whether they have maneuverability and whether they can really play a role need to be further verified. (E-19)

The four downplaying statements can be classified into two types: the type in which the seemingly “tentative” or “preliminary” nature of the claim is emphasized as shown in 10 (a), 10 (b) and 11, and the other type in which critiques of the research are invited as seen in 10 (c) regardless of its ungrammaticality.

An examination of the Chinese version of DA-9 and DA-19 shows that the above downplaying statements are the literal translation of the Chinese sentences. However, such literal translation is subject to low intelligibility caused by the possible difference across cultures in the illocutionary act of the statements.

In the Chinese culture, downplaying statement is traditionally a way of showing modesty and credibility. Influenced by Confucianism emphasizing respectable status of the senior in the age, rank or authority, a person with pleasant personality in the Chinese culture is expected to have appropriate manners and consideration for others. Ignorance of other people is regarded as arrogance. Therefore, apparently taking an inferior position is a golden rule and is highly appreciated. Take the Chinese context of DA-9 and DA-19. If the reader is academically superior to the author in some way, he may pleasantly accept the deserving esteem; if the reader is academically equivalent or inferior to the author, he may interpret the statement as token of the author's praiseworthy modesty. Apart from the research articles, the downplaying statement also appears in the preface or postscript of books. For example, “[m]istakes in the book are unavoidable because of the author's limited experience and low ability. Criticisms and suggestions are warmly welcomed” (Chen, iii). Similarly, in Chinese prestigious journals there are a number of articles titled with downplaying statement markers such as “superficial analysis of ...” (浅析), “analysis of ... in a restricted view” (管见) and “random and unsystematic analysis of...” (散论). Although culture may help explain the use of downplaying statement in the DAs, it is worth mentioning that not all international readers have the adequate knowledge of the Chinese self-belittlement culture.

Consequently, the reader may fail to correctly interpret the author's real intention, hence the low intelligibility of the English the abstracts in question.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on the analysis of the features identified in the corpus and the exploration of the possible causes, three implications are proposed.

First, the intelligibility of the English abstract in the Chinese PhD dissertations seems to reveal a weak awareness of international academic exchange. The purpose of furnishing these dissertations with an English abstract is to promote the research to international readers. Unfortunately, it seems that the purpose has been realized by only a few authors. The naming chaos in referring to the Dai people at the lexical level and the vague use of exclusive/inclusive "we/our" at the discursual level may impair the academic exchange. Since intelligibility is interactional instead of solely reader- or author-centered (Smith & Nelson, 2006, p. 429), it is suggested that the author and the reader make joint efforts to improve the intelligibility of the English abstract. On the one hand, the author must realize that he is writing for the international reader who may not be able to read Chinese. Thus, the abstract must be written in the most comprehensible way. For example, an explanation or an internationally adopted reference of the Dai people can be offered in brackets following the term when the author insists it is necessary to use the pinyin form "Daizu" hardly comprehensible to international readers. Also, when the co-occurrence of the exclusive "we" and inclusive "we" is suspected to influence the intelligibility, the author may resort to other linguistic resources to avoid misinterpretation, such as using the passive voice to leave out the first person pronouns. On the other hand, the reader must realize that there may be other references of his interested issue beyond his present knowledge when he is doing the international literature review. Also, the reader needs to realize it is just natural that the English abstract produced by L2 writers may be flawed by the unidiomatic language use, which, however, does not necessarily mean the low academic value of the research in the dissertation.

Second, the grammatical problems in the English abstracts present the urgent need for a number of Chinese dissertation authors to improve their English language proficiency. This also applies to the translator or writer of the English abstract when the author of the dissertation is not the one who produces the English abstract. At the sentential level, the study focuses on the non-subject sentences only; yet, as is shown by previous studies, other grammatical problems have been found in the English academic writing in China, among which a lot are elementary mistakes such as dangling modifiers, unclear reference of the pronoun "it" and inconsistency between the subject and the verb. It is not important whether the English abstract is the translation of or the L2 writing based on the Chinese abstract. What really matters is that the English abstract of dissertations must try to be free of grammatical mistakes, especially those elementary mistakes.

Third, the acceptance and approval of the dissertations with English abstract containing several prominent problems by the academic panel reflect the loose requirement on the quality of English abstract in Chinese universities. Since the panel members are not necessarily proficient in English, it is worth considering that a committee be organized specifically responsible for the examination of the English abstract of the dissertations. Swales (2009) mentions the special status of DAs in many U.S. universities and offers a typical graduate school evaluation form on which there is a separate line for the abstract where committee members are asked to check off one of the following:

- ___ acceptable as submitted
- ___ acceptable after minor typographical corrections
- ___ acceptable after minor substantive revisions
- ___ acceptable after major substantive revisions
- ___ not acceptable

(Swales, 2009, p.67)

If the evaluation form can be strictly administered or a committee specific for the quality of the English abstract can be organized in Chinese universities, the intelligibility of the English abstract may get improved.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The study identified the features that may influence the intelligibility of the English abstracts at the lexical, sentential and discoursal levels. The causes for the features are explored and the implications are proposed. While the study has the strengths in the attempt of locating the context on the studies on a given issue, there are limitations in the research. First, the evaluation of the intelligibility of the English abstract is based on the researcher's interpretation. The results would be more informative and convincing had international participants been invited to conduct the evaluation. Second, the corpus of 21 DAs is rather limited, and the result is hardly generalizable. Despite the limitations, the study at least offers a description of the English in some Chinese dissertations. It is hoped that more attention can be drawn to the English abstract writing in China, which may facilitate and promote the academic collaboration between international researchers and Chinese researchers across disciplines and on a large variety of issues.

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APPENDIX

English Abstracts in the Corpus

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(E-20) Shen, X. (2006). Construction of multicultural elementary education in the Dai areas. Chongqing: Southwest University.

(E-21) Wu, Z. (2006). The Dai culture and the Beiye archives. Chengdu: Sichuan University.