

Self-promotion in Top Economics Research Articles

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Abstract

Based on ten of the top 20 articles published in The American Economic Review, this article explores how the writers of the most influential research articles in economics successfully promote their ideas. The promotional tenor is found most densely in introductions. The concluding part is another place for further self-promotion. Expert writers also promote their ideas and themselves by constructing an authoritative and credible identity. The promotional effect is further enhanced by building solidarity with readers. This study can contribute to the literature of promotional tenor in academic writing.

Key words: promotion; academic writing; writer; reader; identity

1. Introduction

It is now a widely accepted belief that researchers need not only great expertise in their own disciplinary field, but also powerful rhetorical and linguistic devices to impress and persuade readers in order to have their work published in prestigious journals. Under such background, the promotional tenor of academic writing has attracted increasing attention.

The concept “promotional genre” was first explicitly proposed by Bhatia (1993) in discussing sales promotion letters and job application letters. The promotional intention can also be found in research articles (RAs) as academic genres are also being colonized by advertisements. Authors “have to ‘sell’ their research reports” by employing linguistic resources available (Bhatia, 1993, p. 98). Similarly, Fairclough (1992, 1993) has used the concept of marketisation and commodification to explain the extension of commercial influence to the academia and calls academic texts an “interdiscursively hybrid quasi-advertising genre”(1993, p. 157). Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) have also noticed that science has become part of a promotional, consumer culture and that “scientists seem to be promoting their work to a degree never seen before”(p. 43).

Although the promotional tenor of RAs has been noticed, most studies focus on just one or another feature of self-promotion. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) mainly examined the increasing promotional inputs in article titles. They found that in the hard sciences, the titles contain more essential information about the research result. Harwood (2005a, 2005b) specifically focused on the self-promotional function of two pronouns *I* and exclusive *we*. In fact, the successful promotion of articles depends on many factors working together, like foregrounding the value of research, projecting an authorial voice and engaging readers. Although some of these factors have been discussed from the angle of genre analysis (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 2004) and metadiscourse (Crismore *et al.*, 1993; Hyland 2002a, 2002b, 2005), more work is needed to interpret and integrate these factors from the promotional function. The linguistic and rhetorical characteristics and choices can be better understood when their promotional functions are considered.

2. Research data

This research is based on the top articles of one of the most prestigious journals in economics—*American Economic Review* (AER). In 2011, *American Economic Review* published a review of the top 20 articles selected during the 100 years of publication to celebrate its centennial (Arrow *et al.*, 2011). The articles were selected by an expert committee of six famous economists based on the criteria of quality and significance. Actually, many authors of the top 20 articles have been awarded Nobel Memorial Prize for economics. In order to have a detailed analysis of the articles and focus on the relatively recent articles, we have selected ten most recently published articles from the top 20, the list of which can be found in the appendix.

3. Self-promotion by foregrounding the value of research in the beginning

To attract the readers’ attention, writers must first reveal the value of research. And the introductions, especially the beginning paragraphs of RAs, are the “prime site for self-promotion”(Harwood, 2005b, p. 1216).

Swales’ well-known CARS model (Creating a Research Space) is developed based on the introductions of RAs (1990). According to the model, writers generally follow the pattern of three moves in the introduction, namely, “stabling a territory,” “establishing a niche” and “occupying the niche”(Swales, 1990, p. 141). The three moves can be also seen as following the situation–problem–solution pattern. From the promotional function, Move 1 mainly serves as a prelude of promotion, weaving the current research into the background of an important research area. Move 2 achieves the promotional function by creating the research need. Move 3 can be seen as introducing the product of promotion.

Although Swales' CARS model provides a useful tool for analyzing and understanding the structures of introductions, there are in fact many variations in the arrangement of moves and steps. Even Swales suggests that formal schemata should be seen as resources available rather than "rigid templates against which all texts are forced to fit" (1990, p. 213). The model will be better understood if RAs are analyzed with a focus on their functions or on "the rationale underlying linguistic behavior rather than its surface form" (Bhatia, 1993, p. 93). In the following analysis, we can see that self-promotion is one of the rationales underlying the schemata and linguistic choices. The arrangement of introduction structures can be attributed to different selling points in promotion, that is, what researchers intend to highlight in order to achieve the best promotional effect.

3.1 Promotion by establishing a territory of importance

In the academia, it is a common practice to embed one's own research in the disciplinary community. Just as Bakhtin (1986) argues, no idea is completely new as it is always intertextually linked with past ideas by supplementing, modifying or commenting on existing discourse. Many opening paragraphs of the ten articles follow Move 1 of the CARS model:

(1) The relationship of agency is one of the oldest and commonest codified modes of social interaction.... Examples of agency are universal. (AER 3)

Just as many sales promotional letters start with creating credentials instead of directly introducing the product, many RAs start by highlighting the popularity and importance of a more general research area. By describing an issue as *common*, *basic* or *universal*, writers establish a territory or present a situation that is worth studying. Although they are not directly promoting their product, they are actually foregrounding the importance of their own research.

3.2 Promotion by creating a research need

After establishing a well-grounded territory, expert writers skillfully pave the way to promote their present work by creating an open space for their own research, as can be seen below:

(2) ... However, a much more precise structure must be put on the problem if we are to understand the nature of the bias involved. (AER 6)

This article follows the typical pattern of Move 1 and Move 2 in the CARS model. After establishing a field that is considered as *basic*, a research need is created by the writer through the use of words such as *much more* and *must*. The selling point of the research is that it can fill in the gap by offering a *more precise structure*.

In the following example, the writer explicitly justifies the research need in the very beginning:

(3) For some time now there has been considerable skepticism about ... Neither ... nor ... make much sense in terms of standard theory. As a result, many people have concluded that a new framework for analyzing trade is needed. (AER 9)

Beginning the article with skepticism and weakness about the existing standard theory, the researcher creates an open space for current work by justifying the research need. The use of boosters *considerable*, *many* as well as *neither*, *nor* further intensifies the value of the present work. The writer thus successfully hooks the readers with the implication of offering an academic product that satisfies this need.

3.3 Promotion by highlighting innovation

As we all know, most research is based on previous work. Although the research area may not be new, researchers can still promote their ideas by taking an original perspective or considering a new element:

(4) The problems of agency are really most interesting when seen as involving choice under uncertainty and this is the view we will adopt. (AER 3)

Despite the pervasive discussion on the issue of agency, the researcher highlights the original approach through the combination of the intensifying adverb *really* and the superlative expression *most interesting*. Furthermore, in the following clause, the author uses an emphatic sentence *this is the view we will adopt* to give salience to *this view*, that is, the original perspective.

We have already known that most articles follow the general CARS model of beginning with Move 1—establishing the territory. From the promotional function, the underlying rationale is actually to attract a larger readership. If the article begins with a topic that is too specific, some readers may find the topic irrelevant to their own research and thus lose the interest of reading. This is perhaps one of the reasons why less than 10 percent of introductions in Swales' samples begin with Move 3 (1990). In our samples, although most articles begin with Move 1, one article also begins with Move 3—occupying the niche:

(5) This paper reports the results of an empirical study of real output-inflation tradeoffs ... from eighteen countries over the years 1951-67 ... (AER 4)

Despite its low frequency, the occurrence of the unusual schema structure needs further explanation. Swales (1990) also considers “possible rationales for utilizing or avoiding a centrality claim” as “an unexplored but interesting research area”(p. 144). Promotional effect seems to be one of the rationales. It is true that beginning by building a territory may attract more readers. However, if Move 3 is original enough to impress readers, it is also an effective promotional strategy. One may ask how the beginning of this article can attract readers. As we know, most articles published in AER are theoretical research mainly based on hypothesis and reasoning. This article, however, combines economic hypothesis with the testing of empirical data. This innovative methodology is a striking selling point of the article. What makes the research even more significant is that the data cover 18 countries over 17 years. Although empirical testing on economic theory is now common and popular, the methodology introduced in this article in 1973 provides an insightful foundation for econometric work, which is commented by the expert committee in their review as “very influential”(Arrow *et al.*, 2011, p. 2).

3.4 Promotion by highlighting improvement and advantage

In the field of economics, many theories and models are based on previously existing ones. When originality or novelty is not the focus of promotion, researchers will highlight improvement and advantage over the predecessors. The following excerpt is a particularly typical example:

(6) Many models have been proposed, but perhaps the most important ... are ... Both of these models have been extensively estimated ... In this paper, we propose and estimate a new model ... which has considerable advantages over both. Our model ... gives an arbitrary first-order approximation to any demand system; it satisfies the axioms of choice exactly; it aggregates perfectly...; it has a functional form which is consistent with ...; it is simple to estimate ... Although many of these desirable properties are possessed by one or other of the Rotterdam or translog models, neither possesses all of them

simultaneously. (AER 8)

After giving a brief introduction to the research area, the authors present and evaluate their own research in a way similar to an advertisement, densely loading it with positive evaluations and intensifying adverbs to highlight the advantages of their model over the predecessors which are already described as *the most important* and *extensively used*. These promotional strategies will surely arouse the interest of editors and readers to read on to find out what this model is about.

4. Conclusion as a place for further promotion

The main purpose of conclusion is to summarize and restate what is discussed in the previous sections of the paper, but it is another ideal place to consolidate promotion. Researchers usually re-emphasize the value and significance of the research at the end of the articles. One of the articles ends this way:

(7) ...we believe that the AIDS, with its simplicity of structure, generality, and conformity with the theory, offers a platform on which such developments can proceed. (AER 8)

The conclusion echoes with the advantages that the writers highlight in the introduction (see example (6) in Section 3.4). The attributes described in the introduction as *simple*, *approximation to any*, *consistent* are restated as the corresponding nominalizations *simplicity*, *generality* and *conformity*. The expert use of grammatical metaphors condenses the main arguments presented earlier in the paper and makes the statement less arguable. Besides, many conclusions go beyond just restatement. In this example, the writers imply that their study can provide a foundation for future research as it *offers a platform* for further developments. The use of the verb *believe* rather than *hope* also shows the writers' confidence about the advantages of their model, which is an effective promotion of their research.

Actually, conclusion is not the end of research but rather the starting point of new research. When a new idea or model is incubated and presented in research papers, it may not be fully developed. However, it can still shed light on or provide a foundation for future work, as in the following example:

(8) ... To mention one more path of interest ... The results obtained here provide some of the micro foundations for such studies... (AER 3)

By showing possible directions for further study, the writers imply that the research area that they have chosen is promising and sustainable. They encourage peer members to validate their hypotheses, apply their theories or make further generalization by leaving an open space for future research. The writers skillfully foreground the foundational role of their current work by making recommendation for future work.

5. Promotion by constructing a credible identity

Successful writers need to not only convince readers that their idea is important and interesting, but also convince them of the reliability. For quite some time, academic writing has been considered as objective and impersonal. But recent studies have indicated that academic writing is not completely "author-evacuated" (Hyland, 2002b; Harwood, 2005b). Persuasiveness depends not just on evidence, argument and logic, but also on constructing an authoritative and credible identity (Ivanic, 1998).

5.1 Self-reference as a promotional device

The use of self-reference is linked with authorial presence and the level of claim the authors wish to make (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2002b). While an impersonal voice may sound objective and safe, the use of self-mention can project an authorial voice and be “a powerful rhetorical strategy for emphasizing a writer’s contribution”(Hyland, 2001, p. 207).

It is interesting to note that all the ten articles have used the first-person pronoun *we*. Among the five single-authored articles, three choose to use *I* together with *we* while the other two choose to use the more inclusive *we*. This shows that although they display different levels of authorial presence in their work, they all give some self-presence into the texts. Some uses of self-reference are connected with self-citations. Self-citations send a message to readers that the writers have already occupied a position in the research area and have accumulated research experience and expertise for the current research. This is an artful rhetorical strategy that promotes not only the research ideas but also the researchers themselves:

(9) It is closely related to a model I have developed elsewhere; in this paper a somewhat more restrictive formulation of demand is used ... (AER 9)

If the self-reference is changed into the writer’s name, this self-promotional effect may be lessened by submerging the writer among many other researchers mentioned in the article. Through the selection of the first person pronoun, the writer projects an authoritative voice of being an established member of the disciplinary community.

Just as Hartwood (2005b) argues, although first person pronouns (FPPs) sometimes perform functions other than self-promotion, such as organizing texts, guiding readers, stating personal opinions and recounting research procedures, the words that occur in the immediate surrounding of FPPs can work together to achieve the self-promotional effect:

(10) The importance of our proposed additional elements is revealed ... (AER 2)

The crucial simplification I will make is to assume ... (AER 9)

As can be seen, the expressions that are used in combination with self-reference usually highlight advantages or carry a positive evaluation, such as *importance* or *crucial*.

5.2 Promotion by balancing certainty and caution

In order to better persuade readers to accept their argument, writers use certain linguistic resources to enhance certainty of their claims. These resources have been studied under different terms, such as intensifiers (Crismore *et al.*, 1993) and boosters (Hyland, 2005). We will adopt the more commonly used term “boosters”. The use of boosters emphasizes the writers’ certainty and projects an authoritative image to readers. Boosters are used extensively in the ten articles:

(11) It has always been recognized that ... (AER 5)

It is clear that ... (AER 6)

However, in academic writing, researchers also need to acknowledge the possibility of alternative views and negotiate with readers. Thus despite their promotional intention, researchers also need to project a credible and cautious image by balancing assertion and tentativeness. This tentativeness is realized by hedges, as can be seen below:

(12) In such a case, it would presumably be desirable to add a profits tax to the set of policy instruments.

(AER 1b)

Coase's analysis ... would suggest open-ended contracts but does not appear to imply (AER 2)

Through the use of hedges, researchers downplay their claim but establish rapport with the disciplinary community. It is interesting to note that expert researchers often skillfully combine the two rhetorical resources of boosters and hedges to balance their claim:

(13) The analysis in this section has obviously been suggestive rather than conclusive ... Nonetheless, the analysis does seem to confirm the idea that ... countries will tend to export the goods ... (AER 9)

We can see clusters of hedges and boosters used in an integrative way. The strong claim implied by the booster *confirm* is softened to a certain degree by its merging with the hedge *seem to*, but is further enhanced by another booster *does*. Meanwhile, the strong claim made by the booster *will* is also softened by the hedge *tend to*. This prosodic combination skillfully enhances the promotional effect by projecting the researcher's authoritative and cautious image simultaneously.

6. Promotion by engaging readers

Language is inherently dialogic and writing also involves having dialogues with readers (Bakhtin, 1986). In academic writing, writers also need to engage and involve readers to establish a rapport and win their recognition and support.

To build solidarity and proximity with readers, the most direct strategy is the use of inclusive *we*:

(14) However, once we have determined the optimal p and q vectors we have determined the optimal taxes. (AER 1a)

Through the use of inclusive *we*, the writers involve readers in the reasoning and argument process. By presenting knowledge as possessed not only by the writer but also by the readers, the writer acknowledges the expertise of readers and can gain a sympathetic voice and make their arguments more persuasive.

Besides inclusive *we*, another strategy of involving readers is by appealing to shared knowledge, as can be seen below:

(15) It is well known that ... It has always been recognized that ... Here, the argument is carried one step further ... (AER 5)

By presenting the argument this way, the writers show that they are continuing a tradition that is well known by the community but have made further improvement. In the academia, innovation is a highly-esteemed value. If the researcher can present a new idea or model that is not only different from but also more robust and inclusive than commonly known ones, it will be a powerful promotion. The shared knowledge is introduced to show the importance as well as difficulty of the research area and serves as an effective foil to the significance and innovation of the writers' own research.

In order to highlight important information, writers employ certain linguistic resources to focus readers' attention so that they will not miss the important information:

(16) The crucial thing to recognize in this context is that ... (AER 10)

Hyland's study shows that expert writers employ more directives than novice writers to direct readers' focus (2002a). By highlighting the important part of the paper, writers not only attract readers' attention, but also display their expertise.

When a new theory or idea is proposed, it is very natural for readers to reserve some uncertainties or

doubts. If writers can predict readers' uncertainties, they may not only gain resonance from readers but also demonstrate their expertise by showing that they have fully considered the whole picture. Different from advertisements where the direct address *you* is often used, RAs seldom use the second person pronoun, but instead use words like *readers* and *one*, like the following examples:

(17) The reader may be puzzled that ... (Other readers may be puzzled by our failure to include only n-1 markets in our market clearance equations...) (AER 1a)

... one might therefore question the empirical content of the result so far obtained. Fortunately, there is a way ... (AER 5)

In the first example, by acknowledging readers' doubts and then removing them through explanation, the writers demonstrate that they have made a wise decision of keeping only the indispensable elements in their formulation after having fully considered all possible factors. In this way, readers will be more convinced of the simplicity and rationality of the formulation. In the second example, the writer acknowledges readers' doubt, but then offers a solution. The additional use of the attitude marker *fortunately* makes the solution even more appealing and assuring.

Writers can also engage readers by arousing their interest. A direct way of arousing readers' interest is by explicitly promoting the interestingness of research. Interestingness here refers to the ability to attract readers' attention and implies the value of research. The word *interesting* occurs 18 times in the ten articles:

(18) ... these ideas provide an interesting approach to the analysis. (AER 1a)

Besides *approach*, other common collocates with *interesting* are *result*, *case*, *example*, *property*, *feature*, etc. Interestingness can also be expressed in its nominal form:

(19) Consequently, it will be of considerable interest in future work to ... (AER 8)

Interest used in this sense occurs 12 times in the articles. The frequent use of the explicit expression *interesting* and *of interest* shows the writers' overt promotion of their ideas.

An indirect way of arousing interest is by posing questions. Questions are considered as a "key strategy of dialogic involvement" but "almost non-existent in science and engineering research papers" (Hyland, 2010, p. 125). However, in the ten top economics papers, question marks occur 30 times. Maybe that is also one of the disciplinary variations between hard science and soft science in the sense that soft science tends to have a more personal involvement with readers. Although questions are not used very frequently in RAs compared with other genres, they are still a powerful promotional strategy as they can engage readers and arouse their interest, especially when the questions are interesting and well-designed. One of the articles even poses a question in its title:

(20) Do stock prices move too much to be justified by subsequent changes in dividends? (AER 10)

With the major question in the title, the writer expertly navigates readers through the paper to find the answer. Questions in the main text can also fulfill the promotional effect of engaging readers:

(21) Wherein then is the relationship between a grocer and his employee different from that between a grocer and his customers? ... Exactly what is a team process and why does it induce the contractual form, called the firm? These problems motivate the inquiry of this paper. (AER 2)

By posing such questions, the writer not only explains the motivations for the research, but also invites readers to join the research exploration by arousing their curiosity.

7. Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can see that there is a strong promotional tenor in the top economics articles. In the introduction, the selection and emphasis of different rhetorical moves depends on what researchers intend to highlight in order to achieve the best promotional effect. Researchers also take advantage of the concluding part for further promotion by pinpointing significance and further application. Throughout the text, they promote their ideas and themselves by constructing a credible and cautious identity. The promotional effect is further enhanced by building solidarity with readers. Although there might be slight variations between disciplines in the degree of promotional flavor and interpersonal involvement, it can not be denied that the promotional intention in research articles is universal. The study of experts' promotional strategies can not only shed light on researchers in economics who intend to have their articles published in prestigious journals in their field, but also contribute to the literature of promotional tenor in academic writing.'

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Appendix

The selected list is arranged in the order of publication year and issue. (1a and 1b are two parts of one article published in two issues of the same year.)

- 1a. Diamond, P. A., & Mirrlees, J. A. 1971. Optimal taxation and public production I: Production efficiency. *American Economic Review*, 61(1): 8–27
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