

Arousing Readers' Interest: An Inquiry into Chinese Argumentative Essays

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ABSTRACT

Arousing readers' interest constitutes a major component in argumentative essays, but how writers use language resources to capture readers' interest in the written discourse remains a fascinating area for a qualitative exploration. Based on a genre-based analytical framework, the researchers studied the salient linguistic resources used by professional writers to attract readers' attention to their argumentative essays. Additional information was elicited from specialist informants to examine the circumstances under which the rhetorical move was used. It was found that writers arouse readers' interest using five different strategies aimed at highlighting recent unusual situations, underscoring current relevance of alarming situations, reporting attention-grabbing observations, indicating rapid changes in the modern era, and foregrounding the severity of the problems encountered. Apart from identifying writers' appeals in the five communicative functions, the researchers ascertained how writers vividly depict situations using a range of salient language resources, particularly temporal adverbials signalling noteworthy situations during previous time periods, noun phrases accentuating the significance of specific circumstances, and adjectival modifiers highlighting abundance or prevalence. Aside from illustrating how writers deploy four-character idiomatic expressions indicating deteriorating situations and rapid social transformations, this paper will reveal how writers capture readers' attention by using adjectival phrases denoting the severity of situations, verb phrases signalling undesirable behaviours, and predicator-object structures denoting annoying habits. Recommendations are given on how instructors can use a broad array of rhetorical strategies and language resources to design exercises aimed at helping learners to aptly attract readers' attention to their argumentative essays.

Keywords: Genre analysis; language for academic purposes; Chinese language, teaching materials; argumentative essays

BACKGROUND

Malaysia is an Asian country where Chinese language education has been developing for nearly two centuries, since Wufu Shuyuan, the first Chinese school, was established in Penang in 1819 (X. Wang, 2014). In fact, Chinese language education was in existence even before the country achieved independence in 1957 (Hashim, 2009). Given that Malaysia is a Southeast Asian country which has perpetuated the Chinese education system ever since the colonial era (Ang, 2017; Raman & Tan, 2015), it is understandable that the Chinese language has been taught in numerous primary and secondary schools in the country. In these schools, guiding students to write essays, including descriptive, narrative and argumentative essays constitutes an important component of the syllabus today. In fact, essay writing accounts for 70% of the

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official Chinese language assessment in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination (Toh & Chu, 2016). The writing of argumentative essays, in particular, merits some attention as it requires learners to use a wide range of language resources to persuade readers to accept their points of view. In this paper, the researchers will focus on a major aspect related to the writing of such essays as a genre at secondary school level. Among the various aspects relating to essay writing, this paper specifically focuses on how writers introduce their essays by using specific language resources to attract readers' attention to their argumentative discourse, as part of the requirements expected of the genre. The rationale for focusing on this introductory rhetorical move can be ascribed to the need to familiarise learners with the language resources which are generally employed to arouse readers' attention and set the stage for the entire essay.

While studies can be conducted to investigate learners' ability to use the language in argumentative essays, it is equally important to ascertain what language expressions need to be introduced to learners while guiding them to master the language in the writing of argumentative essays. The researchers are therefore motivated to look into a vital initial component of Chinese argumentative essays (CAEs), namely the inceptive portion that professional writers use to draw readers' attention to the essays. In Malaysia, the writing of argumentative essays, has often become a challenging task that instructors and students need to grapple with in the secondary school system. In the researchers' experience of teaching the Chinese language, it has been noted that secondary school students in Malaysia often lack sufficient knowledge of the language resources needed to write argumentative essays. This explains why students generally show very little confidence in answering the question about argumentative essays in public examinations, such as SPM. Although Chinese language students are given several essay titles from which to choose, Chinese secondary school students in Malaysia seldom opt to write argumentative essays in public examinations. This may be ascribed to the possibility that students are generally unaware of how to write an acceptable argumentative essay using appropriate language expressions. Furthermore, students are often over-reliant on teachers' instructional support and arguments provided for argumentative writing (O'Hallaron, 2014).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

WRITING ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS IN THE CHINESE LANGUAGE SYLLABUS

In section 3.2.1 (ii) of the Chinese Language Syllabus in the 'Integrated Secondary School Curriculum', one of the objectives is "to write argumentative essays to appropriately select and organise writing materials for a Chinese argumentative essay" (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 21). The researchers' review of past-year public examination papers (Malaysian Ministry of Education, 2016) has also indicated that these formal examinations generally incorporate at least an essay question on argumentative essays. It is therefore interesting to consider how an analysis of professional writers' essays can be used to prepare teaching materials relating to the language resources needed to perform specific communicative functions in argumentative essays. More precisely, researchers and instructors teaching the Chinese language in the Malaysian context have yet to thoroughly examine the prevalent language expressions which are generally recommended by professional writers (hereafter referred to as 'writers') to perform the communicative functions in argumentative essays.

Past approaches that focused on largely basic information elements in argumentative essays did not explicate why specific language mechanisms were selected and used in relation to the communicative functions of the constituent steps needed in instructional sessions for student writers. Given that the academic language used in educational contexts and classroom

instruction is, in general, necessary in ensuring students' success in school (Raman & Tan, 2015), it would be interesting to find out how language resources are employed in specific parts of a CAE, particularly the portion intended to attract readers' attention to the essay.

PREVIOUS STUDIES ON WRITERS' ATTEMPT TO AROUSE READERS' INTEREST

This study was initially based on the concepts explained by (i) Swales (2004) in his genre-based analytical framework, and (ii) Hyland's (1990) work that involved some basic elements in the argumentative genre. First, using Swales' (2004) analytical framework, a 'move' is defined as "discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse" (Swales, 2004, p. 228). In the context of this study, an argumentative essay may include moves in three stages (Hyland, 1990). The first stage is "thesis", which involves (i) a 'gambit' that constitutes the first thing one writes to arouse readers' interest, (ii) "information" on the topic of the essay, (iii) "proposition" which states the writers' position and delimits the topic, (iv) "evaluation" that briefly supports the proposition, and (v) "marker" which signposts for the proposition (Hyland, 1990, p. 74). In stage two, a re-statement of the claim is needed before reasons and support are provided. In the third stage on 'conclusion', consolidation and reaffirmation of the initial claim is performed to lead readers to a "close" (Hyland, 1990, p. 74).

Despite the informative model designed by Hyland (1990, p. 70), an in-depth focus on "gambits" is needed. It would be interesting to use an analytical framework proposed by Swales (2004) and Wong and Lim (2014) to first identify the communicative functions involved before attention is directed to the language resources used to perform the functions. Due to spatial constraint, this study focuses on an important initial stage which has been overlooked in previous research, namely how writers arouse readers' interest while introducing an argumentative essay. To be specific, Hyland (1990) pointed out that writers generally introduce the thesis of an essay using a gambit, which has an arresting effect, in order to capture readers' attention, rather than to inform them of the writers' proposition. Hyland (1990), however, did not elaborate on the possible appeals associated with an attempt to arouse readers' interest.

Writers' endeavour to arouse readers' interest can be understood if an attempt is made to consider some of the possible appeals to directly and/or indirectly attract readers' attention. In particular, writers may arouse readers' interest by appealing to "the importance, usefulness, or advantages" of a key idea involved in the topic discussed (Wang & Yang, 2015, p. 166). Apart from appealing to "magnitude" by showing "the prevalence or popularity" of a topic (p. 166), they can underscore the "newness" or "recency" of a topic, thus demonstrating that what they have written is likely to add new knowledge to a "novel area" (p. 167). In addition, through an appeal to "problematicity", writers may focus on "the conflicts, problems, difficulties, or challenges" which a topic or a phenomenon involves (p. 168). Due to the inter-connectivity between the linguistic appeals involved, it is possible that a range of appeals often overlap with one another. This paper therefore argues that it is important to first consider the communicative functions of a text before identifying the linguistic resources associated with the functions (Lim, 2011, 2019), especially if we intend to grasp how writers captivate their audience in a genre such as the argumentative essay.

Even though some studies (Qin & Karabacak, 2010; Yang, 2012) have been conducted on the generic structure of CAEs using the Toulmin's (2003) model, they have not focused on the language resources needed to arouse readers' interest in argumentative essays. Some investigations (e.g., Guo, 2013; H.L. Wang, 2014; Zhang, 2012) have briefly covered certain syntactic features of CAEs, but they have not investigated how writers' language resources are related to a rhetorical move in detail. Given the research gap, this study looks into how language resources, especially lexical and syntactic choices, are associated with writers' attempts to arouse readers' interest to the topic being argued about. The salient language

resources identified in this study can be used in pre-writing instructional session aimed at guiding novice writers to use appropriate language expressions while introducing their argumentative essays to attract readers' attention to their arguments.

Filling the gaps explained above, the results of this study can help instructors make informed choices while guiding novice writers to capture readers' interest in their CAEs. The findings of this research can be of assistance to textbook writers in devising exercises that closely link language resources with communicative functions involved in introducing their argumentative essays. Learners' ability to comprehend and engage in academic forms of argumentation has been widely recognised as a crucial component for language learning (O'Hallaron, 2014). This study therefore has a pedagogical motive concerning how applied linguists may help students in Chinese language classes to aptly arouse readers' interest in their argumentative essays. Instructors may also use the data-based findings derived from this inquiry to prepare teaching materials aimed at enlightening students on the use of the language resources concerned.

OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In relation to the rationale explained above, the specific objectives of this study are to (i) ascertain the frequency and prevalence of the rhetorical move (hereafter referred to as 'arousing readers' interest') in the essays, (ii) identify the specific communicative functions involved in arousing readers' interest in the CAEs, and (iii) explore the salient language resources used to perform the communicative functions involved. Based on the aforementioned specific objectives, the following research questions have been formulated with the aim to guide this research:

- (1) To what extent do expert writers incorporate an introductory move to arouse readers' interest in the argumentative essays intended for secondary school students?
- (2) What are the salient language resources that expert writers use to perform the communicative functions involved in arousing readers' interest?

While the first research question focuses on obtaining quantitative data pertaining to the frequency and prevalence of 'arousing readers' interest' in the corpus, the second research question seeks (i) qualitative statements given by specialist informants to reveal the communicative functions involved in 'arousing readers' interest' in the argumentative essays, and (ii) text-based qualitative data that show how different communicative functions of 'arousing readers' interest' are performed using salient language resources. Studying the linguistic realisations of this move is necessary in that an argument structure generally raises important issues with respect to the relations between grammatical form and meaning (Zhang, 2012).

METHODS

DESIGN

Given the concepts reviewed above, this section proceeds to explain how a corpus (of CAEs) was studied using (i) a basic rhetorical framework proposed by Swales (2004), (ii) a modified generic structure initiated by Hyland (1990) for argumentative essays, and (iii) a procedure for analysing linguistic mechanisms in relation to communicative functions as initiated by Wong and Lim (2014) for short essays. This investigation consisted of both quantitative and qualitative components. In the quantitative component, the frequencies of writers' rhetorical

move to arouse readers' interest in all the CAEs were counted and recorded in order to identify the frequencies of the rhetorical move. In the qualitative components, however, attention was directed to two dimensions involving (i) the general communicative function of the move based on specialist informants' views, and (ii) specific communicative functions of 'arousing readers' interest' as reflected in the language used.

CORPUS COMPILATION

A corpus of 32 CAEs written by professional writers for upper secondary students in Malaysia were selected purposively from a total of eight recently published books. Each argumentative essay was chosen with reference to lengths, themes and settings that had been selected by professional writers for students in Forms 4 and 5. The lengths of the essays ranged from 628 to 1372 words, with an average length of 787.53 words. The CAEs were obtained from eight reference books published from 2009 to 2014 because (i) when we began the study in 2015, the latest essays that were available in the market were those published in 2014, and (ii) we decided to choose essays which were published over a period of five years in an attempt to minimise biases in selection and to cover a broader range of social issues that emerged over a longer duration. The essays chosen were selected from (i) *Secondary School Compositions: 100 Model Essays*, (ii) *SPM Malaysia Certificate of Education*, (iii) *Secondary School Model Essays*, (iv) *SPM Samples Prepared by the Proforma Selection*, (v) *SPM Malaysia Certificate of Education: Secondary School Model Essays*, (vi) *SPM Chinese Model Essays*, (vii) *SPM Chinese Paper One*, and (viii) *SPM Secondary School Essays: Paper 1*. These eight books and the essays included in them were selected as materials to be analysed (not as instruments) because (i) the books and their authors who wrote them were highly recommended by the specialist informants in this study, and (ii) the contents of the books, being closely related to the requirements of the official public examination (SPM), were of interest and relevance to the students concerned. These criteria were therefore consistent with previous researchers' principles for selecting materials in a textual analysis, given that (i) the contents of the materials (being aimed at upper secondary school students) were relevant to the needs of the participants in the discourse community (Wong & Lim, 2014; Swales, 2004), and (ii) they were included in the sample based on the specific recommendations given by our specialist informants (Bhatia, 1993).

An investigation was then conducted to identify the move intended to arouse readers' interest in the aforementioned essays. With respect to reputation, a step was taken to ensure that the writers of the argumentative essays were well-known authors of textbooks who had published their works on Chinese grammar and Chinese Language Examination series. The reputation of these professional writers was determined by requesting the four specialist informants to provide a list of established authors whose books had been adopted by national secondary schools and were considered as suitable materials for upper secondary school students. These authors' works were selected because (i) their autobiographies showed that they had been experienced teachers who had taught Chinese as a subject for 10 to 20 years in secondary schools, and (ii) their essays had also been recommended by the specialist informants interviewed in this investigation.

PROCEDURE FOR A GENRE-BASED ANALYSIS

To answer the first research question, Swales' (2004) genre-analytical framework was adopted in this study by focusing on the occurrence of the rhetorical move aimed at drawing readers' attention to an argumentative essay. Text segments associated with the writers' attempt to arouse readers' interest were counted by two coders. The researchers' method of reporting inter-coder agreement was "percent agreement" which reflected "the number of agreements

per total number of coding decisions” (Biber, Connor & Upton, 2007, p. 35). The ‘number of agreements’ was defined as the number of coding decisions made by both coders that were the same in the entire corpus. This means that when a coder decided (or made a judgment) that a text segment carried (or did not carry) a certain communicative function (such ‘arousing readers’ interest’ or ‘making a claim’), the coder was considered as having made one (1) coding decision. After all the texts were coded, the first coder identified 535 segments, but the second coder identified 536 segments, giving a total of 1071 segments; however, only 868 coding decisions made by both coders were the same in the first coding session, and this means that the percentage of agreement was 81.05% ($868/1071 \times 100\%$). In cases where inter-coder discrepancies occurred in the identification of move and step boundaries, a discussion was conducted to ascertain the possible nuances causing the differences between the choices made by both coders (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). The researchers subsequently employed a three-level system to ascertain the status of the move. If the move occurred in all (100%) of the argumentative essays in the corpus of CAEs, it was considered as ‘obligatory’. It could be considered as ‘quasi-obligatory’ if it appeared in 50%-99% of the essays in the corpus. The move was considered as only ‘optional’ if it occurred in less than 50% of the argumentative essays.

To answer the second research question, four specialist informants were interviewed separately (via face-to-face interviews) to provide qualitative information about the general communicative function of ‘arousing readers’ interest’ and/or why it occurred in a high or low percentage of texts included. The specialist informants interviewed were chosen based on two criteria. First, Bhatia’s (1993, p. 34) criterion was adopted in that each specialist informant had to be a “practising member of the disciplinary culture in which the genre is routinely used”, and in this case, each informant had to be working in school environment where the writing of Chinese argumentative essays at Form Five level were taught to secondary school students. Second, each specialist informant should have taught the Chinese language, as a trained graduate teacher (with a Bachelor’s degree), who had taught the Chinese language (and specifically the writing of CAEs) for more than seven years. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with the specialist informants to elicit additional information related to the significance of ‘arousing readers’ interest’ in the essays.

Subsequently, a text-based qualitative analysis was conducted to identify the more specific communicative functions of ‘arousing readers’ interest’ in relation to the language resources used to perform the functions. Finally, the salient language resources of ‘arousing readers’ interest’ were analysed qualitatively in relation to the aforementioned communicative functions and linguistic resources. Salient language resources are defined as linguistic categories (such as words, phrases, and lexico-grammatical structures) which are recurrently used in different texts to accomplish the same communicative function in the genre concerned (Joseph & Lim, 2018, 2019). The language resources were delineated in accordance with the linguistic categories, as described by Ross and Ma (2006) and Yip and Rimmington (2004), and the resources were considered as “salient” only if they “occurred repeatedly” in different texts “to perform specifically the same communicative function” of drawing readers’ attention to the argumentative essays (Lim, 2017, p. 66).

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are reported sequentially according to the two research questions related to (i) the frequency and prevalence of ‘arousing readers’ interest’, and (ii) the language resources used in relation to the communicative functions involved in the writers’ attempt to arouse readers’ interest.

FREQUENCY AND PREVALENCE OF 'AROUSING READERS' INTEREST'

As the first research question concerning the frequency of 'arousing readers' interest', it needs to be clarified here that the "frequency of occurrence" of a move (Soler-Monreal, 2015, p. 32) refers to the number of times a move occurs in an article, and as such, a higher frequency signals that the move recurs more often in the article concerned. This analysis has shown that the mean frequency of 'arousing readers' interest' is 0.84, with the standard deviation of 0.369, thus illustrating that the rhetorical move generally occurs once in each CAE (see Table 1).

TABLE 1. Frequencies of the rhetorical move aimed at arousing readers' interest and the percentage of texts containing the move in CAEs

Category	Frequency/Value
Mean frequency (average number of occurrences per essay)	0.84
Standard deviation	0.369
Total frequency (total number of occurrences)	27
Number of CAEs containing 'arousing readers' interest'	27
Percentage of CAEs containing 'arousing readers' interest' (%)	84.38

Overall, with regard to prevalence, the rhetorical move is found in 84.38% (27/32) of the argumentative essays in the corpus. The findings show that 'arousing readers' interest' appears in a vast majority of the essay, even though writers generally deploy such a move only once in an essay.

COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS AND LANGUAGE RESOURCES INVOLVED IN 'AROUSING READERS' INTEREST'

Regarding the second research question about the communicative functions involved in arousing readers' interest in the CAEs, the researchers have ascertained (i) the general functions based on the specialist informants' inputs, and (ii) the specific functions with reference to our detailed genre-based textual analysis. The general communicative functions of the move can be identified by examining the circumstances under which it is included, especially by considering some information provided by our specialist informants on the rhetorical practices. According to Specialist Informant A (SIA), 'arousing readers' interest' is akin to "an excellent movie designed to appeal to the audience right from the very beginning of the show", "thus prompting the audience to continue reading the essay". Specialist Informant B (SIB), however, stated that to arouse the audience's interest, writers usually attempt "to establish a rapport with the audience" by "adding a 'bait' to a topic discussion" so that "readers would know what has happened" and "find it more convincing when examples are given later". Such a "bait", according to Specialist Informant C (SIC), "is able to capture the reader's attention and interest", and "signal what the claim is going to be like subsequently, thus telling the audience an important focus of the argumentative essay". Likewise, Specialist Informant D (SID) pointed out that 'arousing readers' interest' in an argumentative essay "is actually a very hard genre", and "if you dump out a large amount of data when you begin an essay, some readers are likely to get bored and will not feel like continuing to read it". Her recommendation was that a "bait" should be "included to urge readers to go on reading (the essay) step by step", so that "it will help writers to lead (the readers) to all other parts that they would like to present later". Their statements suggest that writers arouse readers' interest in the inceptive portion of an argumentative essay in order to establish a rapport and appeal to the audience, thus generating the readers' interest in reading the entire argumentative essay before evidence and instances are furnished to persuade the audience to accept their proposition(s). At a deeper level, our genre-based textual analysis has revealed that the expert writers' attempts to arouse

readers' interest comprise five specific communicative functions which are closely connected with the language resources employed, as reported in the following sub-sections.

INVOKING A RECENT UNUSUAL SITUATION

Our analysis has shown that professional writers often invoke a recent unusual situation involving a remarkable incident or noteworthy event that would arrest the interest of the readers. As shown below, the page from which an instance has been extracted is clearly indicated. For example, 'CAE: 109' indicates that the instance has been extracted from page 109 of Chinese argumentative essay (CAE) number 30. In this case, instances that invoke recent unusual situations are shown as follows:

- (1) **以往**, 常听说马来西亚半岛在东北季风期间, 东海岸地区封港, 水灾灾情严重。(CAE30: 109)
[**In the past**, I often heard that flooding often became serious during the Northeast Monsoon season, and some ports in the east coast were even completely closed.]
- (2) **在之前**, 它必定经过千磨万击, 经历无数人间风雨, 才能释放强韧的生命魅力。(CAE8: 136)
[**Previously**, one must have gone through lots of difficulties and hardships in real life before exhibiting a strong sense of resilience in one's life (before attaining success in one's life).]
- (3) **自一九八零年起**, 电脑已逐渐成为全球各国所大力追求的最新产品。(CAE22: 95)
[**Since 1980**, the computer has gradually become a product very much sought after by people in all countries in the world.]
- (4) **近来**, 我们经常可从报章上读到许多有关自杀的新闻... (CAE10: 92)
[**Recently**, we have often read news about the suicides in the newspaper...]
- (5) **这阵子**, 问题学生层出不穷, 所产生的问题似乎愈来愈严重。**以往**的说谎、打架、偷窃、逃学等不守纪律的行为, 已是“小儿科”。(CAE26: 207)
[**Lately** there have been lots of problematic students creating increasingly serious problems. Lies, fightings, thefts, truancy and other disciplinary problems, which used to occur **in the past**, appear to be less serious in contrast.]

Two categories of temporal adverbials have been identified so far as the communicative functions are concerned. First, past incidences are expressed using adverbials indicating previous time periods, such as '以往' ('in the past'), '在之前' ('previously') to draw readers' attention to persisting problems unravelled in the initial position of an argumentative essay. Second, writers attempt to stimulate readers' interest using temporal adverbials denoting recent occurrences, including '近来' (recently), '这阵子' (lately) and '自一九八零年' (since 1980) to stimulate readers' awareness of issues that have attracted public attention, such as suicide cases and the widespread use of the computer. The second category, in particular, highlights a new trend or recent development, which distinctly appeals to recency of the issue in an attempt to arouse readers' interest.

HIGHLIGHTING CURRENT RELEVANCE OF AN ALARMING SITUATION

Writers attract readers' attention by using the aforementioned temporal expressions in combination with noun phrases (NPs) depicting prominence or seriousness of the alarming circumstances encountered, such as '今天...不可或缺的用品' (today...indispensable gadget), '现代...大勾当' (today...an unexpectedly serious role), '现今...青少年的价值与道德观...令人忧心忡忡的社会问题' (today...young people's value and ethics...disconcerting social problems), as exemplified below:

- (1) 今天, 手机在我们的生活里可是一个**不可或缺**的用品, 它除了能使我们方便联络, 里面多种新颖的功能也能娱乐我们, 所以无论是在家里还是学校, 中学生总是时时“机不离手”。(CAE14: 136)
[Today, the mobile phone is an **indispensable gadget** in our life, as it facilitates contact, and its new functions can also entertain us, so whether it is at home or at school, secondary school students often keep their mobile phones with them.]
- (2) **现代**的学生干的可是**大勾当**! (CAE26: 207)
[Today's students are playing **an unexpectedly serious role!**]
- (3) **现今**社会进步繁荣, 然而随着时代不断在改变, 潮流与媒体过分强调物质化享受, 严重地影响了**青少年的价值与道德观**, 进而**衍生出种种令人忧心忡忡的社会问题**。(CAE32: 113)
[Today there is much progress and prosperity in society, but because of consistent changes in the present era, the current trends and media appear to excessively accentuate material enjoyment, thus seriously affecting **young people's value and ethics**, and causing more **nerve-racking social problems.**]

While writers use NPs depicting severity of the alarming circumstances as an appeal to the salience and problematicity of the issue involved, temporal expressions indicating current relevance and newness of the issues are deployed in sentence-initial positions to highlight the extent to which present social situations or current social problems are disconcerting, thus augmenting the noteworthiness of the issue being introduced. Overall, while temporal expressions indicating current relevance are used as a linguistic strategy that appeals to the newness of a topic, it needs to be acknowledged here that the writers concurrently use NPs denoting alarming circumstances as an appeal to both salience and problematicity. This strategy combines present relevance with the momentum of an alarming situation so as to add a dramatic touch in the writers' attempts to arouse readers' interest.

FOREGROUNDING AN INTERESTING OBSERVATION

Another prominent strategy for arousing readers' interest is associated with the professional writers' attempt to underscore the prominence and prevalence of an interesting phenomenon being observed. Examples of this rhetorical strategy is given as follows:

- (1) 至今, 学校栽培了**无数的优秀人才**, 在国家发展上做出了**重大的贡献**。(CAE4: 10)
[So far, the school has cultivated **many outstanding talents**, and made **significant contributions** to the development of the country.]
- (2) **广泛的阅读**能丰富我们的头脑与心灵, 提高我们的文化素养。阅读的好处是**不胜枚举**的, 遗憾的是现代的学生大多数不阅读课外读物。(CAE28: 219)
[**Extensive reading** can enrich our minds and hearts, thus improving our cultural literacy. The benefits of reading are **numerous**, but I am sorry to say that most students in the present era do not read books beyond the scope of their (school) curriculum.]
- (3) 我国的交通意外事件, **非常之多**。其中不少致命车祸, 属于世界名列前茅者。这种记录, 绝非国家的光荣。相反的, 它是一项耻辱。(CAE29:107)
[There are **innumerable** traffic accidents in our country, many of which constitute fatal accidents, thus placing our country at the top of the list. Such a record is definitely not the pride of the nation; on the contrary, it is a form of disgrace.]

As shown above, writers employ (i) NPs containing modifiers that highlight prominence [e.g., ‘优秀人才’ (**outstanding talents**), ‘重大的贡献’(**significant contributions**), etc.], and (ii) adjective phrases denoting prevalence or abundance [e.g., ‘无数的’(countless), ‘广泛的’(extensive), ‘不胜枚举的’(numerous), ‘非常之多’ (innumerable), etc.], which constitute appeals to both salience and magnitude, to attract readers' attention to an important issue that affects a large number of people in similar or recurrent situations.

ACCENTUATING RAPID CHANGES IN THE MODERN ERA

Another distinct characteristic of ‘arousing readers’ interest’ is the writers’ recurrent reference to a rapid development or transformation in the modern era, as indicated in the following examples:

- (1) 在这脚步紧迫的经济社会里，人们除了走路、办事情的步伐也**加快了**，甚至是用餐的速度也讲求**迅速**...大家都接受了这种速食的文化，因为它符合了现代人讲求的“快”，而且每个人也**乐于购买**这些快餐来吃，因此无论男女老幼对快餐店所供应的食物都**爱不释手**。(CAE13: 132)

[In this fast-paced ‘economic’ community (society), people are moving much **faster** not only while walking but also while performing various tasks in their life, and even the speed with which they have a meal also needs to be fast...People have accepted the fast food culture as it meets the requirement of being “fast”, and everyone is **happy to purchase** such fast food, and as such, regardless of gender and age, people **love to enjoy** the food supplied by fast food restaurants.]

- (2) 网络是**新世纪**的科技产物，学生能通过网络随时了解到国内外的新闻，开拓视野，真正做到“秀才不出门，能知天下事”的宏愿，也能**更快**得到最新的知识...网络也使大家的生活增添了无穷的乐趣，网络的线上电影、购物等娱乐功能更是包罗万象，尤其是网络上所提供的游戏更是让大家**爱不释手**。(CAE16: 148)

[The Internet is a product of the **new era**, and students can have access to news in and outside of a country via the Internet, broaden their knowledge, and “become scholars who are aware of different things in the whole world without having to leave even his/her own house”. People are able to acquire new knowledge **faster**...In addition, the Internet has also provided people with lots of fun and joy. Other entertainment-related apps, such as online movies and online shopping, are also broad-ranging. Online games, in particular, are things that people would **love to enjoy**.]

- (3) 目前是**21世纪**的**资讯时代**，各领域的**发展**可谓**一日千里**。今时今日，世界各国都向前**迈进**，纷纷**跻身**强国行列。我国也不落后人后，日渐**进步**，已从过去的农业国，**蜕变**为今日的发展中国家...(CAE17: 45)

[The present **21st century** is the **information era**, and we see **rapid development** in different fields. In the **modern age**, all countries in the world are **moving forward**, attempting their best to become powerful nations. Our country is also not left behind and **is making progress**, and has developed from an agricultural country, and **has transformed itself** into a modern developing country.]

- (4) **二十一世纪**是个科技**一日千里**、资讯**日新月异**的时代。(CAE22: 95)

[**Twenty-first Century** is an era in which science and technology **undergo rapid development** and information **is constantly changing**.]

As shown above, professional writers use (i) NPs denoting the modern age [e.g., ‘新世纪’(new era), ‘21世纪’(the 21st century), etc.], (ii) adjective phrases indicating swiftness (e.g., ‘加快’, ‘迅速’, ‘更快’, ‘一日千里’, all of which mean ‘fast(er)’ or ‘more rapid’), and (iii) expressions denoting variations (e.g., ‘迈进’, ‘进步’, ‘蜕变’, and ‘日新月异’, which mean ‘to change’ or ‘to make progress’). It is also in such a move that writers highlight the use of phrases indicating favourite activities [e.g., ‘乐于购买’ (happy to purchase), ‘爱不释手’ (love to enjoy), etc.] that underscore people’s preoccupation with modern attractions such as online games and fast food. Overall, it has been found that writers deliberately link expressions signalling rapid changes with those denoting favourite activities and new trends in the modern era in a bid to underscore the newness or current relevance of a topic area.

UNDERSCORING THE SEVERITY OF A RECURRENT PROBLEM

This analysis has shown that writers’ move to arouse readers’ interest is often embedded in their attempt to underscore the severity of a recurrent problem or situation, as exemplified below:

- (1) 我们都知道，我们每天在学校上课的时间非常有限，而老师也只能把一些基本的知识传授予我们...(CAE1: 3)
[We all know that the time that we spend in school **every day** is **extremely limited**, and teachers can only give us some basic knowledge...]
- (2) 然而，根据现有的统计数据，我国青少年的失学情况令人忧虑。社会人士更紧密关注青少年失学带来的社会问题。(CAE5: 120)
[However, according to the **existing** statistical data, our country's school dropout situation is **worrying**. Our society also **focuses much attention on** the social problems caused by the school dropout.]
- (3) 自90年代开始，偶像风可说是越刮越烈。从最初的欣赏演变到现今的盲目崇拜，甚至发生中学生因为属意的偶像有了恋情而闹自杀的案件，道尽现今人的不理智。令人忧心忡忡的是，中学生盲目崇拜偶像的行为似乎已经超越一般影迷的界限了。此举令各界人士担忧，深怕偶像崇拜会对 学生造成很大的负面影响。(CAE11: 94)
[Ever since the 1990s, idol worship has been getting more and more widespread. From the initial appreciation, it has evolved to become **today's blind idol worship**. What is **worrying** is that secondary school students, because of their favourite idols who had had an affair, would **commit suicide**, thus showing the irrational behaviour of **today's people**. This has worried the public as the form of idol worship may have a negative impact on the students.]
- (4) 目前，我国中学生考试作弊现象日趋严重，几乎每次中学校园的考试中都能发现作弊的学生，就连公共考试，作弊现象也屡见不鲜。(CAE25: 205)
[**At present**, the phenomenon of cheating among high school students in our country is becoming **increasingly serious**, and in almost all examinations involving high school students, including public examinations, academic frauds have been found to be **frequent**.]
- (5) 如今，全国各地，尤其是几个发展蓬勃的大城市，每逢雨季，甚至连续下三几个小时的雨，水灾便会发生。水灾，小者造成交通不便，环境污染；大者交通断绝，财物损失，带来伤亡。(CAE30: 109)
[**Currently**, all over the country, especially in several fast-developing cities, flooding occurs during every rainy season. It happens after it has rained for three hours. Flooding, causes **traffic problems** and **environmental pollution** when it is not serious; it also leads to **traffic cut-offs**, **property losses** and **casualties** when it gets serious.]

The communicative function is performed through the combinations of temporal adverbials or adjectives indicating present relevance and adjective phrases denoting severity of a situation, such as ‘每天...非常有限’ (every day...very limited), ‘现有...令人忧虑’ (existing...worrying), ‘目前...日趋严重’ (at present...increasingly serious). These expressions which indicate current relevance are used to draw the readers’ attention to the topic area which the writers consider as an issue that merits attention in the subsequent argument. While the writers employ adjectives and temporal adverbials denoting present relevance to explicitly appeal to recency and newness, they also use adjectival phrases (denoting situational severity) to overtly appeal to problemat�icity in a bid to draw the readers’ attention.

Another salient language resource used in foregrounding the severity of a challenging situation is associated with the recurrent use of locative adverbials [e.g., ‘在不该倒垃圾的地方’ (at a place where one is not supposed to dump garbage), ‘在戏院或巴士车’ (in a theatre or bus, etc.), as exemplified below:

- (1) 相反的，一个人如果在不该倒垃圾的地方倒垃圾，在戏院或巴士车里抽烟等，这些都是缺乏公德心的行为。(CAE2: 4)
[In contrast, if a person **dumps garbage** in places where he or she is not supposed to, or **smokes** in a theatre or a bus, it is actually a behaviour **showing a lack a sense of social responsibility**.]
- (2) 在一些住宅区，垃圾堆积成山，臭味冲天，沟渠大多阻塞不通。垃圾和废弃物经常在河里和海里浮浮沉沉。在一些滨海的旅游区，沙滩给垃圾占领了...(CAE6: 130)

[In some residential areas, **garbage piled up like mountains**, **emitting awful smells**, and **ditches are blocked**. **Garbage** and other **wastes** are often seen **floating or sinking** in rivers and the sea. In some of the coastal tourist destinations, beaches are full of **garbage**.

- (3) 时代的巨轮是不断向前推进的，世界上的一切事物都随着这自然规律并进。即使是身在学府的学生也应融入社会，了解其黑白两面，才能在未来的日子里，不会因前方的路**坎坷不平**而**退缩**、**气馁**。(CAE23: 97)

[The wheel of the time is constantly moving forward, and all the things in the world are occurring in accordance with the law of nature. Even students in academic institutions should also get integrated into society, and understand the black and white of everything in life, so that they will not **give up or get frustrated** when seeing that the road ahead is **winding and bumpy**.]

- (4) 踏入二十一世纪，青少年道德沦落问题大有**日趋严重**的趋势。尽管有些人一口断定青少年之所以会**堕落**，跌入罪恶的深渊是因为家庭问题而导致的，但是我们应以更客观的角度来看待这问题，毕竟没有其他原因在旁煽风点火，青少年道德绝不会**沦落到不可收拾**的地步。(CAE24:101)

[In the 21st century, the moral decline among youths is getting **increasingly alarming**. Although some people are sure that teenagers have **backslid** or **descended** into the abyss of evil because of family problems, we should view the issue from a more objective perspective. After all, if there were no other causes, teenagers' morality would not **deteriorate** to such a **serious extent**.]

The aforementioned locative adverbials are used with verb phrases or predicator-object structures denoting undesirable behaviours [e.g., ‘吐痰’ (spit), ‘退缩’ (give up), ‘气馁’ (get frustrated), ‘沦落’ (deteriorate), ‘丢纸屑’ (**dump** strips of paper), ‘失学’ (**drop out** of school), ‘堕落’ (descend), etc.], and (ii) four-character idiomatic expressions that describe deteriorating situations [e.g., ‘堆积成山’ (piling up like a mountain), ‘臭味冲天’ (emitting awful smells), ‘阻塞不通’ (with ditches blocked), ‘坎坷不平’ (being winding and bumpy), ‘日趋严重’ (increasingly alarming), etc.], all of which focus on disturbing and unsettling situations that are likely to direct readers' attention to the point of argument. These findings suggest that professional writers have the propensity to use verb phrases and predicator-object structures indicating obnoxious human behaviours in an appeal to problemat�icity. Interestingly, such an appeal to problemat�icity appears to rely heavily on the recurrent use of the four-character idiomatic expressions which vividly depict worsening situations in the writers' attempt to capture the readers' attention.

DISCUSSION

This genre-based analysis and the specialist informants' statements suggest that professional writers, in their well-designed attempts to arouse readers' interest in the CAEs, draw on a broad range of rhetorical strategies to establish a rapport with the audience. Given that ‘arousing readers' interest' constitutes a quasi-obligatory move in a vast majority of the essays, it appears reasonable for instructors to allocate sufficient time on introducing learners to some major communicative functions and language resources needed to attract readers' attention in the initial portions of their essays. This investigation has shown that in lessons aimed at guiding novice writers, instructors need to show learners how salient language resources can be closely connected with the specific communicative functions which encompass writers' attempt to (i) foreground unusual circumstances, (ii) highlight alarming situations, (iii) indicate interesting observations, (iv) depict rapid social transformations, and (v) underscore severe recurrent problems in a bid to arouse readers' interest.

A broad array of specific language resources is closely connected with each of the five key communicative functions mentioned above. Although Hyland (1990, p. 70) has highlighted the role of “gambits” in the argumentative genre in English, the researchers have proposed a

new linguistic profile which has not been reported in previous research, in that it illustrates the five key functions of ‘arousing readers’ interest’ in relation to their associated resources in the argumentative essays (see Table 2). What appears salient in the writers’ attempt to arouse readers’ interest in these essays is that temporal adverbials are recurrently used as initial discourse markers to clearly specify the periods during which unusual past events occurred. Writers rely heavily on the use of locative adverbials to invoke noteworthy past incidents as a means to arouse readers’ interest in their essays. Although the findings of this study which are based on an analysis of argumentative discourse differ from those reported by Noor (2001) and Hinds (1990) who focused on expository discourse, some cross-genre similarities need to be highlighted here. In particular, the recurrent use of temporal and locative discourse markers suggests that writers of CAEs have the tendency to employ such adverbials as “landmarks” to ensure that “the reader can piece together the logic that binds the discourse together” (Noor, 2001, p. 263). It also signals that the Chinese writers tend to use “the writer-responsible rhetoric” in an attempt “to persuade the reader” (Noor, 2001, p. 263) instead of depending solely on the reader to sort out their observations. Locative adverbials are oftentimes used in combination with temporal adverbials and adjectives depicting current relevance so as to underscore the severity of a situation, thus reflecting writers’ preponderant emphasis on situational severity as a key strategy to capture readers’ attention. Such recurrent use of temporal and locative discourse markers appears to be in line with Hinds’ (1990) view that modern Chinese adopts a writer-responsible rhetoric (rather than a reader-responsible rhetoric) via the writers’ deployment of distinct discourse markers as a form of interactive resources.

This study has also indicated the importance to use NPs depicting prominence to describe the present circumstances encountered, and this resembles writers’ attempt to show that an area is “important”, “central” and “interesting” in research introductions (Feak & Swales, 2011, p. 55). Adjectival modifiers which highlight abundance and prevalence are especially salient in the writers’ attempt to foreground interesting observations, and the use of such language resources is akin to the stress on abundance and prevalence of previous studies in research article introductions (Swales, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2004). What appears different is that adjective phrases indicating swiftness are particularly prominent in the writers’ initial descriptions of speedy changes in the modern era, and NPs denoting modern age are especially salient in the writers’ attempt to draw readers’ attention to rapid social transformations. The findings therefore suggest that it is important to consider using adjective phrases depicting severity of a current problem in an attempt to captivate the readers’ attention.

TABLE 2. Language resources used by writers to arouse readers’ interest in CAEs.

No.	Communicative Function(s)	Salient Language Resource(s)	Instances of Language Resources
1.	To invoke a recent unusual situation (to invoke a noteworthy past incident to arrest readers’ interest)	Temporal adverbials indicating previous time periods or recent occurrences in the inceptive part of an essay	‘以往’ (in the past); ‘在之前’ (previously); ‘近来’ (recently); ‘这阵子’ (lately);
2.	To highlight the current relevance of an alarming situation (to direct readers’ attention to a shocking situation)	Temporal expressions indicating current relevance used with NPs depicting seriousness of the circumstances encountered	‘现代...大勾当’ (today... a momentous role) ‘现今...忧心忡忡的社会问题’ (today...disconcerting social problems)
3.	To foreground an interesting observation relating to the abundance or prevalence of occurrences	Adjectival modifiers highlighting abundance and prevalence that draw readers’ attention to a critical issue	‘无数的’ (countless); ‘不胜枚举的’ (numerous); ‘非常之多’ (innumerable)

4.	To accentuate rapid changes in the modern era that merit readers' attention	NPs denoting the modern age	‘新世纪’(new era); ‘21世纪’(the 21st century);
		Four-character idiomatic expressions indicating favourite activities	‘乐于购买’ (happy to purchase); ‘爱不释手’ (love to enjoy)
		Adjective phrases indicating swiftness	‘迅速’; ‘一日千里’ (‘fast(er)’ or ‘(more) rapid’)
		Expressions denoting social variations and transformations	‘迈进’; ‘蜕变’; ‘日新月异’ (‘to change’ or ‘to make progress’)
5.	To underscore the severity of a recurrent problem (to draw readers' attention to the topic area considered as a serious issue or unfavourable situation)	Four-character idiomatic expressions that describe deteriorating situations	‘堆积成山’ (piling up like a mountain); ‘日趋严重’ (increasingly alarming)
		Combinations of temporal adverbials or adjectives indicating present relevance and adjectival phrases denoting severity of a situation	‘每天...非常有限’ (every day...very limited’); ‘现有...令人忧虑’ (existing...worrying)
		Locative adverbials	‘在不该倒垃圾的地方’ (at a place where one is not supposed to dump garbage); ‘在戏院或巴士车’ (in a theatre or bus)
		Verb phrases denoting undesirable behaviours	‘退缩’ (give up); ‘气馁’ (get frustrated); ‘沦落’ (deteriorate);
		Predicator-object combinations denoting annoying habits	‘吐痰’ (spit phlegm), ‘丢纸屑’ (dump strips of paper)

This investigation has also highlighted the necessity to focus on verb phrases and predicator-object structures denoting undesirable behaviours which constitute salient language resources in the writers' descriptions of the severity of present problems. What appears noteworthy is the writers' use of four-character idiomatic expressions to depict rapid social changes in the modern era and the delineation of severe circumstances resulting from a present problem. This result is in tandem with Karlgren's (1962) finding that Chinese writers are generally expected to use quotations in the form of idioms to demonstrate some familiarity with the events and their love for literature.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It can be concluded that ‘arousing readers' interest’ constitutes a major rhetorical move that writers generally need to incorporate while introducing their CAEs, and its importance lies in its position as an inaugural move in nearly all argumentative essays. This initial move plays a preponderant role in that it accentuates the severity of a situation and underscores specific events to lucidly signal to the audience that a social issue is of current relevance and interest to the general public, thus demonstrating the noteworthiness of subsequent arguments. Nevertheless, the language resources used in it need to be seen in close relation to its specific communicative functions. It is therefore necessary to further consider the findings of this study in relation to (i) actual implications in the classroom, and (ii) some limitations resulting from the methodological options of this study. First, it is recommended that novice writers be exposed to some of the key communicative functions identified in this study. In an initial brainstorming exercise, learners can be encouraged to suggest some strategies for arousing readers' interest in their argumentative essays before they are given authentic instances to be matched with the actual rhetorical functions identified in this study. The brainstorming exercise can be designed to encourage learners to ponder upon some past incidents that can possibly be used to draw readers' attention to the issue being focused on. This activity can be conducted to raise the learners' consciousness of the possible range of rhetorical functions involved in

arousing readers' interest. Having familiarised learners with these functions, instructors can consider introducing the key linguistic resources connected with each of the specific communicative functions (as summarised in Table 2). Instructors can proceed to help learners present such a move using the salient language resources in several steps.

In a pre-writing instructional session, learners may first attempt a gap-filling exercise that directs their attention to (i) temporal adverbials indicating current relevance or recent events, (ii) adjective phrases signalling swiftness needed at the beginning of their argumentative essays, and (iii) verb phrases and predicator-object structures denoting disagreeable social behaviours which are intended to warn readers of an alarming situation in society (as demonstrated in Table 2). To draw the reader's attention, novice writers may attempt text completion items requiring them to depict current situations using adjectival modifiers that positively highlight the prevalence of a noteworthy situation. The exercise may include a range of choices containing four-character idiomatic expressions that depict rapid social transformations and severe circumstances resulting from challenging issues. Subsequently, in another text-completion exercise, learners can practise choosing the appropriate verb phrases and verb-object structures expressing undesirable behaviours in order to delineate the severity of the current problems encountered as a strategy to grab their readers' attention (see Table 2). These exercises can be used to help instructors (i) raise learners' consciousness of the need to attract readers' attention to the issue in their argument, and (ii) add a dramatic element to the initial portion of an argumentative essay.

In brief, this genre-based analysis has highlighted a central role accorded to the rhetorical move to arouse readers' interest and the associated language resources intended to cogently direct readers' attention to the topic area in argumentative writing. However, a limitation of this study needs to be acknowledged at this juncture. Due to the relative short lengths of the argumentative essays written for secondary school students, the range of language resources used to draw readers' attention appear to be relevant largely for school students at intermediate level. Future research may look into how a broader range of language resources can be ascertained by analysing longer essays written for students at higher levels. Overall, the interesting gamut of function-based language resources reported in this study has enriched our understanding of the numerous linguistic strategies used by professional writers to capture readers' attention in the argumentative essays, and these resources can be aptly used as an initial frame of reference in the teaching of argumentative writing.

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