

# A Corpus-based Study of Nominalization in Business English Abstracts Written by Chinese Writers and Native Writers

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**Abstract**—Nominalization is frequently associated with academic writing for its ability to condense information with clarity and conciseness. It also enhances objectivity and creates contextual cohesion. Given its practical value, mastering nominalization is of central importance for English learners. Although numerous studies have explored nominalization, few have approached it from the perspective of business English writing in abstracts. Adopting a corpus-based approach with both qualitative and quantitative methods, this study investigated the differences of nominalization usage in business English abstracts written by Chinese writers and native English writers.

Under the framework of Halliday's systemic functional grammar (1994), 100 papers were extracted from domestic higher education institutions and leading business English journals. AntConc was employed to analyze nominalization patterns. Results showed that lexical nominalization occurred more frequently than clausal nominalization in both corpora. Chinese writers produced longer abstracts on average than native writers (321.6 vs. 246.5 words). Specifically, Chinese writers used more lexical nominalization, with more evident use of suffixation and conversion compared with English writers. In contrast, English writers employed more clausal nominalization, particularly excelling in the use of that-clauses and the noun-preposition-noun structure. Moreover, native English writers used more adjective nominalization, especially derivation.

Chinese writers' overreliance on lexical nominalization (suffixation/conversion) and longer abstracts with fewer clausal nominalization structures suggest that instruction should emphasize clausal (e.g., that-clauses, noun-preposition-noun) and adjective-based nominalization to improve conciseness and information density. Furthermore, automated writing feedback and materials of English for academic purpose should move beyond counting total nominalization frequency and instead distinguish lexical versus clausal nominalization and verb-based versus adjective-based derivation,

as these are where native and non-native writers diverge most.

**Keywords**—*nominalization; abstract; corpus-based study; business English papers*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Learners' English proficiency has long been a central concern for scholars. The analysis of language acquisition outcomes reveals problems learners encounter and informs teaching methods aimed at improving learning strategies. Writing competence, in particular, requires thorough investigation due to its dominant role in the English academic field. Meanwhile, the abstract, as an essential component of a research paper that provides readers with a general understanding of the whole work, has become a major focus in academia. It serves as the entry point to academic papers (Hartley, 2003) and a condensed representation of the research (Tippet, 2004). Essential as they are, abstracts belong to a high-stakes genre in which writers foreground the main claims of their papers by emphasizing centrality (Hyland, 2000) to attract readers' interest. Consequently, achieving objectivity and conciseness in an abstract remains a challenge for writers, especially for English as a second language (ESL) learners. This problem can be partially addressed through nominalization.

Nominalization, a common phenomenon in English, refers specifically to the conversion of verbs and adjectives into nouns. In linguistic terms, it is the process by which a noun or a noun-phrase-functioning syntactic unit is derived from another type of unit, such as a verb or an adjective. Quirk (1985) defined nominalization as a noun phrase that systematically corresponds to a clause structure, while Biber (2006) maintains that nominalizations are nouns morphologically correlated with verbs or adjectives from which they are derived. Nominalization distinguishes academic English from conversational language. As an essential element in English writing, it has been examined from multiple perspectives. Structuralism approaches nominalization from a grammatical angle but neglects lexical meaning. Within transformational grammar, linguists view nominalization as the outcome of syntactic variation, independent of context. Compared with these earlier

frameworks, systematic-functional linguistics offers a more thorough and profound investigation, focusing on meaning and language use. Halliday (1994), within the functionalist tradition of grammatical metaphor, provides a comprehensive explanation of the functions of nominalization, noting that it endows discourse with accuracy, conciseness, and qualities vital for constructing scientific discourse, where the extensive use of nouns is most characteristic (Halliday, 1994). Under such circumstances, an investigation into the use of nominalization in business English abstracts is worthwhile and essential for English learners.

Business English writing, as a discourse type of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), can be regarded as a specialization within English language learning and teaching. In recent years, scholarly interest in academic papers has been steadily increasing. Related studies have focused on structural analysis and linguistic features such as tense, voice, and the use of first-person pronouns. Furthermore, researchers have extended their attention to various paper types, including book reviews, research articles, and textbooks. Although a large proportion of English academic papers have been thoroughly examined, the abstract—as a concise yet crucial component—still warrants further exploration. Some scholars have investigated variations in the componential structure of academic papers, while others have concentrated on disciplinary differences across subjects. However, the comparison between Chinese and English research papers with respect to nominalization in abstracts remains underexplored and requires more systematic analysis.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *Business English papers*

The body of research on business English papers encompasses a diverse range of topics, methodologies, and analytical approaches, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the field. According to Peters, Collins, & Smith (2002), recent corpus research has expanded to include new types of corpora that facilitate the study of business and communication technology, as well as computer-mediated communication and genre variation across different contexts (Peters, Collins, & Smith, 2002). This indicates a growing interest in leveraging corpus-based methods to analyze business English language use in various genres and settings. Academic publication pressure in German-speaking countries underscores the role of scholarly communication in advancing business English research (Grund & Müller-Camen, 2014). Pedagogical studies highlight the effectiveness of flipped classrooms and online learning strategies in enhancing business English outcomes (Karapetian, 2020). Bibliometric analyses, such as those focusing on China, reveal evolving themes and stages in business English writing instruction (Sun & Asmawi, 2022). Further research links business English to entrepreneurship and sustainability strategies. Finally, bibliometric work on ESG practices

points to growing interdisciplinary connections between business English, sustainability, and corporate responsibility (Bai & Kim, 2024). Overall, the literature demonstrates a broad and evolving landscape of research on business English papers, encompassing corpus linguistics, pedagogical innovations, bibliometric trend analyses, and interdisciplinary studies linking language proficiency with business success and sustainability. However, research on specific linguistic aspects such as nominalization may offer worthwhile avenue for higher writing competency.

### B. *Nominalization*

Nominalization is a pervasive feature of language that transforms grammatical categories, enabling writers to express ideas concisely and precisely. In academic writing, particularly in abstracts, nominalization enhances clarity and objectivity. Despite extensive research, certain aspects of nominalization in abstracts remain underexplored. This chapter reviews key issues concerning nominalization, including its definition, classification, functions, and previous studies.

Nominalization operations differ functionally depending on the semantic relationship between the derived noun and its source. Following Halliday's broad perspective, this study divides nominalization into two major types: lexical nominalization and clausal nominalization. Lexical nominalization transforms processes or clauses into things or entities. It primarily involves conversion (changing a word's part of speech without morphological change) and derivation (adding affixes). Clausal nominalization involves turning clauses into nominal elements. It includes three main forms: noun clauses, infinitive phrases, and noun-preposition-noun.

As a key resource of grammatical metaphor in Halliday's theory, nominalization serves multiple functions in academic abstracts: enhancing objectivity, conciseness, formality, authority, and textual cohesion. Nominalization, often combined with passive voice, reduces subjectivity by omitting the agent. Thompson (2013) noted that nominalization makes the "doer" disappear and materializes the process. Some believed that objectivity increases because the action's performer and restrictive elements are removed, yet the meaning remains intact. Nominalization compresses information, increases lexical density, and packages complex clauses into nominal groups. Nominalization contributes to a formal, authoritative tone typical of academic discourse. By turning dynamic processes into static entities, it aligns with the expectation of detachment and rigor in scholarly writing. However, overuse of verbs or personal constructions would lower formality. Nominalization thus signals expertise and credibility.

The research on nominalization in English academic writing reveals its significant role in shaping the structure and coherence of scholarly texts. Nominalization is instrumental in constructing the

logical framework of medical English articles, emphasizing its importance in academic communication. Similarly, investigations comparing English and Iranian medical papers highlight the use of nominalization as a means to enhance lexical density, suggesting its function in conveying complex information efficiently across different linguistic backgrounds (Mahbudi, Mahbudi, & Amalsaleh, 2014). The morphological aspects of nominalization have been explored to understand its historical development and frequency across various publication types. A review of the morphology of nominalizations summarizes their evolution over time and examines their prevalence in diverse texts, indicating a broad application in academic and non-academic contexts (Hartnett, 2004). In the context of abstracts, nominalization serves to make summaries more concise and focused. A dedicated study on linguistic abstracts demonstrates that employing nominalization can improve the quality of abstract writing by condensing information without sacrificing clarity (Hong & Wang, 2022). From a functional perspective, a cognitive approach to nominalization emphasizes deverbal forms and their role in the lexicogrammar of English, shedding light on how nominalizations function within the language system to express complex ideas efficiently (Mattiello, 2008). Finally, disciplinary variation influences the frequency and function of nominalization in research articles. Studies suggest that the strategic use of nominalization varies across fields, and understanding these differences is crucial for effective academic writing and dissemination of knowledge to diverse audiences (Heidari Kaidan, Jalilifar & Don., 2021). Overall, the literature underscores the multifaceted role of nominalization in English academic texts, from enhancing conciseness and cohesion to reflecting disciplinary conventions.

### C. Abstracts

The examination of abstracts within business English papers reveals a multifaceted landscape characterized by diverse research approaches and thematic focuses. While some studies primarily utilize abstracts as a means of summarizing extensive research, others emphasize the role of abstracts in facilitating interdisciplinary communication and knowledge dissemination.

Ng's (1978) report exemplifies the early use of abstracts in leisure research, presenting 85 bilingual abstracts of papers from the Second Canadian Congress on Leisure Research. This work underscores the importance of abstracts in providing concise overviews of research presentations, thereby aiding dissemination across linguistic boundaries (Ng, 1978). Similarly, Lo, Wang, Neumann, Kinney, & Weld (2020) introduce a corpus, a comprehensive collection of over 81 million English academic papers, including abstracts, to facilitate text mining and scholarly analysis across disciplines. This underscores the centrality of abstracts in enabling large-scale bibliometric and thematic studies within business

English research (Lo, Wang, Neumann, Kinney, & Weld, 2020). Some studies focus on the content and quality of abstracts in specific fields. Chifor & Badea (2022) analyze abstracts in dentistry literature to identify causes of overtreatment and how these can be mitigated, illustrating the role of abstracts in summarizing research issues and recommendations (Chifor & Badea, 2022). Likewise, McClean, Ismail, & Bird (2021) utilize systematic review methodologies that rely heavily on abstracts to synthesize evidence regarding community business impacts on health and well-being, emphasizing abstracts' function in literature screening and data extraction. Despite the empirical advance, there is still a necessity to explore detailed information about the use of nominalization in business English abstracts, as such studies provide English learners with invaluable insights.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### A. Research methods

A prerequisite of a successful study is a scientific method used in the analysis of a paper. In this study, the author utilized a corpus-based research method. Specifically, the paper adopted the qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct a comprehensive and scientific research.

### B. Data collection

The study employed a corpus-based approach to investigate the way in which nominalization was used. The samples selected in this paper are composed of 100 papers in total written by Chinese writers and native English writers. All of the papers were published in the years from 2023 to 2025. To ensure reliability and validity, the selection of abstracts underwent a rigorous procedure. Since abstracts created by native English writers usually contain fewer words than those written by Chinese writers, the total number of papers written by Chinese and native English writers was of slight difference. By applying a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the use and frequency of nominalization in English abstracts were accurately discussed.

### C. Research tools

This paper mainly adopted four tools, namely, Excel, Antconc, and Word. First, the random sampling function of Excel and the word limit function of WPS were adopted to select suitable texts from the collected abstracts to build two corpora. Secondly, Antconc was used to calculate the number of different aspects of nominalization that appeared in our samples. After the retrieval of the information, the author screened data by manual tagging and then confirmed the nominalization phenomenon.

### D. Research procedure

The research procedure consisted of two stages. In the first stage, a quantitative approach was adopted to examine the use of nominalization. Abstracts related to business written by Chinese and native English writers

were purposively selected, primarily based on significant differences in the status and role of English as a second language. Data on nominalization were then retrieved using AntConc. The second stage involved a qualitative content analysis of the selected abstracts. After the completion of the first stage, all instances of nominalization were counted and sorted to produce clear descriptive statistics, with AntConc facilitating information retrieval from the corpora. Subsequently, a holistic and detailed analysis was conducted regarding the distribution of nominalizations.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Overall data description

This study compares English abstracts written by graduate students from selected key universities with a major of Business English in China with those written by native English writers and published in core business journals. The abstracts by native writers are evidently shorter than those by Chinese graduate learners. To ensure comparability between the two corpora in terms of total word count, 43 abstracts by Chinese writers and 57 by native writers were selected. Accordingly, abstracts composed by native English writers were downloaded from major business journals, and each had to meet four criteria: publication in a core journal; publication date between 2023 and 2025; the first authors as native English speakers and Chinese majoring in business English; and Abstract length of no less than 200 words. Under these restrictions, 100 abstracts were available. AntConc's concordance tool was used to identify and count the number of nominalization. The comparative data are presented in Table I (CW stands for Chinese writers, while NW for native writers). The corpus of Chinese-authored abstracts contains 13,829 words, while the native-authored corpus contains 14,050 words. Additionally, the Chinese corpus comprises 765 clauses (Clau. for clause), while the native corpus consists of 790 clauses. The abstracts written by Chinese writers are slightly longer on average than those by native writers. As shown in Table I, the average length per abstract by Chinese writers is 321 words, with an average of 17.8 clauses and 11.9 sentences (Sent. For sentence) per paper. For native writers, the average abstract length is 246.5 words, with an average of 13.8 clauses and 8.5 sentences per paper.

TABLE I. HOLISTIC DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Sum			Average		
	Word	Clau.	Sent.	Word	Clau.	Sent.
CW	13829	765	513	321.6	17.8	11.9
NW	14050	790	490	246.5	13.8	8.5

Table II presents a comparison of the average sentence and clause lengths between the two corpora. Native writers produced longer sentences and clauses, with an average of 31.1 words per sentence and 20.3 words per clause, compared to 24.6 words per sentence and 18.2 words per clause for Chinese

writers. This indicates that native writers tend to construct longer and syntactically more complex sentences.

TABLE II. AVERAGE NUMBER OF WORDS

	CW	NW
Average Number of Words per Abstract	321.6	246.5
Average Number of Words per Clause	18.2	20.3
Average Number of Words per Sentence	24.6	31.1

As shown in Table III, the longest abstract (363 words) appears in the Chinese writer corpus, compared with 332 words for native writers. The native writer corpus exhibits the maximum clause length (29 words), the maximum sentence length (40 words), and the shortest abstract (235). In contrast, the Chinese writer corpus records the shortest clause (9 words), the shortest sentence (10 words), and comparatively a longer minimum number of words in abstracts. These findings indicate that native writers tend to produce more informationally dense sentences with greater syntactic complexity.

TABLE III. MAXIMUMS AND MINIMUMS

	CW	NW
Maximum Number of Words in Abstract	363	332
Maximum Number of Words in Clauses	24	29
Maximum Number of Words in Sentences	32	40
Minimum Number of Words in Abstract	314	235
Minimum Number of Words in Clauses	9	10
Minimum Number of Words in Sentences	10	12

Table IV presents a comparative analysis of nominalization frequency in abstracts written by Chinese writers (CW) and native English writers (NW). In terms of lexical nominalization, CW produced a higher total frequency (3,802) than NW (3,704), with the most notable differences found in suffixation (2,076 vs. 1,978) and conversion (1,137 vs. 1,067). Conversely, NW used slightly more gerunds (659 vs. 589). The higher use of suffixation and conversion by CW may reflect a conscious effort to achieve lexical density and formality, often taught as a marker of academic writing in English as a second language contexts. Regarding clausal nominalization, NW exhibited a higher total frequency (908) than CW (803), primarily due to more frequent use of that-clauses (76 vs. 50) and the noun-preposition-noun structure (639 vs. 545). Chinese showed slightly more use of to-infinitive clauses (200 vs. 189) and wh-clauses (8 vs. 4). The greater reliance on clausal nominalizations by NW may indicate a preference for syntactic complexity and explicit clause-level embedding, whereas CW

tended toward lexical (word-level) nominalization. This distinction suggests that while Chinese writers manage to achieve nominal density through derivational morphology, they may be less inclined to employ clause-level nominal constructions, possibly due to differences in instructional focus or L1 transfer effects.

TABLE IV. HOLISTIC FREQUENCY OF NOMINALIZATION

		CW	NW
Lexical Nominalization	suffixation	2076	1978
	gerund	589	659
	conversion	1137	1067
	subtotal	3802	3704
Clausal Nominalization	that-clause	50	76
	wh- clause	8	4
	to- infinitive	200	189
	Noun- preposition-noun	545	639
	subtotal	803	908

Overall, the data reveal that both groups used substantial nominalization, but with different strategic preferences: Chinese writers favored lexical nominalization, whereas native writers leaned more toward clausal nominalization. These findings underscore the importance of examining not only the overall frequency but also the structural types of nominalization in cross-linguistic academic writing research.

*B. Fine-grained analysis of nominalization strategies*

Table V presents the frequencies of three types of lexical nominalizations in the two corpora. Overall, Chinese writers (CW) produced a higher total number of lexical nominalizations (3,547) than native writers (NW, 3,398), suggesting an overuse of lexical nominalization by Chinese writers in business English abstracts. Specifically, Chinese writers used considerably more derivations (1,657 vs. 1,345), whereas native writers employed slightly more gerunds (653 vs. 600) and conversions (1,400 vs. 1,290). The marked difference in derivation may reflect a pedagogical emphasis on suffix-based nominalization in Chinese academic writing instruction, while native writers tend to rely more on conversion and gerund forms, which are often more flexible and less derived.

TABLE V. FREQUENCY OF LEXICAL NOMINALIZATION

	CW	NW
Derivation	1657	1345
Gerund	600	653
Conversion	1290	1400
Total	3547	3398

In contrast, adjective nominalization, which typically expresses state, nature, or degree, is much less frequent than lexical nominalization in both corpora. As shown in Table VI, Chinese writers used fewer adjective nominalizations (418) than native writers (506), indicating an underuse of this type by

Chinese writers. This pattern holds across both derivation (296 tokens for CW vs. 374 for NW) and conversion (122 tokens for CW vs. 132 for NW). The lower frequency of adjective nominalization among Chinese writers may be attributed to a relative lack of exposure to or practice with adjectival-derived nouns in academic writing, or to first-language interference, where adjectives in Chinese are less readily nominalized than in English.

TABLE VI. FREQUENCY OF ADJECTIVE NOMINALIZATION

	CW	NW
Derivation	296	374
Conversion	122	132
Total	418	506

Taken together, the results reveal a divergent pattern: Chinese writers had a stronger awareness to use lexical nominalization but neglected the use of adjective nominalization compared with native English writers. These findings suggest that while Chinese learners have acquired the strategy of deriving nouns from verbs—perhaps overapplying it—they have yet to attain native-like proficiency in using adjective-derived nominalizations, which often require more nuanced semantic and collocational knowledge. Future instruction should therefore address the balanced use of both sub-types to achieve more native-like nominalization practices in business English paper writing.

V. CONCLUSION

This study is a step towards the understanding of nominalization in academic writing. By the discovery of the similarities and differences in the use and frequency of nominalization in business English abstracts written by Chinese writers and native English writers, this paper attempts to shed some light on the use of nominalization for Chinese learners. In this chapter, we will probe into the major findings of the study, the limitations, and the implications for future research.

A. Major findings

First, despite the comparable total word counts between the two corpora (CW: 13,829 words; NW: 14,050 words), notable differences emerge in syntactic density and abstract length. Chinese writers produce substantially longer abstracts on average (321.6 words) than native writers (246.5 words), and their abstracts contain more clauses (17.8 vs. 13.8) and more sentences (11.9 vs. 8.5) per paper. However, native writers construct longer sentences (31.1 words per sentence on average) and slightly longer clauses (20.3 vs. 18.2 words per clause) than their Chinese counterparts. This suggests that native writers achieve greater syntactic compression and complexity within a shorter text length.

Second, regarding nominalization strategies, a clear divergence is observed. Chinese writers favor lexical nominalization (3,802 occurrences) over clausal nominalization (803), whereas native writers, while

using slightly fewer lexical nominalizations overall (3,704), employ significantly more clausal nominalizations (908). In other words, Chinese writers tend to nominalize at the word level, particularly through suffixation and conversion, while native writers rely more on clause-level nominal structures such as that-clauses and the noun-preposition-noun pattern. This distinction indicates that the two groups operationalize nominalization differently: Chinese writers prefer compacting meaning into derived nouns, whereas native writers embed nominalized structures within clause complexes.

Third, within lexical nominalization, a further contrast emerges between lexical nominalization and adjective nominalization. Chinese writers overuse lexical nominalization (3,547 vs. 3,398), especially derivational forms, but underuse adjective nominalization (418 vs. 506) compared to native writers. The present study shows that the overall frequency difference is small, but the strategic preference differs markedly by type.

#### B. Limitations

First, the study is based on a limited sample of 43 English abstracts by Chinese writers and 57 by native English writers. Therefore, more extensive research is needed. Second, not all forms of nominalization are examined, as nominalizations ending with affixes other than those discussed are excluded, and this omission may affect the results. Lastly, to further inform teaching and scientific research, future studies could focus on cross-disciplinary comparisons.

#### C. Implications

The observed differences in the use of nominalization between Chinese writers and native English writers draw attention to the issue of language transfer. English and Chinese differ considerably in form and structure. When writing English abstracts, Chinese learners may rely on translation or produce sentences following Chinese thought patterns, which may account for their relatively lower use of nominalization. In addition, they tend to avoid unfamiliar linguistic structures.

Writing is generally considered more challenging than speaking, particularly in academic contexts. In the current era of information explosion, the abstract serves as a crucial medium for conveying essential information to readers. Therefore, abstract writing ability is vital for learners pursuing academic goals. Nominalization is a key criterion in abstract writing. Moreover, scholars have demonstrated that developing students' awareness of nominalization enhances their academic writing skills. Consequently, it is necessary to emphasize the phenomenon of nominalization.

Nominalization instruction can be approached from various perspectives, including classification, function and use in academic contexts, and the transitivity system. Such instruction and input can

improve learners' awareness of nominalization and their knowledge of English grammatical features, thereby advancing their overall English proficiency. Meanwhile, sufficient language exposure is equally important. As students progress to higher education, academic demands increase, requiring their English level to rise accordingly for adequate comprehension of nominalization in texts. Awareness of nominalization and language performance are mutually reinforcing. By analyzing the use of nominalization in abstracts of business English papers, this paper aims to enhance readers' awareness of nominalization and inform future related research.

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