

# Comparing Professional and Common Literary Critics Using Multi-Dimensional Analysis

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## Abstract

This study uses multi-dimensional analysis to explore the linguistic features of literary criticism by professional critics and common readers. We analyzed 68 linguistic features to identify patterns and differences in critical discourse. The findings show that professional critics tend to be more informational, explanatory, evidence-based, and focused, while common critics are generally less organized, more personal, and dispersed. Understanding these disparities helps bridge the gap between academic and public discourse, establishing a mutual basis for communication and positive interaction, and provides practical guidance for making literary criticism more accessible.

## 1 Introduction

Literary criticism has historically divided professional and common readers (Johnson, 1779; Woolf, 1953). This divide is evident not only in the perspectives and depth of criticism but also in the linguistic features and modes of expression. Common readers' online reviews have become increasingly active, creating a discourse system distinct from traditional professional criticism. Yet, there's a lack of empirical research on these linguistic differences. Studies have explored this from sociological (Koreman et al., 2024) and literary theory (Long, 2024) perspectives, but not much from a linguistic perspective using large-scale data.

This study aims to bridge this gap by analyzing discourse variation between professional and common readers in Chinese

foreign literature criticism from 2008-2022, including academic abstracts and Douban book reviews. The research objectives are: 1) Build a comparative corpus of professional and user reviews. 2) Analyze 68 linguistic features to identify patterns. 3) Use factor analysis to uncover key dimensions. By conducting multi-dimensional analysis, this research seeking to address the following questions.

1. Are there differences between professional literary criticism and general literary reviews across the 5 dimensions?
2. What register variations of professional and common literary critics do the dimensional differences between the two types of reviews reflect?

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Professional Readers and Common Readers

The dichotomy between professional readers and common readers remains a contentious divide, characterized by the opposition and estrangement between the two groups, resulting in a lack of interaction and communication basis. This estrangement is evidenced by a perceived alienation in literary criticism, due to an overemphasis on academic and theoretical aspects (Yin, 2020). This shift has professionalized and academized literary criticism, marginalizing the interests and concerns of ordinary readers, and making literary criticism more exclusive and less accessible (Miall & Kuiken, 1998).

Despite its objective nature of aesthetic value judgments and aesthetic appreciation as the fundamental purpose, professional critics maintain a dominant position in literary criticism. As authority figures, they exert substantial influence in the cultural field, controlling the discursive power of literary criticism (Bourdieu, 1980; Van Rees, 1989; see also Kristensen & From, 2015). From an external perspective, their institutional embeddedness grants traditional critics legitimacy and thus provides them with authority (Janssen, 1997; Verboord, 2010). Discourse delineates their territory and signal how their classifications should be compared to those of others (Tominc, 2014; Van Leeuwen, 2007). Specifically, Koreman et al. (2024) suggests that professional critics use specific strategies to reinforce their authority.

This dominance and authority of professional critics create an ongoing tension with common readers, who often approach literature differently, highlighting the need of diverse perspectives and the de-canonization of critics. Previous studies lack consensus on the precise definition of the “common reader.” Johnson did not explicitly associate this group with a particular class, profession, or level of education (Kernan, 1989:232). Prior to the 18th century, literary works were predominantly aimed at “refined readers” (Engell, 1989:160), who were typically well-educated and equipped to appreciate the subtleties of literature. Over time, the notion of the ordinary reader expanded. During the Neoclassical period, ordinary readers were viewed as individuals embodying universal human traits, with their reading experiences and emotions considered central to literary criticism. According to Zhang & Yin (2022), the term “ordinary readers” encompasses both actual individuals and idealized readers, but primarily refers to a broad audience, comprising most readers who fall outside the realm of literary professionals or those engaged in literary careers.

The rise of electronic reading and online platforms has provided cultural participants

not only with more options to inform common readers on the cultural products but also with places where they can voice their opinions (Beaudouin & Pasquier, 2017; Verboord, 2014). Consequently, the power balance between audiences and critics has changed and new forms of criticism have emerged (Frey, 2014; Jaakkola, 2021; Kristensen & From, 2015).

Douban Books Reviews, a popularized platform for ordinary readers, serves as a public forum for literary critics with personal aesthetic perspectives and democratic critical analyses of literary works. Over two decades, Douban’s online literary criticism has evolved alongside traditional literary criticism, forming a new variant known as Douban literary criticism (Long, 2024).

## 2.2 Biber’s Multi-dimensional Analysis

Register, as a discourse type that emerges to serve different communicative purposes, is a linguistic variety closely associated with specific usage contexts (Biber & Conrad, 2019:6; Halliday, 1978: 31). It reflects the tendency to use certain linguistic features in relation to the specific functions and themes of a text. Different disciplines construct their disciplinary cultures and knowledge through distinct discourse conventions, such as the expression of authorial stance, participation, and the organization of arguments (Hyland & Bondi, 2006). In the context of the disciplinary characteristics of academic discourse, research on the linguistic features of literary academic discourse can reveal certain unique aspects of professional literary criticism.

Biber (1988) proposed the Multi-Dimensional (MD) Analytical Approach, which combines large-scale corpora with dimensionality reduction techniques to extract register dimensions. This method deconstruction features at both macro and micro-level to examine language differences across disciplines and to describe precise language choices in specific contexts (Biber, 2006; Hardy & Römer, 2013). It provides comprehensive methodological support for

analyzing register variation and features in different types of literary criticism discourse.

In English studies, applying multi-dimensional analysis to the study of academic language features and register variation has recently become a focal point in academic writing research. For example, Gray (2013), Xu & Zhang (2023) analyze linguistic strategies in academic research articles, and the conclusions of English research articles (RAs) in linguistics using a multi-dimensional analysis (MDA) method. Abstracts are crucial for evaluating research paper quality and represent article pragmatic tendencies (Hyland, 2000: 63). Multi-dimensional analysis has been applied to humanities journal abstracts (Zhang et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2021). These studies primarily used Nini's (2015) Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT), based on Bibber's framework with 67 features. While demonstrating MDA's applicability to English academic discourse analysis, these studies also revealed limitations in preset linguistic features.

Multi-dimensional analysis in Chinese academic discourse remains limited due to technical constraints. Notable studies include Zhu (2014), Liu (2018; 2019), and Yuan (2022), who identified linguistic feature patterns across 7 dimensions in humanities and social sciences journals. These works utilized computational techniques, advancing and expanding the research scope in Chinese stylistics and language variation. However, multi-dimensional analysis has not yet been applied to Chinese foreign literature studies.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Identification of Professional Readers and Common Readers

For the two kinds of reviews, the distinction between professionals and common readers might not be clear-cut, as, in recent times, “the boundaries between different types of critics (and reviewers) have blurred” (Feldman, 2021). Even though the professional readers build their authority relying on (perceived)

expertise, many types of expertise are hardly unique to professional critics (Koreman et al., 2024). Many of the “amateurs” contributing online have educational credentials and specialized knowledge comparable to “professionals” (Kammer, 2015).

This study distinguishes between “professional critics” and “common critics” based on the authority of the researchers. The former refers to authorized publications that have been peer-reviewed, with critics typically holding a certain social research status. The latter concerns individuals, who contribute reviews on an individual basis without the ‘institutional legitimacy and authority’ of professionals, as these amateurs are not affiliated with or employed by legacy media (Kammer, 2015: 874).

#### 3.2 Corpus Selection and Preprocessing

This research gathered and selected literary criticism data from the past fifteen years (2008-2022), with the aim of representing the voices of both “professional readers” and “common readers” to a certain extent. For professional readers, we have chosen a total of 5720 Chinese abstracts from five authoritative foreign Literary studies journals (CSSCI Index). For general readers, we have manually selected 133 classic foreign literature works out of online book reviews retrieved from the *Douban top 250 book list*. After eliminating review entries with a text length of less than 180 tokens, we have obtained a total of 4536 reviews. Using different sources for corpus data collection, ensuring that the time span is aligned and filtering the text as evenly length as possible as a compromise in the absence of more information from the comments.

In this research, we built comparative corpora: the professional reader corpus (i.e., Pro Corpus) which contains 3,239,857 tokens, and the common reader corpus (i.e., Com Corpus) which contains 3,055,063 tokens. All data are cleaned, including removing full English comments, unnecessary numbers and informal punctuation.

After the comparison of tagging toolkits, including NLP-ICTCLAS, NLTK, HLT-LTP4, and Jieba. Jieba provides the most comprehensive and abundant part-of-speech annotation system and labels, and it was used as a key reference. Word segmentation and part-of-speech tagging are performed using Jieba. The descriptive information of the corpus is presented on Table 1.

### 3.3 Selection of Linguistic Features

Due to the insufficient automatic instruments of the Chinese grammatical system with functional interpretations comparing with English, previous research has predominantly adopted a combined approach of automatic and manual annotation to construct linguistic features. For instance, Liu (2018; 2019) employed a combination of word segmentation systems and manual annotation, extracting 63 and 72 linguistic features respectively, encompassing lexical, grammatical, and rhetorical aspects.

Regarding feature selection, the study referred to the 88 Chinese features proposed by Zhu (2014), which is one of the most comprehensive Chinese feature lists accessible. Given the differences in corpus samples, features with high Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were eliminated based on VIF, and appropriate merging and refinement of features were conducted. Meanwhile, linguistic features crucial to register variation in literary criticism were selected, such as specific word classes, grammatical categories, and syntactic structures related to the

communicative functions of the target register (Pan, 2022).

68 linguistic features were extracted, with statistics on the frequency of occurrence in each abstract and standardized frequency per 1000 tokens. These features belong to 21 categories: Tense and aspect markers, Place and time adverbials, Pronouns, Nominal forms, Expressions, Passive forms, Stative forms, Subordination features, Prepositional phrases, Adjectives and adverbs, Lexical specificity, Auxiliary, Lexical classes, Modals, Verbs and specialized verb classes, Co-ordination, Negation, Exclamation & interjection, Numerals, Quantifiers, and Onomatopoeia.

### 3.4 Data description

This study employed the Python statistical package to conduct an Exploratory Factor Analysis on the normalized data. First, we examine the interpretability of the variables, using `factor_analyzer` to conduct KMO and Bartlett’s test, yielding a KMO value of 0.671. The Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ( $p = .000 < .05$ ), indicating that the data are suitable for factor analysis. Factor analysis was employed to ascertain the loadings of each feature under each factor. A Kaiser Normalization with Varimax Rotation (Kaiser, 1958) is employed to calculate the factor loadings. Through a Kaiser normalization, each row of a table of loadings and cross-loadings is divided by the square root of its communality (Kock, 2014a). This has the effect of making the sum of squared values in each row add up to 1. The first 6 factors were selected to establish the

Type	Source	Docum ent	Min Length	Max Length	Mean Length	Tokens
Pro	《外国文学》(Foreign Literature)	5720	51	605	224.03	3,239,857
	《外国文学》(Foreign Literature)					
	《外国文学评论》(Foreign Literature Review)					
	《当代外国文学》(Contemporary Foreign Literature)					
Com	Douban Online Review (Foreign Literature)	4536	181	255	313.09	3,055,063

Table 1: Description of Comparative Corpus Pro, Com. The corpora consist of professional academic abstracts and Douban book reviews from 2008 to 2022. The book reviews are based on foreign literary works from the Douban Top 250 book list.

dimension referring to the Scree Plot (Figure 1). A total of 40 language features and their loading values were obtained, accounting for 27.546%<sup>1</sup> of the Cumulative Variance Explained. According to Conrad & Biber (2001:39), the linguistic features of dimensions 6 and 7 in the multidimensional analysis are relatively rare, and most studies have discarded them. This study only examines the first 5 dimensions.

### 3.5 Factor Analysis and Dimension score calculation

Dimensional interpretation relies on salient linguistic features with communicative functions, defined by absolute loading values exceeding 0.3. The magnitude of these values correlates with the feature's importance in interpretation. Features are categorized as positive or negative based on their factor loadings, representing two directions (positive and negative) within a dimension. Dimensions may include feature sets with similar or divergent orientations, showing complementary distribution across registers. According to Conrad & Biber (2001:39), the linguistic features of dimensions 6 and 7 in the multidimensional analysis are relatively rare, and most studies have discarded them. Dimensional scores for comparative corpora validate the 5 dimensions in distinguishing between professional literary criticism and common reviews. The process involves calculating standardized score (z-scores) for linguistic features in both corpora using Python. Then compute dimensional scores for each text by summing positive loadings and subtracting negative loadings. Averaging these scores to obtain the final register dimensional score (Figure 2).

According to the standardized score of the language feature frequency data, the scores of each text in 6 dimensions are obtained by quantitative weighting of the factor loadings of each dimension. After the score is standardized,

it can be quantitatively compared regardless of the length of the text.

The following analyzes and names the first 5 dimension of the humanities and social sciences register with reference to the linguistic characteristics of each dimension and the mean of the domain dimension of the discipline, combined with specific texts.

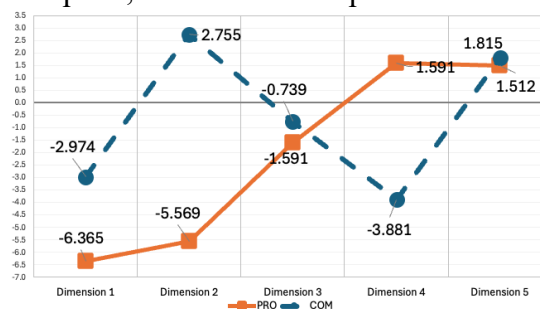


Figure 2: Dimension score of 5 dimensions

## 4 Dimensional analysis of texts in both registers

### 4.1 Personal subjective stance vs. Objective description and interpretation

The first dimension (Table 2) clusters linguistic features expressing personal perspective and emotion, including adverbs, adjectives, state words (d, a, z), and amplifiers (ap), adding descriptive and evaluative resources. Adverbs include “amplifiers”, “emphatics”, “downtoners”, and “hedges”. The first two reinforcements mark higher topic engagement (Chafe, 1982). For evaluative language, it has been emphasized in academic discourse by Hyland (2005). The structure of “是(vshi)” verb makes more concise judgments, when used with predicates, conveys sparse information and often pairs with demonstrative pronouns (rzv) to express judgments or evaluations. Brainerd (1972) grouped pronouns to explain less informative, less accurate, or less formal styles, rarely appearing in formal written texts that require clarity and formality.

In the use of personal pronouns, the first-person pronoun (rr1) appears in this dimension.

<sup>1</sup> The Cumulative Variance Explained in Literary content is weakly lower than in other fields of general humanities.

	Linguistic Features	Label	Loadings
POS	Total adverbs	d	0.671
	Total pronouns	r	0.596
	Amplifiers	ap	0.468
	Demonstrative pronoun	rz	0.455
	First-person pronouns	rr1	0.454
	Total other adjectives	a	0.440
	Numerals	m	0.397
	Interjection	y	0.393
	Proverb	i	0.383
	Predicate demonstrative pronoun	rzv	0.360
	Adjectives as noun and predicate attributes	z	0.328
	Concessive adverbial subordinators (although, though)	cas	0.318
	Verb “shi” as main verb	vshi	0.310
NEG	Public verbs	pv	-0.656
	Verbs functioning as noun	vn	-0.538
	Preposition	p	-0.478
	Coordinating conjunctions	cc	-0.378

Table 2: The linguistic features of the dimension 1 and factor loadings. POS and NEG represent the positive and negative linguistic features according to factor loadings respectively (similarly hereinafter).

Although some scholars argued that the use of first-person pronouns shows the author’s ownership and identity posture towards academic propositions and knowledge creation (Hyland, 2012). However, in literary criticism, professional critics intend to strip away the identity of the author, that is, avoids subjective expressions, such as “我 (I)”, “我们 (we)”, “笔者 (author)”, “本文/拙文/拙作 (this article)”, etc. This separate their personal preferences from the quality of the book through reflexive reading (Chong, 2013: 274–275). On the contrary, the personal point of view (articulated, e.g. by the usage of first-person pronouns) is found in common reviews (De Jong and Burgers, 2013; Skalicky, 2013). This is consistent with what the general readership holds, a popular aesthetic “that emphasizes functional, emotional and experiential ways of evaluation (Van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010: 397). Common readers’ interpretations are based on personal feelings and life experiences, providing more

emotional and personal reflection of how literary works are received and their impact on society. These characteristics reflect the readers’ evaluation of texts as interactive, low information density, context-dependent, and less formal style.

The factor loadings of the negative feature groups of this dimension, such as the common verb (pv) and the function of the verb as a noun (vn), were -0.656 and -0.538, which tended to reduce the interactivity and enhance the descriptive and written. Preposition(p) contains prepositions that represent means and credentials, such as “凭借”, “通过”, “依照”, etc., emphasizing the basis for objective statements and inferences, which helps to enhance logical coherence and persuasiveness. The positive characteristics (pv, vn, p) are indicated with different symbols.

[1]当代小说探访的核心问题是文本自身的运行。戏仿是文本言说自我的方式之一，将重心从被表现之物转向表现过程。什维亚通过戏仿各种文学类型检验作家继承和创新文学遗产的能力。本文力图通过分析什维亚作品中的戏仿现象来思考书写与意义、书写与文明之间的关系。

Example [1] reflects professional literary critics’ preference in descriptive and objective evaluation concepts, “moving from knowledge that is embodied or instinctive to knowledge built on rational arguments” (Chong, 2013: 273), engaging in “evidence-based reviewing” (p. 272).

The dimension score of professional literary reviews and common reader -6.365 and -2.974 respectively, with a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates more frequent co-occurrence of negative features in professional reviews, suggesting stronger objectivity. However, the overall factor loadings and dimension scores are relatively low.

Professional literary criticism is rooted in extensive literary background, theoretical knowledge, and professional analysis. Critics “invoke conceptions of art (literature) that resonate with the wider field of cultural production” (Janssen, 1997; Van Rees, 1989).

Conversely, common critics “rarely translate these discursive propositions into an argumentation which explains in a more detailed way why this specific emotion is evoked” (Koreman et al., 2024), focusing on personal emotional statements and subjective assertions. This reveals the tendencies of professional and common literary critics, in this dimension, while both texts generally employ interpretive and descriptive language features, literary studies, as an interpretive discipline (Becher, 1989), are more closely connected to aesthetic consciousness and interpretability.

#### 4.2 Literary narrative vs. Evidence-based

	Linguistic Features	Label	Loadings
POS	total verbs	v	0.817
	verbs used as adverb	vd	0.739
	necessity modals	nm	0.394
	possibility modals	pm	0.359
	private verbs	prv	0.356
	predictive modals	prm	0.353
	directional verbs	vf	0.332
	total conjunctions	c	0.327
NEG	total nouns	n	-0.632
	name of persons	nr	-0.521
	names of persons translated based on pronunciation	nrt	-0.397

Table 3: The linguistic features of the second dimension and factor loadings.

For the second dimension, common readers focus the narrative of literary content. They situate the content in their own life and often discuss their connection with the book. This accords with the findings of previous studies (De Jong and Burgers, 2013; Skalicky, 2013; Verboord, 2014) indicating that the amateurs often refer to their own experience. This dimension includes private verbs (prv), which express the psychological activities of characters in the text. Along with event modality verbs (Cui, 2003) indicating necessity (nm), expressing possibility (pm), predicative modal words (prm), these linguistic elements collectively contribute to a dimension that reflects personal involvement, interaction and subjective expression. The

presence of private verbs allows for the articulation of internal states and cognitive processes, while the various modal verbs and directional verbs facilitate the expression of attitudes, possibilities, and movement in both literal and figurative senses. The co-occurrence of these features suggests a discourse style that is more informal, personal, and narrative-driven. It contrasts with more objective, impersonal academic writing styles.

Negative features primarily focus on proper nouns such as personal names (nr), translated place names (nrt), and geographical names (ns). As Biber (1988) posits, nouns are the main carriers of referential meaning in a text, indicating a text with higher information density. It is commonly found in literary history studies, particularly in the analysis of authors’ lives and works. This information provides the basis for in-depth analysis and evidence-based research.

#### 4.3 Colloquialism vs. Explanatory

	Linguistic Features	Label	Loadings
POS	exclamation	e	0.9716
	English Words	eng	0.9718

Table 4: The linguistic features of the dimension 3 and factor loadings.

Exclamations (e) and English Words (eng) have high factor loadings in this dimension (Table 4), representing colloquial and professional expression features respectively. Exclamations are often associated with propositional modality, expressing the speaker’s attitude, stance, and even emotions (Cui, 2020), and indicating informality and orality. English Words denote specialized terminology, often used to elaborate or specify literary concepts or definitions, enhancing precision and reducing ambiguity, see [2]. These characteristics suggest that this dimension is closely linked to the different reviewer’s explanatory, and colloquial narrative discourse traits respectively.

[2] 雌雄同体(androgyne)这个文学构想是伍尔夫研究,尤其是《一间自己的房间》研究中经常被提及的重要概念之一。

#### 4.4 Textual richness vs. Monotony

In Table 5, positive features in this dimension

Linguistic Features		Label	Loadings
POS	type token ratio	ttr	0.358
NEG	total auxiliary	u	-0.8586
	auxiliary de for the possessive case of noun	ude1	-0.7556
	auxiliary le aspect article	ule	-0.3217

Table 5: The linguistic features of the fourth dimension and factor loadings.

is type/token ratio (ttr), which is a measure of morphological richness, and reflects the diverse usage of words with different syllables in the text (Xie, 2024; Liu, 2019). Academic texts exhibit high lexical complexity, featuring numerous multi-syllabic words, particularly two to four-syllable terms. This characteristic enhances information density and semantic precision in expressing complex concepts. The elevated type/token ratio indicates rich word patterns and precise expression, aligning with the abstract nature that literary papers pay more attention to proposing and presenting the arguments (Conrad & Biber, 2001: 29). This linguistic feature enhances information density by conveying more specific and specialized content, allows for greater semantic precision and dispersion (diversity) of discourse content in expressing complex concepts.

Negative features include auxiliary words (u), the aspect marker “了” (ule), and the structural particle “的” (ude1), reflecting lexical monotony. The frequent use of “的”, which expresses the modifying or restrictive relationship between attributes and head words, demonstrates vocabulary uniformity through its repetitive usage in the text.

The dimensions of professional literary criticism and general reader reviews are 1.501 and -3.881 respectively, with a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ). This indicates that professional literary criticism exhibits significantly higher lexical richness and information density compared to general reader reviews.

#### 4.5 Structural Controllability

Dimension 5 (Table 6) focuses on negation

Linguistic Features		Label	Loadings
POS	mean word length	wl	0.9886
	negation	ngt	0.9889

Table 6: The linguistic features of the dimension 5 and factor loadings.

(ngt) and word length (wl). Negation serves functions such as emphasis, contrast, and exclusion. By modulating the information flow, it enables speakers to convey messages more effectively and control discourse structure, which makes the content more involved, and topics concentrated, as exemplified in [3].

[3] 此次的伦理转向不是回到 19 世纪的文学批评传统，而是对形式主义的驳斥和对文学作为一种认知方式的重新定位。此次的复兴也不是道德批评的重申，而是伦理批评的进一步发展。

### 5 Conclusion

This study reveals major differences in language use between professional critics and common readers in Chinese foreign literature criticism. These disparities reflect divergent purposes, audiences, and modes of expression, while also highlighting the power dynamics and discourse constructions within the field. Observations based on MDA show that professional literary criticisms focus on extensive literary evidence, whereas common critics are often rooted in personal emotions and experiences evoked by literary narratives. The differences indicate that, although both groups employ interpretive and descriptive language features, general readers exhibit a more personalized aesthetic perspective. Their voices have become an essential part of literary criticism, influencing diverse interpretations of literary value and critical practices. This research provides a new approach to understanding literary criticism from the perspective of varying discourse, emphasizing the interplay between expert analysis and common reader engagement.



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