SELLING THEIR RESEARCH: THE LINGUISTIC REALIZATION OF RHETORIC MOVES IN ENGLISH THESIS ABSTRACTS WRITTEN BY HUNGARIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract: Abstracts are short and dense summaries of the main aspects of academic work. Major rhetoric moves, such as the aim the research, description of the methodology, the summary of the results, are identified in 52 undergraduate theses written by Hungarian students of English. Emphasis is given to the academic lexical bundles, the use of tenses and aspects, personal pronouns, modal auxiliaries, hedging in the realization of these moves. Comparison is made between novice and experienced writers. The pedagogical implications of the findings are also discussed.

Keywords: abstract, academic phrases, academic writing, rhetoric moves, undergraduates

1. Introduction

Inexperienced academic writers, such as undergraduate students of English writing their thesis, are faced with multiple challenges while trying to adhere to the requirements of academic discourse. They have to attend to methodological issues, text construction, grammatical and lexical choices and referencing simultaneously, a task which is demanding in the authors' L1, let alone in an L2 as a foreign language. While students in this research show different levels of target language competence, being only at the end of their three-year BA studies, they have a high proficiency in the reading of research articles and books, as they do most of their readings for classes and research in English. Yet, the planning and writing of a thesis as long as 20-35 pages in English, as the main requirement for graduation, remain a major challenge. Previous corpus-based studies have pointed out instances of over-, under- or misuse in the lexical choices made in learners' academic texts (e.g. Hyland 2001, Martínez 2005). For example, research has found a gap between native expert academic writing and university student academic writing (both native and non-native) in terms of the use of formulaic language. L2 writers tend to over-generalize and favor certain phrases and connectors and use academic bundles less (Chen and Baker 2010, Li and Schmitt 2009). Task difficulty, lack of experience in academic text

production and the availability of electronic resources may draw students to patchwriting, misuse of sources and, also, unawareness of the functions and the pragmatic and rhetoric potentials of certain lexical and structural choices they make (Pecorari 2003, Martínez 2005, Wette 2010, Weigle and Parker 2012, Petrić 2012). Student writers are often glad to fulfill requirements by filling up pages with seemingly appropriate linguistic and structural forms, yet, are unaware of the fact that their choices carry meaning. In the case of thesis writing, students need to be familiar with the literacy practices of their chosen disciplines, and to learn that the texts they write are part of a disciplinary discussion. This is so regardless of the fact that most of the theses remain unpublished and that, in the majority of cases, their readership is limited to supervisors and other instructors.

A key element of academic texts, especially research articles, is the abstract. The abstract is usually the last item authors write, but the first or only one people read in order to gain a quick overview of the whole paper or decide to read it further. Therefore, authors need to be very precise and accurate in order to "sell" their research to their potential readers. If the abstract is unclear or does not contain key information, it is very likely that it loses readership. In short, abstracts serve as a window to the content and quality of articles or other shorter academic texts, and they are important to be studied both from the writers' and the readers' point of view. Abstracts are short (usually between 150 and 300 words) and provide a dense summary of the background, aims, methods, results and conclusions of the paper (Wallwork 2011). The structure or the length of the abstracts may vary according to the publishers' or conference organizers' guidelines. Highly structured abstracts are typical of conferences in health sciences in the case of which online application forms provide pre-set space for the different moves of the abstracts; therefore, all abstracts need to follow the same format (Bayley and Eldredge 2003). In the case of soft sciences, general guidelines are provided in terms of length or number of key words only. In all cases, abstracts, as academic genres, need to follow the conventions of academic discourse and to be formal, objective and well-structured, and to use both academic vocabulary and technical terms. Academic vocabulary points beyond the use of Coxhead's (2000) academic word list and infers the inclusion of academic lexical phrases as main building blocks of texts.

Academic works, including research abstracts, are built of steps that construct their rhetoric or move structure. Pho (2008) identifies five main moves in research article abstracts, namely situating and presenting the research, describing the methodology and summarizing and discussing the findings. Each move can be identified according to its functions and the questions they answer (see Table 1). The author points out that move identification based on content or function should be supported by the analysis of linguistic realizations. Furthermore, rather than relying on single linguistic features, a cluster of features need to be considered. A move can be realized by textual sections as small as phrases or clauses, but usually moves follow each other in separate sentences or groups of sentences (Lorés 2004, Pho 2008).

Moves	Functions	Questions to ask
1. Situating the research	Setting the scene, topic generalization	What has been known about the field/topic of research?
2. Presenting the research	Setting the purpose of the study, research questions/hypotheses	What is the study about?
3. Describing the methodology	Describing the materials, subjects, variables, procedures	How was the research done?
4. Summarizing the findings	Reporting the main findings of the research	What did the research find?
5. Discussing the findings	Interpreting the results, giving recommendations, implications, applications	What do the results mean? So what?

Table 1: Framework for the analysis of move structure in abstracts (Pho 2008:234)

While most studies that investigate the moves of academic papers do not combine the analysis of moves with the study of their linguistic realization (see for the moves in introductions e.g. Hirano 2009, Sheldon 2011), a number of previous studies have focused on the linguistic features of articles, such as tense use (Malcolm 1987), personal pronouns (Harwood 2005, Martínez 2005), voice (Martínez 2001, Stotesbury 2003), vague language or hedging (Hyland 1996) and lexical phrases or bundles (Biber and Barbieri 2007, Strunkytė and Jurkūnaitė 2008). Very few studies so far have linked choices of linguistic features with rhetorical structure (see e.g. Anderson and Maclean 1997, Lorés 2004, Pho 2008, 2009).

With this perspective, the present study uses Pho's 2008 model to identify the structural organization of undergraduate thesis abstracts written by Hungarian students of English or American studies and their linguistic realization. This specific study population was chosen due to the fact that their academic writing customs have not been fully explored, although a number of previous studies have investigated the language use in essays written by Hungarian undergraduates (e.g. Horváth 2001, Lehmann 2003, Doró 2007, 2008, Zergollern-Miletić and Horváth 2009). As BA thesis writers have difficulties both with research design and writing, their thesis drafts are usually returned by the supervisor, often several times, for language and content revision. Abstracts, in most cases, are the final steps in thesis production and are written without close supervision. Therefore, we can safely conclude that they give the most accurate picture of the students' academic writing abilities. After the identification of the macrostructure of the theses, the following linguistic features are investigated here: academic vocabulary, academic phrases, verb tense and aspect, self-reference words including the personal pronoun *I*, and finally modal auxiliaries and other forms of hedging.

2. Methodology

The corpus used in this study consists of 52 abstracts taken from BA English or American studies theses written in 2011 by undergraduate students enrolled at a major Hungarian university. Students were instructed to include a 200–300 word abstract both in English and in Hungarian in their theses. The present investigation focuses on the English versions, which build an 11.345-word corpus. The move categories were first coded manually, then the linguistic features underwent both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The applied linguistics papers (n=12) and theses written in other fields (literature, culture, gender studies, history, n=40) were analyzed separately for moves as it was assumed that the linguistics papers, which all include the analysis of empirical data, might have different macrostructures from those that do not necessarily have empirical data collected by the student authors.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Macrostructure of Thesis Abstracts

The analysis of the moves revealed that the five moves identified by Pho (2008) were only partly present in the thesis abstracts. The only move that is included in all abstracts is move 2, presentation of the research. As shown in Table 2, the assumption that linguistics papers differ from the others in terms of move structure was supported. Move 1 was found by Pho to be non-obligatory and his findings were similar to those of the student papers which show even lower figures (33% for linguistics paper and 27% for the others). Move 3, methodology of the research, is mentioned in 92% and in 90% of the two subgroups, which is a slightly lower figure than the one found by Pho (2008). One would assume that the methodology move is clearly worded in thesis abstracts, emphasizing the students' own work, but this is not always so. What is more surprising is the lack of the summary of the findings in over half of the non-linguistics theses, leaving the reader puzzled as to what the author did in his or her study. Meanwhile, the findings are clearly stated in all but one applied linguistics papers. Move 5, the discussion of the results, is an option only if the results are presented first; therefore, only half of the linguistics papers and only one culture paper provide interpretation of the findings. These are figures significantly lower than the 70% found by Pho.

Moves	Applied ling theses (n=12)	Literature, culture, history theses (n=40)	Results of Pho (2008) (n=30)
1. Situating the research	4 (33%)	11 (27%)	40%
2. Presenting the research	12 (100%)	40 (100%)	100%
3. Describing the methodology	11 (92%)	36 (90%)	97%
4. Summarizing the findings	11 (92%)	17 (42%)	100%
5. Discussing the findings	6 (50%)	1 (2.5%)	70%
6. The structure of the thesis	2 (17%	8 (20%)	--
7. Preparatory steps	--	5 (12%)	--
8. Comments	1 (8%)	9 (22%)	--

Table 2: Move structure of thesis abstracts

It needs to be noted here that moves other than the five indicated by Pho were identified in the thesis abstracts. These are referred here as move 6, reference to the structure of the paper (see example 1), move 7, reference to the preparatory steps of the writing process (see examples 2), and move 8, comments on the topic or the thesis itself (see examples 3). These moves seem to be more appropriate in an introduction rather than a short and dense abstract, and make the author sound less professional and focused.

(1) *Thus, I will conduct my analysis in five chapters to describe …Finally, I will summarize my study and conclude that …*

(2a) *Furthermore, I collected relevant sources to describe the various methods' potentials, and in order to make the reader familiar with this interesting subject.*

(2b) *In order to gain a background for my argumentation, I have read through a number of relevant books that deal with the literature and poetry of the age.*

(3a) *I have been interested in America and its history for a long time. That is the reason why I picked the American Civil War as the topic of my BA thesis.*

(3b)   *I believe my thesis is an important and enjoyable one, because it contains the required amount of background needed in order to understand my argumentation without becoming too superfluous at the expense of poetic analyses.*

Although the majority of previous studies have not focused on the order of the moves, but assumed a logical flow, the analysis of the student corpus revealed a non-linearity from move 1 to move 5. Pho (2008), for example, only found a few instances of move cycles or move embedding. All thesis abstracts show reference to at least two moves, but moves often follow each other in an unexpected order or are referred to more than once. Often times, therefore, the labeling of certain sentences or passages in terms of moves is problematic. Some macrostructures that are unusual in published research articles are found, for example, in theses with move structure 2, 3; moves 2, 1, 3; moves 2, 6, 3; moves 2, 3, 2, 4, 2, 3, and moves 2, 8, 7, 8, 3.

3.2. Academic Words and Phrases

Overall, the results of the analysis of academic word use revealed that 10.1% of the running words in the abstracts consist of the academic word list. This is in line with previous research that shows a close to 10% ratio of academic words in academic texts. The academic verbs that are present in the abstracts are *analyze, approach, constitute, create, define, establish, formulate, identify, imply, initiate, indicate, interpret, invoke, involve, manipulate, modify, motivate, occur, pose, predict, process, reconstruct, reinterpret, require, reveal, specify, summarize, symbolize, target, trace, transform, undertake, undergo, validate, visualize.* These and a number of other verbs, especially in the function of reporting verbs (such as *show, reveal, indicate, argue, propose*), suggest that most students have the productive knowledge of academic language. Manual coding was also done in order to identify longer lexical chunks typical of academic texts. These academic phrases often introduce moves, which helps both the authors and the readers to identify key aspects of the abstracts. Examples for introductory phrases of move 2 are:

(4)   *The topic of my BA Thesis is the ...*
       The aim of my thesis is to ...
       In this essay I discuss the ...
       This paper concerns ...
       This thesis wishes primarily to dwell on the ...
       The present paper is an attempt to ...
       This study analyses and compares...
       This paper provides a review of ...

Most of the phrases in examples (4) are also found in published texts, although the first three are more typical of student writers and are less academic in style. The examples (5)

provided for the introductory phrases of the results section of the abstracts all follow the conventions and rhetoric of academic discourse. In conclusion, highly academic, excellent phrases are found in all five major moves in some abstracts, while others are only partly successful in employing them.

(5)   *The thesis concludes that…*
        The present findings suggest that …
        Although more research is needed to be able to generalize these results, it can be concluded that…

3.3. The Linguistic Realizations of Moves

3.3.1. Verb Tenses and Aspect

Pho (2008) shows that the most common combinations of tense and aspect in research abstracts are present simple, past simple and present perfect. The author concludes that certain moves have typical tense and aspect combinations. The *Situating the research* move (move 1) uses present simple and present perfect, the *Presenting the research* move (move 2) present simple or past simple, the *Describing the methodology* and the *Summarizing the findings* moves (moves 3 and 4) typically employ past simple, and the *Discussing the research* move (move 5) present simple. As opposed to Pho's findings, a frequent reference to the future using the auxiliary *will* is seen in the thesis abstracts. It is possible to infer that this is not typical of published academic abstracts. Reference to the future using *will* occurs in 14 abstracts, altogether 55 times, which indicates that in some abstracts the predominant reference is to the future, which is highly problematic in sections other than move 5 when implications, applications or future directions are discussed. The constant reference to the future suggests that student authors of these texts view their thesis as unfinished or confuse the genre of a research proposal or plan with the final product.

In the thesis corpus, the predominant tense–aspect combination for move 1 is the present simple and the present perfect, for move 2 the present and past simple, while for move 3 the present and past simple, together with reference to the future using *will* and the present perfect. Move 4 usually presents findings using the present and past simple. Most of these results are in line with previous research except for the indication of future plans.

An unjustified mixture of tenses is also seen in a number of abstracts, which again suggests uncertainty about the students' own academic work, the genre conventions or academic language use in general. Examples are seen below in (6) and (7), extracted from two abstracts.

(6)   *This thesis <u>proposes</u> to provide an analysis of …*
        I <u>am interested</u> in how they reflect …
        I <u>concentrated</u> on the literary techniques …

(7)   *In my thesis <u>I'm concentrating</u> on …*

        I <u>have read</u> …

        I <u>enlisted</u> …

        …<u>will be discussed</u> in my work.

3.3.2. Self-Reference Words

Self-referencing in academic texts is done through the use of the following words: *I, me, my, mine, myself, we, us, our, ours, ourselves, the author(s)* and *the researcher(s)*. A close examination of the thesis abstracts indicates that of these options students employ only the first person singular personal pronoun *I*. It occurs 145 times in 28 of the 52 abstracts, which shows that more than half of the students position themselves in the center of the research. It is debatable, however, whether the personal pronoun choice was a deliberate one to indicate authorial stance or rather illustrates a less academic, personal style. The analysis of the grammatical subjects reveals that noun phrases with the main words *(BA)thesis, paper, study, essay, work* are also frequently used in the abstracts.

3.3.3. Modal Auxiliaries and Hedging

According to Pho (2008) modals and semi-modals (such as *need to*) are usually used in move 5, the interpretation of the results and their implication or application. The other moves employ less auxiliaries and cautious language use. In the student theses, however, the modal verb *may* is found once in move 1, twice in move 2 and four times in move 5. The auxiliary *can* appears 36 times, across all moves. It is often used as a form of cautious data interpretation (*…which can be due to the lack of color vocabulary in English…*) or as part of fixed phrases (*The present study can contribute to …; … it can be concluded that...; we can see that …*). It also indicates modality (*I will show how differently it can be used, how it can fulfill different roles...*). *Need to* and *might* are not represented in the corpus, while *have to* appears twice in move 4. As discussed in the previous sub-section, there is a surprisingly high frequency rate of the auxiliary *will*.

Other forms of cautious language use and hedging are visible in the abstracts (see examples 8), especially in the choice of verbs or verb phrases, such as *intend, attempt, make an attempt, wish, tend* and *try*. Some of these verbs also indicate incomplete work, uncertainty in the aims or outcomes of the research. It is unclear whether they are deliberately used as an indicator of sophisticated lexical use without the awareness that certain lexical choices downgrade the text rather than showing expertise.

(8)   *This thesis <u>intends to</u> examine…*

        Finally, <u>an effort is made to prove</u> that..

        In this paper <u>an attempt is made to find</u>…

I <u>wish to</u> argue…
I <u>attempt to say</u> that…
This essay <u>tends to</u> prove…
I <u>try to</u> show symbols

4. Conclusion

This study provided empirical support for the observation that great variability exists in the quality and structure of thesis abstracts written by inexperienced authors such as undergraduates. The results show the students' effort to employ the discourse of the academic community they marginally participate in.

The findings reported above suggest that there are important differences in the rhetoric organization of thesis abstracts and published research abstracts. In addition, more successful abstract writing is seen among the applied linguistics abstracts than in abstracts written in other fields. Three moves that are not typical of research article abstracts were also identified. The linguistic realization of these eight moves shows both similarities and differences compared to abstracts written by more experienced researchers. The most striking difference between novice and expert authors' texts lies in the uncertainty and unfocused writing that is visible through the mixture of move cycles, reference to the finished work as future task, hedging and frequent shifts between academic and non-academic styles. These features unquestionably "sell" research papers with less success. It is the task of future research to clarify whether similar problems occur in the theses themselves and to provide support to the observation that poor abstract writing often announces problematic research reports and theses.

Problems of misuse may be solved by awareness raising through various means, for example, by drawing students' attention to particular lexical choices and concordances in corpora containing texts written by student or novice academic writers and those produced by expert researchers, both natives and non-natives. Lists of academic phrases may also be provided to students; however, instructors of academic writing and supervisors of novice writers should be cautious in providing models that are later overused (Coxhead and Byrd 2007). Guided or self-discovery of various lexical and rhetoric choices should be encouraged together with their functions and strategic potentials.

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