A comparative study of textual and rhetorical features of abstracts written by expert and novice writers

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ABSTRACT: This article presents a comparative study of textual and rhetorical features of abstracts written by expert and novice writers. Using a comparative corpus of abstracts written by expert scholars and by novice scholars in the Field of linguistics, the results of this study indicate that the published scholars' abstracts seem to distance from the established rhetorical moves while the novice scholars' abstracts all adhere to the rhetorical moves established for writing abstracts. Based on some concepts of genre and on scholars' contributions for the genre "abstract", the main elements and lexicogrammar choices are analyzed and finally comments on the result of the analysis are made**.**

KEYWORDS: genre, abstracts, analysis, rhetorical structure, lexicogrammar choices.

Introduction

For the past decades, there has been a growing interest in the study of genre, mainly in specialized language teaching and in the development of professional communication skills. Nowadays, according to Swales, genre is quite easily used to refer to a distinctive category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations (Swales**,** 1990:33). Based on this view of genre, many scholars have already examined the instantiations of genre in different fields, such as literary studies, linguistics, rhetoric among others in order to tackle genre as a rhetorical construct for language teaching.

My purpose in this essay is not to report the extent to which these scholars have reached valuable conclusions in each single field. Instead, I will present how the specific genre of the research article abstract has been described by Bhatia and Swales and then, how

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this particular genre can be suitably approached in EAP language teaching. I intend to focus on the analysis on the genre of abstracts since it is one of the most widely used genre in academic and research settings. According to the American National Standards Institute, "an abstract is an abbreviated, accurate representation of the contents of a document, preferably prepared by its author(s) for publication with it" (ANSI 1979:1) Also, we have to take into consideration that abstracts in published papers function as independent discourses (Van Dick, 1980) since they summarize the content and structure of the whole following text in advance. My first goal in this paper is to show the rhetorical organization and the main lexicogrammar choices presented in a corpus of abstracts written by established scholars and compared them with the rhetorical organization and lexicogrammar features of abstracts written by post-graduate students. By this means I intend to identify some difficulties that these students may find while working on this particular piece of writing.

Definitions of genre

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community. The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute a valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation. (Swales, 1990; 58).

Bhatia takes Swales's definition with some comments and contributions concerning communicative purposes, communicative events and constraints. As he cites, any major change in the communicative purpose gives us a different genre. Also, it is the ongoing result of a long training in a particular community that shapes the genre and gives it a conventionalized internal structure. Concerning the constraints of the genre abstract, it is said that even though the writer is free to use linguistic resources in any way, breaking the conventions of the genre would be inadequate. Bhatia sums up the concept of genre by saying that 'it is an instance of a specific communicative purpose using conventionalized

knowledge of linguistic and discoursal resources'. As Bhatia points out his concept of genre it is clear that the two scholars share several similar features even when they state their different points of view.

Features of abstracts

Abstracts from different fields of study are usually written in a quite similar way because writers follow conventional criteria concerning the types of information to be included and the logical order that they should be placed.

Abstracts have at least four distinct uses according to Huckin (1987:93)

> First, they serve as stand-alone mini-texts, giving readers a quick summary of the study's topic, methodology and findings. Second, they serve as screening devices, enabling the reader to decide whether to read the article as a whole. Third, for those readers who do opt to read the article as a whole, abstracts serve as previews, creating an interpretive frame that can guide reading. Finally, abstracts serve as aids to indexing by professional indexers for large database services.

Graetz (1985) gave her initial contributions by summarizing these features about the language of abstracts sometime ago

> The abstract is characterized by the use of past tense, third person, passive, and the non-use of negatives. It avoids subordinate clauses, uses phrases instead of clauses, words instead of phrases. It avoids abbreviation, jargon, symbols and other language shortcuts which might lead to confusion. It is written in tightly worded sentences, which avoid repetition, meaningless expressions, superlatives, adjectives illustrations, preliminaries, descriptive details, examples, footnotes. In short it eliminates the redundancy which the skilled reader counts on finding in written language and which usually facilitates comprehension. (Graetz, 1985:125)

On the other hand, Swales comments on Graetz's conclusion concerning the use of past tense. He states as follows

> [it seems] clear that tense usage in abstracts is fairly complicated. First, the conclusions are nearly always in the present. Second, research paper summary abstracts often use the present or present perfect for their opening statements. Third, there appears to be considerable disciplinary and individual tense variation with sentences dealing with results. (Swales 1990: XX)

The most frequent order of elements included in an abstract are: the background information, the purpose of the study and its scope, the methodology used, the results of the

study and a statement of conclusion or recommendation. That is, the B-P-M-R-C sequence according to Weissberg and Buker (1990). Even though Weissberg and Buker suggest this pattern, in my research, I noticed that not all abstracts follow this sequence, as can be seen in Chart 1, but they should be as brief and concise as possible. On the other hand, it is often established a word limit for the journal articles and conference abstracts so that the authors and speakers do not exceed this limit. In order to fit such limitations, Weissberg and Buker (1990) state that abstract writers should rely on reduced abstracts that typically focus on two or three elements since the more synthesized the information provided in the abstract is, the better.

The plenary lectures abstracts at conferences have been shown to vary in interesting ways from other research genres, in consequence of several factors, conference abstracts, as Swales states, are much more of a "selling work" than research paper abstracts, since they are often longer, they need to impress the review committee, and appeal (if accepted) to as large an audience as possible (Swales and Feak, 2000:214).

Methods

The corpus of analysis consisted of 15 abstracts in applied linguistics, five of them written by published scholars and ten of them written by post-graduate students. The fifteen abstracts were written in English by non-native speakers of English, and published in 2008. All the abstracts were retrieved from a recently-held conference website in electronic format.

An interesting feature for the comparison is that while the five abstracts were written by published Anglophone scholars the ten post-graduate students' abstracts belong to Spanish researchers. The abstracts were analyzed according their rhetorical structure as well as the lexicogrammatical elements, following the model used by Weissberg and Buker in terms of moves. With regard to lexicogrammar aspects of the abstracts, some variation was taken into consideration concerning the verb tenses since, Swales and Feak (2000) argue, it seems that choice of tense and person may be partly a strategic matter in abstracts.

Results and discussions

Analysis of the fifteen abstracts (See Charts 1 and 2)

Chart 1 below provides information on the organizational structure and the lexicogrammar features of the abstracts written by the published scholars.

Chart 1 - Published Scholars

	Abstract 1	**Abstract 2**	**Abstract 3**	**Abstract 4**	**Abstract 5**
Background	Background information is provided in the **present tense**	No background information is given	No background information is given	Background information is provided in the **present tense**	No background information is given
Purpose	In my presentation, I will discuss (modal auxiliary)	In this paper I will present recent…(modal auxiliary)	This paper will analyse the presence (modal auxiliary)	In this paper I explore some of the … (present)	In this overview, I survey some … I consider … (present)
Methods	The text-linguistic analysis <u>will be supported</u> by opinions... (modalised passive)	The argument <u>will be developed</u> through the application of … (modalised passive)	These investigations <u>rely on a</u> especially compiled corpus… (present tense)	I show how different language choices <u>are employed</u> to negotiate... (unmodalised passive)	These under-explored features <u>might include</u> the elaboration of… (modalised present tense)
Results	None of the writers provided information about results or conclusions in their abstracts				
Conclusions					

As can be seen in Chart 1, abstracts 1 and 4 have the same rhetorical features, that is, three moves were used. Background information is provided. Abstracts 2, 3 and 5 differ from 1 and 4 in that they only contain two moves. No background information is presented and no results or conclusions are given in the abstracts. Instead, the writer in abstract 2 opted to end the abstract with a discussion on the issue. In abstract 3 the results obtained in the investigation will be illustrated and discussed *in situ*. And the writer in abstract 5 decides to close the abstract with some thoughts on the current state of LAP[2] methodologies. These irregular patterns seem to suggest that the published scholars make themselves some

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[2] Language of Academic Purpose

concessions that allow them to distance from the rhetorical model established for writing abstracts.

Concerning the conventions that govern the use of verb tenses, the corpus shows that in abstracts 1 and 4 background information was written in the present tense in both. In abstract 1 the modal of certainty will was used and the writer in abstract 4 used the present in the second move. Abstracts 1, 2 and 3 state the purpose using the modal *will*, while abstracts 4 and 5 use an unmodalized present tense. In the methods, abstracts 1 and 2 use modalized passive constructions while abstract 4 makes use of the passive voice but no modal meaning is conveyed. As for the reference to methods, the writer in abstract 3 used the present while in abstract 5 the present tense is modalized with the probability modal *might*. None of the five abstracts refers to results and conclusions, as they were meant to be reported at the end of the lecture, probably attempting to raise the audience's expectations. Chart 2 below details the rhetorical organization of the novice scholars.

Chart 2 - **Novice scholars**

	Abstract 1	Abstract 2	Abstract 3	Abstract 4	Abstract 5
Background	Background information was shown in the **present perfect tense and passive voice**	Background information was shown in **the present tense**	No background information was presented	Background information was shown in the **present tense**	No background information was presented
Purpose	In this paper, we explore the …(present)	… how criticism is expressed (passive)	This paper is a corpus-based… (present)	The present paper investigates … (present)	This study shows … (present)
Methods	To this end, we have analysed comparatively a corpus of 80 …	Our corpus is made up of two subcorpora of referee reports.	The corpus analysed consists of 20 academic…	… 40 articles written in English have been selected	Time-saving strategies have been developed
Results	The results revealed that the Spanish …	Results show that there are similarities ….	The results indicate that first person pronouns…	Data found suggest that relevant differences-…	Results are anticipated in the title-+…
Conclusions	The findings in our study	Attitude markers are shown …	Moreover, there is a substantial		I conclude that this rephrasing

	indicate...		difference…		…

	Abstract 6	Abstract 7	Abstract 8	Abstract 9	Abstract 10
Background	No background information was presented	Background information was shown in **the present perfect tense**	Background information was presented **in the passive**	Background information was presented with the use of **passive voice**	No background information was presented
Purpose	This paper explores titles as a … (present)	In this paper, we follow… (present)	The purpose of this paper is to analyse… (present)	The aim of the present paper is to provide … (present)	This paper deals with contrastive text … (present)
Methods	A detailed model for a functional analysis of title is devised to…	So as to identify the … we have developed a corpus of …	The data for the study consisted of posting …	Based on two … the paper compares the reviewers' amount…	…description of the study corpus and the classification scheme used for the analysis…
Results					
Conclusions	…differences and continuities were found …	We present the preliminary results of….	The results show that different groups …	The results show that the peninsular …	Results are presented and discussed…

As shown in Chart 2, abstracts 1 and 2 follow the five-move structure. Abstracts 3 and 5 follow four moves without any background information. Abstracts 4, 7, 8, and 9 share a similar rhetorical organization and they all refer to the results and conclusions in a single statement. In abstracts 6 and 10, only three moves are used. No background information was used to introduce the paper and the results and conclusions are referred to together in a single move.

With regard to lexicogrammar aspects of the abstracts, in abstracts 1 and 2 there is variation in the use of verb tenses in each move. In abstracts 3 and 5, verb tense variation can be seen in the methods and results moves. Abstracts 4, 7, 8, and 9 use the same verb tense to present the purpose, except for the methods move, in which they differ in the use of verb tenses such as the present perfect, present perfect passive, past and present tense. In abstracts 6 and 10, all of them introduce some background information using different verb tenses. The purpose is stated in the present tense in both cases. The methods are presented

in the passive and the past and the results are referred to in the passive voice. An interesting finding is that from the 5 students, only 1 uses explicit 'we' mention, but the others are not visible at a textual level (because they use the passive, as is the case of Abstract 2, or abstract rhetors, as is the case of Abstracts 3, 4 and 5)

The results of this analysis tentatively suggest that the published scholars' abstracts seem to distance from the established rhetorical moves. An interesting variation is that the scholars do not focus on the results of the study as the model suggested by Weissberg and Buker, but the two steps emphasize the purpose and methods. The results and conclusions were meant to be reported during their conference presentation. This might happen, in my view, due to the fact that the presentation at conferences may report on work in progress (Swales 1999) or simply because, as published scholars, they show awareness of the need to raise audience's expectations towards the conference talk.

The novice scholars' abstracts all adhere to the rhetorical moves established for writing abstracts. Broadly speaking, they all provided their audience with a summary of their conference talks. Although some of them initiated the abstract by directly referring to the purpose of the presentation they all opted for referring to results and conclusions, as opposed to what the expert scholars did.

Conclusions

In the light of the analysis above, it seems that the novice scholars are knowledgeable of the genre conventions as they all tend to stick to the rhetorical organization pattern established for writing abstracts. Whether they have become knowledgeable through instruction or through reading would need to be approached in future research. Interestingly, a corpus-based instruction would be a suitable pedagogical approach in order to elicit knowledge of the genre through exposure to real models. In my view, it is really important for novice scholars to develop awareness of audiences and communicative purposes as well as more specific textual issues such as rhetorical organization of information into moves, awareness of communicative intentions of those moves and knowledge of the lexicogrammatical aspects to be used. In the future, it would also be interesting to develop pedagogic materials based on corpus with a variety of authentic texts to provide novice writers with adequate instruction on rhetorical organization.

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RESUMO: O artigo apresenta um estudo comparativo de características textuais e retóricas de *abstracts* escritos por autores renomados e outros membros da comunidade acadêmica. Usando um conjunto de *abstracts* escritos por membros da comunidade acadêmica na área de linguística, os resultados indicam que os *abstracts* escritos pelos autores renomados parecem distanciar dos passos retóricos estabelecidos enquanto que os *abstracts* de todos os escritores noviços aderem aos passos retóricos estabelecidos para a execução de *abstracts*. Baseado em alguns conceitos de gênero e nas contribuições de escritores sobre o gênero *"abstract"*, os principais elementos e escolhas léxico gramaticais são analisadas e finalmente comentários sobre os resultados dessas análises são apresentados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: gênero, *abstracts*, estrutura retórica, escolhas léxico gramaticais.