

JOURNAL ARTICLE ABSTRACTS (GENRE ANALYSIS)

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Abstract: Genre analysis has been dealing with academic genres since the early 1980s, with most studies drawing upon the works of Swales (1981, 1990) and Bhatia (1993), who proposed to observe the rhetorical moves of the text. One of the explored genres has been the abstract, which is the focus of the present paper. Based on 25 English abstracts published in the international journal *Discourse Studies*, and 25 English abstracts published in 4 Slovak linguistic and literary journals, the following phenomena were compared: the professional field, the length, the rhetorical moves, the tenses used and 'I' or 'we' orientation. The results show differences between the abstracts taken from the journal *Discourse Studies* and the ones from Slovak journals: firstly, the Slovak writers write shorter abstracts, secondly, they often omit the move 4 (Results), thirdly, although they also use the simple present tense most frequently, it occurs mainly in the move 1 (Introduction) and the move 2 (Purpose), and not in the move 4 (Results). Finally, the Slovak writers, unlike the analysed *Discourse Studies* contributors, avoid personal authorial references, and prefer impersonal forms.

Key words: abstract, journal article, genre analysis, rhetorical move, tense, personalization

Introduction

A basic way researchers join the academic discourse community is via publishing the outcomes of their work in journals and proceedings. As the number of publications is growing every year, it is vital to introduce the article with an abstract that corresponds to current expectations and conventions, thus persuading the readers to enter particular research space. In this article I wish to provide an insight into abstract writing and show current ways of coping with this academic genre. To meet the task, the corpus of 50 abstracts published in foreign linguistic journals and in Slovak journals was created and the abstracts were analysed from the perspective of genre analysis. Thus, the theoretical framework for the study is provided by genre analysis, which enables to observe the macrostructure of the text through identifying the structural moves of the topic development. In the article the basic concepts of genre analysis and its application in teaching academic writing are explained. Then, an abstract definition including its functions is provided, and finally, the analysis of the abstracts included in the corpus is conducted.

1. Genre Analysis

Genre analysis has been applied mainly to written institutional, legal and academic discourses. It was Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), who defined genre as “a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s)”. Thanks to its regular occurrence within a professional discourse community, an event acquires its typical structure embodied in the series of sequential stages or moves. Thus, the conventional nature of genres enables to identify their rhetorical moves and their lexico-grammatical accomplishments. Bhatia (ibid.) promotes the use of genre theory in ESP teaching and suggests that „learners need to develop the *understanding of code*, the *acquisition of genre knowledge* associated with the specialist culture, *sensitivity to cognitive structuring of specialist genres* and then, and only then, can they hope to *exploit generic knowledge* of a repertoire of specialist genres by becoming *informed users* of the discourse of their chosen field.” Dudley-Evans (1997) points out advantages and disadvantages of genre models when teaching academic writing to L2 students. Although a genre approach has been acknowledged and developed as a suitable way of academic writing teaching, some authors criticize it for focusing on a restricted number of genres or for forming stereotyped attitudes to writing. Nevertheless, my teaching experience favours a genre approach in the analysis and production of promotional texts as it helps the teacher and the students shape the discourse, and understand the relationship between the language means choice and their textual organization as well as the communicative purpose followed by a certain event, accomplished through a specific text type. There is much value in the application of genre analysis and models also in teaching academic writing as it is the field the students of the English language programmes at the Faculty of Arts in Prešov University get just limited instructions.

2. Abstract definition

Swales (1990: 179-182) refers to abstracts as to “advance indicators of the content and structure of the following text”. Bhatia (1993: 76-93) also distinguishes research article abstracts and introductions as two separate academic genres because of their different communicative purpose. While the abstract is “a description or factual summary of the much longer report, the research article introduction introduces the report and places it in the framework of the previous research” (ibid., 78). In his more recent works, Swales gives journal

article abstracts the status of a part-genre as together with the introduction, the discussion, etc., they are just part of the genre of research article. According to some authors, well-written abstracts have the potential to substitute the whole text, for example, Cleveland (1983) claims that an abstract “is a true surrogate of the document” (Orasan, 2001: 1). Orasan does not think that an abstract can be exhaustive enough to replace a paper; anyway, he emphasizes the *filtering* function of an abstract, as it is this short introductory text that helps other authors understand what the paper is about. Orasan (2001) studies the genre of a scientific abstract on lexical, syntactic and discourse levels, aiming to identify the patterns of its writing, which might be useful for both computational linguistics and abstract writing teaching. As for the functions of research article abstracts, Huckin (2001, In: Swales – Feak, 2009: 1) identifies four basic ones: 1. *mini-texts* that provide a brief summary of the article’s topic, procedures and findings; 2. *screening devices* that might or might not attract the reader; 3. *previews* that function as an orientation map for the reader, and 4. *indexing help* for professional abstract writers and editors. When considering the function and structure of abstracts, two basic types are distinguished: indicative and informative. While informative abstracts are preferred for the research articles indicative abstracts are preferred for review papers. (Martin and Martin, 2005)

3. Abstracts analysis

The analysis of the selected abstracts follows the procedure that Feak and Swales (2009) use for the analysis of unstructured abstracts. The features that are examined and discussed in this article are as follows: 1. the professional field; 2. the length; 3. the rhetorical moves; 4. the tenses used; 5. ‘I’ or ‘we’ orientation.

3.1 The Professional Field

All the foreign abstracts included in the corpus were published in *Discourse Studies* (ENC – English Corpus), the international peer-reviewed journal for the study of text and talk, in the years 2011 and 2012. All the abstracts are available online at the web site of Sage Journals. The Slovak abstracts (SKC – Slovak Corpus) were published in several journals available online: *Topics in Linguistics* (2010), *Media and Text II* (2008), *Language, Literature and Culture in a Changing Transatlantic World* (2009) and *English Matters II* (2011). As the titles of the source

journals suggest, the professional field of the journal articles included in the study is applied linguistics and literature, media and cultural studies.

3.2 The Length

Feak and Swales (2009) observed the average number of sentences in abstracts written in a variety of professional fields. They found out that the average number of sentences per an abstract was 6.5. The abstracts in both groups of my corpus are shorter; the average of ENC abstracts is 5.32 and the average of SKC abstracts is 4.4 sentences. The average number of words in the Slovak part of the corpus is also smaller than in the ENC; 115 vs. 154.2. The recommended number of words was explored in several sources by Basthomi,, who found out that most guidelines asked for abstracts with 150-200 words. In our corpus, out of 25 Slovak writers just 5 authors either approach or slightly surpass the length of 150 words. About half of the authors wrote the abstract shorter than 100 words. In the ENC, the authors match the standard length of the abstract, as the average length of the selected corpus abstracts is 154.2 words, with 20 authors using between 150 - 200 words.

	SKC abstracts	ENC abstracts
Total number of sentences	110	133
Average number of sentences per abstract	4.4	5.32
Total number of words	2,875	3,855
Average number of words per abstract	115	154.2

Table 1: The length of abstracts

3.3 The Rhetorical Moves

The rhetorical moves suggested by Bhatia (1993: 78-79) include purpose, methodology, results and conclusions. Swales and Feak (2009) add one more move that is typical nowadays, and it is Introduction/Background. They provide the following move pattern of abstracts, including the questions that are to be answered within each move:

Move #	Typical labels	Implied questions
Move 1	Background/introduction/situation	what do we know about the topic?
Move 2	Present research/purpose	what is this study about?

Move 3	Methods/materials/subjects/procedures	how was it done?
Move 4	Results/findings	what was discovered?
Move 5	Discussion/conclusion/significance	what do the findings mean?

To illustrate the concept of moves and their realization in abstracts, bold and standard letters text chunks are used in the journal article abstract written by A. Bateman:

This article discusses the ways in which a group of four-year-old children co-constructed friendship networks when they began primary school in Wales, UK. (M2 Purpose) **This discussion has emanated from a wider study of the everyday social interactions children engage in when new to their school environment. (M1 Background)** The children's interactions were investigated through the use of an inductive, ethnomethodological approach through the combination of conversation analysis (CA) and membership categorization analysis (MCA). (M3 Methods) **The transcriptions revealed that the children used the collective pro-terms 'we' and 'us' in order to explicate affiliations and exclusions with their peers in their everyday social interactions. (M4 Results)** These findings offer an insight into the daily social organization processes children engage in and suggest their preference for exclusive dyadic friendships. The article also reveals the social competencies which four-year-old children have in accomplishing social organization. (M5 Conclusion)

Hyland's study (2000, In: Swales and Fiend, 2009: 13) provides the comparison of moves in abstracts from eight professional areas published in 1980 and in 1997, which shows that there is almost no difference in the percentage of occurrence of the Method (48% / 49%) and Result (96% / 95%) moves. Around 10% increase can be seen in the Introduction move, from 33% to 47%, and in the Purpose move, from 72% to 81%. The highest increase was recorded in the Conclusion move, which has grown from 7% to 22%.

The comparison of Hyland's results and the results of the present study shows that the Introduction move is more common in both ENC and SKC from 2008 -2012 than in the explored abstracts from 1997. While Purpose is the most frequent move in both current corpora, the Result move was the most common stage of abstracts in 1980 and in 1999. The most striking result is the low occurrence of the Result move in the SKC; just 40% in comparison with 88% in ENC and 95 % in the corpus compiled in 1997. The explored Slovak authors allot more space to introducing the topic and stating the purpose of their study than

to the results. The Conclusion move in SKC is also rare – just 3 abstracts out of 25 conclude the results of the articles.

	Introduction	Purpose	Methods	Results	Conclusion
TOTAL ENC	17 / 68%	25 / 100%	13 / 52%	22 / 88%	12 / 48%
TOTAL SKC	16 / 64%	22 / 88%	10 / 40%	10 / 40%	3 / 12%

Table 2: The rhetorical moves in abstracts

3.4 The Tenses Used

The table below provides an overview of the tenses that occur in ENC and SKC, pointing out the number of occurrences of the most frequent tenses and their percentage out of the total number of verbal forms. A closer attention is paid to the present perfect tense, the simple past tense and the simple present tense. In both corpora the simple present tense is by far most frequent. Other verbal forms, such as modal verbs *may*, *can* are just sparsely used.

	Present Perfect	Simple Past	Simple Present	Other	Total
TOTAL ENC	16 / 8%	20 / 10%	147 / 78%	8 / 4%	191
TOTAL SKC	8 / 5%	11 / 7%	135 / 85%	4 / 2.5	158

Table 3: The tenses used

Authors in both analysed corpora prefer the simple present tense, which is in compliance with the findings of other scholars, e.g. Orasan (2001), who analysed the use of tenses in individual moves. In the Slovak corpus the present simple is most commonly used in the move 1 (Introduction/Background) and in the move 2 (Purpose), which are the most frequent stages in the Slovak abstracts while in the English corpus the most frequent use of the simple present tense is in the move 4 (results). The table shows the percentage difference in the move 4 is quite striking, which corresponds to the low occurrence of the move 4 in the SKC.

	M1 Introduction	M2 Purpose	M3 Methods	M4 Results	M5 Conclusion
EN	22 / 15%	34 / 24 %	16 / 11%	56 / 38%	19 / 13%
SK	50 / 37%	53 / 39%	6 / 4 %	21 / 16%	5 / 4%

Table 3: Simple Present Tense in Moves

In the SKC there are 7 examples of the present perfect tense in the Introduction section, and 1 example in the Conclusion. Through the simple present and present perfect tenses the links to the previous works are made or general truths are expressed in order to create the background for the published journal article. Orasan (ibid.) claims that the present perfect is mostly used for stating negative features of the previous research; our SKC provides one example of the present perfect tense expressing a drawback of the previous research and ENC 3 examples, such as:

The strengths of conversation analysis **have not included** – and indeed **have not attempted to achieve** – successful engagement with beyond-the-immediate-talk aspects of culture and the commonsense workings of society. (R. Gardner, 2012)

In both the SKC and the ENC the simple past tense is mainly used in the move 3 (Methods) and in the move 4 (Results); although less frequently in the SKC. An example shows taking turns of passive and active voice when referring to the results of the research:

It **was found** that a systematic application of the keys **did indeed provide** a richer account of what **was going on**. Whereas categories alone **did not appear to provide** more insights than commonsense can tell us, when the broader array of MCA tools and keys **were applied**, an enhanced analysis of the passage of talk emerged.

3.5 'I' or 'We' Orientation

There is a notable difference in the use of personal pronouns between the ENC and the SKC. While in the ENC 31 examples of I – orientation are found in 14 articles, in SKC it is just a single example. We – orientation is found in two ENC articles that were written by two authors. One example of a personalized use of the pronoun *we* referring to two co-authors can

be found also in the SKC. Two Slovak authors, however, are overtly present in a single author text through the authorial *we* referring to one author. Flottum, Dahl and Kinn draw attention to “the fundamental referential vagueness of ‘we’... That is, it includes the author(s), but there is variation in terms of whether the reader is included and whether others are included as well. The question of reference is further complicated by the fact that ‘we’ is frequently used figuratively (or, to be more specific, metonymically), especially referring to a single author alone (‘we’ for ‘I’) or to the reader (‘we’ for ‘you’)” (2006: 95). A metonymical reference to a professional community, including the author and the reader is made in one of the abstracts of the ENC: *Yet we have only begun to make explicit the complex processes of discourse comprehension, especially also how structures of discourse are related to broader social, political, historical or cultural macro-contexts.* Another example illustrates personalization through the pronoun *we* as the main strategy expressing all five rhetorical moves: *In this study we draw upon elements of discursive psychology... as we oriented to... We examine... We analyzed... Our findings point to how... Our findings highlight how...*

Conclusion

The comparison of the abstracts taken from the journal *Discourse Studies* and the ones from Slovak journals has brought several differences: firstly, the Slovak writers write shorter abstracts, secondly, they often omit the move 4 (Results), thirdly, although they also use the simple present tense most frequently, it occurs mainly in the move 1 (Introduction) and the move 2 (Purpose), and not in the move 4 (Results). Finally, the Slovak writers, unlike the analysed *Discourse Studies* contributors, avoid personal authorial references, and prefer impersonal forms. It is a difference in the moves that suggests that Slovak authors of linguistic, literary and cultural studies journal articles prefer indicative abstracts rather than informative ones. Nevertheless, it seems that especially the articles informing about the author’s research should include the move 4 (Results). The findings of the presented analysis have brought a few suggestions for academic writing courses. Thanks to its specific functions and distinctive structure, research abstract is a genre suitable for introducing structural moves and for showing students different ways of presence of the author in academic writing.

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