

Studying the Abstracts of Academic Writings: An Analysis of some M.A. Theses in Linguistics

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Section One:

Introduction

As an important part of any thesis, an abstract has gained significant attention from the academic community. A well written abstract gives clear ideas about the body of the study it summarizes. The abstract summarizes the research, giving information about the objectives, hypotheses, methodology and data as well as on the conclusions and their implications, including suggestions for further research. The abstract should be about a page and a half in length. Previous studies of abstracts have covered several different disciplines, such as medicine, psychology, and applied linguistics, (e.g., Cross & Oppenheim, 2006; Lau, 2004; Santos, 1996, Busch-Lauer, 1995; Pho, 2008). In spite of such studies in academic writing, there has been less research on analysis of abstract as a sub-genre, written in Arabic and English, in terms of the moves in M.A. theses abstracts written in these two languages. Moreover, although several studies have analyzed research articles in all its kinds, only a few studies have focused on abstracts in the field of linguistics. Hence, two questions are raised in the present study: the first one is whether or not the abstracts of the M.A. dissertation written in English and Arabic stick to the logical moves specified in the previous studies and the second question is whether there is any difference in the use of functional moves in abstracts on linguistics written in Arabic and English by Iraqi M.A. students from different Iraqi universities. To answer these questions ten abstracts of M.A. theses in the field of linguistics are examined in an attempt to specify the generic moves used in the abstracts written in English and Arabic following the model of Bhatia's (1993) IMRD (Introduction, Methods, Result & Discussion) move structure. In addition to that, the linguistic features that constitute these abstracts are analyzed.

Section Two: Theoretical Background

2.1 Definition

An abstract is a brief representation of a larger document or presentation. It should tell the reader what the researcher does, why does he/she do it, how the researcher does it, what does the researcher found, and what it means. The abstract should also include all the key words in the research, so that other researchers can retrieve information from it. The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) defines abstract as follows: "an abstract is an abbreviated, accurate representation of the contents of a document, preferably prepared by its author(s) for publication with it" (Lorés, 2004:281)

Put differently S-1(2008:6) gives another definition of abstract saying that an abstract is a concise, stand-alone statement that conveys the essential information contained in an article, book, research paper, or document. Written in a direct non-repetitive style, theses the abstract should (Santos, 1996)

- Identify the problem (research question) investigated.
- Describe the scope or method of investigation.
- Summarize the results.
- State the conclusion(s).

Li_Yun (2011:9) states that the abstract, a part-genre of the research article, has gained significant attention in recent years and she defines it as a brief summary accompanying the research. An abstract represents material in the same order as the body of the original research. However, some sections of the research contribute more detailed information to the abstract, while other sections can almost be skipped.

From all the above mentioned definitions of abstracts, one can conclude that abstracts serve three specific purposes:

- The first: positioned at the beginning of the text, abstracts introduce readers to the content of the research. By writing an academic abstract, the researcher is trying to be as clear and informative as possible, so that the reader knows what to expect in the content of the research.
- The second: is to help the reader decide whether to read the entire research.
- The third: is that abstracts also summarize the findings of the research. Reading an abstract should give the reader a clear indication of the importance of the research.

2.2 Structure and component of An Abstract:

Abstracts should follow the same clear and logical structure of their associated text. It should begin by introducing the topic of the article and quickly addressing the research question being investigated. Next, the methods used to answer the question should be stated and the results should be outlined. Finally comes a statement to conclude the abstract (S-10:6). Tuner (2007:78) presents the following list which includes the various sections that may exist in a research report abstract. It is important to mention here that most abstracts do not include all these sections, and they do not appear in a particular order:

- 1- Introduction: it should present a clear idea about the research study. In the introduction the researcher should clearly mention the area and theme of the research. It includes the following points:
 - a. Background of the research.
 - b. Research problem or research questions.
 - c. Gap or lack of research in the field – (more common in social sciences and almost required in dissertation writing to show that the thesis is a significant document).
 - d. Purpose of the paper – (many sciences and engineering abstracts do not have much background but start with the purpose of the research or even the method).
 - e. Description of the research – (summarizes what the paper does).
 - 2- Methods - the researcher should clearly mention the sampling method, data collection methods and data analysis techniques of the methodology the researcher followed:
 - a. Sample of the study: Sampling method, sample size and sample structure.
 - b. Data Collection Method: Data collection instruments, structure of strategy/ strategies.
 - c. Method of Data Analysis: Primary or secondary data analysis techniques.
 - 3- Results – The findings of the study should be clearly stated.
 - 4- Conclusion – (main contribution of the research). May be hard to be distinguished from the results). It includes the following points:
 - a. The statement of conclusions which represents the findings reached at the end of the study.
 - b. Recommendations given by the researcher and based on the findings and conclusions reached at.
 - c. Implications – importance of the results for the field as a whole.
- S-4 (:) agrees with Tuner (ibid) adding two more moves: the title and objectives, saying that the title of the research is a concise summary of the main points of the research. Other move (that is the objectives move) is positioned after the introduction explaining the primary or main objectives of the study.

2.3. The Language of Abstract

Abstract writing is a highly specialized form of academic writing. It requires a clear and concise writing style that conveys complicated information in a limited number of words. Summarized below are some of the main characteristics of abstract language:

- 1- Often uses the third person: *he/she/it/they*, not *I/we/you*
 Example: *It was found that.....*, and avoids writing in the first person (*I*). Rather than saying , " *In this study I discuss....*" A more formal approach is used by starting an abstract with an opening similar to: " *This essay discussed the effects of It attempts to answer the question....*"
- 2- Often uses passive voice verbs to describe the researchers' own actions. The use of "we" + active verb is becoming more common in some subfields of biomedicine.
 Passive: " *It was found that.....* " Vs. Active: " *We found that.....* "
 Active voice, however, is used to describe phenomena in the study: Examples: *the mice grew...., questioner responded....*

- 3- Avoids abbreviation, jargon, other language shortcuts that may lead to confusion. If any abbreviation is used, its meaning should be written unless the researcher is absolutely certain that all the readers know what it means.
- 4- Avoids superlatives: like "very" and "extremely"

2.4. The Concept of Genre

2.4.1. What is Genre?

The past decade or so has seen increasing attention given to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning (Hyland, 2004:303). A genre has been defined by Swales and Feak (2009:1) as "a type of text or discourse designed to achieve a set of communication purposes".

Swales (1990) states that a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. Bhatia (1993) asserts that a genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form, and functional value. He focuses on discourse within the academic community and of the genre characteristics, conventions and constraints that are recognized and understood by its professional members (Kashani,2011:).

2.4.2 Move and Move Analysis

According to Samraj (2005), each 'macro genre' can be divided to some sub-genres comprising a genre set. In other words, in the context of research articles, which can be viewed as a macro-genre, there are some sub-genres like abstract, introduction, literature review, method, conclusion, etc. parts that are observable in most internationally acclaimed research articles. Accordingly, each sub-genre is believed to be made of some functional moves revealing the purpose behind the linguistic expressions written in that part. Richard and Schmidt (2002:344) define *move* as "a unit of discourse which may be smaller than an utterance". Therefore, they are functional unites that are realized through the text. Santos (1996:485) gives a clear definition of *move* after Swales (1990) that "as genres are purposed, staged activities, the move was chosen as the unit of analysis. A move is to be considered as a genre stage which has a particular minor communicative purpose to fulfill, which in turn serves the major communicative purpose of genre".

Section Three: Data Collection and Analysis

3.1 Sample Choice (or Data Collection)

A sample of ten M.A. theses abstracts were examined, five were written in English and the other five were written in Arabic. All the ten abstracts were chosen from Iraqi universities in order to avoid socio-cultural differences between the two languages. It is a well improved fact that some of the reasons for differences are due to cultural reasons: Lau (2004:53) states that there are differences in the abstracts' structure and gives three reasons for that: 1. Socio-cultural atmosphere, talking about academic dissertation this refer to the academic cultural community, 2- the relation between the writer and the reader and 3- the linguistic variation. Therefore, it was preferred to choose the entire sample from the same or a very similar academic culture in order to limit the reason for any difference in the moves found in the abstracts to the nature of language alone.

Considering that the structure of linguistic features of one discipline can be different from those of other disciplines, and in order to avoid variations across disciplinary boundaries, the sample was gathered only from the field of linguistics.

3.2 Data Analysis

The analysis of generic moves of the gathered sample is mainly drawn on Hylands (2000) model IPMRC (Information, Purpose, Method, Result, Conclusion) and Bhatia's (1993) model (i.e. Introducing purpose, describing Methodology, summarizing Results and presenting Conclusions)

However, it was found that not all the component moves found in the data analyzed are expressed in

Hylands (2000) and Bhatia's (1993) models. That is to say, the English and Arabic texts analyzed include some component moves that have not been identified in the mentioned models. Therefore, some of the moves were modified depending on the analysis given by Tuner (2007:84). These modifications are pointed below:

- 1- In the introduction move, not only the statement of problem, but also a background information about the main subject talked about in the thesis, lack of research in the field of the study, a statement of knowledge giving an idea about the subject and a reference to the previous study.
- 2- In the move of method, three steps are recognized, these are sampling method, data collection and data analysis.
- 3- In the move of conclusion, recommendations and implications are added to the statement of conclusions.

One new component move is added to the model of analysis applied in the current study: that is a specific move for the component of the thesis. In this move the writer gives details about the chapters that constitute the thesis so it is a summary of the chapters.

In this section, the moves found in the English and Arabic abstract are analyzed. Below are the moves found in the samples arranged according to their appearance in the abstracts starting with the moves mentioned in the model of analysis:

Move 1- Introduction

a- Statement of problem or question raised

Here the writer presents a specific question or questions raised in the study and point out a gap in the information, saying that his/her study is an attempt to answer this question and fill this gap. It is found in 100% of the English sample and 80% of the Arabic ones. The present tense is used in this move. And it is noted that the writers used certain words like *little*, *no*, *short* or other quantifiers indicating negative meaning. In the Arabic sample, on the other hand, negative form of the verbs and verb phrases is used making use of the negative articles such as لا or لم both of which mean *no* or *not*.

b- Referring to previous Study

It is found that the writers of the M.A. theses sometimes refer to previous studies. They either specify the names of the other researchers referring to the titles of their studies or they refer to previous studies in general (e.g. *recent studies covers this subject.....*, *previous studies*), (لقد تناولت دراسات عديدة سابقة هذا (.....الموضوع).

The verb tense used in this move is mainly present simple, e.g. *Crystal (1985:89) defines*

c- Presenting a statement of knowledge:

In this move the writers make statement about knowledge giving an idea about the topic or the subject of the study. This move was found in 100% of the English sample, and 100% of the Arabic sample. Regarding the linguistic features of the introduction, in both the English and Arabic samples, the present tense is used.

Below are some examples from the samples:

- *The uniqueness of meaning of every antonym is attributable to its occupation of a particular semantic space.*

فانه لزاماً على غير العربي أن يتعلم منها ما يُقيم صلاته, وعلى العربي أن يأخذ منها ما يستطيع به أن يفهم النصوص الشرعية

Move 2- Presenting the Purpose

In this move the writer points out reasonable things that push him/her to present the thesis. This was found in 60% of the English and 60% of the Arabic sample. In the English abstracts verbs like *show*, *present*, *examine*, *investigate*, *deal with*, *discuss*, *argue*, *provide*, etc. are used. In the Arabic sample, on the other hand, verbs like: يتناول, يهدف, يناقش, يُعنى ب: etc. are used and all are given in present tense.

Move 3- Hypothesis

Studying the Abstracts of Academic Writings:

In this move the writers present one or more hypotheses trying through the study to find out its validity, so at the end of the thesis, the study either validate or refute this hypothesis (or hypotheses). It is noted through the survey of literature that this step is not necessary in the study as there is a gap in the information so it is very much possible that the writer has no clear implication about the current state. But in a recognizable amount of cases the writer can hypothesize certain possibilities which justify the percentage found in the sample. It is found in 80% of the English sample while only 20% of the Arabic one.

Move 4- Methods and Procedures of the Study In this move, detailed information is given about the method followed in choosing the sample of the study, that is the data selection and about the methods and procedures of analysis including a reference to the model used in the analysis. This move was found in 60% of the English sample and 60% of the Arabic one. The past tense is the dominating tense used in this move. For example:

لقد استهدف اختياري للعينة..... *This sample was selected* Present continuous tense was also found in only one of the English abstracts: *The researcher has conducted a test...*

Move 5- Indicating thesis structure and content

In this move the writers give details about the component of the thesis in terms of chapters and sometimes sections of the chapters giving information about the main topic discussed in each chapter. The information here are given in varying degrees of detail, we often find a summary of each chapter. This component was found in 100% of the English abstracts and 80% of the Arabic ones. In all the English sample the simple present tense is solely used:

-The study comprises five chapters, the first of which is devoted to.....

While in the Arabic sample the past tense is used, as shown in the examples below:

..... *خُصِّصَ الفصل الاول لدراسة.....* وتناولنا في الفصل الثاني *اما الفصل الاخير فتناول-*

وقد خصص الفصل الاول للحديث عن..... وتحدثت في الفصل الثاني عن..... والمبحث الثالث تكلمنا فيه على..... (هكذا جاءت في النص على - وليس عن

Move 6- Results

In this move, a summary of the results found after doing the analysis is presented. The analysis of our sample revealed the same percentage in English and in Arabic samples in both it is 60%.

Move 7- Conclusions

In the conclusion move, there are three steps found in the sample as shown in the table below. The first one is for giving a statement of conclusion, it appears in 80% of the English sample, while it is rare in the Arabic one, only 20%. For the second step, namely recommendation, the frequency of its appearance is the same in the English and the Arabic samples: 40%. Regarding the third step, the implication it is found only in the English sample (40%).

Table (1) The Number and Frequency of The Appearance of Each Generic Move

Moves	Number of English Abstracts Having This Move	Percentage of the appearance of each move in English Abstracts	Number of Arabic Abstracts Having This Move	Percentage of the appearance of each move in Arabic Abstracts

Intro duct ion	Statement of problem (A Gap in the information)	5	100%	4	80%
	Referring to previous studies	0	0%	1	20%
	Statement of knowledge	5	100%	5	100%
Purpose – aim of the study		3	60%	3	60%
Hypothesis		4	80%	1	20%
Meth od	Sampling method	3	60%	3	60%
	Data collection	2	40%	1	20%
	Data analysis techniques	3	60%	0	0%
Results		3	60%	3	60%
Concl usio ns	Statement of conclusion	4	80%	1	20%
	Recommendati on	2	40%	2	40%
	implication	2	40%	0	40%
Indicating thesis structure		4	80%	4	80%

It is worth pointing out that there is a remarkable amount of collapsed structures used by the writers. And this draw the abstract far away from the standard way of writing an abstract, especially the abstracts written in Arabic.

The following unexpected genres were found in the Arabic sample:

- In one abstract there is statement of acknowledgment
- In one abstract there is a paragraph in which the writer refers to the source he made use of.
- One of the writers had devoted a paragraph in which he expressed the difficulties he faced.
- One of the writers devoted the last paragraph for a pray for God.

Section four: Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

From the analysis, it is indicated that there are seven main component moves that constitute the theses abstracts. Comparing the English and Arabic M.A. linguistic abstracts, it is found that there are differences in some of the moves and similarities in the other. The differences are not only in the frequency of the appearance of move but also in the type of these moves. For example the frequency of the hypothesis move

in the English sample is 80% while it is only 20% in the Arabic sample. More over there are three unexpected moves in the Arabic abstracts. These are a reference to the sources: in this move, the most important ones of the sources used in the study are mentioned in a form of praise, it is found 20% of the Arabic sample. The second one is a statement of acknowledgement. The statement of acknowledgment is a separate genre and should not be put in the abstract genre, its frequency is 40%. The last one and the most surprising one is a statement of pray for God, here the writer expresses his wishes, in a form of a pray, that the almighty God accept his work in a way that may God award him for that work, its frequency is 20%.

Regarding the similarities, it is found that the frequency of three moves was exactly the same in both the English and Arabic sample. These moves are: the statement of knowledge (100%) in both samples, move of the indicating thesis structure (80%) and result move (60%), finally the move of purpose (60%).

It appears from the high frequency of the appearance of the initial paragraph which expressed praise for God and for prophet Mohammad and Ahlul-Bait, that the Arab M.A linguistic students added a genre a pattern of abstract writing different from the well-established one followed by the English students.

4.2 Recommendation:

The analysis carried out in this study indicates that the abstracts written in both languages are not identical to the standard way of writing abstracts, for that it is highly recommended that M.A. students should be instructed on the particular values of the abstracting of any research in general and abstracting theses in specific. It is also recommended to draw the attention of M.A. students of linguistics in the department of Arabic language to shorten the abstracts of the Arabic theses.

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