

The structure of PhD conclusion chapters

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Abstract

This paper considers the generic structure of *Conclusion* chapters in PhD theses or dissertations. From a corpus of 45 PhD theses covering a range of disciplines, chapters playing a concluding role were identified and analysed for their functional moves and steps. Most *Conclusions* were found to restate purpose, consolidate research space with a varied array of steps, recommend future research and cover practical applications, implications or recommendations. However a minority were found to focus more on the field than on the thesis itself. These field-oriented *Conclusions* tended to adopt a problem–solution text structure, or in one case, an argument structure. Variations in focus and structure between disciplines were also found.

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1. Introduction

The genre analysis of academic writing has tended to focus on the research article (RA) far more than on longer theses and dissertations for research degrees (Bunton, 2002; Swales, 1990). Where *Conclusions* have been considered, it has usually been as part of the *Discussion* section of an RA or MSc dissertation (Dudley-Evans, 1986, 1994), the one exception being Yang and Allison's (2003) study of the final sections of RAs in applied linguistics, where they found and analysed final sections called *Conclusions* and *Pedagogic Implications*. However, in a PhD thesis the *Conclusion* usually has the status of a separate chapter, as confirmed by Paltridge's (2002) survey of guide books and actual practice, in which there is a *Conclusions* chapter in each of four thesis types he presents:

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Traditional-simple and Traditional-complex (drawing on Thompson, 1999), Compilation of research articles (drawing on Dong, 1998) and Topic-based. However, there is a lack of published research on the actual structure of PhD *Conclusions*, the closest being Hewings' (1993) analysis of six MBA *Conclusions*. This study, therefore, set out to discover what common, generic features PhD *Conclusion* chapters in a range of disciplines share and what variety they display.

The paper begins with a review of previous research into *Discussions* and *Conclusions*, describes the corpus of 45 PhD theses and methods of analysis, then presents the findings and proposes three models for *Conclusions* with some disciplinary variation.

2. Previous research

In one of the early studies of the research article, Hill, Soppelsa, and West (1982, pp. 335–338) categorised the “rhetorical divisions” of an experimental-research paper as *Introduction*, *Procedure* (*Methods* and *Results*) and *Discussion*. They suggested that the *Introduction* moves from the general to the particular, the *Procedure* then focuses on the particular, and the *Discussion* moves back as a ‘mirror image of the *Introduction*’ from the particular to the general: from ‘the solution of the problem that motivated the study to the implications of that solution for the larger field’. The conclusion of the *Discussion* which they analysed notes limitations of the study and suggests areas for future research. To paraphrase, Hill et al. typify the *Discussion* as comprising: *Implications* \wedge *Limitations* \wedge *Recommendations*.

Some of the most important work on *Discussions* has been done by Dudley-Evans. His work is particularly relevant to this study as it was carried out on the longer genre of the Masters dissertation, rather than the research article. His 1986 study of the *Introduction* and *Discussion* sections of seven MSc dissertations found three main parts to the *Discussions*: *Introduction*, *Evaluation of results* and *Conclusions and future work*. He identified 11 moves, modified in 1994 to nine moves, in the *Evaluation of results*: *Information move*, *Statement of results*, *Finding*, *(Un)expected outcome*, *Reference to previous research*, *Explanation*, *Claim*, *Limitation* and *Recommendation*. He noted that the moves were usually cyclical, with each cycle normally headed by a *Statement of results*, which was the only compulsory move, the others being optional. The *Conclusions and future work* part, the most relevant to this study, he found to contain:

Summary of main results
Summary of main claims
Recommendations about future work.

Even in this research on MSc dissertations, the *Conclusion* described is still a part of the *Discussion* section rather than a separate section or chapter.

Peng (1987), looking at chemical engineering research articles, found *Discussion* moves very similar to those of Dudley-Evans. She also found that the cycles were either at a higher level, answering research questions, or “at a lower level (dealing) with each separate step in the author’s argument...” (p. 94). Peng does make a short reference to

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