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How do writers evaluate their own empirical research? A genre-based inquiry into economics journal papers

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Abstract

Genre literature has indicated that academic discourse communities commonly uphold established conventions with regard to the writing of research articles in their respective disciplines. Recent studies have also acknowledged that disciplinary differences exist in the writing of research articles, and this has resulted in numerous investigations into the specific genre features of this text type in various academic fields. An interesting area which has been identified in past research is a rhetorical move that evaluates the study being reported. To date, however, this move on self-evaluation has not been examined at length in a core academic discipline such as economics. Using the latest Swalesian move-step analytical framework, this study aims to analyse the communicative functions of this move in empirical economics research articles and identify its constituent steps. The textual analysis of this investigation was triangulated by a qualitative analysis of spoken data elicited from specialist informants in the field of economics. Our results indicate that self-evaluation of a study is, by and large, a principal or quasi-obligatory move although each of its three steps is optional in economics research reports. These three constituent steps collectively play a pivotal role in putting the research into perspective for the reader after research results are presented. The findings of this study have contributed to the advancement of genre knowledge in that they have shed some light on how instructors can design relevant teaching materials aimed at helping learners to foreground the value of their studies in the later portions of their research reports.

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1. Introduction

Regardless of academic disciplines, academicians around the globe generally recognise the research article (RA) as “the main channel of scientific or scholarly communication” (Holmes, 1997, p. 322) and the “central genre of knowledge production” (Yang & Allison, 2003, p. 365). Due to the prestigious status of the research paper in the eyes of the academic discourse community (Swales, 2004), it is often the genre through which researchers make the results of their work known to others, and further gain recognition for their position in the discourse community. Publication in prestigious and high-ranking journals are therefore seen as a means for discourse community members to attain a higher level in the research community hierarchy, which may then translate into opportunities for career advancement or research grants (Swales, 1990). Thus it is understandable that academic discourse communities generally strive to maintain the quality and standard of the research article (Leki & Carson, 1997; Swales, 1990).

The interest in these academic conventions has generated numerous studies in the past, notably in the field of genre analysis (Anthony, 1999; Brett, 1994; Holmes, 1997; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Lim, 2006; Nwogu, 1997; Ozturk, 2007; Peacock, 2002; Samraj, 2002; Williams, 1999; Yang & Allison, 2003). One common finding which has emerged from many past genre studies of the RA is that disciplinary variations affect the rhetorical structure and language used in research articles (Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Lim, 2011; Posteguillo, 1999; Samraj, 2002; Swales, 1990). In order to provide a more useful description of the research article genre, it would be necessary to provide discipline-specific descriptions without disregarding the established general conventions of the wider academic discourse community.

Studies into the RAs of different academic disciplines have suggested numerous generic structures for various sections of the RA, which consists of a series of different moves and steps. An interesting move which has been identified by past studies is a move in which writers evaluate their own research. It was found that a form of self-evaluation was occasionally present in RAs of different fields notably with regard to (i) the research results obtained and/or (ii) the overall study. For instance, in a study on sociology articles, Brett (1994) incorporated a communicative category ‘evaluation of finding’, which was actually an evaluation of research findings done either by confirming that the findings match a hypothesis or by highlighting that it was different from the earlier assumed premise(s). Apart from Brett (1994), Lim (2005) also proposed a move (i.e., ‘evaluating findings’) to evaluate research results in his study of management RAs. The three constituent steps (consisting of ‘supporting a hypothesis’, ‘rejecting a hypothesis’, and ‘indicating mixed results’) in Lim’s (2005) proposed move are coterminous to Brett’s (1994) rhetorical categories apart from an additional step where mixed results may be indicated. It should be noted that both Brett’s (1994) and Lim’s (2005) studies were focused on the Results sections of the RAs in the disciplines concerned. Yang and Allison (2003), however, proposed a self-evaluation move in the Discussion section of Applied Linguistics, which they called ‘evaluating the study’. According to Yang and Allison (2003), when writers evaluate their own research, they typically indicate its limitations, significance or advantages, and/or evaluate the methodology used.

It is interesting to note that the findings of past genre researchers seem to indicate that self-evaluation of a study can be done on a narrow scale (i.e., evaluating findings) or broad scale (i.e., evaluating the study). This might be ascribable to the scope of past studies which have focused on individual sections of the typical Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion (IMRD) macrostructure. This study, nonetheless, focuses on examining the presence of a self-evaluation move in economics research articles without being confined to specific sections in order to provide a clearer delineation of how writers evaluate their own work in the RA. The field of economics is chosen as it is a rigorous academic field of study which places massive discursive expectations on its writers (Lung, 2011). The research questions guiding this study are provided as follows:

- (1) What constituent steps are used by economics researchers to evaluate their own empirical research?
- (2) How do economics researchers employ language mechanisms to perform the communicative functions in each rhetorical step?

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