Discourse structure and variation in manuscript reviews: Implications for genre categorization

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A B S T R A C T

Recent studies on the manuscript review, an occluded genre, have focused mainly on its discourse features and not on discourse variation in reviews according to final reviewer recommendation. This paper reports on a study of two sub-sets of manuscript reviews written for *English for Specific Purposes*, with the final reviewer recommendation of "major revision" and "reject." An analysis of the organization of the commentary section of manuscript reviews indicates that "major revision" reviews are characterized by discourse units with the function of recommendation while "reject" reviews tend to foreground discourse units with the function of negative evaluation. Lexicogrammatical features associated with the functions of recommendation and negative evaluation were also found to vary in frequency in the two sub-groups of texts through analysis using Python, a computer language. I argue that "reject" and "major revision" reviews have different positions on two continua, one for recommendation and the other for negative evaluation, and I use these positions to explain the variation in discourse organization and lexicogrammatical features revealed in the "text-first" analysis suggested by Askehave and Swales (2001). I suggest that sub-categories for heterogeneous genres with multiple communicative purposes could be established through use of the centrality of a particular purpose.

1. Introduction

Research interest in academic genres has, in recent years, moved from a focus primarily on public genres such as research articles, PhD dissertations, textbooks, and book reviews to include more private genres such as personal statements, manuscript reviews, grant proposals, grant proposal reviews, and research and promotion letters (Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Fortanet, 2008; Hyon, 2011; Koutsantoni, 2011; Samraj & Monk, 2008). Swales's (1996) paper on occluded genres has played a key role in promoting interest and analyses of genres generally not very easily available, but still of importance in the discourse communities in which they are produced and used. Studies of these private, occluded genres have subsequently increased our understanding of the landscape of academic writing.

As an important occluded genre, the manuscript review has been the focus of a number of recent studies (for example, Fortanet, 2008; Gosden, 2003; Hewings, 2004; Paltridge, 2013, 2015). A small number has focused on this genre within the

process of peer review and publication, exploring the construction of voice in blind manuscript review (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009) and the challenges posed by the review process to off-network scholars (Belcher, 2007). Many others have focused on the language of these texts. An early study by Kourilova (1998) explored the sorts of discourse strategies, such as compliments, unmitigated commands, and blunt criticism used, and the targets of criticism in peer reviews of articles submitted to scientific journals by non-native speakers of English. This study revealed that negative criticisms were prevalent in this genre, which was explained by the great difference in power between the author and reviewer, as well as the anonymity of the reviewer and the lack of a public audience for such texts.

Hewings's (2004) substantial study of evaluation in manuscript reviews explored the things or entities (such as analysis or expression) evaluated and the categories of evaluative adjectives used (such as adjectives pertaining to accuracy or importance). His study sought to uncover "evaluated entities and evaluative criteria as expressed in adjectives attached to entities" (p. 268), that is, not only what reviewers focused their evaluations on, but also the dimensions along which certain aspects of the paper were evaluated. Another study, conducted by Fortanet (2008), focused on three strategies used in this genre, criticisms, recommendations and requests, in two sets of reviews from Linguistics and Business Organization and found that criticisms and compliments were more frequent than recommendations and requests. This study also identified disciplinary differences, such as the greater frequency of evaluative acts in the reviews from Business Organization than those from Linguistics. In his textual analysis of manuscript reviews, Paltridge (2015) focused on the sorts of speech acts made in reviews and also noted their variation across reviews with different final recommendations. The analysis revealed that many reviewer directives for change are framed as suggestions, clarification requests, and recommendations, and points to difficulties novice scholars might have in interpreting these texts.

In addition to a focus on the use and distribution of discourse strategies such as recommendations and negative evaluation in manuscript reviews, some studies have also sought to analyze the overall organization of this genre. Fortanet (2008) following Gosden (2003) analyzed the overall organization of reviews in terms of Swalesian moves (Swales, 1990) and identified four moves in these texts: move one, summarizing judgment regarding suitability for publication; move two, outlining the article; move three, points of criticism; and move four, conclusion and recommendation. Although the proposed structure in terms of moves presents an adequate global account of this genre, it fails to capture its complexity. The largest part of the manuscript review is the move Fortanet labels "points of criticism," which is also the most important part of the text. However, not much is known about how this move is structured. In fact, it is not clear whether this large part of the manuscript review can be analyzed further into discoursal units. Since this is a central part of the manuscript review, understanding the nature of this part of the genre will be key to understanding its structure on the whole.

Previous discourse studies of manuscript reviews have also not usually categorized them according to the final recommendation given by the reviewers. There have been a few exceptions, however. One is Gosden's (2003) study of two groups of reviews, those with the outcomes of "accept with revisions" and "unacceptable." The two sets of reviews are shown to differ in the categories of reviewer comments found in them, and the reviewer comments given to the "accept with revisions" reviews were said to be more helpful for authors making revisions. Reviews with different outcomes have also been shown to result in the construction of different reviewer roles, such as the "Guardian" and "Ringmaster" in a more recent study by Englander and Lopez-Bonilla (2011), who investigated a small number of reviews of two journal article manuscripts written by non-native speakers of English. Although Fortanet (2008, p. 29) refers to the manuscript review as a "request for improvement," other researchers have pointed to the gate-keeping role performed by reviewers and how authors of some research article manuscripts might be barred from entry into a journal (Belcher, 2007). Given these findings, it may not necessarily be the case that reviews with different recommendations by reviewers (such as "major revision" and "reject") have the same communicative purpose and similar discourse structures. Although not much is known about when a reviewer reaches his or her decision to deem a manuscript as "reject" or as needing "major revision," it is undoubtedly the case that the selected outcome would influence the structure of the review constructed. It might thus be useful to explore in greater detail the discourse structures characterizing manuscript reviews with different reviewer outcomes.

Although communicative purpose has been widely used as the basis for genre categorization, Askehave and Swales (2001, p. 207) have pointed out that the communicative purpose of a text may not be immediately apparent and that near identical texts (such as shopping lists) might fulfill different functions and suggest that "it would be prudent to abandon communicative purpose as an immediate or even quick method for sorting discourses into generic categories." In addition, they (Askehave & Swales 2001, p. 199) state that "we are no longer looking at a simple enumerable list or 'set' of communicative purposes, but at a complexly layered one."

In this paper, I seek to analyze the organization of manuscript reviews while considering the possibility of variation in structure across manuscript reviews with different reviewer recommendations due to variations in ways that communicative purposes might be complexly layered in reviews with different recommendations. Such variation in communicative purpose and discourse organization have implications for questions in genre membership and categorization such as the following: can instances of the same genre foreground different communicative purposes? The question being explored then is whether "reject" reviews also have a directive purpose like "major revision" reviews or if they have another foregrounded communicative purpose, such as that of justifying rejection from publication through negative evaluation. Two sub-sets of manuscript reviews with different reviewer recommendations, "reject" and "major revision," submitted to the journal *English for Specific Purposes* will be analyzed for their organizational structure, with a focus on the main commentary section, and use of two sets of lexicogrammatical features selected for their association with the functions of recommendation and negative evaluation. In this study, I follow the text-first approach proposed by Askehave and Swales (2001) where the structure, style