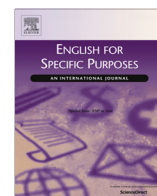




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Convincing peers of the value of one's research: A genre analysis of rhetorical promotion in academic texts



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ABSTRACT

Intercultural studies have shown the existence of rhetorical variation in the prevalent discourse practices of multilingual scholars and those of English-speaking scholars. In this paper, we examine comparatively the typical rhetorical practices used in the Introduction section of 80 research articles written in English and 80 in Spanish in four disciplines in the fields of Health Sciences and Humanities/Social Sciences. We particularly examine how writers present their research studies in Move 3 (Swales, 2004), with a special focus on those steps that add promotional value to one's research. The results revealed that, within the same field, the English texts present a higher degree of rhetorical promotion than the Spanish texts in each of the disciplines analysed. However, when comparing the two broad fields, the Spanish texts in Health Sciences present a higher degree of promotion than the English (and Spanish) texts in Humanities/Social Sciences. This indicates that, in shaping the promotional features of the (sub)genre in question, when professional and national cultural variables interact simultaneously, cultural factors tend to override the influence of disciplinary context. However, when broad fields of knowledge are compared, it is the disciplinary conventions in specific professional subcultures that seem to prevail over national cultural factors.

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1. Introduction

For contemporary scholars, the need to publish scientific papers has become ever more pressing if promotion and professional advancement are to be achieved. In order to get their papers accepted, researchers need to meet the expectations of the members of their particular disciplinary communities, especially those of the editors and reviewers of international English language journals in which the degree of competitiveness continues to grow (Hanauer & Englander, 2011; Lillis & Curry, 2010). By mastering the appropriate structural rhetorical conventions which have been institutionalised internationally in a specific research genre, scholars demonstrate their credentials as qualified writers. A persuasive rhetorical practice, which is increasingly becoming important, is the use of effective promotional elements whose main function is to enhance the perceived value of one's research (Bhatia, 2005).

In this context, we define persuasive promotional rhetoric as being realised by means of those linguistic choices that seek to change or affect the opinions or behaviours of an audience in terms of positively assessing the research contribution. The study of rhetorical promotion involves the analysis of metadiscourse (e.g. Hyland, 2005), evaluation (e.g. Hunston & Thompson, 2000) and lexico-grammatical features such as self-reference and self-citation (e.g. Afros & Schryer, 2009; Harwood, 2005a, 2005b;

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Hyland, 2000, 2005). This also focuses on the use of other rhetorical strategies that allow writers to ‘sell’ their ‘product’ (Fairclough, 1995; Hyland, 2000; Shehzad, 2010) through explicitly highlighting the novel contribution that their work makes to the discipline and by means of anticipating findings, in the Introduction section of the research article (RA).

In his ground-breaking move analysis of RA Introductions, Swales’ (1981, 1990) presented a prototypical English RA Introduction consisting of a three-move structure in which the degree of rhetorical effort involved is said to increase gradually from Move 1 to 3: In Move 1 (Establishing a territory), writers situate their work in their specific research field mainly by highlighting the interest of the topic of their study. In Move 2 (Establishing a niche), writers must then justify publication, that is, they must create a research space which allows them to present their new claims to the other members of their disciplinary community. This mainly involves the indication of possible knowledge gaps in relation to previous work and/or the criticism of any weak point in the earlier studies conducted by other researchers. It is in Move 3 (Occupying the niche) where writers actually present their research by means of an indication of the main purpose of the study or a description of its main features. Writers also have other available options associated with this move which are more likely to occur in some disciplines than others (see Swales, 2004). Salient among them are those promotional steps which allow writers to highlight the contribution of their research in an effort to convince peers of the relevance of their work to their field, such as anticipating the principal findings and enhancing the value of one’s research.

Following Swales’ pioneering work, a large number of studies have analysed the structural organisation of the various sections of research papers in English, using Swales’ notions of “move” and “step” as a framework for genre-analytic research. Among the many such studies we might cite are Nwogu (1997) in Medicine; Posteguillo (1999) in Computer Science; Yang and Allison (2004) in Applied Linguistics and Kanoksilapatham (2005) in Biochemistry. A major focus of attention has been the Introduction, since this section generally entails a great deal of complexity in terms of rhetorical options, among them the possibility of including promotional elements. Although Swales’ (1990) CARS model initially postulated a common structure for RA Introductions in English, subsequent research has revealed that the rhetorical choices that writers make to promote themselves and their work in relation to the other members of their discourse community may vary not only across very different disciplines (Anthony, 1999; Nwogu, 1997), but also across those that are more closely related (Samraj, 2002). This variation seems to depend on the particular social interactions which are established between writers and readers and the actual writing conventions of the discipline itself. In her analysis of RA Introductions from two related fields, Samraj (2002) found that the Conservation Biology Introductions fulfil a greater promotional function than the Wildlife Behaviour Introductions through the use of steps such as centrality claims. On the basis of these findings, Swales (2004) revised his CARS model and presented a new version (see our discussion of this version in Section 2.1), which better accounts for most of the limitations to the model encountered in these more recent publications. Studies conducted in the last five years have also shown the existence of intra-disciplinary variation (see, for example, Ozturk, 2007).

Despite the importance of RA writing for English as an Additional Language (EAL) scholars, the studies which have applied the ‘move analysis’ framework from a cross-cultural perspective are somewhat fewer, although the last few decades have seen an increase in studies comparing English academic writing to other languages such as Chinese (Loi, 2010; Taylor & Chen, 1991), Polish (Duszak, 1994), Swedish (Fredrickson & Swales, 1994), Malay (Ahmad, 1997), Indonesian (Adnan, 2008), Brazilian Portuguese (Hirano, 2009) and Spanish (Burgess, 2002; Mur Dueñas, 2010). All these studies have concluded that RA Introductions are influenced, to some extent, by sociocultural variables and the specific features of the sociopragmatic context in which the texts were produced (i.e. local constraints). This is clearly seen, for example, in a tendency to avoid direct confrontation and an apparent lack of self-promotion in some languages, in contrast with the more combative stance adopted by writers of some RA Introductions published in English. Most of these studies, however, have applied Swales’ (1990) original version of his CARS model, omitting the analysis of a step with a high degree of rhetorical promotion (“stating the value of the present research”), which Swales later added in his revised version of 2004.

In an attempt to expand this area of genre analytic research, in this paper, we explore cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary rhetorical variation by comparatively examining the prevalent rhetorical practices of English-speaking scholars and Spanish scholars in the Introduction sections of RAs in two disciplines in the field of Health Sciences (Clinical and Health Psychology and Dermatology) and in two other disciplines in the field of Humanities/Social Sciences (Political Philosophy and Political Science). We particularly examine how writers present their research in Move 3 (in terms of Swales, 2004), with a special focus on those steps that clearly add promotional value to the writers’ presentation of their research. These steps are those that Swales names ‘announcing principal outcomes’ and ‘stating the value of the present research’.

The findings obtained in this study emphasise the growing functional importance of promotional strategies in RA Introductions. Given the value they have for both writers and readers, the study can be particularly relevant for its pedagogical implications: If novice and EAL writers are made aware of the most commonly used promotional strategies in published RAs, they are in a better position to make informed rhetorical choices when seeking to publish in English-medium journals.

2. Corpus and method

A total of 160 RA Introductions² in English and Spanish were compiled for the analysis of this study. As regards the Health Sciences subcorpus in English, 40 Psychology and Medicine texts were selected over a period of five years (2006–2010).

² Due to space constraints, we have not included in this paper the complete bibliographical details of the articles that make up the corpus of analysis in this study. These can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

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