Writers' positioning in literature reviews in English and Spanish computing doctoral theses

Luz Gil-Salom *, Carmen Soler-Monreal

Departamento de Lingüística Aplicada, Escuela Técnica Superior de Ingeniería Informática, Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Camino de Vera s/n, 46022 Valencia, Spain

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ABSTRACT

Making appropriate reference to other texts is an essential feature of successful academic writing (Hyland, 2000; Myers, 1990). Writers are expected to integrate others' ideas into their arguments to indicate what is already known about the area of study of the discipline, or to point out weaknesses, aligning themselves with a particular disciplinary framework (Thompson & Tribble, 2001). Literature reviews (LRs) of PhD theses provide support for the writer's position and show the novelty of her/his work. This study analysed the resources of evaluation at both rhetorical and linguistic levels used by the writers of 20 PhD LRs in computing in English and Spanish. The data reveal that the Spanish and the English PhD LRs have a similar rhetorical structure. However, the English writers use more strategies for the development of each move than the Spanish writers. Attitude markers are the most usual devices doctoral writers use to express opinion in both sets. Epistemic modality and a variety of discourse-based markers are typically found in the English LRs while the Spanish LRs seem to rely mainly on adversatives and certainty markers. Differences respond partly to individual writing styles, but also reflect rhetorical variation in the relationship with the audience.

1. Introduction

Making appropriate reference to other texts is an essential feature of successful academic writing (Hewings, Lillis, & Vladimirou, 2010; Hu & Wang, 2014; Hyland, 2000, 2002; Kwan & Chan, 2014; Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2011; Myers, 1990; Petrić, 2007; Thompson, 2005a). Writers are expected to integrate the ideas of others into their arguments, to indicate what is already known about their research area, or to point out the weaknesses in others' arguments, while aligning themselves with a particular disciplinary framework (Harwood, 2009; Kwan, 2008; Thompson & Tribble, 2001). They are also required to demonstrate that they have made an original contribution to knowledge in the chosen field, which is in fact "the driving force of disciplinary activity" (Hyland, 2012a: 32). Studies on research articles (RAs) (Kwan, Chan, & Lam, 2012; Lim, 2012; Martín & León Pérez, 2014; Swales, 1990) and PhD theses (Bunton, 2002; Kwan, 2006; Lim, Loi, & Hashim, 2014; Ono, 2012; Ridley, 2011; Thompson, 2005a, 2005b, 2009) have shown that reviewing previous research and justifying the study being reported are central rhetorical functions of introductions and literature reviews of research texts for obtaining acceptance and credibility.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 963877530; fax: +34 963877219.
E-mail addresses: mlgil@upv.es (L. Gil-Salom), csoler@upv.es (C. Soler-Monreal).

When reporting the work of others, the source of the reported statement is important in the study of evaluation. According to Hunston (1993, 2003), the choice of source reflects a shared world between the writer and the reader, which is constructed with the ultimate aim of persuading the reader to accept the writer's position. The attitudinal assessment of content and the argumentative and metadiscoursive devices used to interact with readers are crucial persuasive strategies of academic communication.

The PhD thesis represents the first step in the academic career. The doctoral candidate must show that s/he knows the state-of-the-art of the field of study. At the same time, the research reported in the thesis must be shown to be relevant to the discipline (Bunton, 2002; Ridley, 2011). To achieve this purpose, thesis writers seek to adopt a tone of authority (Thompson, 2009), a dominant voice or position in the text, and evaluation seems to be a fundamental element to this goal. In displaying a command of the topic and projecting a position, these writers demonstrate an appropriate degree of autonomy while respecting the exigencies of the context of situation in which the thesis is elaborated (Hyland, 2012b). When reviewing the literature the writer's voice and stance guide the reader through the text by reporting what has been done previously and pointing at what still remains to be done. In doing so, writers use evaluative resources to convince readers of their authority. Thus, the final successful text results from the combination of linguistic elements of varied nature, which allows for the study of academic discourse from different perspectives. One of these perspectives explores interpersonal relationships in the text, i.e. the ways in which writers project themselves and consider their audience in discourse. Academic writers do not simply produce texts but use language to offer a credible representation of themselves and their work, and to establish social relations with readers. This concern with the interpersonal has related language use to its social, cultural and educational contexts (Hyland, 2004: 13).

The process of establishing connections between the writer's innovation and the work of predecessors on the topic under study is most manifest in the Literature Reviews (henceforth LRs) of PhD theses. LRs are background chapters that contextualise the thesis writer's research by describing previous research and the theoretical and methodological issues which are relevant to the topic in the thesis (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007). This review leads to the indication of the gaps or needs in the disciplinary field that the thesis aimed to fill and makes it necessary to include critical comments on former studies in order to justify the validity of what is being presented. Thus, the main communicative purposes of LRs must be achieved not only through expository pieces of information but also through expressions of evaluation towards the propositional content in the text. The writer's stance towards reviewed authors' materials and her/his own research is constructed in the reported propositions and the writer's own claims. Indeed, citing another author involves the evaluation of that author, thus opening an "evaluative space" for writer comment (Thompson & Ye, 1991: 369). Writers highlight the strengths, weaknesses and omissions of existing literature, providing a critique of the research. Hence, the language used in an LR is often evaluative and demonstrates the writer's position about the literature in relation to her/his own work (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007).

Critical evaluations in LRs reflect the writer's attitude towards the reviewed author's work, the writer's own work and the reader, who represents the discipline community they all belong to. In this social context, the linguistic expression of evaluation confers an interactive dimension on academic discourse. The writer's linguistic choices adjust the praise and criticism attached to a statement with the aim of building a convincing argument and having a persuasive effect on the reader.

A number of researchers have examined the ways of expressing and interpreting evaluation in academic genres from specific disciplines. These include Thompson and Ye (1991) and Hyland (2000, 2002), who studied potentially evaluative reporting verbs used in academic papers, Stotesbury (2003), who analysed attitudinal language in RA abstracts, and Koutsantoni (2004), who explored appraisal resources in scientific RAs. There has also been an interest in the reasons for variation across languages in terms of evaluation (Fløttum, Dahl, & Kinn, 2006; Mauranen, 1993; Shaw, 2003; Vassileva, 2001; Yakhontova, 2002). As regards English and Spanish, Burgess (2002) and Martín-Martín (2003) studied RA introductions and abstracts respectively, while Vázquez (2010) compared the use of modal verbs in the expression of epistemic stance in business management RAs. Recently, Martín and León Pérez (2014) examined promotional strategies in a corpus of RA introductions in business management.

Among the studies in PhD theses, some research has been carried out recently on stance and voice (Charles, 2003, 2006, 2009; Thompson, 2005a, 2005b, 2012). A group of analyses have explored the structure and purposes of the introduction, LR and conclusion sections on theses produced by native English speaking writers (Bunton, 2002, 2005; Flowerdew & Forest, 2009; Kwan, 2006; Paltridge, 2002; Peters, 2011; Ridley, 2000; Thompson, 2001, 2009). A second set of studies has focused on the contexts of situation and culture of doctoral research work, comparing writings subject to different traditions (Carbonell-Olivares, Gil-Salom, & Soler-Monreal, 2009; Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; Lim et al., 2014; LoCastro, 2008; Pecorari, 2006).

Contrastive genre-based studies of PhD texts have compared the rhetorical organisation of English and Japanese introductory chapters of literature theses (Ono, 2012) and of computing thesis introductions written in English and in Spanish (Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares, & Gil-Salom, 2011). Citation practices in computing PhD LRs written in English and in Spanish have also been compared (Soler-Monreal & Gil-Salom, 2011). But to our best knowledge no contrastive analysis has been carried out on evaluative language in the LRs sections of PhD theses. Therefore, our interest in this study was first to explore the rhetorical structure of PhD LR sections, second, to identify the expression of evaluation in them and, finally, to compare the writers' strategies in theses written by native speakers of two different languages.

This article analyses the writer's attitude toward the validity, the worth and the significance of the information that is provided in a corpus of LRs in the applied field of computing written in English and in Spanish. Research in the area of computing science has focused on structural patterns (Anthony, 1999, 2001; Cooper, 1985; Posteguillo, 1995, 1999) and