



A contrastive study of the variation of sentence connectors in academic English



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ABSTRACT

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This paper focuses on the variation of sentence connectors in academic English and, more specifically, on the issue of whether language use can change depending on the linguistic background of the writer. This study takes a functionalist point of view to analyse academic language in use; furthermore, identity and interpersonal style are also taken into account. The main objective of this paper is to analyse whether native English speakers and non-native English speakers vary the frequency of connectors and their use across different sections of research papers depending on the rhetorical choices of the writers to construct identity. In order to accomplish this, a corpus of forty academic papers was created and the uses of sentence connectors were analysed. The occurrences of the categories and of individual connectors were compared in order to determine whether Spanish writers of English and native English writers employed the same categories of sentence connectors to join ideas and the categories used in the sections of the research paper. The results were contrasted and the conclusions confirmed the initial hypothesis of this study: variation may exist in academic English, as the interpersonal style of writers could be different when their linguistic background is different.

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1. Introduction

Linguistic variation has traditionally been studied from a diachronic point of view; however synchronic variation has recently gained increasing recognition. In this sense, researchers' interest in the notion of variation within the field of English for academic purposes has revolved around rhetorical aspects of the structure of academic English (Durrant, 2009; Samraj, 2005; Samraj & Monk, 2008; Yakhontova, 2006) or on analysing how genres vary across linguistic disciplinary lines (Charles, 2007; Freddi, 2005; Ozturk, 2007; Samraj, 2002, 2004), while, on the other hand, other researchers have investigated variation across communities or associated particular discursive features with different linguistic backgrounds (Hinkel, 2009; Schleef, 2009; Yli-Jokipii & Jorgensen, 2004). Still others have focused on the variations in text features when writers come from different cultural backgrounds, mainly English and Spanish-speaking ones (de Haan & van Esch, 2005; Martín Martín, 2003; Moreno & Suárez, 2008; Salager-Meyer, Alcaraz Ariza, & Zambrano, 2003). To sum up, the main aim of the above mentioned analyses has been to describe, through diachronic or synchronic contrastive rhetoric studies, variation in discourse patterns that could operate as a barrier to effective communication (Carrió Pastor, 2002, 2005, 2009).

Although the intrinsic characteristics of some genres made Widdowson (1979: 61) claim that there is a universal expression of scientific exposition which "[...] with some tolerance for individual stylistic variation, imposes a conformity on members of the scientific community no matter what language they happen to use", I consider in this study that this may not

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be so true nowadays and the interpersonal style of writers may be different. The fact that information is received and sent so rapidly results in language borrowings and novel linguistic items that are constantly being incorporated into international discourse from diverse linguistic backgrounds. As Hyland (2011: 11) observes, “While we become who we are only in relation to others, adopting the modes of talk that others routinely use, identity also means assembling a performance using the language and values we bring to the group from our social backgrounds”.

In the same line, the term ‘variation’ is used in this paper to refer to the different manifestations of a given concept in a particular language which are neither mistakes nor errors and which appear in texts written by authors with different linguistic backgrounds. I consider variation as a different way of conveying the same reality and it arises when writers differ in their choice of language structures or text features to express the same or similar ideas. I believe this makes the way writers communicate dependent on their linguistic, cultural and social background; in addition, the rules by which language functions cannot be said to be as general, fixed or evident as initially thought by Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), Quirk (1986) or Chomsky (1999).

To understand the context in which the present study was conducted, I will review the three main approaches to the study of sentence connectors that have been taken into account in this paper. First of all, the classification of sentence connectors has been a long-standing concern for several well-known researchers. In this vein, Halliday and Hasan (1976) divided connectors into additive, adversative, causal and temporal types; Quirk et al. (1985) then added the further categories of listing, summative, appositional, resultive, inferential, contrastive and transitional connectors. Later, Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999), Martin and Rose (2003) and Carter and McCarthy (2006) proposed other classifications. More specifically, in metadiscourse research, scholars seem to take a rather broad approach to classifying text-connectors. For example, Mauranen (1993) used the term ‘internal connectors’ without listing any subcategories; Hyland (2005), following Martin and Rose (2003), divided transitions into those expressing addition, comparison and sequence while leaving sequencers under the category of frame markers. In this piece of research, I have decided to apply the classification proposed by Quirk et al. (1985) in order to first analyse the choices made by research writers and to later contrast the use of sentence connectors as employed by native English speakers (NES) and non-native English speakers (NNES). I certainly believe that this classification will aid in establishing which connectors are most frequently used by English writers in the sections of the research papers. The categories of listing, summative, appositional, resultive, inferential, contrastive and transitional connectors may provide a classification for all the connectors found in the corpora under study.

Second, sentence connectors have been shown to help maintain text coherence in academic discourse by researchers such as Halliday and Hasan (1976), Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1983), Quirk et al. (1985) and Achugar and Schleppegrell (2005). More precisely, Swales (1990) studied the use of connectors in academic writing to maintain coherence and, more recently, Lockman and Swales (2010) have compared the different connectors found in the Michigan Corpus of Upper-level Student Papers (MICUSP), highlighting that *however* was the most frequent connector used in research paper introductions. The occurrences reported by Lockman and Swales (2010) are similar to those of Hyland and Tse (2004) and Shaw (2009). These studies consider sentence connectors as potentially coherent semantic units that construct knowledge mediated by distinctive patterns of language. Connectors are the parts of discourse which signpost how the text is to be appropriately interpreted, facilitating understanding. In general, Hyland and Tse (2004) and Shaw (2009) contrast the use of different connectors in discourse and in different genres, although factors such as the mother tongue or the cultural background of the writer are not investigated. I believe, in this study, that connectors may be used in a different way by authors of different linguistic background, making different rhetorical choices to construct identity while maintaining text coherence in academic discourse.

Third, researchers such as Goldman and Murray (1992), Field and Yip (1992), Lorenz (1999), Milton (2001), Chen (2006), Tseng and Liou (2006), Rahimi and Qannadzadeh (2010) and Yang and Sun (2012) have conducted comparative studies on the use of connectors in texts written by native English speakers and non-native English speakers. In these studies, the importance of connectors for the understanding of inter-sentence relations and to the construction of cohesive devices for text coherence has been highlighted. Further studies, such as the ones carried out by Altenberg and Tapper (1998) and Tankó (2004), found a general tendency to underuse sentence connectors in students’ writings; however, Granger and Tyson (1996) noticed neither general overuse nor underuse of connectors in students’ essays and concluded that the use of individual connectors varies, rather than the connector categories. More recently, Hyland and Tse (2004) have focused on the study of academic writers and the projection of an academic identity through the use of connectors. In this paper, I focus on the projection of an academic identity and compare the use of sentence connectors in academic writing to identify whether the use of English as a second language causes the categories or the individual connectors to vary.

What seems obvious from the aforementioned studies is that different scholars take clearly different approaches to the role of connectors in discourse. It would seem of interest for contrastive studies of sentence connectors to examine further issues such as linguistic variation. The use of sentence connectors may vary depending on the linguistic background of the speaker, as the linguistic process followed by a writer when combining ideas in such a way as to guide the reader through the text is a complex one, even in an L1. This process involves the knowledge both of linguistic features and of the logical organisation of concepts which may be conditioned by the academic background of the writer. The creation of a fluent flow of discourse is not an automatic process; it is an act of personal choice, where the influence of the mother tongue, social constructs, the community-specific context and the creation of an authorial persona are also at play. In this sense, Hyland (2005, 2008, 2010, 2011) emphasises, on the one hand, the relationship between writing and the creation of a writer’s identity, and on the other hand, the importance of writing for readers in academic writing, following the distinction proposed by Hinds (1987) and recently applied to scientific discourse by Salager-Meyer (2011).

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