



Vague language in conference abstracts

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A B S T R A C T

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This study examined abstracts for a British Association for Applied Linguistics conference and a Sociolinguistics Symposium, to define the genre of conference abstracts in terms of vague language, specifically universal general nouns (e.g. people) and research general nouns (e.g. results), and to discover if the language used reflected the level of completeness of the abstract (whether the data was collected or analysed). It was found that half the authors had not completed the analysis and some had not finished collecting their data, and that the abstracts mostly consisted of introduction and method moves. Vague language is part of the conference abstract genre as used by all authors. The function of general nouns appeared to be a matter of 'convenience' or 'anticipation'. Abstracts of less complete research contained open references to the incompleteness of the research, but the universal general nouns implication, resource, thing and problem appeared to 'disguise' the incompleteness, as did the clusters of research general nouns with no details about the research. It is considered that EAP lecturers guiding early career researchers will benefit from this description of vague language in the conference abstract genre.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale and aims

When early career researchers (ECRs) write a conference abstract (CA), they may need guidance; this is especially true if their research project is as yet incomplete. Applied linguistics mentors and supervisors, and EAP lecturers, are often called upon to help ECRs respond to Calls For Papers that stipulate *informative* CAs (Cremmins, 1996). Such are the stipulations of the British Association for Applied Linguistics conferences, which state that CAs should 'indicate clearly objectives, method(s), and result where appropriate' (BAAL2012), and Sociolinguistics Symposiums, that ask for papers describing 'completed research which has given rise to substantial results' (SS2012). Supervisors are generally mindful that reviewing committees seek abstracts which are interesting, innovative and of scholarly quality, but they may not be au fait with the degree of informativeness, in terms of the referential explicitness and distribution of IMRaD moves (Introduction, Method, Results and Discussion), that is characteristic of successful abstracts. In addition, whilst they will recognise that scholars who have not completed their research are likely to compensate for its incompleteness by writing a 'promissory' CA (Kaplan et al., 1994), defined by Swales and Peak as 'one that projects what will be done by the time of the conference' and refers to results that are 'more anticipated than real' (2009, pp. 55–57), they may feel ill-equipped to advise students about structural and linguistic ways of compensating for the incompleteness. The literature on CAs does not address this issue.

This article reports on a study of the degree of informativeness in a corpus of CAs from BAAL2003, held at the University of Leeds, and the SS2004, held at the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne. The study of referential explicitness focused on vague

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language (VL), defined as forms that are intentionally fuzzy, general, and imprecise, have a low semantic content and are heavily dependent on shared contextual knowledge for their meaning. Channell (1994, p. 20) argued that an expression is vague, if 'it can be contrasted with another expression which appears to render the same proposition' (for example, 'She *did* all the *people*'¹ meaning 'She *analysed* all the *theorists*'), if it is 'purposely and unabashedly vague' (as in the case of a speaker deliberately choosing to say 'I asked about all the *things*' to avoid listing unnecessary information), or if 'the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty' (as in 'I wanted to know about their culture, experience *etc.*' when the speaker does not have the precise referent in mind). The study examined the usage of general nouns, general verbs, indefinite pronouns and general extenders (see Section 1.3 for definitions) throughout the corpus. This article focuses on the general nouns because they occurred more frequently than other VL features.

The study aimed to describe the level of informativeness across all CAs, and to reveal any differences between CAs based on complete research and those based on incomplete research, the level of completeness being identified from questionnaires. To this end, it examined the general nouns to find which predominate, whether their co-text (cohesion, pre- and post-modification) adds explicitness, and what their main interpersonal social functions seem to be. It also analysed the content of the IMRaD structure to discover the main moves. There were two assumptions. The first was that the level of informativeness of all CAs in the corpus would be relatively low, because of shared knowledge and an understanding that details would be discussed at the conference. The second was that the level of informativeness in CAs describing incomplete research would be especially low, because the absence of findings would coincide with semantically empty language, employed to compensate for and indeed disguise the incompleteness.

The remainder of this section reviews the literature on IMRaD moves and VL forms, to situate the study in current thinking and show the origin of the categories of analysis used.

1.2. Moves and language in conference abstracts

The literature pertaining to CAs has more often centred on IMRaD moves than on linguistic features (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Halleck & Connor, 2006; Kaplan et al., 1994; Räisänen, 1999; Stein, 1997; Swales & Feak, 2009). There is a general understanding that the 'introduction' move presents the context, the aims and the literature review; the 'method' explains how the data was collected and analysed; the 'results' move provides summaries of findings; and the 'discussion' offers interpretations, implications and applications.

Some of the literature consulted examines how the IMRaD structure affects the way that the CAs are rated by reviewers. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) found that highly-rated CAs in the 1989, 1990 and 1992 Conferences on College Composition and Communication (CCC) contained all the aforementioned moves, described as problem-method-findings-conclusion. Swales and Feak (2009, p. 45) recommend that authors should include all the moves if they are to make a strong appeal to CA review committees and 'sell' their work effectively.

Conversely, other studies have shown that all the moves are not necessarily present in highly-rated CAs, although these have reached no consensus as to which moves are essential. Kaplan et al. (1994) did, however, identify that the 'results' move was a deciding factor in acceptance, after examining American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) 1993 abstracts. They based this assertion on the discovery that 76% of accepted abstracts contained a 'results' move, whereas only 43% of rejected ones did so. In contrast, Stein (1997) analysed CAs submitted to the 1996 TESOL Conference Special Interest Groups ESL in Higher Education and Research and although he found no significant difference in the frequency of moves between accepted and rejected proposals, and confirmed that they were 'more optional than obligatory in nature' (Stein, 1997, p. 170), he did discover that the 'Introduction' move was the most frequent and the 'Results' was the least frequent. Halleck and Connor (2006, p. 73) identified ten moves 'territory' (context), 'reporting previous research', 'gap', 'goal', 'means 1' leading to the goal (research method), 'means 2' leading to the presentation (method for presenting the paper), 'outcomes', 'benefits' (impact), 'importance claim' (significance) and 'competence claim' (author's qualifications). Although they failed to identify any move as obligatory, they found that the term 'goal' appeared in 82% of the CAs in their study, whereas 'outcomes' and 'benefits' appeared in half.

The literature that does refer to the language of CAs explores interpersonal functions. It suggests that authors of highly-rated CAs position themselves 'as a member of the disciplinary community' (Swales & Feak, 2009), and that they successfully project an insider ethos and status through the use of buzzword terminology and explicit or implicit references to the literature (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Faber, 1996). Pointing to shared knowledge to claim membership of the community of practice is one of the functions of VL, as this article suggests.

1.3. Forms of vague language in academic written discourse

Studies of VL in academic written English have mostly been concerned with vague quantifiers and hedging devices; general nouns and general extenders have received some attention; general verbs and indefinite pronouns have received less.

Vague quantifiers and hedging devices were not part of the study because they do not depend predominantly on shared contextual knowledge for their meaning. Vague quantifiers, such as 'about 30 subjects', 'around 18 million', 'a great deal of

¹ Examples without a citation reference are created by the author for the purposes of the article.

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