

A discourse analysis of master's theses across disciplines with a focus on introductions

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Abstract

There have been a growing number of discourse studies in recent years on written academic genres produced by students. However, the master's thesis has not received as much attention as the PhD dissertation. This investigation of master's theses from three disciplines, biology, philosophy and linguistics, employs both discourse analysis and interviews with subject specialists. An analysis of the overall organization of the thesis with a focus on the structure of introductions reveals discourse features that distinguish this genre from research articles and also points to disciplinary variation within this genre. An analysis of the use of citations and the first person pronoun in the introductions shows that philosophy students create a much stronger authorial presence but establish weaker intertextual links to previous research than the biology students do in these texts. The linguistics students occupy a more central position in terms of these dimensions.

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1. Introduction

In the last three decades the field of genre analysis has seen a great number of studies on written academic genres, especially the research article (e.g., Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990, 2004). The studies on research articles have explored both the discourse structure of various sections in this genre, such as the discussion section (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Yang & Allison, 2003), as well as patterns of use of linguistic features. Some recent studies have also revealed disciplinary and cross-linguistic variations within this genre (e.g., Ahmad, 1997; Hyland, 2000, 2001, 2002; Mauranen, 1993; Samraj, 2002a).

Another area of study growing in importance is the writing of graduate students, which falls into two broad groups. One set of studies has explored the socialization of graduate students into various disciplinary communities and has revealed the situated nature of the acculturation process, especially of doctoral students seeking to become legitimate members of different disciplinary communities (Belcher, 1994; Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1991; Casanave, 1995; Prior, 1998). A second set of studies has emphasized the discourse analysis of texts, mainly the

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PhD thesis/dissertation, produced by these students (e.g., Bunton, 2002, 2005; Dong, 1998; Ridley, 2000; Swales, 2004; Thompson, 1999, 2001, 2005). However, very few studies have focused on the structure of the master's thesis. Such studies have been motivated by the need to create relevant EAP material for master's students, who will not usually be involved in the writing of research articles (Dudley-Evans, 1994, 1999). Some studies of master's theses have explored the organization of certain sections of this genre such as introductions and discussion sections (Dudley-Evans, 1986) and conclusions (Hewings, 1993). These studies have tended to focus on texts from single disciplines produced in some British institutions and have used a small number of texts for analysis, although a more recent study by Paltridge (2002) analyzes the overall organization of both master's and PhD theses from a number of disciplines produced at a major Australian research university. Previous studies on master's theses have not drawn on the views of subject specialists concerning the purpose and nature of this genre in different disciplines, and, while these studies have provided us with a preliminary understanding of the generic structure of master's theses, they have not systematically analyzed disciplinary variation in this student-produced genre. Recent research in academic writing has revealed much on disciplinary variation but few studies have examined disciplinary variation in writing produced by graduate students (Prior, 1998; Samraj, 2000, 2002b).

One feature of academic writing, among many, that has been shown to vary along disciplinary boundaries is the use of intertextual links where authors seek to present their contribution to knowledge as part of an ongoing disciplinary conversation through their selection of references to previous research. An author's contribution is not usually presented in a disciplinary vacuum but as relevant to the research questions pursued by other researchers in that disciplinary field. Studies of introductions in research articles and PhD theses have made it clear that a crucial rhetorical function of introductions is to justify the study being reported (Bunton, 2002; Swales, 1990). We would expect the use of references to previous research to be an integral part of realizing this rhetorical function of master's thesis introductions.

Another related feature of academic writing shown to vary across disciplines is the use of the first person pronoun to establish authorial presence (Hyland, 2001). Research article writers have been shown to use the first person pronoun for a number of discourse functions, mainly to state the goal or purpose of the paper, to outline procedures carried out and to make a knowledge claim (Harwood, 2005; Hyland, 2001; Kuo, 1999). However, undergraduate writers have been found to make much less use of the first person pronoun, and to use it for a narrower range of functions in discourse (Hyland, 2002). Tang and John (1999) point out that the undergraduate students they studied use the first person pronoun in ways that do not establish a strong authorial presence. Hyland (2002) shows that the disciplinary variation in self reference noted in published writing is blurred in novice student writing and concludes that the undergraduate students studied have not been socialized into the epistemological practices of their individual disciplines.

Master's theses appear to be an essential part of most master's programs in the U.S. and are produced at the culmination of master's programs comprising around two years of coursework. However, there has been, to date, no study on this common student-produced genre in the U.S. As such, a study of the master's thesis produced in U.S. universities can inform us on a student-produced genre that fills a place somewhere in between student-produced course papers, on the one hand, and published research articles, on the other, in a taxonomy of academic writing. A genre analysis of master's theses that also draws on subject specialist views can shed light on the nature of this student-produced genre in terms of its discourse structure and its place among different kinds of academic writing. The findings from such a study can be utilized in EAP courses to facilitate the production of this genre by master's students. This paper reports on a study of master's theses from a cross-disciplinary perspective using both textual and interview data.

This paper draws its data from a larger on-going study to focus on the structure of introductions, since previous research has pointed to the rhetorical salience of this genre element in research articles (Swales, 1990; Swales & Najjar, 1987) and dissertations (Bunton, 2002). Like doctoral students in previous studies, master's students are purportedly reporting original research and the introduction is a site where the interplay of the student's agency in the research being reported and the role of previous research is manifested. Therefore, the use of the first person pronoun to create authorial presence and the use of citations to construct intertextual links to previous research in these introductions will be explored.

2. Methods

The data consist of twenty-four theses produced at a large public university in the U.S, eight each from philosophy, biology, and linguistics. The three disciplines were selected as examples of the sciences (biology), social sciences

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