



Literary research article abstracts: An analysis of rhetorical moves and their linguistic realizations[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 February 2016

Received in revised form 6 March 2017

Accepted 5 April 2017

Keywords:

Abstracts

Move analysis

Lexico-grammatical features

Corpus analysis

Literature research article

ABSTRACT

Research article abstracts are the most effective means of sharing research results. This function and the evolution of the research article genre have kept the abstract in the focus of academic investigations. However, despite the impressive research output on abstracts, research addressing specifically literature research article (LRA) abstracts is scarce. This study, therefore, describes the move structure of the LRA abstract, defines the functions of the identified moves, and discusses their linguistic realizations. To conduct the research, a corpus consisting of 135 abstracts from four international journals with high impact factors was compiled and subjected (a) to move analysis performed by a human analyst and (b) to software-driven analyses involving text analysis software. The results reveal that LRA abstracts have a non-hierarchical eight-move structure with four stable moves, whose functions are to present the background, purpose, methodology and outcomes of the research. LRA abstracts are a mix of the descriptive and informative abstracts and structurally overlap with the rhetorical structure of RA introductions. They have high syntactic complexity and lexical density and contain primarily low frequency words. These features and their high information content make them difficult to process.

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1. Introduction

Scientific journals disseminate knowledge and foster interaction, professional development, and the acquisition of discourse community membership. These functions and the fact that genres evolve (Bazerman, 1988; Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010) keep research articles (RAs) in the focus of attention of academic investigations. A part-genre within RAs that has become the most read type of research literature with the exponentially increasing research output is the abstract.

Abstracts from a large variety of disciplines have been investigated. Studies were conducted on abstracts in the fields of medicine (Anderson & Maclean, 1997; Busch-Lauer, 1995; Salager-Meyer, 1990, 1992); biology (Samraj, 2005); biomedicine (Huckin, 2001); psychology (Hartley, 2003); engineering, physics, marketing, sociology and humanities (Hyland, 2004); applied linguistics (Santos, 1996; Tseng, 2011); and humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences (Stotesbury, 2003). Some of these studies and additional ones were cross-linguistic investigations of differences between English and German (Busch-Lauer, 1995), Spanish (Martín-Martín, 2003), Portuguese (Feltrim, Aluísio, & Nunes, 2003), or French journal abstracts (van

[☆] The research was supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA K83243).

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Bonn & Swales, 2007). The importance of the abstract is further underscored by a recent edited volume dedicated to this part-genre (Bondi & Lorés Sanz, 2014) and by the numerous publications dedicated to the classroom applications of genre research findings (Paltridge, 1996; Swales & Feak, 2004, 2009, 2010).

In contrast, English language literary research article (LRA) abstracts have received little attention. A rare exception is Stotesbury (2003), who noted that the few literary abstracts she investigated seemed to have a topic–argument–conclusion structure. She also stated that the LRA has a “liminal status” compared to research reports from other fields of science. The scarcity of research on LRA abstracts and their perceived generic status already justify research interest in them.

Literary research journals constitute international fora for academic exchange for an intellectually diverse readership consisting of scholars and teachers of literature and feature primarily previously unpublished articles. The articles are theoretically engaged and historically informed texts that address significant topics related to, for example, literary theory, method, interpretation, genre(s), style, censorship, history, or interdisciplinarity. Authors present findings clearly, cogently and concisely to enhance the communicative effectiveness of their articles. The discipline is highly divergent and has numerous schools of thought, so the question emerges how literature scholars document their research endeavors in a convergent genre like the abstract.

Unlike in the case of abstracts in several other fields of study, valid and reliable empirical evidence is unavailable on the move structure of LRA abstracts, the rhetorical functions performed by their moves, and the linguistic realization of the moves in terms of lexico-grammatical patterns, syntactic complexity and lexical richness. The present study was motivated by the lack of information on these rhetorical structure and linguistic features of LRA abstracts.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research article text abstract typology

As opposed to graphical abstracts, text abstracts written by scholars form two groups in terms of format: structured and traditional abstracts. Regarding rhetorical goals, they can be descriptive, informative, or indicative-informative.

Traditional abstracts consist of a block paragraph entitled *Abstract*. Structured abstracts have sub-headed sections and typically occur in natural or social science journals. Research has suggested that structured abstracts are superior because of their extended length, increased readability and searchability, and information content (Hartley, 1999). However, they have been also found to feature confusing typesetting, have space-inefficient layout, and therefore miss important information because of the restrictions imposed by the publisher (Hartley & Benjamin, 1998; Taddio et al., 1994). In contrast, traditional abstracts dominate in social sciences and humanities and have been researched extensively. However, few descriptive studies evaluate traditional abstracts critically in terms of their effectiveness: as an exception, Santos (1996) noted that because some applied linguistic abstracts made only vague references to implications and conclusions, readers could not determine the usefulness of the articles. The communicative effectiveness of abstracts in general, and of LRA abstracts in particular, should be more extensively studied.

Text abstracts can be descriptive or informative. The descriptive abstract is not summative; does not discuss methodology/results; has an impersonal style; and uses primarily present tense, passive voice and third-person reference forms. The informative abstract is a condensed version of the entire RA, uses primarily past tense, active voice, and self-reference (Day, 1988; Goldbort 2002; Liddy, 1991; NISO 1997). According to Cremmins (as cited in Cross & Oppenheim, 2006), these two abstract types can mix and form an indicative-informative abstract that combines descriptive abstract content with conclusions. Because LRA abstracts were described as transitional (Stotesbury, 2003), it raises the question which abstract type the discipline prefers and why?

Discourse analytical investigations have sought to map the textual organization of traditional RA abstracts in terms of moves realized by functional components (e.g., steps, sub-moves, or strategies). A review of the literature on abstracts reveals that some original empirical research studies are available on the RA abstracts in mainstream literature that specifically address both the question of canonical rhetorical structure, described in the form of conventional and optional constituents (see Table 1), and lexico-grammar, but no such study on the LRA abstracts seems to be available.

Lorés (2004) provided a new analytical angle by comparing the rhetorical structure of abstracts to that of a whole article (Introduction–Methods–Results–Discussion/IMRD structure) or of an article introduction (Swales, 1990 CARS structure). According to her, the IMRD structure matches the definition of the informative abstract; the descriptive abstract, which does not discuss methodology, reproduces the CARS structure; and the mixed-structure abstract corresponds with the descriptive-informative abstract. Her mapping may be debatable at the level of steps in the CARS model. Methodology in some disciplines is discussed in Move 3, Step 1B (Announcing Present Research) as some of Swales' (1990) examples suggest (see, e.g., the outline structure on p. 165 in *Genre Analysis*) or as Árvay and Tankó (2004) have shown in their analysis of theoretical RA introductions (see M3 S1C Analytical Details in their revised CARS model, pp. 79–80). Nevertheless, this analytical angle is also relevant for the study of LRA abstracts as it is not known which abstract type literary scholars use.

2.2. Rhetorical moves

A move is a stretch of text with a definable rhetorical function (Swales & Feak, 2009). Researchers considered it conventional and therefore obligatory if it appeared in 50% (Holmes, 1997; Nwogu, 1997; Swales, 1990), in 60% (Kanoksilapatham,

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