



The schematic structure of discussion sections in applied linguistics and the distribution of metadiscourse markers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 March 2017

Received in revised form 6 April 2018

Accepted 10 April 2018

Keywords:

Genre analysis

Research article

Discussion section

Metadiscourse markers

Replication study

ABSTRACT

This study examines the applicability of the schematic structure of research article (RA) discussion sections in the field of applied linguistics proposed by Yang and Allison (2003), and the organizational features of moves, and the distribution of metadiscourse markers across moves. The analysis is based on a corpus of 20 RAs from two high-profile journals in applied linguistics. Findings from the current study have shown that this schematic structure can be applied to a different dataset from the same field, without the need for additional moves. Specific patterns were noted with regard to the organizational features of moves and steps, in particular, opening and closing moves and move sequences. Marked differences were identified in the distribution of textual and interpersonal markers across moves in discussion sections. The findings from this study have both theoretical and pedagogical significance in terms of strengthening confidence in the reliability of Yang and Allison's RA discussion section schematic structure, deepening novice writers' understanding of differences in the frequency and sequencing of moves and steps, and heightening writers' awareness of the functions of metadiscourse markers and their distribution across moves in RAs.

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1. Introduction

A central tenet of the genre-based approach to text analysis is the belief that written genres may be identified through an analysis of linguistic features (Hyland, 2007) and rhetorical structure (Kanoksilapatham, 2005). Such linguistic and rhetorical features contribute to fulfilling specific communicative functions or purposes in individual discourse communities (Hyland, 2007; Kanoksilapatham, 2005). The research article (RA) is recognized as a specific text genre, the main purpose of which is the dissemination of disciplinary knowledge (Peacock, 2002). A variety of linguistic features of different sections of RAs have been previously examined, such as hedging (e.g., Hu & Cao, 2011) and reporting verbs (e.g., Bloch, 2010). A second analytical perspective has investigated the schematic structure of entire RAs (e.g., Kwan, 2017) or particular RA sections including the introduction (e.g., Briones, 2012), literature review (e.g., Khoo, Na, & Jaidka, 2011), methodology (e.g., Lim, 2006), results (e.g., Lim, 2010), discussion (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012) and conclusion sections (e.g., Bunton, 2005).

Particular importance has been attached to the discussion section of RAs, owing to its role in construing and reinforcing the principal line(s) of argument pursued (Jalilifar, Hayati, & Namdari, 2012) and in establishing the importance of the research findings (Yang & Allison, 2003). Models for the schematic structure of the discussion section have been proposed in

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recent decades based on dataset from different disciplines (e.g., history, political science, and sociology in Holmes, 1997; biology in Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; physics, biology, environmental science, business, language and linguistics, public administration, and law in Peacock, 2002; dentistry in Basturkmen, 2012). Of these, Yang and Allison's (2003) move structure (based on data from applied linguistics) is the most recent fully-developed two-layer framework.

Employing a corpus of 20 empirical articles, Yang and Allison (2003) examined the closing sections of RAs (i.e., the result, discussion, conclusion, and pedagogic implication sections). In order to identify the schematic structure of discussion sections, they undertook a separate analysis of just eight sections from the original corpus. To our knowledge, only one other study, Basturkmen (2009), has employed Yang and Allison's (2003) schematic structure to analyze discussion sections. This work bestowed particular attention on one specific move, *Commenting on results*. However, the absence of further replication studies means the reliability of Yang and Allison's model has only been subject to partial evaluation. The existence of additional replication work would contribute to boosting confidence in findings from the original study (Basturkmen, 2014).

Previous studies have also examined particular organizational features of moves in discussion sections, such as move frequency, obligatory and optional moves, and move patterns or sequences (e.g., Basturkmen, 2012; Holmes, 2001; Jalilifar et al., 2012; Peacock, 2002). These studies present certain inconsistencies in their findings, however, particularly with regard to opening and closing moves, move frequency, and move sequences. Furthermore, as corpora employed in these studies were drawn from various academic disciplines, insights into the organizational features of moves from applied linguistics are limited.

The aforementioned circumstances (i.e., the small corpus size in Yang and Allison's original study, the restriction of Basturkmen's study to one move, and the inconclusive findings with regard to move organization) signal the need for a reanalysis of the full discussion section using Yang and Allison's schematic structure by applying a different, and larger, dataset.

In previous explorations of the schematic structure of different RA sections, authors noted the presence of particular metadiscourse markers when identifying moves (e.g., Afros & Schryer, 2009; Basturkmen, 2009, 2012; Jalilifar et al., 2012; Khedri, Heng, & Ebrahimi, 2013; Yang & Allison, 2003). This acknowledgement of the functional contribution of metadiscourse markers seems a logical corollary of identifying the communicative purpose of individual moves (Holmes, 1997). The functions of metadiscourse markers include the articulation of stance, signaling the overarching organizational structure, and guiding readers through the information flow (e.g., Crismore & Abdolhezhadeh, 2010; Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993; Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 1998). Nevertheless, the specific contribution of metadiscourse markers to the formulation of individual moves, and the distribution of metadiscourse markers across moves have not been systematically investigated.

Accordingly, the present study aims firstly to examine whether the seven-move schematic structure of discussion section identified in Yang and Allison (2003) is applicable to a larger dataset from the same discipline by conducting a conceptual replication study.¹

Secondly, we aim to identify the schematic organizational features of RA discussion sections with respect to move frequency, obligatory and optional moves, opening and closing moves, and move sequences. Thirdly, we intend to explore the use of metadiscourse markers in the formulation of different moves. The research questions are as follows.

RQ 1: To what extent can the moves identified in Yang and Allison's (2003) discussion section schematic structure be found in a different set of data from the field of applied linguistics?

RQ 2: What are the schematic organizational features of discussion sections regarding opening and closing moves, move frequency, obligatory moves, and move sequences?

RQ 3: How are metadiscourse markers distributed across the different moves in discussion sections?

1.1. Previous studies on schematic structure of RA discussion sections

Previous studies have explored the schematic structure of RA discussion sections among various disciplines by employing moves and steps as units of analysis. A move is defined as a segment of discourse or a rhetorical unit (Nwogu, 1997; Swales, 2004), which is shaped by a specific communication purpose (Holmes, 1997; Swales, 2004). Moves can be realized by a step or a combination of steps (Swales, 1990). Table 1 shows three schematic structure models of discussion sections proposed by Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988), Swales (1990) and Holmes (1997) respectively. These three models have either been employed directly or they have been used as a point of departure for the development of further schematic structure models of discussion sections.

Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988) initially proposed an eleven-move structure for discussion sections using a corpus of academic writing from the sciences. The first five moves of this model (as displayed in the first row of Table 1) were adopted in later models put forward by Swales (1990) and Holmes (1997). Swales' (1990) eight-move structure simplified Hopkins and

¹ A conceptual replication study is one of three types of replication study (the remaining two being exact replications, and approximate or systematic replications). It aims to investigate the original study's external validity, generalizability and to assess the explanations of the results in the original study by changing certain variables (Abbuhl et al., 2008; Polio & Gass, 1997).

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