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Creating a theoretical framework: On the move structure of theoretical framework sections in research articles related to language and linguistics



Ming-Yu Tseng

National Sun Yat-sen University, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, 70 Lien-Hai Road, Kaohsiung 804, Taiwan

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the theoretical framework (TF) section of the research article. It is based on a dataset of 20 TFs from nine linguistics journals covered by the Web of Science in its Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), especially those related to applied and social aspects of linguistics. Adopting a contextualist view of rhetorical moves, this paper proposes a theory-centered perspective from which to examine the TFs of research articles. The proposed model - Creating a Theoretical Framework (CATF) - consists of three moves: Providing a theoretical background, Establishing a theoretical framework, and Sharpening the significance/focus of one's study that uses the framework. Each move is achieved by a combination of strategies. The results show that although the combination and sequence of strategies in each move may vary, certain strategy patterns occurred frequently. This paper offers pedagogical suggestions regarding the teaching of the TF section and concludes with remarks on connections between the CARS and CATF models.

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1. Introduction

In studies of research articles, much attention has been paid to the key sections of the IMRD model (Swales, 1990), i.e., Introduction (Hirano, 2009; Lim, 2012; Loi & Evans, 2010; Swales, 1990, 2004; Wang & Yang, 2015), Methods (Cotos, Huffman, & Link, 2017; Lim, 2006, 2017), Results (Brett, 1994; Bruce, 2009; Lim, 2010; Thompson, 1993) and Discussion (Basturkmen, 2012; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Holmes, 1997; Peacock, 2002). In the model, literature review (hereafter LR) was not treated as a separate section but covered in Introduction or regarded as one similar to it. This may be the reason why LRs, compared with the identified sections in the model, have received relatively less attention.

Kwan's (2006) study is one rare study of LRs or, rather, LR chapters in doctoral theses. According to her, LRs and introductions have some resemblance in that both generally have a similar move structure starting from establishing a territory through creating a niche to occupying the niche (cf. Bunton, 2002; Swales, 1990). Despite the similarity, they also differ in their overall function. Introductions are more concerned with creating a research space. In contrast, LRs "delineate the complex conceptual and theoretical contours of a thesis" and may also "prepare the ground for specific methodological aspects of the writer's research study" (Kwan, 2006, p. 51).

Research articles (hereafter RAs) sometimes contain a section named theoretical framework (TF) or something similar instead of LR. Surprisingly, no study has specifically examined this subgenre. This might be attributed to potential similarities

E-mail addresses: mytseng_2000@yahoo.com.tw, mytseng@mail.nsysu.edu.tw.

between TF and LR and to the association of LR with Introduction. TF and LR are similar in at least two respects. Firstly, the TF section always involves reviewing relevant literature, as will be shown in section 4. Secondly, LR may cover some knowledge claims as its theoretical base. As Kwan (2006, p. 51) puts it, LR sometimes enacts the strategy of “abstracting or synthesizing knowledge claims to establish a theoretical position or a theoretical framework”. The possible similarities between them and their association with Introduction, especially the move of establishing a territory by reviewing items of previous research, could make the teaching of writing the TF section difficult. Shall instructors of EAP tell students that they produce the Introduction based on the CARS model and then repeat using the model when working on the subsequent section so long as it concerns LR and/or TF? While stimulating discussion of this issue, the present study attempts to offer an alternative. Building on the niche-establishing perspective (Kwan, 2006; Lim, 2012; Swales, 2004) and taking it as a point of departure, this paper proposes an alternative perspective – a theory-centered one – from which to exam how the created research space in the Introduction develops in the TF. This perspective is not intended to deny the significance of establishing niches or to challenge the well-established CARS model but to complement the niche-surrounding perspective, especially when the unfolding of research writing shifts from Introduction to TF. This study explores the move structure of TFs using a perspective in dialogue with, but not identical to, creating a research space.

2. Theoretical framework: toward a contextualist view of rhetorical moves

A rhetorical move in genre analysis is defined as “a discursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse” (Swales, 2004, p. 229). A move can be realized by one clause, one or more sentences, a paragraph or longer. Although the ways to perform a move vary, they can be classified in functional terms called *steps* or *strategies*, which are subunits of a move.

It is often assumed that a move is identified not through a specific lexical or syntactic pattern but mainly based on the meaning of the text segment being examined. However, sometimes the purpose of a textual segment may not be self-evident until contextual information is available, e.g., the title, section, paragraph, and position where it is used. This contextualist view of rhetorical moves calls for the notion of utterances rather than that of grammatical sentences. The meaning of an utterance is somewhat indeterminate until its context is considered (Kecskes, 2008; Searle, 1980; Sperber & Wilson, 1995), e.g. who speaks it to whom, where it is uttered, for what purpose it is used, and what effect can be generated by it. In written academic discourse, what action a textual segment performs also requires contextual information.

In this study, a move is defined as a stretch of utterances that serve a specific communicative purpose and is achieved by a set of discourse strategies. Furthermore, a move is both embedded within the coherence of the paragraph(s) where it appears, and is coupled with the persuasion of argumentative writing. Move structure is defined as a configuration of stretches of utterances serving not only specific communicative purposes in context but also paralleling with the coherence and development of ideas. The significant implication is that move structure is also characterized by discourse development that contributes to coherence and persuasion. In other words, the development of rhetorical moves and that of strategies within the moves run in parallel, co-contributing to the development of ideas in the examined section.

When identifying and naming the rhetorical moves and strategies, I particularly consider four points and their interaction. Firstly, although the functional-semantic feature of a text segment is the key to move analysis, the title and subject matter of the article, the heading of the section and its subheadings, if any, are also considered. For example, (1) appears to be a niche-like statement, but it is cited from a section called ‘Theoretical background and rationale’. Can (1) be interpreted the same way as in an introduction section? It can be if we see TF as the same as Introduction. Nevertheless, if a niche has been established in Introduction (see (2)) and we see the TF as developing from Introduction, then (1) can be renamed in its new context. The two possibilities might not be in conflict if we view the two sections as connected yet different. The Introduction can contain an account of the used theory, but it can be restructured in ways that the theory is treated separately in the subsequent section. In the latter case, the TF section is written in response to the research space created in Introduction, and the space can be sustained and reinforced in the TF, thus taking a more developed shape in terms of theoretical underpinning. That is, there could be two parallel move structures in the TF, especially if we view the TF as closely connected with the Introduction: that of the potentially latent CARS model and a newly emerging structure developing from but not identical to it. Taking this perspective, we may interpret (1) as a gap-indicating statement which may serve a purpose in its new context in addition to the latent function of establishing a niche (see section 4.3).

- (1) So far, little attention has been paid to the influence of literacy histories on an understanding and implementation of academic writing conventions in the context of a master's thesis. (JEAP3)
- (2) The current study extends this line of enquiry in the specific context of student mobility in the European Higher Education Area ... (JEAP3)

Secondly, the identification and naming of a move need to consider the position where it is located, e.g. at the beginning, middle or ending part of a section or subsection. That is, a move is embedded within the development of ideas and the organization of a section. According to Bakhtin (1986), while sentences can be repeated, utterances cannot because the context is bound to change (pp. 105–107). Viewed in this way, a gap-indicating statement could have a different function when appearing in different parts that fulfill different move functions. For example, (3) immediately follows (1), and

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