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Rhetorical structure of the introductions of applied linguistics PhD theses

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rhetorical structure of 20 introductions of applied linguistics PhD theses (AL introductions) produced in Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US. The results are compared with previous studies examining thesis introductions produced in other disciplines (OD introductions). The analysis shows that the AL introductions have a greater tendency to include research questions, descriptions of research subjects or material, and reviews of previous literature, while they have a lesser tendency to indicate problems or needs. Unlike the writers of the OD introductions, who were reported not to refer to their studies until in the closing paragraphs, the majority of the writers of the AL introductions do so from the opening paragraphs and at several places. These writers introduce their studies in general terms in the opening paragraphs as the introductory part and then describe or justify specific aspects of the studies in the body part, often followed by previews of the subsequent chapters as the ending part. The AL introductions following this pattern are found to be much longer than the AL introductions following the pattern of the OD introductions.

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1. Introduction

The main focus of this paper is on the introductory section or chapter (introduction) of doctoral theses or dissertations. Although the terms 'thesis' and 'dissertation' can be used differently, this derives from the difference between UK and US conventions. According to [Thompson \(2013, p. 213\)](#), while, in the US, "the lengthy text produced as the culmination of doctoral research is generally referred to as a dissertation", "it is referred to as a thesis" in the UK. Moreover, "dissertation" in the UK refers to "the extended piece of work at the masters level". This paper follows these UK conventions.

The rhetorical structure of thesis/dissertation chapters has been an active topic of research (e.g., [Bunton, 1998, 2002, 2005](#); [Kamler & Thomson, 2014](#); [Koutsantoni, 2007](#); [Kwan, 2006](#); [Lim, Loi, & Hashim, 2014](#); [Ono, 2017](#); [Paltridge, 2002](#); [Samraj, 2008](#); [Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares, & Gil-Salom, 2011](#); [Thompson, 2009](#)). However, to date, very few studies have empirically examined the overall structure of PhD thesis introductions. These studies often utilised the Creating-A-Research-Space (CARS) model ([Swales, 1990, 2004](#); [Swales & Feak, 2012](#)) or its modified version (e.g., [Bunton, 2002](#)). According to the CARS model, which is originally a model to represent the rhetorical structure of the introductions of research articles (RAs), RA writers are expected to achieve the following communicative purposes or moves in the introductions. The first move is called 'establishing a territory' (Move 1), which consists of rhetorical actions, or steps, such as presenting the larger research contexts and reviewing relevant literature on topics explored in the research. To achieve the second move 'establishing a

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niche' (Move 2), the writers employ steps such as indicating insufficient aspects of previous research and/or specifying the aspects of previous knowledge to be extended. The writers end their introductions by presenting their studies as 'occupying the niche' (Move 3). In other words, Move 2 may function as "the hinge that connects Move 1 (what has been done) to Move 3 (what the present research is about)" (Swales & Feak, 2012, p. 348). While such a tripartite structure "for English-language introductions in many leading journals is – or has become – prototypical" (Swales, 2004, p. 226), the CARS model also assumes an option of "recycling Move 2s" (Swales & Feak, 2012, p. 352) or "the potential cycling, or iteration, of Move 1 and Move 2 sequences" (Swales, 2004, p. 160). Swales (1990, pp. 158–159) noted that "the longer the introduction the greater the probability of cycling configuration" between Moves 1 and 2. Hence, it can be said that introductions following the CARS model may generally have the three-part structure (Move 1–Move 2–Move 3) or the two-part structure (Move 1/Move 2 cycles followed by Move 3). It needs to be stressed here that as Paltridge and Starfield (2007) wrote, the CARS model is not to be viewed as a rigid template. As Swales (1990) noted, the CARS model only represents "high probability expectations" (Swales, 1990, p. 58) regarding the rhetorical structure of RA introductions. In fact, a number of cases have been reported in which RA introductions contain features discordant with the CARS model (e.g., Lewin, Fine, & Young, 2001; Nwogu, 1997; Samraj, 2002).

Based on the CARS model (Swales, 1990), Bunton (2002) analysed 45 PhD thesis introductions by native and non-native English-speaking writers from various disciplines in the science and technology fields, and the social science and humanities fields. Bunton found that the thesis introductions basically consist of the three moves of the CARS model, whereas they also contain a number of steps not described in the model. Another noteworthy finding reported by Bunton was that the majority of the introductions followed the two-part structure assumed in the CARS model (Move 1/Move 2 recycles followed by Move 3). Based on these findings, Bunton proposed a move-step model for PhD thesis introductions. Also based on Swales' (1990) CARS model, Bunton's earlier work (1998) compared the introductions of humanities and social science PhD theses with those of science and technology theses. It showed that the authors of the humanities and social science introductions used more varieties of Move 3 steps to elaborate their studies in a more detailed manner. More recent studies have also reported cases suggesting disciplinary variations in the structure of PhD thesis introductions. Soler-Monreal et al. (2011) drew on Bunton's (2002) move-step model to analyse PhD thesis introductions by the writers in the computer science discipline. They found that the computing introductions basically consist of the moves and steps described in Bunton's model. However, the majority was found to constitute the tripartite structure of the CARS model (Move 1–Move 2–Move 3), unlike the introductions analysed by Bunton (2002). Ono (2017) attempted to utilise Bunton's (2002) model and Swales and Feak's (2012) CARS model to analyse how steps can be sequenced in PhD thesis introductions in English literary studies. According to Ono, however, the literature introductions contain so many step-related features discordant with these models that he needed to design virtually a new framework for the analysis. He also demonstrated that due to the complexity in step-sequencing in the literature introductions, their overall structure is no longer comparable to the two- or three-part structure of the CARS model.

The purpose of this study is to extend research on disciplinary variations in the rhetorical structure of PhD thesis introductions. To date, no studies have empirically investigated the rhetorical structure of the introductions of applied linguistics PhD theses. The analysis examines the move structure of these introductions based on Bunton's (2002) move-step model for PhD thesis introductions, seeking to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Can the applied linguistics introductions be described in terms of the moves and steps in Bunton's model?
- 2) Do the applied linguistics introductions have the two- or three-part structure assumed in the CARS model, or do they have a different structure?
- 3) If step-related or structural features specific to the applied linguistics introductions are identified, can they be attributed to the nature of the applied linguistics discipline in some ways?

2. The study

The corpus selected for analysis in this study comprises 20 introductions of applied linguistics (AL) PhD theses produced at English-speaking universities in Australia, Canada, the UK, and the US (T1–T20; see Appendix). These theses were selected based on the claim that texts produced at institutions where English is the first language (L1) may constitute more normative samples irrespective of its ethico-political implications (see Belcher, 2007; Canagarajah, 2002; Tang, 2012 for this point). The selected theses were all of the 'traditional' type that consists of introduction, literature review, methods, results, discussion, and conclusion chapters (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007; Thompson, 1999). Introductions were identified based on the notion that the entire chapter before the literature review chapter constitutes the introduction chapter (Kwan, 2006). The introductions selected as data total 1616 sentences, with an average of 80.8 sentences.

The present analysis uses Bunton's (2002) move-step model for PhD thesis introductions; see Table 1 summarising the moves and steps. Unlike the CARS models for RA introductions (Swales, 1990, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2012), Bunton's taxonomy includes 'Defining terms' and 'Parameters of research' as Move 1 steps; '[indicating] Problem/Need' as Move 2 steps; and 'Chapter structure', 'Theoretical position', 'Parameters of research', 'Method', 'Material/Subjects', 'Product/Model proposed', 'Application', and 'Thesis structure' as Move 3 steps. The analysis uses this taxonomy to identify the types of moves and steps achieved in the selected texts. To investigate the trends in their use, it also counts the number of their occurrences and the

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