

Functional analysis of Subject and Verb in Theses Abstracts on Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to analyse abstracts related to Applied Linguistics, and more precisely the discourse functions of grammatical subjects and verbs. The corpus consisted of 50 PhD thesis abstracts written on the subject of Applied Linguistics. All of the abstracts were written from 2010 to 2014. The theses from which the abstracts were extracted are available in the ProQuest database. Based on the model put forth by Swales and Feak (2004), the elements of the abstracts were identified. In accordance with Ebrahimi (2014), frameworks were used to analyse discourse functions, while the realisation of grammatical subjects and verbs was analysed for tense types. The results revealed that the “introducing part of study” and “research-related objects” were the predominant types of grammatical subjects. Indeed, these performed more discourse functions in Applied Linguistics PhD thesis abstracts compared with other grammatical subject types. The results also indicated that simple past tense was predominant in aim, method, and results sections, while the simple present was predominant in the background and conclusion sections.

Key words: Academic writing, thesis Abstract, grammatical Subject, verb, genre

Introduction

One of the most challenging tasks for a graduate student is the writing of a thesis, and especially its abstract. This challenge is made even harder when the student writes in English as a foreign language. In such cases, they not only have to adapt to the disciplinary discourse, but must also do this in a language whose rhetorical convention is quite different from that of their mother tongue. Another potentially challenging aspect is when students have to give a brief report on the whole thesis within a thesis abstract.

Abstract is an important genre for study. This is sourced from the important functions of abstract. An abstract informs “the reader about the exact content of the accompanying text, indicating whether the full text merits their further attention” (Martin, 2003 p. 26). In actual fact, an abstract is often the last section that a student will write, but the first thing people read when they want to have a quick overview of the whole text. Moreover, it could help to convince readers to read the whole text by drawing their attention to the important information. It should convince a student’s supervisor to read and examine the whole thesis. As such, the analysis of various thesis abstracts, and more specifically their rhetorical organisation and linguistic features, could help writers, especially EFL writers, to create a thesis abstract in a way that serves the above-mentioned functions.

A number of research studies focussed on identifying the overall organisation of abstracts in specific disciplines or across disciplines (Santos, 1996; Martin, 2003; Hyland, 2004; Samraj, 2005; Cross and Oppenheim, 2006; Pho, 2008; Swales and Feak, 2009). A number of researchers have focussed on the linguistic features of abstracts used in writing (Hyland and Tse, 2005; Pho,

2008; Golebiowski, 2009; Gillaerts and Van de Velde, 2010; Hu and Cao, 2011; Chan and Ebrahimi, 2012).

Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the types and discourse functions of grammatical subjects, as well as the verbs used in Applied Linguistics thesis abstracts. As such, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What types of grammatical subjects are used in thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics?
2. What are the discourse functions of grammatical subjects used in thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics?
3. What types of verbs are used in thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics?
4. What types of verbs are used in moves of thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics?
5. What are the preferred types of verb(s) in moves of thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics?

Literature Review

Abstracts have been the focus of certain studies over the last two decades (Hu and Cao, 2011; Kanoksilapatham, 2013; Khedri, Chan and Ebrahimi, 2013; Lores, 2004; Pho, 2008; Saadabadi and Ebrahimi, 2014; Slager-meyer, 1992; Fan-Ping Tseng, 2011). Reviews of some of the studies focussed on abstracts are presented as follows:

Lores (2004) analysed research article (RA) abstracts from linguistics journals, with a particular focus on two related angles: rhetorical organisation and thematic structure. She carried out her study using a corpus of 36 abstracts taken from 4 prestigious publications in the field of linguistics: *Journal of Linguistics*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Linguistics* and *Journal of Pragmatics*. The results revealed that the study of thematisation can shed light on the complex profile of the RA abstract and contribute towards the understanding and explicit description of these texts.

Pho (2008) investigated the rhetorical moves, linguistic realisations of moves, and authorial stance in abstracts from the fields of applied linguistics and educational technology. She analysed 30 research article abstracts which were selected from three journals in the areas of applied linguistics and educational technology. The results indicated that there are three obligatory moves in abstracts from these two disciplines, namely “presenting the research”, “describing the methodology”, and “summarising the results”. The results also indicated that a combination of certain linguistic features such as grammatical subjects, verb tense and voice can help distinguish moves in the abstract.

Khedri, Chan and Ebrahimi (2013) investigated the possible similarities and differences between two disciplines in terms of the use of interactive metadiscourse markers. They analysed 60 research article abstracts on the subject of Applied Linguistics and Economics. The results revealed marked variations across the two disciplines in terms of interactive metadiscourse markers.

Saadabadi and Ebrahimi (2014) investigated the realisations and discourse functions of grammatical subjects in RA abstracts from the two disciplines of Economics and Biology. They selected these two disciplines in order to adhere to the cross disciplinary nature of the study. They analysed 50 abstracts, which were selected to represent each discipline. The results of the data analysis indicated that there were disciplinary differences concerning the realisation of the research-related entity, research-related event, self-mention, and introducing some of the study’s grammatical subjects. The results also indicated that, in most of the cases, the grammatical subjects were used to serve similar discourse functions in both sets of abstracts.

Kanoksilapatham (2013) investigated the structural organisation of civil engineering abstracts and identified a set of linguistic features commonly associated with a particular type of

information presented in the abstracts. He analysed 60 English abstracts belonging to civil engineering research articles which were systematically selected from the top journals in civil engineering and evaluated based on Swales' genre analysis. The results revealed a typical pattern of how information presented in the abstracts is organised. Furthermore, each information type was linguistically characterised by a cluster of linguistic features that was frequently used.

Slager-meyer (1992) examined 84 medical abstracts in research papers and found that different verb tenses perform different functions. For example, the past tense was widely used in the Purpose, Methods and Result sections, while present tense was used in the Conclusion and Recommendation sections.

Fan-Ping Tseng (2011) analysed the move structure and verb tense of research article abstracts in applied linguistics journals. He examined 90 research article abstracts in three applied linguistic journals from two dimensions: the move structure features and the verb tense of each move. Moreover, Santos' (1996) five-move pattern for abstracts in applied linguistics was adopted as the framework for the move analysis of the abstracts.

He found that the abstracts analysed tended to adopt a four-move instead of a five-move structure, while in terms of the verb tense in each move, the preferred pattern was as follows: present tense usually occurred in the first, second, and fifth moves, while past tense was often used in the third and fourth moves.

Indeed, following a review of the literature, it would be reasonable to conclude that thesis abstracts have received little attention. As such, the present study will shed light on GS and verbs used in the moves of thesis abstracts.

Methodology

Data

This study was carried out using a corpus of 50 thesis abstracts written on the subject of Applied Linguistics at doctoral level. The abstracts were extracted from theses which had been submitted at English speaking universities. These theses were examined between 2010 and 2014. The theses from which the abstracts were extracted are available in the ProQuest database. Within the database, the researcher searched for theses submitted in the field of Applied Linguistics.

Framework for Data Analysis

In order to analyse the data for types and discourse functions of GS and types of verbs, the following two frameworks were used.

Ebrahimi (2014) suggested a framework for the analysis of subject types and discourse functions. He based his framework on the two earlier frameworks suggested by McDonald (1992) and Gosden (2003). Indeed, his is the latest framework of analysis.

Table 1. *Types and discourse functions of grammatical subjects*

<i>Types of Subject</i>	Discourse Function
<i>Research-related Object</i>	To present materials, entities and objects concerned with the physical world.

<i>Research-related Process</i>	To present actions and procedures executed in or resulting from scientific research activities.
<i>Introducing(part)the study</i>	To refers to integral, parts or internal entities of a discourse.
<i>Personal Citation</i>	To refers to earlier researches by citing the authors' names of earlier studies.
<i>Impersonal Citation</i>	To refers to earlier researches by citing the community-validated studies.
<i>Self-mention</i>	To clearly present the author(s) and mostly recognized through the use of 'we', even in the case where there is a single named author.
<i>This</i>	The GS is clearly recognized through the use of "this".
<i>Empty Theme</i>	To postpone research-related entities and events characterized by seemingly formulaic patterns.

The data were analysed for tenses types (present (progressive/perfect), past (progressive/perfect), and future).

In order to analyse the data for moves, Swales and Feak's (2004) framework was used.

Table 2. *Framework for Move Analysis*

Move (Swales and Feak 2004)
Move1: Background (B)
Move2: Aim(A)
Move3: Method(M)
Move4: Result(R)
Move5: Conclusion(C)

Unit of Analysis

In this study, only GS and the verbs of independent clauses were isolated for analysis. The rationale for this focus came from the following consideration: (a) an independent clause presents a clear picture of the discourse function of the GS and verb, without having to focus on the secondary organisation; (b) independent clause plays a significant role in text development (Fries and Francis, 1992).

Procedure

The study adopted the following procedures: First the corpus was downloaded and saved from the related databases. Second, the abstracts were extracted and converted into word files for analysis. Third, the researcher read the abstracts in their entirety so as to identify subjects and verbs based on the suggested frameworks. Following this, and to estimate reliability, the analysis of a sample of 10 abstracts was checked by 2 expert scholars with experience in carrying out similar studies. After this stage, the abstracts were read again to identify the discourse functions of subjects and verbs. Once this had been achieved, and again to estimate reliability, the analysis of a sample of 10 abstracts was checked by two expert scholars with experience in conducting similar studies. Finally, the findings were tabulated and discussed.

Results and discussion

Results concerning the types and discourse functions of GS and the realisation of verb types in the moves of thesis abstracts are presented and discussed as follows.

Types and Discourse Function of GS

The results presented in Tables 3 and 4 relate to the frequency and percentage of GS types and their discourse functions in these abstracts.

Table 3. *Frequency and percentage of GS types*

	Types of Subject	Frequency	Percentage
1	Introducing (part) the study	345	57.98%
2	Research-related Object	191	32.01%
3	Empty Theme	27	4.53%
4	Self-mention	15	2.52%
5	Impersonal Citation	11	1.84%
6	Research-related Process	3	0.50%
7	Personal Citation	2	0.33%
8	This	1	0.16%
	Total	595	100%

Table 4. *Discourse functions of GS types*

GS types	Discourse Function
1 Introducing (part) the study	introduces purpose of study states the research's finding states the implications of the study
2 Research-related objective	defines the research-related objectives in the method section elaborates on the features of data, materials and objects states the result related to the research-related objective
3 Empty Theme	postpones the important information to the predicative section of the main clause

Introducing part of study

As evidenced by Table 3, the introducing part of study GS (Example 1) was the predominant GS in the analysed thesis abstracts. This predominance indicates that the writers tried to pay more attention to the research rather than the researcher. They intended to focus more on the results, findings and purpose of the study and make their role less invisible in the abstracts. They may well look at their thesis as the first important piece of research. and might consider themselves as new community members who prefer to refer to the research rather than to the researcher.

Example 1: *The findings* reveal that second language writing teacher-educators were well-informed with the research regarding ESL composition and had broad experience in the ESL classroom.

The results were not in line with the findings of Ebrahimi and Saadabadi (2014). They analysed RA abstracts from the two disciplines of Economic and Biology and found that this GS was used for 6% and 27% respectively. This difference between our findings and those of Ebrahimi (2014) could be explained by referring to the nature of the writers of the data in these studies. Greater use in this study could indicate that novice writers prefer to leave the responsibility more to the researcher and free themselves of the stress. The findings could also be attributed to disciplinary differences. The data in this study, and that of Ebrahimi's (2014) was extracted from three different disciplines.

Based on the data analysed, the introducing part of study GS was used to serve three discourse functions. The first discourse function was introducing the purpose of the study (Example 2). In actual fact, the writers intended to draw readers' attention explicitly to the purpose of study. This discourse function could be explained by referring to the writers' aim, namely to contribute to the existing literature.

Example 2: *This study* investigates the first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing processes of group of Arab ESL students.

The second discourse function was stating the research's findings (Example 3). The writers intended to increase the validity and objectivity of the reported findings and results. This discourse function helps the writer validate the study by leaving the responsibility to the findings.

Example 3: *The result* indicated that when ESL students wrote to a real reader with encouragement, their willingness to write was enhanced their ESL writing abilities improved.

The third discourse function was to state the implication of the study (Example 4). This use suggests the writers' intention to explicitly state the implication of their study to convince the examiner to accept the importance and significance of the study.

Example 4: *The implication of study may* suggest that L2 teachers should ask their students to reflect, in diaries, journals, and portfolios, on the linguistics problem they have encountered during their classroom activities.

Research-related Objective

As indicated by Table 3, the Research-related Object GS is the second most predominant GS in thesis abstracts (Example 5). This result indicates that the writers intended to increase the validity of data by paying more attention to the objects and material used in their studies. In actual fact, the writers felt the need to present the data and materials and focused on the method of the study.

Example 5: *The ELL students' test score* are invariably lower than their English speaking peers.

This GS was used in the present study (32.01%) and this result was in line with Ebrahimi and Saadabadi (2014). This similarity shows that the novice writers preferred to devote some parts of their abstracts to the objects and materials used in their studies. The novice writers felt the need to offer some description of how the research was conducted. It seems that in both studies the writers intended to give more validity and objectivity to their study by providing the reader with explicit information regarding the method of the study.

The Research-related Object GS was used to serve three discourse functions in thesis abstracts. The first discourse function was to define the research-related objectives in the method section (Example 6). The writers explicitly intended to introduce the object and data used in their

studies. This introduction could well represent the contribution of the writers to the existing literature, as many studies focus only on the object or data investigated.

Example 6: *A multiple-method approach* was applied with a teacher survey administered to 174 teachers.

The second discourse function was to elaborate on the features of data, materials and objects (Example 7). This might help to provide readers with more details concerning the data.

Example 7: *The effect of both the type (e.g., grammar-based vs. lexis-based) and the quality (e.g., noticing with reasons vs. noticing only) of written languaging* was assessed by subsequent text revisions.

The third discourse function was to state the results related to the research-related objective (Example 8). Writers preferred to directly name the object and materials and show the results concerning them. Here, the writers preferred to present the findings in the form of cause and effect. This could certainly increase the validity of the study.

Example 8: *A whole-group MFRM* analysis indicated that the IL2 learners, as a group, performed better than the G1.5 learners.

Empty Theme

As indicated by the results in Table 3, tendency to use the empty theme GS was just 4.53% (Example 9). This result was in line with the findings of Ebrahimi and Chan (2015). They reported the realisation of this GS in 3% of Applied Linguistics research article abstracts. The word limit of an abstract leaves no space for writers to use empty themes. They prefer to make use of the GS slot.

The result showed that this GS was used to perform only one discourse function. It was used to postpone the important information to the predicative section of the main clause. This could be justified by referring to Hasselgard (1998), who stated that sometimes a long GS is represented by an empty subject and is postponed to the latter parts of the clause. This use of GS could be justified based on the nature of the abstract, i.e. there is a word-count limit. This limit forces writers to communicate information in the GS position and to not leave this piece of sentence empty of information that needs to be communicated.

Example 9: *It* examined their perception about the continuities and discontinuities of their university preparation and their teaching realities.

The results in Table 3 indicate that the GSs of self-mention, impersonal citation, research-related process, and personal citation received little attention. This lack of attention may be due to various factors. The only slight use of self-mention suggests that writers are not very inclined to explicitly present themselves in an abstract way. They might want to give the authority of the study to their data, method and the results of their study. The minimal employment of impersonal and personal citations could be justified based on the fact that there is no room for citations and a literature review, and thus these are postponed to the introduction section. The research-related process was not realised because the nature of the discipline does not call for the use of this type of GS. The last type of GS is “this”. The small word count of the abstract leaves no space for the use of such GS in the GS slot.

Verb forms in moves of thesis abstracts

The abstracts were analysed for the moves and realisation of tenses in the moves. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Moves and tenses in theses abstracts

<i>Moves</i>	<i>Occurrence s in the corpus</i>	<i>Number of sentences of move</i>	<i>Tenses of sentences of move</i>	
Background	29	107	Present simple	69 (64%)
			Past simple	14 (13%)
			Present perfect	24 (23%)
Aim	35	74	Present simple	29 (39%)
			Past simple	44 (59%)
			Present perfect	1 (2%)
Method	45	184	Present Simple	18 (10%)
			Past simple	166 (90%)
Results	46	166	Present Simple	24 (15%)
			Past simple	142 (85%)
Conclusion	19	38	Present simple	31 (81%)
			Past simple	4 (10%)
			Future	3 (9%)

The results in Table 5 indicate that four moves were treated as obligatory moves following the framework of Swales and Feak (2004). Bhatia (1998) pointed out that if moves are presented in more than 60% of the total number of texts, it could be said that these are obligatory moves. Thus, four moves are obligatory and the conclusion is treated as an optional move. It must be mentioned that tenses used in the conclusion move will not be discussed, as this move was not treated as an obligatory move.

Background move and verb types and discourse functions

With regard to the background move, writers used three types of tenses (see Table 5). Present tense was the predominant tense in this move. They used this tense to perform three functions. The first function was to indicate that writers prefer building their study based on a valid statement made earlier by experts in the field which is commonly accepted as fact by the discourse community members (Example 10).

Example10: In Japan, English-as-a-foreign language *is* an important part of the educational process, and the cross-cultural aspect of English learning is recognized among language educators in Japan.

Another function was to convey the hypothesis and gaps in the literature. In fact, the writers intended to outline their research hypothesis or question in the background move and

support the research by providing the main feature of the work in question in the first move (see Example 11).

Example 11: The research questions *are*:

(1) What are the most common types of negative transfer from English that occur in the writing of students of Russian at the Intermediate High-Advanced levels?

(2) Are there differences in types and amount of negative transfer used by HLLs vs. SLLs at comparable levels of proficiency?

Next in the functions list was to state the problem in the present tense (Example 12). This use could be justified on the grounds that background is the place where writers have to state the problem which motivated the creation of their study.

Example 12: This increase *poses* serious challenge for the U.S. University in which the students are enrolled as well as for students themselves.

The next most frequent tense in the background move was present perfect. It seems that this tense is used to perform a discourse function, according to which writers show the importance and significance of the topic of their study (Example 13). In fact, the writer attempts to give more credibility to his/her study in the background move by alluding to previous research.

Example 13: The background of this study *is* the ongoing issue in the second language acquisition and second language writing fields regarding the role of explicit language instruction in teaching and learning.

Past simple compared with the present and present perfect tense received the least attention in the background move. This may not be unusual, as in the background move writers prefer to create a line between their study and earlier studies. Thus, there is no room for use of the past tense. In the analysed abstracts, writers would only allude to earlier studies while reviewing the literature.

Aim move and verb types and discourse functions

In this move, simple past and simple present were used to show the move in question. Past tense was used more compared with present tense. These two tenses were used only based on how writers treat the study. In the case where writers treated the abstract as the last part to write, then past tense was preferred in order to show the aim. In the case where writers treated the abstract as the first part of the thesis to be read, simple present tense was used.

These two differences were only used to serve the discourse function of clearly presenting the aim of the study (Examples 14-15)

Example 14: This study *aims* to establish a clear definition and operationalization of metacognitive knowledge in the context of L2 writing by identifying its components.

Example 15: This study *explored* the phenomenon of negative transfer from English in the writing of proficient heritage vs. second language learners of Russian.

Method move and verb types and discourse functions

As evidenced by Table 4, past tense was the preferred tense in the method move. The result indicates that this tense was used to serve reporting information concerning data, participant, instruments, and procedure of data analysis (Example 16).

Example 16: Data *were collected* using semi-structural interviews and researchers memos, and analyzing using the listening Guide method.

Results move and verb types and discourse functions

The results in Table 5 indicate that past simple was the predominant tense. This tense was used to serve the main function of the move, which is stating the results generated from the study. This is not uncommon, as the results were reported after conducting the experiment (Example 17).

Example 17: Results *indicated* that the etymological elaboration approach can be successfully implemented in a formal classroom setting.

Conclusion and implications

This study intended to study a) the realisation and discourse function of GS types and b) the realisation and discourse of tense types in the moves of thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics. The results concerning frequency of GS types indicate that two types of GS, namely introducing part of study and research-related object, were more predominant. This could suggest that writers of thesis abstracts related to Applied Linguistics prefer to directly guide the reader in the sections of the abstracts. This might help the reader to identify the source of the stated information; indeed, this also makes it easier to refer to such information in the accompanying text. The other GS type, namely research-related object, helps reader to figure out the research objectives with which this study is more concerned and focussed on. It could be concluded that such GSs may help writers in Applied Linguistics to write thesis abstracts that are easy to follow and clear in terms of content. Such uses of GSs help examiners to easily decide on whether or not they wish to examine the thesis.

In relation to the discourse functions performed by the use of GS types, the results revealed that discourse functions were mostly related to the functions of abstracts. In order to be more precise, it is vital that the abstract is used to present information which is strongly related to the functions of the abstract itself. While reading abstracts, we expect to find information concerning the aim, method, and implications of the study, as well as features and definitions of the research-related objectives. The results of this study showed that Applied Linguistics writers presented such information by carefully selecting GS types.

It could be concluded that writers in Applied Linguistics disciplines and closely related disciplines should practice more care in selecting GS types. The selection and the discourse functions, which are performed as the result of such selections, are highly related to the functions of informative abstracts.

The results concerning moves and preferred tenses in the moves of Applied Linguistics abstracts indicated that there are four obligatory moves in Applied Linguistics thesis abstracts. In these four moves, writers preferred to rely mostly on two tenses, namely simple past and simple present. From the results, it could be concluded that selections of tenses are guided by the functions of moves of abstracts. This is more evident in the third move “Method”. In this move, writers preferred the use of the past simple because they were writing the abstracts after they had conducted the experiment and performed the analysis.

The findings of this study may well be useful for syllabus designers and novice writers. Syllabus designers might consider the findings of this study to be included in the section dealing with guiding the writing of thesis abstracts. Novice writers, and especially novice non-native writers, could take the findings of this study into consideration when writing abstracts. Indeed,

this could, in turn, convince examiners and readers to develop a better understanding of the accompanying thesis.

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