Titles and Abstracts in Academic Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, researchers have become increasingly interested in genre analysis whereby features of academic discourse are examined. Basically, genres have a set of rhetorical patterns. It is essential to initiate one's awareness of these patterns so as to provide a general understanding of the rhetorical outline of a text.

OBJECTIVE

With this in mind, the paper examines the language of titles and abstracts. The different styles of writing abstracts set by publishers, editorial committees and universities, especially for the post-graduate students, serve as a factor worth noting. In order to comply with a particular style of writing, one has to pose questions such as. "What should be included in the abstract?", "What are the important points that should be highlighted in the abstract?", "Is the abstract too long/short?"

As for determining an appropriate title, one should ask the following questions.

> "What is the best title for this article?", "Is the title appropriate/interesting?", "Will this title attract potential readers/audience?", "What kinds of titles intrigue readers?", "What determines the length of a title?", "Will articles with lengthy titles attract readers?" and so forth.

These are some of the questions that researchers need to ask because answers to these questions greatly influence an

individual's style of writing. As such, titles and abstracts, generally, vary not only in length but in the selection and presentation of content as well. Hence, one should be aware of the importance of the functions of titles and abstracts and their linguistic parameters.

Consequently, the focus of this paper is two-fold; first, to investigate the rhetorical structure or styles of writing abstracts and second, to determine features of a good title.

METHODOLOGY

Instrument

A total of 15 abstracts, varying from 150-500 words, were extracted from randomly selected theses for the purpose of investigating the rhetorical structure of writing abstracts. In addition, the writer randomly selected 28 titles from papers presented at conferences and seminars and journals of sciences and literary studies for the purpose of determining the features that characterize a good title.

Procedure

The abstracts were analysed according to the RAMAC procedure. RAMAC is an acronym for Rationale for study, Aims/objectives of the study, Methods/ procedures, Analysis of data & findings, and Conclusion/summary. Features of the selected titles, however, were analyzed according to the following elements a) Key lexical unit (KLU), b) Structure (NP + NP = ?), c) Length total number of units, d) General vs Specific

ANALYSIS

In this section, the writer analysed the structures of abstracts according to RAMAC in Part I, and then proceeded to examine the selected titles in Part II

PART I : ABSTRACTS

In the analysis of the data for the writing of abstracts, the following elements were examined

    a. the various styles of writing the selected abstracts

    b. the **content** which embodies RAMAC and the **lexical and structural patterns** of sentences in the five sections (RAMAC)

A. STYLES

TABLE I shows the description of the various styles or basic organization of writing abstracts for theses and the frequency count of the writer's preference of utilizing those styles.

    The majority of writers prefer the numbering system whereby the content of the thesis is briefly discussed according to the number of chapters in the thesis. The discussion for each chapter, however, follows the RAMAC procedure (see number 2, Table 1).

TABLE I

Styles	Frequency
1. the five main sections: (RAMAC)	
Rationale for study	
Aims/Objectives of study	
Methods/Procedures	
Analysis of Data & Findings	
Conclusion/Summary	4
2. the number of chapters in the theses	
– the discussion for each chapter	6
follows the RAMAC procedure	
3. a variation of the RAMAC procedure	3
4. the number of chapters in the theses	
excluding the conclusion	1
5. the number of sections in the theses and	
a variation of the RAMAC procedure	1
TOTAL	15

B. CONTENT

The gist of what embodies the RAMAC procedure was elicited and analysed in this section

I. Rationale for study

In this section, writers of theses prepare the ground for establishing the field, summarize previous research, prepare the readers for present research and initiate the need to proceed with the purpose of the theses. In most cases, the written statement on the description of the current situation of the study is 'non-specific' or general in nature. For instance, recurring words like 'most lessons. ', 'previous research...', 'most of the writing. ', ' .set of difficulties. ' and so forth indicate the generality of the subject.

Furthermore, the data show that only two abstracts of the theses begin with statements describing the rationale or current situation of the research while 13 others opt for a more direct approach whereby the objective or purpose of the study is immediately stated or clarified. The structural pattern of 'this' + 'dissertation/thesis/study' as indicated in Table 2 is commonly used. *Other* patterns used include the Subject-Verb structure whereby the actual subject is clearly stated for the purpose of clarification

TABLE 2

The use of 'this' + 'dissertation/thesis/study'	Frequency
a. This dissertation...	2
b. This thesis...	5
c This study	4
d. Other	4
TOTAL	15

However, those abstracts which are written according to the chapters begin with sentences describing what the theses dealt with and then proceed with a description of each chapter (see Table 3)

TABLE 3

Description + extension (more detailed/specific)

1. This study deals with spontaneous lexical formation in Thai.
   + Chapter 1 focuses on

2. This study is concerned with the effect of source language
   interference. + Chapter 1 consists of

3. This is a study of the meanings of pure English loanwords
   in Malay + These loanwords.

II. Aims/Objectives of theses

The purpose or aim of writing the thesis is stated in this section
The data indicate that the words like 'describe', 'aim', 'objective',
'purpose', 'examine' and 'determine' are frequently used in order
to state the writers' intention or purpose rather than
description of the theses.

The minority of writers prefer the unassertive manner of
indicating the new field that they are venturing into, hence,
the frequent use of unassertive words like 'attempts', 'try', 'initiate'
and 'effort'

The data also show that the writers prefer to use the infinitive
'*to*' to state their intentions and that the pronoun reference '*it*'
is used to refer to the purpose of the study

III Methods/Procedures/Strategies

This section deals with the actual proceedings of the research
The writers indicate the type of instrument, sample type used
and size (see example) and describe how the aims of the research
were achieved. The data show that the information regarding
the procedures or methods employed for the study are directly
stated. The nature or tone of the language used in this section
is impersonalized which is appropriate for an academic setting.

Example   Fourteen bilingual Malay students provided the
           data. comprises thirty-five taped spontaneous

conversations between the subjects and their friemds, teachers or siblings.

IV. Analysis of Data & Findings.

In this section, the writers state their choice of methodology, approach, model, theory, or system upon which the analysis of the data is based. The description and findings of the analysis are also stated. The data indicate that writers (nine out of 15 of the abstracts) prefer to use the lexical word 'analyse' (base word) and other forms of the word such as 'analysed', 'analysis', 'analysing', and 'analytical' to refer to their meticulous study of the collected samples. Words like 'describe' and 'examine' are frequently used as well

V Conclusion/Summary·

In this last section, the writers present their findings and based on these findings, provide recommendations. The data show that the writers select words like 'shows', 'proves' and 'observed' to validate their findings, and to conclude their abstracts, they opt for words like 'conclusion' and 'summary'.

The data also show that another style of concluding an abstract is to propose an entirely new idea, for instance, making provision for a programme, proposing a new strategy/strategies, producing new activities and techniques or even advancing some suggestions or recommendations. However, it is important to highlight that the statements which indicate conclusion are absent in the six abstracts examined.

PART II : TITLES

A total of 28 titles extracted from theses, papers presented at conferences and seminars and journals of sciences and literary studies were examined. The structures of these selected titles were analyzed according to the following elements:

a. Key lexical unit (KLU)

b. Structure : (NP + NP = ?)

c. Length . total number of units

d. General vs Specific

A. KEY LEXICAL UNIT (KLU)

It is the recurring lexical word (hereafter unit) in the abstract or summary of a thesis that appears in the title. In some journals, the key lexical units are provided under the titles. The objective is to draw the readers' attention to the article, and by merely scanning through the units they can select which articles they wish to read.

Upon reading the KLU, the readers' schema or prior knowledge will be activated. The reading of abstracts will then be undertaken subject to the readers' interest. TABLE 4 shows a listing of titles extracted from a medical journal. In this journal, all the key lexical units or KW (as used in the journal) are highlighted below the title.

TABLE 4

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1. **Are** *our babies* becoming bigger?
   KW. birthweight, birthweight distributions; international trends

2. Vasomotion in *venous disease.*
   KW· venous disease; varicose veins; blood flow velocity

3. Treatment of *colonic anastomotic strictures* with 'through the scope' *balloon dilators.*
   KW colonic anastomotic stricture, balloon dilation

4. Psychomotor and clinical assessment of *flumazenil* as an antagonist of *midazolam*
   KW flumazenil, midazolam; benzodiazepines; *antagonists*

5. Are *patients* in favour of *general health* screening?
   KW public health, patient acceptance; health facility planning; primary prevention

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Key lexical units are underlined for reference purposes. It is to be noted that those units are frequently repeated in the KW

B. STRUCTURE · (NP + NP = ?)

The structure of titles was analysed. The culmination of lexical units within a single title was examined. The possiblities of variation occurring were also determined. The data indicate that the writers use noun phrases (NP) in their titles and it is

common to have two or more noun phrases in a title (see Table 5). In addition, variations of noun phrases with the use of colon and question mark are other techniques used in formulating titles.

TABLE 5

A. NP : Situation
1. Adapting local authentic readings for the classroom : Relating to the adolescent with developing reading skills.
2. Developing reader response Teaching the novel

B. NP + NP : Situation
1 Language in culture and culture in language : Interpretation of some old Buginese expressions from the "Lontarak" through concepts of time and space
2. The expression of the concepts of time and space within the linguistic universe of Portugese and Kristang : A contrastive approach
3. The nature of introspection, retelling and writing relationship : A study of oxperienced readers and writers.

C NP : question
1. Class readers Bane or Boon?
2. Eliciting creative responses to literature How open-ended? How prescribed?
3. Gender differences in the interpretation of literary texts Fact or Fiction?

Variation:

A. Question : NP + NP
1. What distances? A re-look at the relationship between culture and accessibility

B. NP : NP + NP + NP
1. Literacy in a multilingual society · Issues, problems and prospects.

C Questions
1. Are teachers and parents walking the same path?

C. LENGTH · TOTAL NUMBER OF UNITS

The data show that the length of titles varies from a minimum unit of three to a maximum of four to five lines as reflected in Table 6.

TABLE 6

Titles	Number of units/items
1 Literary role play.	3
2 Basic Skill and Question Types in Reading and Interpreting Literary Texts.	11
3. Creating instructional change using an ID (instructional development) systems model: Application with EAP curriculae within a Malaysian/American cooperative university setting.	20
4. Principles of integration in ESL language units at secondary level A consideration of the processes involved in developing literacy at the intermediate level.	23

D GENERAL VS SPECIFIC

In this section, the writers' choice of the lexical units and the length of the title are the two elements that are focused on in order to determine the generality or specificity of titles. TABLE 7 shows the selected titles from theses which were examined for this purpose

TABLE 7

Title of Thesis	No. of Units
1 The Grammatical Structures of English and Malay	7
2. A Study of Code-Switching Among Bilingual Malay Students in Certain Urban Secondary Schools	13
3. The Translation of Metaphors A text analysis of The Good Earth, The Great Gatsby, The Moon and Sixpence and in Dubious Battle.	16

The analysis shows that the generality or specificity of a title correlates with the number of lexical units in the title. As the number of the lexical units increases the title becomes more specific. For instance, title number 3 in Table 7 indicates that the text analysis of the translation of metaphors is based specifically on four different types of texts and interestingly, the titles of all the texts are also included.

On the other hand, the title becomes general in nature when the number of the lexical units decreases. Referring to title number 1 in Table 7, for example, "the grammatical structures of a language" is within itself very broad, what more if it includes two different languages. Hence, one needs to focus on one aspect of a research area and explore its possibilities.

DISCUSSION OF ABSTRACTS

In the journals of sciences, accuracy and specificity in relating various experiments and stating the observations are greatly emphasized. Failure to provide an accurate information will lead to different findings such that the entire experiment, for instance, will not be similar to the original or that the experiment will not be valid. As such, relating scientific experiments and observations with the utmost precision and, in any instances "leave no room for doubt", is vital. In fact, the ability to write such statements is considered a precious skill which scientists need to arm themselves with

In this study, the most favoured style of writing abstracts for theses is the numbering system where the content of each chapter of the thesis is summarised. The discussion for each chapter is impersonalized and it includes the rationale of the study, the objectives, methods or procedures, analysis of data and findings, conclusion and recommendation. This style is much preferred by writers of theses perhaps due to the academic setting or requirements of a higher learning institution

The concluding chapter of theses is sometimes not included in the abstracts (see Section V of Part I Abstracts). The writers of theses exclude the concluding statements because they assume readers who are interested in the theses would proceed to reading the theses after reading the abstracts. However, the RAMAC procedure which is the next most preferred style proves to be more systematic in its presentation of ideas. Its accuracy and

briefness are appreciated since the RAMAC procedure only furnishes the main ideas, readers could easily have an idea of what the thesis is all about by reading the abstract.

DISCUSSION OF TITLES

It is apparent that some lexical units in a title are more important than others. These lexical items are the content words which connote the gist of the theses, article, book and so forth

As for the question of "what constitutes a title?", it is important to highlight that a title should contain words which could attract a reader's attention As such, readers, upon skimming through the list of titles or even the table of contents, for instance, would be able to select titles which are of interest to them In fact, upon looking at the lexical items alone, readers will immediately be able to predict the content and proceed to obtain the essence of the theses from the abstract.

In order to write a suitable title, there seems to be a general consensus that the coinage of recurring key lexical items from the paragraph/s of the abstracts is deemed necessary in order to form appropriate titles for articles or theses. In Chemistry, for instance, titles would be about four to five lines in length (see Table 6, number 5). This is due to the fact that it has to convey an appropriate or relevant information in order to give enough coverage of the theses, hence, the need to be specific but not necessarily brief

Lexical items that project uncertainty or vagueness are avoided in formulating titles because readers will be left guessing about the research work This is, of course, a recipe for failure such that when scanning through a series of titles, only those that are prominent and intriguing or thought-provoking will be retrieved by readers or computers.

The writing of titles is usually left to the last. One needs to read the whole research article or theses first and then proceed to reading the abstract before deciding on a title which is worthy of being selected. This idea was reiterated by Aljafri Abdul Majid (1992) who claims that an article has a function and it selects potential readers. Thus, an article worth publishing merits a good title and formulating the title should be the last step of the research procedure.

CONCLUSION

It is useful to point out that writing an abstract involves isolating the main ideas and condensing those ideas into a concise form Writers of theses should look at headings or subheadings and chapter titles because these are directly related to the main ideas of theses.

Another strategy in locating main ideas for the writing of abstracts is to look for topic sentences that control ideas and key words or phrases within a paragraph.

Precision in the writing of abstracts and formulating titles should be noted as well. In their deliberations, writers should only relate specific information deemed necessary in order to attract potential readers or audiences. Furthermore, it is essential for writers of theses to realise that abstracts and titles are both "abstractions" Titles, to be more specific, are abstractions of abstractions.

In conclusion, writers of theses should inculcate the skills of writing abstracts. Employing the suggested techniques or strategies would be a step in ensuring good production of abstracts and according to Marcus, S. (1992), a good abstract would include (a) clear identification of the scope of the topic in question, (b) indication of specific objectives, and (c) clarification of the principal details - methods, procedures and results.

REFERENCES

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