

***Diana KRAJŇÁKOVÁ***

University of Prešov

diana.krajnakova@gmail.com

## **GENRE ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH-WRITTEN MASTER'S THESES AND DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS IN THE SETTING OF PREŠOV UNIVERSITY**

**Abstract:** The genre of abstract is an important part of academic writing which functions as an eye-catcher inducing other members of a particular discourse community to read the original work. While conference abstracts (CA) and research article abstracts (RA) have been widely discussed from the perspective of genre analysis, the importance of thesis abstracts (TA) has been, on the other hand, neglected. According to the present paper, TA embodies the essential step in development of a student's academic writing skills. Moreover, this study examines the issue of English-written TA with the focus on five widely used rhetorical moves, tense and grammatical subject used by the students of Management at Prešov University. The corpus of 33 Master's and 33 Dissertation thesis abstracts shows a common preference for the moves of Problem Statement and Methodology, whereas the most significant moves of Results and Conclusion are sparsely included. The phenomenon of tenses displays the predominance of the present simple and it is pointed out that the students prefer non-personal Discourse Domain grammatical subjects. The results confirm the underestimated position of TA and show how its genre features are characteristic of the Slovak academic setting.

**Key words:** genre analysis, academic writing, thesis abstract, rhetorical moves, tense, grammatical subject.

### **The background to thesis abstract analysis**

*Thesis abstract (TA)* as a text type reifies a vital component in the world of academia. Although limited in length, it is aimed at fulfilling the underlying function of communicating information on an original piece of writing to a predominantly academic readership. In doing so, a set of rhetorical and linguistic features is chosen by the text producer and it is their interrelationship on which this study is focused. The analysis is carried out in the setting of *Prešov University*, thus the

outcomes reveal the characteristics of Slovak students when writing the only part of academic work in their non-native language – English.

In order to pursue the analysis itself, it is important to make clear at the outset what the position of TA is within a framework of genre analysis. *Genre* is generally distinguished by a communicative function which is superordinate to its linguistic features (Swales 1990:58). The communicative function consequently identifies a set of purposes embodied within rhetorical strategies used by the text producer which determine the actual textual structure as well as the use of language in genre.

Concerning the structure, an abstract is recognised in two basic subtypes influenced by a slightly different set of communicative purposes (Stašková 2005:30). The first type is exemplified by the *conference abstract* with its main purpose of persuading the members of a conference committee on the significance of a future presentation (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995). Secondly, a *research article abstract* aims at presenting the overall structure of an already written piece of academic work and emphasises its findings (Čmerjková, Daneš and Světlá 1999:75). The text type of TA appears to fulfill the communication function characteristic of research article abstracts, thus the textual structure of TA mirrors the structure of the original thesis which is reflected in a set of rhetorical moves.

Although there is not an absolute model of rhetorical moves, the most widely known and effective one seems to be Koopman's model (1997) which consists of five communicative stages, i.e. *Motivation; Problem Statement; Methodology; Results* and *Conclusion*. The merit of the model for the present study is reflected by its correspondence with the standards for writing final theses at *Prešov University* provided by the document *STN ISO 214 Abstrakty (referáty) pre publikácie a dokumentáciu*.<sup>1</sup>

As pointed out above, the use of language in genre is primarily under the influence of communicative purposes of a particular text type. The linguistic features peculiar to an abstract were first summarised by Graetz (1985:125) as follows: the use of past tense, third person and passive structures; the non-use of negatives and the avoidance of redundancy. Since language is a living substance dependent on its users, the linguistic option of the present simple happens to be more popular at present (Swales 1990:180-181). A subtly higher occurrence of the passive in abstracts is still evident, however the presence of the active voice is becoming more and more frequent (Busà 2005:45-46). In turn, the third person singular and the general avoidance of redundancy keep their hegemonic position and have become inherent features of the language used in abstracts. Although there is a constant change in language users' preferences, Graetz (1985) has outlined the areas of interest when analysing the linguistic features of abstract and two of them – the use of tense and grammatical subject – underpin our research.

What is more, Gosden's (1993) categorisation of grammatical subjects into four domains, i.e. *the Participant; Discourse; Hypothesised/Objectivised (H/O)*

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<sup>1</sup> The author's translation: *Abstracts (Reports) for Publication and Documentation*.

and *Real World*, functions as a stepping stone to the present analysis. Given the categories, one can notice a scale ranging from the presence of the writer in the text on the one hand, up to his or her absence on the other hand. The presence of the text producer is evident by the use of pronouns, common and proper nouns in the Participant Domain, e.g. *we*; *author*. The Discourse Domain subject describes the internal or previously community-validated units of the text, e.g. *literature*; *study*. The H/O subject represents externally validated entities as well as the author's mental activity, e.g. *aim*; *idea*. Finally, the Real World Domain accounts for nominalisations of mental and research processes and entities. The classification is widely used in the analyses of research articles (cf. Busà 2005; Ebrahimi, Chan and Ain 2014) and thus seems to be suitable for the context of the current study drawing from the parallels between research article abstract and TA.

Since the aforementioned theoretical and empirical framework is predominantly drawn from the studies of English-written abstracts or by English-speaking linguists, the text type of abstract has been generally neglected by non-native speakers of the English language. Nevertheless, the process of globalisation has penetrated the academic world and Slovak academia has recently witnessed an increased interest in genre analysis of abstracts (cf. Krajňáková 2014a, 2014b; Rázusová 2012; Stašková 2005). As the present author considers English-written TA in the setting of Slovak universities to be the only contact with non-Slovak speaking members of academia, the inherent function and power to communicate the outcomes of an original thesis to a wider academic community is indisputable.

Concerning the research areas discussed, the author's previous studies on the rhetorical patterns in the corpus of abstracts of Bachelor's and Master's theses show the hegemony of Problem Statement and Methodology (Krajňáková 2014b) and the predominance of the present simple, the Discourse Domain subject, stereotypically used passive constructions and simple sentences (Krajňáková 2014a). The foregoing outcomes have raised the question of a potential link between the rhetorical and linguistic patterns used by non-native English speakers at *Prešov University*. In order to provide a reliable answer, this paper aims at going beyond the surface of the rhetorical moves by examining the connections between the textual structure and linguistic choices of text producers with focus on the morphosemantic feature of tense and the morphosyntactic feature of grammatical subject.

## Corpus and research method

The corpus of 33 Master's and 33 PhD thesis abstracts under scrutiny is retrieved from the electronic database *Centrálny register záverečných a kvalifikačných prác*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The author's translation: *The Central Registry of Final and Qualification Theses*.

and compiled with regard to the following criteria. TA is (1) written in English; (2) written by non-native English speaking students of Management at *Prešov University*; (3) a part of Master's or PhD thesis. The overall number of the analysed thesis abstracts is determined by the number of PhD theses available in the Registry at the time of data collection. A numerically identical subcorpus is analogously drawn on Master's thesis abstracts.

The rationale behind the first two criteria is influenced by the author's primary area of research, which is the sociolinguistic phenomenon of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). From its perspective, the students of Management at *Prešov University* are proficient users of ELF and not learners (cf. Jenkins 2006). They are thus suitable subjects for discussion in terms of ELF communication in academic settings.

The third criterion reflects our wish to compare the academic writings of undergraduate and postgraduate students of Management at *Prešov University*. Although the author presupposes negligible differences, objective research has to be done to demonstrate this.

After the compilation of data in the first phase of the present research, the individual components, i.e. moves, tenses and grammatical subjects, are consequently identified and further interpreted in terms of potential mutual rhetorical and linguistic links. The overall dispersal of the moves in the present corpus is additionally contrasted with the outcomes of the author's previous studies. The most significant divergence is identified.

In examining the morphosemantic and morphosyntactic features, the identical procedural pattern is generated. It starts with measuring the incidence of particular linguistic items, which are subsequently labelled according to the particular rhetorical move they occur in. The research question here is whether the linguistic choices of tense and subject are dependent on the individual rhetorical moves embedded in the communicative function of TA and whether an evident pattern of the dependence can be recognised.

### **Thesis abstract analysis – rhetorical moves**

Initially, the analysis inclusive of both subcorpora confirms the author's previous studies since the most recurrent moves appear to be Problem Statement and Methodology. Interestingly enough, more than a half of the analysed thesis abstracts (53%) are limited solely to these two moves. The move of Motivation is statistically equal to Results whereas the Conclusion move is nearly excluded from the textual structure of the abstracts discussed. Figure 1 summarises the findings in percentages.

In the spirit of comparing the subcorpora at hand, Table 1 shows the distribution of moves in the two samples. The most striking difference is seen in the moves

of Results and Conclusion. Despite an increase in the Doctoral thesis abstracts, the incidence is still represented in relatively small numbers. What is important here is that the most recurrent as well as overlooked moves are identical for both subcorpora as anticipated by the author.

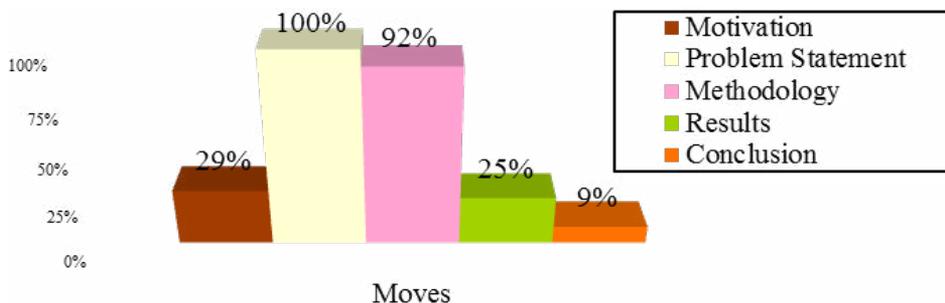


Figure 1. Percentage of all thesis abstracts containing particular moves.

Table 1. Distribution of the moves in the subcorpora.

	Master's TA	PhD TA	Average
Motivation	30 %	27 %	29 %
Problem Statement	100 %	100 %	100 %
Methodology	91 %	94 %	92 %
Results	18 %	33 %	25 %
Conclusion	6 %	12 %	9 %

### Thesis abstract analysis – tense

Since the situation of the moves is outlined, the study moves on to the subanalysis of the morphosemantic feature of tense. At the end of the twentieth century, text producers were advised to write the abstracts using only one tense, usually the past simple or present simple (cf. Graetz 1985; Swales 1990). At present, the homogenous character of abstracts is not so prevalent as writers tend to use a greater variety of tenses (cf. Orasan 2001; Rázusová 2012).

However, as shown in the table below, the prevailing dominance of one tense is still evident since 71% of all verb phrases are written in the present simple. This is followed by the past simple and interestingly enough by the present perfect simple. Taking into consideration the subcorpora, differences are negligible except for an increased use of the central modal *will* expressing the future in the Master's thesis abstracts. Its use expresses a sense of the writer's future intention and implies that the writing process of TA probably precedes the act of writing the thesis, which is not peculiar to this text type.

Other verbal forms range from the present continuous and past perfect up to the modals *would*; *could* and *may*; however they occur very infrequently.

Table 2. Tenses employed in the corpus.

	Master's TA	PhD TA	Average
present simple	65 %	76 %	71 %
past simple	23 %	16 %	20 %
present perfect	7 %	5 %	6 %
modal <i>will</i>	4 %	0.5 %	2 %
others	1 %	0.5 %	1 %

A closer look at the distribution of the past simple reveals that it is predominantly included in Methodology and Results. According to the findings, it seems to be employed when indicating the completion of the research, its past state or event, the most frequent verbs used being *analyse*; *confirm* and *show*; either in the active or passive.

The preference for the passive voice is more striking in the use of the present perfect simple, which mostly occurs in the Methodology move. Given the instances from the corpus such as *to be assessed*; *to be evaluated* and *to be fulfilled*; one can notice the intention of text producers to show the relevance and influence of the research in the present. This can be effective in persuading the readership on the significance that the thesis is topical and up-to-date.

At this point here, several points need to be made about the ubiquity of the present simple. The overwhelming dominance happens to be in the moves of Motivation and Problem Statement, but the problematic case seems to be Conclusion as it is hardly present in the corpus. However, when taking a different perspective, 8 out of 13 verb forms in this move are written in the present simple. It evidently confirms the dominance of the simple present in the academic world of TA.

### **Thesis abstract analysis – grammatical subject**

While the use of tense seems to be rather straightforward, the identification of grammatical subjects shows a diversification in use which can be seen in Figure 2.

In order to provide an objective picture of the outcomes, the analysis is carried out from two perspectives. The focus is initially put on the particular domains, their lexical realisations and frequency in the individual moves; secondly, the moves and their typical subject domains are examined. At the outset of the following subanalysis, it is important to note that the differences in the subject use between the subcorpora appear to be inconsiderable here and are therefore not discussed further in this subsection.

In the present research, the text producer is clearly recognised in the discourse, especially in Methodology and Results, by the use of the personal pronouns *we* and *I*, which represent the Participant Domain.

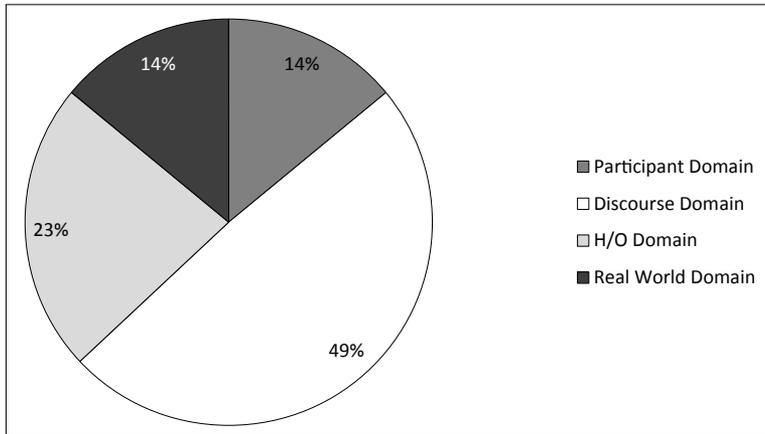


Figure 2. Incidence of individual subject domains in percentage.

According to Figure 2, the percentage of the Discourse Domain subject equals the sum of all other domains and appears to be the most frequent in the present corpus. Discourse Domain subjects refer here to internal entities and integral units of the text and predominantly occur in the Methodology and Problem Statement moves, e.g. *the first/second/third chapter; the/this thesis*.

Focusing on the domain of H/O viewpoints, it is the move of Problem Statement in which they occur most. The most recurring phrase *the goal/aim + (prepositional phrase)* implies the writer's intention and general modality which is reinforced by the distance of the writer within the text.

Finally, the absent writer happens to be in the Real World Domain, which is in a position similar to the Participant Domain in terms of its frequency. However, a noteworthy difference is evident when discussing their use in the rhetorical moves. As mentioned above, the Participant Domain subject is predominantly employed in Methodology and Results, in contrast, text producers opt for the subject referring to the Real World Domain in the Motivation and Conclusion moves, e.g. *globalisation; the world*.

By way of summarising the subanalysis, the investigation of the individual communicative stages and their typical subject domains reveals the preferences of text producers for a particular set of linguistic tools. Motivation is, despite its underestimated position in abstract writing, characteristic of the grammatical subjects referring to the Real World entities and processes. The most recurrent move of Problem Statement turns up to be a representative of the H/O subjects pursued by Discourse Domain. Methodology is linguistically reflected by the Discourse and Participant Domains. The Participant Domain is similarly present in Results and the almost invisible move of Conclusion is reified by the Real World Domain.

Given Gosden's model (1993) of the presence/absence of the writer in the text, the individual rhetorical moves can be placed in the continuum as illustrated below.

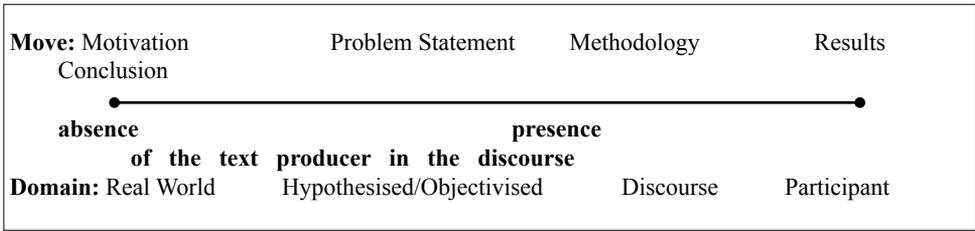


Figure 3. Interrelation between rhetorical moves and grammatical subject domains.

Blending the three analysed areas and their components, the extended scale demonstrates their interrelationship, which can be summarised as follows. The more present the text producer seems to be within the text, the more miscellaneous the writer’s language choices are. The moves of Methodology and Results appear to be characteristic of the use of the Participant and Discourse Domains and simultaneously the greatest range of tenses is employed here. On the other hand, Motivation and Conclusion exclusively fall into the category of the Real World Domain while the use of tense is limited to the present simple.

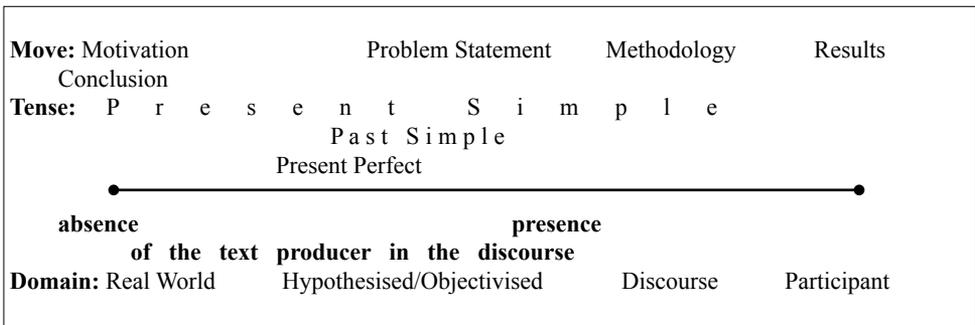


Figure 4. Interrelation between moves, grammatical subject domains and tenses used.

By way of interpreting the link between the rhetorical and linguistic patterns in the present corpus, three specific cases peculiar to the academia discussed are revealed. Firstly, although the rhetorical functions used in Motivation and Conclusion differ, their general aim is the same – to imply the notion of general truth. In doing so, the text producer employs the grammatical subject referring to the Real World Domain, which deprives the text of the presence of its author and increases its objectivity. What is more, the writer’s absence is in terms of tense expressed by the present simple, which also underpins the text’s objectivity and universality. The linguistic choices can therefore easily fulfill the rhetorical functions of both moves, viz. to motivate the reader to read the original thesis and to show the significance and further implication of the work.

The second case accounts for Methodology and Results with the functions of demonstrating the main methodological principles and the most significant

outcomes of the thesis. Both moves are reflected in the corpus by the use of the Participant Domain subjects and by a higher occurrence of the past simple and present perfect. The rationale behind these language choices seems to be a tendency to persuade the readership about the writer's personal interest in the subject as well as personal engagement in the research.

Finally, Problem Statement appears to be in the middle of two sets of moves aforementioned; however, it is more inclined towards the strategy of general truth, thus the writer tends to employ the present simple and to be absent from the discourse. Nevertheless, the presence of the text producer cannot be excluded from this move as it aims at fulfilling the function of showing the writer's orientation in the research subject and the aims of their thesis.

## Conclusion

In the present study, the part-genre of thesis abstract reveals its peculiarities when written in the setting of *Prešov University in Prešov*, Slovakia. The initial subanalysis confirms the author's previous research as the most frequent rhetorical moves happen to be Problem Statement and Methodology, while Motivation, Result and especially Conclusion are still neglected by the Slovak students in the current corpus. Another important point here is that there is only one instance demonstrating a difference between the subcorpora of Master's and PhD thesis abstracts. This is the use of the central modal *will* in the sample of the Master's TA; other variances appear to be negligible.

Two subsequent partial analyses examine the interrelationship between the moves and both tense and grammatical subject employed in the corpus. First, the present simple proves its hegemony in thesis abstracts, especially in the moves of Motivation, Problem Statement and Conclusion. This dominance is followed by the past simple and present perfect mainly employed in Methodology and partially in Results. What is more, the interrelation between the moves and the choice of grammatical subject happens to follow a similar paradigm as the grammatical subject referring to the Real World Domain, characteristic of the writer's absence from the text, is exclusively present in the moves of Motivation and Conclusion. In contrast, the presence of the writer in the Participant Domain is typical for Results and Methodology. In other words, the moves of Motivation and Conclusion seem to present the notion of general truth by the use of the present simple and non-personal subjects. On the other hand, the Methodology and Results moves are open to the past simple and present perfect as well as the Participant Domain subject in order to present the writer's personal engagement in the research and thus enhance the credibility of the thesis.

A general conclusion that might be drawn from the current study is the evidence of links between the individual rhetorical moves and both tense and grammatical

subject. However, it is not possible to describe them by the term *pattern* because of the limited data in the corpus at hand.

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