

A Rhetorical Analysis and Contrastive Rhetoric of Selected Conference Abstracts

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Abstract: The present study is an investigation with dual aims. Firstly, it reports to identify the elements of generic structural potential (GSP) and their sequence which construct the rhetorical pattern of abstract texts of papers presented at the FISS Conference on April 9 and 10, 2011 in the University Putra Malaysia (UPM) in the discipline of Higher Education. Secondly, it illuminates the distinctions that exist in the rhetorical patterns obtained in the disciplines of Higher Education, English Language and Linguistics and Communication of the abstracts presented in the same conference. The theoretical framework of this analysis is based on the Generic Structure Potential model adopted from the Systemic Functional (SF) theory of language and genre [1]. The data of the study were drawn from five paper abstracts of the proceeding of the foresaidconference in the discipline of Higher Education. The findings shed light on four rhetorically potential elements which include three obligatory elements of Articulating an Objective (AO), Articulating a Method (AM) and Articulating a Result (AR) and one optional rhetorical element namely Addressing a Problem (AP). Conclusion wise, the following rhetorical pattern was uncovered and formulated:

$(AP)^{\wedge}AO^{\wedge}AM^{\wedge}AR$

Key words: Distinction • Rhetorical pattern • Generic Structural potential • Conference abstract • Higher Education Discipline • Rhetorical analysis

INTRODUCTION

Writing and rhetoric have recently revisited. It is deemed that rhetoric plays a crucial part in influencing the ideation and presentation of (conference) abstracts and might positively impact the major role of abstract texts as to describe the contents and scope of the project as well as to enable readers to perceive its relevance [2].

Rhetoric is the strategy used by the writer to convince readers of his/her claims and to increase the credibility of his/her research (Valero-garces, 1996:281). Rhetoric has two major trends which maintain the term rhetoric: generative rhetoric which was developed under the influence of Noam Chomsky and the other is contrastive rhetoric (Malmkjaer 2004).

It is seen that rhetoric, in effect, might appear in form of structural patterns to prepare an appropriate bed for audiences' acceptance.

Research Questions: Since the study is concerned with rhetorical pattern and abstract texts, the following research questions have been designed:

- What rhetorical pattern is used in the scholarly abstracts presented at FISS conference in the discipline of Higher Education?
- How does this rhetorical pattern of abstracts differ from those of English Language and Linguistics and Communication disciplines?

The Theoretical Framework: Introduced by [1], the concept of Generic Structure Potential (GSP) is designed for any specific contextual configuration (context) to define a genre (pp. 63-65). The GSP model which is driven from the Systematic Functional Theory is a compact statement that shows the elements and their sequence in the structure of a text. These macro-structural elements, regardless of their size hold the potential or possibility for

a text structure or *unity of structure* (macro connexity). The sequenced elements that make up the GSP of a genre, offer at least a proposition.

Several researchers such as [3] who identified the GSP of the genre of *Shop Transaction* in Libya, [4] who established the GSP of *Business Letters*, [5] and [6] who investigated the rhetorical structure of the Introduction sections of Ras, [7] who identified the GSP of introductions and endings of forty essays, [7] who identified the rhetorical pattern of conference abstracts using the GSP model, [8,9], as well as [10] who all explored the GSP of English newspaper editorials, applied the theoretical model of the GSP successfully.

[1] in an attempt to explain the GSP of the "Service Encounter" (or shop transaction) examined a shop transaction text between a customer and shop assistant. [1] believe that any shop transaction is composed of a set of optional and obligatory macro-structural elements ordered specifically. They eventually came out with the following GSP which consists of the elements of Greeting (G), Sale Initiation (SI), Sale Enquiry (SE), Sale Request (SR), Sale Compliance (SC), Sale (S), Purchase (P), Purchase Closure (PC) and Finish (F):

$$[(G).(SI)^{n}][(SE.)\{SR^{m}SC^{k}\}^{s}]P^{r}PC^{t}(F)$$

[5] maintains that the GSP model of the SFL is particularly suitable for any investigatory study that that

- ... enables us to analyse any passage and relate it to its context in the discourse and also to the general background of the text: who it is written for, what is its angle on the subject matter and so on.

Thus the present research aims to apply the Generic Structure Potential as a theoretical model to delve into the rhetoric of the abstracts presented at FISS conference in 2011.

Literature Review

Rhetoric: As defined by [11], rhetoric is "the strategies the writer uses to convince readers of his/her claims and to increase the credibility of his/her research." Rhetoric is of two major trends which maintain the term rhetoric in their designations: generative rhetoric which was developed under the influence of Neom Chomsky and the other is contrastive rhetoric [12].

Rhetoric flourished in ancient Greece as a subject of formal study and a culture of performance. Its most well-known definition came from Aristotle, who called it "the

art of finding [seeing] the available means of persuasion" More simply, rhetoric includes the study and the use of language with persuasive effect, but definitions abound. In Aristotle's systematization of rhetoric, one important aspect of rhetoric to study and theorize was the three persuasive audience appeals: logos, pathos and ethos, as well as the five canons of rhetoric: invention or discovery, arrangement, style, memory and delivery. Along with grammar and logic or dialectic, rhetoric is one of the three ancient arts of discourse. From ancient Greece to the late 19th Century, it was a central part of Western education, filling the need to train public speakers and writers to move audiences to action with arguments.

Linguistically, rhetoric has patterns. According to Conner (2001), these patterns seem to differ from one culture background to another and as a result may lay influence on the way a writer approaches his/her written piece. A rhetoric pattern is a mode in which an article is organized. Patterns might include exemplification, definition, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, description, narration, to name but a few. Each one of these patterns is a tool to empower the rhetoric of the written work. These patterns could boost persuasiveness, authenticity, believability, credibility, acceptability, cohesiveness and effectiveness of a written document such as a conference abstract.

Abstract: Research article (RA) abstracts are considered the most widely published and most read as well. [2] supports the above claim and adds that abstracts are neither introduction nor conclusion instead they are distillation of research papers or theses. He maintains abstracts [of theses] are of 250 to 500 words in length and are to identify the project's objectives, methodology, findings and conclusions. Abstracts enable the readers to identify the basic contents of the report as well as its relevance.

[11] in an attempt to find out the rhetorical structure of medical abstracts, carried out an analysis of seventy-seven abstracts published between 1987 and 1989. The study used a "move analysis" as the method of analysis and revealed that 48% of the abstracts analyzed were "poorly structured" in a way that they presented discursal deficiency.

The structure of abstracts from a discipline to another, differs to some extent. [13] partly supported the above claim by researching the structure of pharmacology, sociology and Slovenian language and literature abstracts of papers published in international and Slovenian scientific periodicals. The study showed

the three disciplines have different information content. The identified differences can in part be associated not only with the disciplines but also with the different role of journals and papers in the professional society as well as the differences in perception of the role of abstracts. The results questioned the structure of abstracts required by some publishers and international journals.

In a rhetorical study, [7] analyzed five sampled articles' abstracts presented at the FISS conference held between 9th and 10th April, 2011 in the University Putra Malaysia in the disciplines of a) English Language and Linguistics and b) Communication. Using the Generic Structure Potential model, he managed to uncover two rhetorical pattern for the abstracts relating to both disciplines as a) (BI)^(AP)^AO^AM^AF^AR and b) BI ^ AO^ (AP)^ AM^ AF^ (AS)^(AR) which are rhetorically distinctive..

In a nutshell, thus, a study that concentrates on the identification of the rhetorical pattern of research articles written and presented by Iranian scholars in the field of Higher Education is deemed significant; firstly the rhetoric of the Higher Education discipline seems understudied as [13] notes down. Secondly, a contrastive rhetorical investigation that studies a few disciplines is deemed conspicuously absent and finally conference organizers and journal editors might gain benefits from the current study as to set structural or stylistic criteria for paper acceptance. Hence this study aims to fill up the gap using the Generic Structure Potential (GSP) model of analysis. The GSP model of analysis which seems novel to the domain of rhetorical research, proved appropriate for this rhetorical investigation as well as further research studies in the same or related domain(s).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Corpus: The corpus of the study contains five Iranian-written English abstracts in the field of Higher Education submitted to and presented at the *First Iranian Students' Scientific*(FISS) conference. Sponsored by Iran's embassy to Malaysia, the conference was held in the University Putra Malaysia (UPM) between 9th and 10th April 2011 and accommodated hundreds of papers from twenty-one varied academic disciplines such as English Language, Communication, Higher Education, Economics, Medicine, GIS, Law, Psychology to mention but a few. In the field of Higher Education, a total of five papers were presented. The researcher has collected the five papers' abstracts (the whole population). In other words, these abstract texts constructed the data of the small-in-scope corpus as this investigation serves as a journal article rather than a full research paper. The Generic Structure Potential model of [1] was selected as the framework of the study.

Analysis: Discourse analysis is known as one of the competent mode of analysis as it specially serves a solid means to scrutinize discourse [14]. Following this statement, the analysis basis of the study relies much on the qualitative approach using a few tables to organize the presentation of findings. In so doing, five tables have been designed to better demonstrate the analysis of the rhetorical components in each abstract text. These rhetorical elements/components which are (hereafter) abbreviated include Addressing a Problem (AP), Articulating an Objective (AO), Articulating a Method (AM) and Articulating a Result (AR).

Table 1: Analysis of Abstract text 1

No.	GSP element identified	Position			Length (in words)	GSP
		Initial	Middle	Final		
1	AO	*			23	AO^AM^AR
2.	AM		*		38	
3.	AR			*	65	

Table 2: Analysis of Abstract text 2

No.	GSP element identified	Position			Length (in words)	GSP
		Initial	Middle	Final		
1	AO	*	*	*	31	AO

Table 3: Analysis of Abstract text 3

No.	GSP element identified	Position			Length (in words)	GSP
		Initial	Middle	Final		
1	AO	*			60	AO^AM^AR
2.	AM		*		76	
3.	AR			*	27	

Table 4: Analysis of Abstract text 4

No.	GSP element identified	Position			Length (in words)	GSP
		Initial	Middle	Final		
1	AO	*			16	AO^AM^AR
2.	AM		*		57	
3.	AR			*	231	

Table 5: Analysis of Abstract text 5

No.	GSP element identified	Position			Length (In words)	GSP
		Initial	Middle	Final		
1	AP	*			64	AP^AO^AM^AR
2.	AO		*		2929	
3.	AM		*		58	
4.	AR			*	60	

The following table shows that only three rhetorical elements: (AO), (AM) and (AR) are used in the first abstract text. (AR) has made the largest element with the length of sixty-five words whereas (AO) occupied the smallest area of the abstract. Hence the rhetorical structure (GSP) of this abstract is schematized as below:

AO^AM^AR

As to the second abstract text, table two demonstrates only one rhetorical elements of (AO) which is as long as twenty-eight words. Thus the following rhetorical structure (GSP) could be formulized:

AO

In table three, three rhetorical elements: (AO), (AM), and (AR) have made up the rhetorical structure of the third abstract. (AR) and (AM) served the smallest and largest elements. The GSP could be presented as:

AO^AM^AR

Table four which is associated with the fourth abstract text, tabulates three rhetorical elements of (AO), (AM) and (AR) with (AR) and (AO) being considered the largest and smallest elements of the GSP. Thus the following rhetorical structure (GSP) could be schematized:

AO^AM^AR

The following table which illustrates the fifth abstract text, reveals four rhetorical elements: (AP), (AO), (AM) and (AR) are employed. (AP) has made the largest element with the length of sixty-four words whereas (AO) occupied the smallest area of the abstract (twenty-nine words). Hence the rhetorical structure (GSP) of this abstract is schematized as below:

AP^AO^AM^AR

CONCLUSION

Findings of the present paper clearly demonstrate that there were totally four rhetorical elements in the structure of the collected abstract texts: Addressing a Problem (AP), Articulating an Objective (AO), Articulating a Method (AM) and Articulating a Result (AR). In the light of the analysis, (AP) that appeared only in one abstract (abstract four) is considered an optional element whose presence just influences the rhetoric of presentation in the GSP to some extent whereas (AO), (AM) and (AR) are regarded obligatory elements of the GSP of the rhetorical pattern appearing in four of the abstract texts' GSPs. Therefore, the following GSP that represents the rhetorical pattern of the five abstract texts analyzed in the study, was formulated:

Table 6: Inter-disciplinary analysis of rhetorical patterns

No.	Discipline	Rhetorical Pattern(GSP) Obtained	Total No. of Elements	No. of Obligatory Elements	No. of Optional Elements
1.	Higher Education	(AP)^AO^AM^AR	4	3	1
2.	English Language and Linguistics	(BI)^(AP)^AO^AM^AF^AR	6	4	2
3.	Communication	BI ^ AO^ (AP)^ AM^ AF^ (AS)^(AR)	7	4	3

(AP)^AO^AM^AR

In the above formula, the round brackets indicate optionality of the enclosed elements. Therefore Addressing a Problem (AP) is optional while Articulating an Objective (AO), Articulating a Method (AM) and Articulating a Result (AR) are obligatory i.e. they are deemed the backbone of the abstract texts. The caret sign (^) shows the sequence. Violation of sequence in the above GSP can bring disorder to that section of a text, hence hard to follow.

The rhetorical pattern obtained from the current analysis of the conference papers presented in the discipline of Higher Education demonstrated four elements [(AP)^AO^AM^AR] with only optional element (AP). This rhetorical pattern differs from the other two rhetorical patterns resulted from the other two studies stated in the literature review [15]. It is to say that the rhetorical pattern of the current study is different from its counterpart rhetorical patterns a) in the discipline of English language and linguistics where the [(BI)^(AP)^AO^AM^AF^AR] pattern of six elements with two optional elements, was resulted and b) in the discipline of Communication where the [BI ^ AO^ (AP)^ AM^ AF^ (AS)^(AR)] pattern of seven elements with three optional elements was concluded. Hence, it should be inferred that rhetorical patterns vary from discipline to discipline as the fore-formulated GSPs showed. This finding is in line with and supports that of [13] who stressed that different disciplines hold different abstract components.

It is worthwhile to make an implication for conference organizers, journal editors and genre writing educators so that the obligatory/required components of conference abstracts could be set accordingly. The following table may illuminate these differences clearly.

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