

# DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES OF TOPICAL PROGRESSION IN DISCOURSE: THE CASE OF ABSTRACTS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY STUDIES

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**Abstract:** Conducting research and successfully communicating research findings play an important part in the life of academic researchers and university students. Writing a publishable quality article can be exceptionally challenging for novice researchers and university students alike. However, if scholars want to become part of the discourse community in their research field, they should become familiar with the genre requirements of their discipline. It is especially important for them to be able to write an appropriate abstract because it can promote the research article. To help the novice researchers of English Literature and English Applied Linguistics gain an insight into the main features of a successful research article abstract, the present study analysed the topical structures of 10 Applied Linguistics and 10 Literary Studies abstracts, which were published in two prestigious journals of their respective fields. The outcomes of the study attempt to provide guidelines for both university students and novice researchers who would like to publish their works in English language academic journals.

**Key words:** research article abstract, literary study abstract, applied linguistics abstract, theoretical studies, topical progression analysis

## 1 Introduction

Conducting research is an essential part of academic work for both full-time researchers and university students. Carrying out research, however, is not the only task to be completed in the academic environment. As dos Santos (1996) contends, the results of research projects also need to be communicated in order to give an account of the value they have. Research results can be communicated in different ways, for example, in the form of a speech at a conference or by writing a research article (dos Santos, 1996), which has to be as meticulously organized as the research itself, so that the readers can follow what the particular study is about.

However, readers have to decide whether they would like to read a given research paper or not, and they usually make such decisions on the basis of the title and the abstract (of the article), the latter of which provides a short summary of the research (dos Santos, 1996). While titles are likely to be created arbitrarily by authors so that they catch the attention of prospective readers, abstracts have to be more carefully constructed. This is because abstracts should provide a truthful representation of the research, while, at the same time, they should impact the reader as powerfully as the title does. Research article abstracts, therefore, have a particularly important role to play in the presentation of the actual research.

Abstracts represent a special type of genre, and therefore being familiar with the patterns and the traditions of this genre helps writers and the discourse community communicate their results in a more efficient way and understand each other better. The characteristics of a genre, however, can vary across the different academic fields and disciplines. As Hyland's (2000) work suggests, different academic disciplines have different social practices. This is because scientific texts present how knowledge is negotiated and constructed within the particular discourse community (Hyland, 2000). As a result, writers of a particular research paper are to learn and bear in mind the conventions of the discourse community they are writing for (Corbett, 2006).

Learning and knowing such conventions are just as essential for researchers as university students so that they can integrate into the research community and obtain recognition. In Hungary, students of English and American studies in BA programmes frequently choose to write their thesis on either a literature-related, or an applied linguistics topic. These two disciplines presuppose different kinds of organisational patterns both in terms of writing up the research and presenting the different topics within the research. Such differences should also be indicated in the abstract of the papers or theses because the abstract is essentially a short summary of the research study. Therefore, paying attention to the topical structures of the abstracts (Lautamatti, 1987) might reveal some underlying organisational patterns in terms of communicating the value of the research in these two different academic fields.

Since the presentation of results is hypothesised to be different for the two different disciplines, the topical structure of the abstracts (of papers) might also be different. In order to examine whether there is a difference between the structure of abstracts in a literary paper and one in applied linguistics, a small scale exploratory study has been conducted. Even though the methodology applied in the present investigation does not allow for generalisable conclusions, it can still shed light on whether embarking on a larger scale investigation using a similar method is worthy of further research. The aim of the present paper, therefore, is to compare and contrast the topical structure of the abstracts of literary studies and applied linguistics articles published in prestigious academic journals. By observing the way experienced academics write abstracts, it is hoped that future thesis writers and novice researchers will be able to learn about the process of developing research papers into publishable articles.

## **2 Literature review**

The aim of the present study is to investigate, by topical progression analysis, how professional researchers present the topic of their research in their abstracts. The following section is going to provide an overview of the relevant and currently available literature. First, a definition of a research article abstract will be provided; then some of the previous research conducted on the topic of research article abstracts will be presented. Finally, this section will also discuss topical progression analysis, and how analysing the topical progression in research article abstracts can provide useful insights, which can be used for training students and novice writers.

According to Swales (1990), "abstracts function as independent discourses as well as being advance indicators of the content and structure of the following text" (p.179). Unlike other sections of the research article, the research article abstract is considered to be an

individual genre (Biber & Conrad, 2009). This view seems to be reasonable, as the abstract usually stands on its own, separated from the rest of the research article; it has its own communicative purpose, and it also has its own unique discourse structure (Biber & Conrad, 2009).

As the main aim of a research article abstract is to promote and ‘sell’ the research article, it also serves as a means for researchers to position themselves in their discourse communities (Hyland, 2000). According to Swales (1990), a discourse community has six main characteristics:

- it has a commonly agreed set of goals,
- it has participatory mechanisms which ensure the communication between the members,
- it uses these mechanisms to provide information and feedback,
- it uses and possesses its own genres of communication,
- it has its own specific lexis, and
- it has a reasonable ratio between novice and expert members.

Taking these characteristics into consideration, it then becomes apparent that if novice researchers wish to become members of discourse communities pertaining to their research fields and to successfully communicate their research results, they should, in turn, become familiar with the genre requirements of such discourse communities. To be able to do so, they need guidelines and instruction on the topic; therefore, conducting research on the characteristics of successful research articles in different academic disciplines is indispensable.

With regard to research on abstract writing, one major investigation drew attention to a strategy called “move analysis” (dos Santos, 1996). Dos Santos (1996), who focused on abstracts in applied linguistics, identified different moves present in the abstract itself. He categorised the moves which are descriptive as not prescriptive in the sense that they may or may not be applied by the author in the organisation of the abstract. He then further explained that there were moves which appeared to be compulsory elements to be used within the abstract, such as, presenting the research (i.e., move 2) and describing the methodology (i.e., move 3). All the other moves with their sub-moves, however, are merely optional to use: situating the research (i.e., move 1), summarising the results (i.e., move 4) and discussing the research (i.e., move 5). Looking at this categorisation, the moves might also be connected to the different topical structures the authors may use in their abstracts. Having these two compulsory moves, which behave like anchor elements, might be useful in identifying the major topics in the topical structure.

The writing of abstracts in literary research has not yet been extensively researched. Research to the present day has exclusively focused on either applied linguistics abstracts (dos Santos, 1996) or applied linguistics introductions (Swales, 1990). Moreover, even though Swales (1990) briefly examined the other components of research articles, including the research article abstract, his work focused on empirical studies and they did not investigate theoretical research papers. Doró (2013b), on the other hand, analysed the move structures of theses abstracts of undergraduate EFL students. The theses were written on topics of literature, culture, history and applied linguistics, and the findings of this study implied that the applied linguistics research abstracts followed dos Santos’s (1996) model more closely than the theses written on the other topics (i.e., literature, culture, and history) (Doró, 2013b).

Doró (2013a) also carried out a more detailed investigation of the differences in the move structures of linguistics and literary abstracts. However, this study did not distinguish between theoretical, historical and applied linguistics papers nor was it able to draw a systematic conclusion about the move structure of literary abstracts.

Therefore, the question of how far the different move analyses may be applied to literary papers offers room for plentiful prospective research. Combining the investigations with topical structure analysis (Lautamatti, 1987) might result in a more in-depth understanding of the literary paper abstracts and introductions. Topical structure analysis as originally described by Lautamatti (1987) is a text-based analysis of coherence in a piece of discourse (Schneider & Connor, 1990; Witte, 1983). It divides sentences into two parts, namely *topic* and *comment*, or according to other terminology used, *theme* and *rheme*. In each sentence, the topic serves as a sub-topic of the discourse topic in the text; therefore, the method of topical structure analysis can be used to investigate how the sentence topics relate to the discourse topic in a text (Lautamatti, 1987). When considering the topic of a sentence, only lexical subjects can be connected to the discourse topics, while dummy subjects, such as the dummy “it” are disregarded (Károly, 2013).

Lautamatti (1987) identified three ways in which sub-topics can progress in a text in order to develop the discourse topic:

- 1) parallel progression: “the sub-topic in a number of successive sentences is the same” (Lautamatti, 1987, p.88)
- 2) sequential progression: “the predicate, or the rhematic part of the sentence provides the topic for the next [sentence]” (Lautamatti, 1987, p.88)
- 3) extended parallel progression: “the primary sub-topic is re-assumed without being reintroduced by sequential progression” (Lautamatti, 1987, pp.99–100).

Based on Schneider and Connor’s (1990) explanation, the role of parallel progression is usually to strengthen the discourse topic through repetition, the use of synonyms, or through the use of pronominal forms. Sequential progression serves the development of ideas in sub-topics, or it can be used to add detail to a sub-topic. Extended parallel progression is meant to provide a closure and to remind the reader of the discourse topic (Schneider & Connor, 1990). Lautamatti (1987) illustrates topical structure analysis with the following sample:

(1) When a human infant is born into any community in any part of the world, it has two things in common with any other infant, provided neither of them has been damaged in any way either before or during birth. (2) Firstly, and most obviously, new born children are completely helpless. (3) Apart from a powerful capacity to draw attention to their helplessness by using sound, there is nothing the new born child can do to ensure his own survival. (4) Without care from some other human being or beings, be it a mother, grandmother, sister, nurse, or human group, a child is very unlikely to survive. (5) This helplessness of human infants is in marked contrast with the capacity of many newborn animals to get to their feet within minutes of birth and run with the herd within a few hours. (6) Although young animals are certainly at risk, sometimes for weeks or even months after birth, compared with the human infant they very quickly develop the capacity to fend for themselves. (7) It would seem that this long period of vulnerability is the price that the human species has to pay for the very long period which fits man for survival as a species.

(8) It is during this very long period in which the human infant is totally dependent on others that it reveals the second feature which it shares with all other undamaged human infants, a capacity to learn language. (9) For this reason, biologists now suggest that language is “species specific” to the human race, that is to say, they consider the human infant to be genetically programmed in such a way that it can acquire language. (10) This suggestion implies that just as human beings are designed to see

three-dimensionally and in colour, and just as they are designed to stand upright rather than to move on all fours, so they are designed to learn and use language as part of their normal development as well-formed human beings. (Lautamatti, 1987, p.78)

Topical subjects		Progression Types
1	human infant	Parallel Progression
2	new born children	
3	the new born child	
4	a child	
5	this helplessness of human infants	Sequential Progression
6	young animals	
7	this long period of vulnerability	
8	human infant	Extended Parallel Progression
9	language	
10	human beings	

Table 1. Progression types (Lautamatti, 1987, p. 83).

The development of a topic carries significant importance in the representation of the different ideas discussed, which also indirectly defines the quality and thus the value of a piece of research writing. How researchers communicate the value of their research can depend on the ways in which authors present what they did during the research process along with how and why they did it. Some research may have great potential in offering valuable solutions to the issues and problems at hand; however, if the ideas are presented in an incoherent way, the topical structure of the paper might actually undermine the value of the research.

Since topical structure analysis is an appropriate tool used to define the quality of a text, it has been widely applied in research studies investigating the quality and coherence of students' writings (Almaden, 2006; Carreon, 2006; Simpson, 2000). It has also been successfully used as a tool taught to students in order to raise their awareness of cohesion and coherence in (processing) texts and to improve the cohesion and coherence of their own writing (Connor & Farmer, 1990; Nunan, 1994). Schneider and Connor (1990) have used topical structure analysis as a way to investigate the differences between high-rated and low-rated student essays. As their findings suggest, there are observable differences between the topical progressions preferred by the writers of high-rated and low-rated essays (Schneider & Connor, 1990), and it can be assumed that topical structure analysis can also be a suitable tool of analysis for finding the main characteristics of research articles published in prestigious international journals.

As neither literary research abstracts nor applied linguistics research abstracts have been investigated using topical structure analysis as yet, the aim of the present paper is to explore the topical structures of abstracts of prestigious academic journals in the field of applied linguistics and literature, and to compare and contrast them with each other. Since Lautamatti (1987) offers a clear-cut categorisation and definition of the different types of topical progression, the present paper builds upon her work of topical structure analysis, and attempts to answer the following research question:

- How might theoretical research article abstracts of applied linguistics and those of literary studies differ in terms of their topical structures?

### 3 Methods

#### 3.1 The corpus

In order to seek answers for the proposed research question, I looked for abstracts in research articles, using the same type of research approach. Since the nature of literary studies lends itself to a theoretical approach, the applied linguistics papers also had to be aligned with this approach. Having theoretical research papers both in applied linguistics and literary studies ensures a solid basis for comparison and contrast.

For the present exploratory study 10 applied linguistics and 10 literary studies abstracts were selected from prestigious academic journals. The reason for collecting abstracts from high quality journals was that professional academic journals establish high quality standards. Therefore, investigating abstracts published in academic journals might provide novice researchers with some guidelines about how to write an abstract in their particular research field.

In the field of applied linguistics, the articles were selected from *The Modern Language Journal* and the literary studies abstracts were selected from *Shakespeare Quarterly*. These two particular journals were selected because they have a high impact factor and because they do not have any specific official guidelines published in their calls for paper sections regarding the structure of the abstracts. The length of the abstracts varied between 130–200 words (for sample abstracts see Appendix A and Appendix B).

#### 3.2 Methods of data analysis

The present research is an exploratory study. Topical structure analysis was conducted manually based on the works of Lautamatti (1987), and calculated on the basis of T-units instead of sentences to investigate the patterns of the topical chains. A T-unit is defined by Hunt (1965) as “one main clause with all the subordinate clauses attached to it” (p.36). For ensuring the reliability of the coding another researcher was asked to analyse the abstracts. Cohens’ Kappa measure was applied for inter-rater reliability analysis. Having an acceptable level of reliability between the codings of the two researchers, Kappa = 0.79 ( $p < 0.001$ ), 95% CI (0.713 to 0.845), the collected data were analysed with SPSS 17.0. An independent samples t-test was calculated and the mean values of the frequencies of the three different progression types (e.g., parallel progression, sequential progression and extended parallel progression) were also calculated.

### 4 Results and Discussion

First the collected data were examined with the help of statistical analysis conducted with SPSS 17.0. Even though t-test analysis did not provide any significant measures between the different variables across the two different academic fields, observing the mean values (see Table 2) of the different progression types, it can be argued that two different kinds of organisational patterns of topical structures can be detected in terms of applied linguistics abstracts and literary paper abstracts. While the mean value of the sequential progression type is higher in applied linguistics abstracts, the mean values of extended parallel and parallel

progression types are higher for literary abstracts. Comparing the abstracts of the two different kinds of disciplines, it can be further claimed that applied linguistics abstracts use sequential progressions and have a higher topical depth (i.e., their mean values) than literary abstracts which have lower topical depth (see Table 2).

	<b>Genre</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
<b>Topical Depth</b>	Applied Linguistics	10	.67	.18
	Literature	10	.55	.18
<b>Sequential Progression</b>	Applied Linguistics	10	.52	.15
	Literature	10	.47	.21
<b>Extended Parallel Progression</b>	Applied Linguistics	10	.09	.06
	Literature	10	.14	.10
<b>Parallel Progression</b>	Applied Linguistics	10	.22	.12
	Literature	10	.26	.21

Table 2. The mean values of progression types

The majority of applied linguistics abstracts, namely, seven out of ten abstracts contain the sequential progression type (Lautamatti, 1987). This means that every new sentence in the abstract introduces a new topical subject and attempts to describe the different aspects discussed throughout the paper. The majority of literary abstracts (i.e., seven out of ten), however, include parallel progression and extended parallel progression types (Lautamatti, 1987). In other words, the topical subject is the same in sentences used in the literary abstracts. The topical subject of the sentences is most often the article itself, providing some kind of metadiscussion (about it). Furthermore, it can also be asserted that many of the literary abstracts do not summarise the whole article but focus on some aspects of the text only, particularly those with the topical subjects of the papers.

Besides having two different patterns for the abstracts of applied linguistics and those in literary articles, the corpus also contains some exceptions within both disciplines. One applied linguistics abstract seems to discuss only a single aspect of the whole article and explores this particular aspect while, interestingly, the title does not appear to be in harmony with the abstract itself. Namely, only one of the three topics indicated in the title is topicalised (i.e., featured as a topic) in the abstract itself (see Table 3).

<b>Topical subjects</b>		<b>Topical depth</b>
1	This article	1
2	We	2
3	methodologies, theories, and foci within SLA	3
4	the former orientation	3
5	This (former orientations being unquestionable)	4
6	the foreign language speaker	5
7	We	2
8	SLA research	3
9	Field of SLA	3

Table 3. Topical Structure Analysis of Applied Linguistics Abstract #4: *On Discourse, Communication, and (Some) Fundamental Concepts in SLA Research*

There is another example of an applied linguistics abstract whose topical subjects are the same as the ones mentioned in the title of the paper, and which discusses this particular topical subject only (see Table 4). However, having investigated the structure of the whole paper, it appears that the article itself covers considerably more aspects in detail than the aspects topicalised both in the title and the abstract.

<b>Topical subjects</b>		<b>Topical depth</b>
1	Constructionist approaches	1
2	Grammar	2
3	This emphasis	3
4	That (this emphasis)	3
5	Input related factors	4
6	We	5
7	We	5
8	The association	2

Table 4. Topical Structure Analysis of Applied Linguistics Abstract #6: *Input Effects within a Constructionist Framework*

As far as literary abstracts are concerned, the majority of these abstracts generally do not discuss the topics indicated in the titles of the paper, rather they provide the reader with some metadiscussion about the article itself. In fact, the titles of the literary papers indicate several different topics, but the related abstracts only discuss one of these topics with the help of parallel progressions. However, one of the literary abstracts represents an exception, in which the topicalised data in the title of the paper do not appear in the abstract of the article (see Table 5). As another exception, the abstract investigated demonstrated the use of sequential progression which is otherwise more typical of applied linguistics papers (see Table 6).



Topical subjects		Topical depth
1	This essay	1
2	The Merchant of Venice	2
3	Shakespeare's play	2
4	the coterminous entitlements	3
5	John Locke	4
6	The decision of the trial	5
7	The play	2
8	The dilemma	5
9	This	5
1	The Merchant of Venice	2
0		
1	it	2
1		

Table 5. Topical Structure Analysis of Literary Abstract #5: *Shylock and the Slaves: Owing and Owning in The Merchant of Venice*

Topical subjects		Topical depth
1	Authorship attribution studies	1
2	it	2
3	the first computer-driven attribution methods	3
4	Authorship problems	4
5	Time	5
	...	...
	Continues until topical depth	14

Table 6. Topical Structure Analysis of Literary Abstract #9: *Shakespeare and Authorship Studies in the Twenty-First Century*

Regarding literary studies, based on the corpus, it seems that most often there is one single perspective of the article which is discussed in the abstracts, while other important elements of the paper are either not topicalised, or are completely ignored and out of scope.

One of the problems with an abstract which describes only one aspect of the paper might be that it does not provide reliable information about the research for the readers. This is very likely to be a shortcoming because it might give the impression of poor academic practice, that is, the abstract does not provide a sufficient summary, making it pointless to purchase and read the article. From the point of view of writing a thesis, the thesis marking committee (i.e., the raters) would also get the impression that such an abstract does not fulfil the criteria of a good quality, concise abstract. Therefore, from a pedagogical point of view, students wishing to write effective abstracts for their seminar papers or theses should probably be encouraged to provide a more rounded overview of their research in their abstracts with the help of sequential progression.

Nevertheless, if one wishes to successfully publish an article in a prestigious journal and become part of the discourse community of their field of research, the traditions of that

discourse community are also important to consider. Based on the findings of the present study, different traditions apply to abstracts present in applied linguistics and literary studies articles. While sequential progression in their topical structure appears to be favoured in applied linguistics abstracts, where all topics mentioned in the title are usually topicalised, literary studies abstracts, on the other hand, may contain a more in-depth discussion on the title's main topic. There are instances, however, when they completely ignore the rest of the topics mentioned in the title. This is usually done with the help of parallel progression.

## 5 Conclusions

This paper attempted to explore whether there was a difference between applied linguistics abstracts and literary abstracts in terms of their topical structures. Based on the analysed data, it is argued that there is a difference between the abstracts of the two academic fields investigated. While applied linguistics abstracts mainly follow a sequential progression type, literary abstracts are organised around parallel progressions. However, this distinction between the abstracts of the two academic fields only offers a descriptive summary of the collected data rather than a prescriptive guideline, according to which, prospective applied linguistics or literary paper abstracts should be written.

The limitation of the study is that it only focused on topical structure analysis. Nevertheless, having only one particular item of data which is not topicalised or emphasised in the abstract does not necessarily mean that the information contained is not communicated in the abstract and the paper. Therefore, in order to glean knowledge about the information content of the different abstracts, it is advisable to conduct either propositional analysis (Bovair & Kieras, 1985) or move analysis (dos Santos, 1996).

Even though further analysis is necessary and essential in the investigation of abstracts, it can already be seen on the basis of the present research that applied linguistics abstracts generally provide a more comprehensive summary of the paper than the literary study abstracts. From a pedagogical point of view, this difference might raise awareness about the use of different progression types, namely, how the emphasis of a particular topical subject can change what is going to be emphasised overall in the abstract itself, which can easily influence the value of a particular research study. Representing the value of a particular piece of research is of primary importance for students. Therefore, even though the results of the present research are not generalisable, the differences identified in this short study might provide information to teachers of applied linguistics and literary studies and help them advise their students on writing abstracts for their thesis. Moreover, the findings of the present paper might also provide valuable insights for both novice researchers and students who would like to turn their research projects or seminar papers into research articles and have their work published in prestigious English language international journals.

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## APPENDIX A

Sample abstract: The Modern Language Journal

*Second Language Acquisition, Applied Linguistics, and the Teaching of Foreign Languages*

Given the current popularity of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as a research base for the teaching and learning of foreign languages in educational settings, it is appropriate to examine the relationship of SLA to other relevant areas of inquiry, such as Foreign Language Education, Foreign Language Methodology, and Applied Linguistics. This article makes the argument that Applied Linguistics, as the interdisciplinary field that mediates between the theory and the practice of language acquisition and use, is the overarching field that includes SLA and SLA-related domains of research. Applied Linguistics brings to all levels of foreign language study not only the research done in SLA proper, but also the research in Stylistics, Language Socialization, and Critical Applied Linguistics that illuminates the teaching of a foreign language as sociocultural practice, as historical practice, and as social semiotic practice.

Kramsch, C. (2000). Second language acquisition, applied linguistics, and the teaching of foreign languages. *The Modern Language Journal*, 84(3), 311–464.

## APPENDIX B

Sample abstract: Shakespeare Quarterly

*Shakespeare and Authorship Studies in the Twenty-First Century*

Authorship attribution studies have traditionally been based on a wide reading knowledge of a text in its historical and generic contexts. With the advent of computers, it became possible to process large quantities of data quickly. However, the first computer-driven attribution methods could only deal with individual words, ignoring grammar, syntax, and all the individualizing features of authorial language. By counting word frequencies and subjecting the word-count information to statistical analysis, it was hoped that authorship problems could be solved. Time has shown that the most this method can achieve is a measure of likeness, not identity. Second-generation research in authorship attribution has opened up a new path, drawing on recent advances in linguistics. Neurolinguists have shown that human utterances often take the form of “chunks” or ready-made groups of words. In parallel, linguists studying large corpora of actual language use have found that certain word groups tend to recur in close proximity. These collocations are partly phrases or idioms in general circulation, partly idiosyncratic formations which an individual speaker or writer uses regularly. By using modern plagiarism software we can establish the distinctive “phraseognomy” of one or more authors within a restricted database, organized by genre and date. Collocation matching, an automated and replicable process, can provide a reliable authorship indicator when dealing with anonymous or co-authored texts. On the evidence given here, it seems certain that the Additions to the 1602 text of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* were written by Shakespeare.

Vickers, B. (2011). Shakespeare and authorship studies in the twenty-first century. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 62(1), 106–142.