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Title

A Cross-Disciplinary Analysis of Thematic Structure of Dissertation Abstracts

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Abstract

The ways by which the academic texts are investigated differ from time to time with legacies of each tradition influencing the subsequent approaches. One of the approaches that has not lost its favor ever since it was established is the Australian Systemic Functional tradition. Based on the descriptions provided by this tradition, in this study, the thematic structure (Halliday, 1994) of the gap indication move and the Introduction section (Swales, 2004) of 120 dissertation abstracts from six disciplines was investigated at two levels, i.e. choice of theme type and thematic progression. The simple topical theme was recognized as the typical theme of the rhetorical units in focus across the six disciplines. With respect to the thematic progression, the theme-reiteration and zig-zag patterns
were found to be the characteristic patterns. These results indicate that the language of abstracts is remarkably factual and far from abstraction.

**Keywords**: thematic structure, thematic progression, dissertation abstracts, gap indication move

1. **Introduction**

One way of analyzing academic texts is examining their functional meanings. One of these functional aspects is examining the textual meaning (or ‘metafunction’ to use Halliday’s (1994) term). In English, textual meaning is expressed by means of the order that constituents are given in the clause. Textual meaning assigns two functional components, i.e. *Theme* and *Rheme*. *Theme* is identified by first position in the clause. It should be noted that the first position in the clause is not what defines the *Theme*; it is the means whereby the function of *Theme* is realized in the grammar of English. To keep the readers of a specific field interested in following the text we write, we should take account of the standards sanctioned by the expert members of the target discourse community (D. C) One way of accomplishing this is using the proper *Themes* in the proper positions in the clause. Studying the thematic structure is a way of signifying the convoluted relations between *Themes* in a text, and a way of reflecting the framework of the text (Jia-po & Bin, 2006:75). It is hypothesized that exploring the thematicity might have a fundamental role in the identification of rhetorical units of the dissertation abstracts.

Previous studies on abstracts have mainly focused on the rhetorical structure of abstracts. Thus far, the link between the rhetorical moves (Swales, 2004) of the dissertation abstracts and their functional linguistic realizations has not received much momentum. Pho (2008:232) points out that there are a few studies that have investigated the linguistic features or the link between the macro-structures and their linguistic realizations in the abstracts. Therefore, for novice non-native writers of English to gain insight into a more comprehensive understanding of writing an abstract, it is indispensable that we base our analyses on an entrenched, functional, and multidimensional linguistic theory that can account for both semantic and grammatical aspects of language. In this study, a functional approach, which includes both semantic and linguistic accounts, will be pursued. Pertinent to this study is the investigation of the thematic structure which is claimed to have been applied much less to the analysis of written language than to the spoken language (Fries, 2009:11).

Except for Lorés (2004), other researchers who have attended to the linguistic features of
abstracts (Martín-Martín, 2003; Tahririan & Jalilifar, 2004; Samraj, 2005; Pho, 2008) have scarcely based their linguistic analyses on a well-grounded functional linguistic theory along with the investigation of the rhetorical structure. Lorés (2004) states that the function of an abstract will determine both its global structure and its linguistic realization (p. 281). Following this, we can hypothesize that there is an intricate interaction between the global structure and its linguistic realization.

This study aims to shed light on the importance of the concepts of Theme and thematic progression (TP) as two-fold guiding means for understanding and producing the purported message of the texts. It has been observed (Fries, 1983:8) that different genres are structured differently at the level of Theme. Alternatively, it is possible to discern that there is a relationship between Theme types and TP, and the rhetorical units of a defined genre which ultimately leads to the characterization of that genre. Particularly, the thematic structure of the Introduction section of the abstracts following IMRC/D (Introduction, Methods, Results, Conclusion/Discussion) structure and the rhetorical Move 2 of the abstracts, which indicates a gap in the related literature, complying with CARS (Create A Research Space) structure (Swales, 2004), are examined.

2. Theoretical background

In the Theme system, the clause is configured into two functional components: Theme and Rheme. Specifically, one element in the clause is assigned as the Theme. This then combines with the remainder (Rheme) so that the two parts together constitute a message. Halliday (1994:39) conceptualizes Theme as a clause-initial, and Rheme as the development of Theme. In other words, while the Theme is the element that functions as the “starting-point for the message: it is what the clause is about” (ibid) and in this sense it typically conveys familiar or given information, the Rheme is the part of the clause in which the message is developed and “typically contains unfamiliar or new information” (Eggins, 1994, p.275).

According to Eggins (1994), one important system of the thematic structure is the choice of type of Theme. Concerning this system, three different types of elements can get to be Theme in a clause. They can be ‘topical’ (or experiential) elements, ‘interpersonal’ elements, and ‘textual’ elements. Topical Theme refers to the element which occurs in first position in a clause and to which a Transitivity function can be assigned. Interpersonal Theme also refers to the fronted position clause element and to which a Mood label can be designated. Textual
Theme refers to the elements, which “do not express any interpersonal or experiential meaning, but which do important cohesive work in relating the clause to its context” (p. 281).

Eggins (1994) also states that every clause has only one thematic element which must be a topical Theme. However, it is common for a clause to contain a sequence of Themes, with often several textual and/or interpersonal Themes occurring before the obligatory Theme. This is labeled ‘multiple Themes’. Besides topical, interpersonal, textual, and multiple Themes, there is also elliptical Theme which is not physically found at the thematic position of the clause, but which has to be inferred and included in a grammatical analysis.

Another important system of thematic structure refers to Theme markedness which depends on conflation of the Theme constituent with different Mood and Transitivity constituents. This system includes unmarked and marked Themes. The former is when the element that is a Theme conflates with the Mood structure constituents, such as: Subject, Finite, Predicator and Wh-element. The latter refers to the conflation of the Theme with “any other constituent from the Mood system”. The commonest type of marked Theme is when the Theme conflates with a circumstantial Adjunct (Eggins, 1994, p. 296). Also, according to Eggins (1994), the importance of choosing marked Themes relies on the effective signaling the purpose of the clauses, therefore marked Themes add coherence and emphasis to the text. In sum, the choice between marked and unmarked Themes contribute to the ‘thematic structure of the text’ (ibid.). Still, a third category distinguishes the predicated Themes from the non-predicated Themes.

Besides the important aspects related to thematic Structure mentioned above, it is worth mentioning the way Theme and Rheme are used to organize the information in the text. The thematic development of a message can be perceived through the way thematic elements succeed each other through the three main Theme patterns: a) Theme re-iteration pattern; b) zig-zag pattern; c) multiple Theme. Eggins (1994) and Halliday’s (1994) categorization of Theme types is adopted in this study since they afford space for the optional and obligatory elements in the Theme position, leading to the construction of multiple Theme. This is completely different from the European functionalism, for which any Theme type, except for the topical Theme, in the initial position is regarded as marked Theme (Martínez, 2003, pp. 108-109).

3. Review of the literature
It was pointed out earlier that a number of researchers have analyzed the rhetorical structure of RA abstracts; however, not many have attempted to analyze them based on the descriptions of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Among this minority, Ghadessy (1999) and Lorès (2004) have directly addressed the thematic organization of abstracts. Nevertheless, the pioneering studies in this regard, as cited in Lorès (2004:289), are those of Nwogu (1990) and Nwogu and Bloor (1991) in which they analyzed the TP of different sections of RAs. In these studies, it was revealed that there is a tendency for abstracts to display both simple linear (the zigzag) and constant (theme re-iteration) patterns.

Employing Halliday’s (1994) taxonomy of Theme/Rheme, Ghadessy’s (1999) analysis revealed that although the writers used a variety of different linguistic forms for the realization of the Theme of the clauses in their abstracts, a common method of development was established through the Theme selection (p. 141). He also found that the writers mostly tended to use simple and marked Themes in the clauses (p. 148). Ghadessy concluded that the choice of appropriate points of departure for the clauses is a powerful and realistic way of maintaining some of the essential characteristics of the texts that people may meet in their professions everyday (150).

Lorès (2004), found three distinct types of abstracts: informative, indicative, and informative-indicative (combinatory). In the second step, she analyzed the TP and the method of development of the abstracts to reveal the textual mechanisms underlying the construction of this genre. In this second end, Daneš (1974) and Fries (1983) models were employed respectively. Applying thematic analysis, Lorès found distinct patterns of thematic distribution and choice to the two types of structures (p. 298). Her findings confirmed the previous results (Nwogu, 1990; Nwogu & Bloor, 1991), since the thematic progression of RA abstracts was mostly the zigzag and reiteration patterns.

After reviewing the available literature, it was found that only Nwogu (1990), Nwogu and Bloor (1991), Ghadessy (1999), and Lorès (2004) have unraveled the thematic organization of the moves constituting the RA abstract on a functional basis. However, even in these studies, except for Ghadessy (1999) there was a infinitesimal concern with comparisons between disciplines. As a partial endeavor to create awareness and sensitivity to the specific features of this genre, in this study, it is aimed at conducting a comparative study on the method of development and thematic progression of the Introduction section of abstracts following IMRC/D structure and the rhetorical Move 2 (establishing a niche) of abstracts following CARS structure to shed light on the characteristic patterns utilized by the writers of the six disciplines under study.
4. Methods
Considering the aim of this study which is to explore the thematic organization of dissertation abstracts across different disciplines, a total of 120 English abstracts of ‘masters’ theses (M.A.) and ‘doctoral’ dissertations of six disciplines from Shahid Chamran University of Ahwaz (Khouzestan province, Iran) were collected and analyzed. These included Persian Language and Literature (15 M.A. +10 Ph.D.), Teaching English as Foreign Language (15 M.A.), Microbiology (15 M.Sc.), Veterinary Medicine (15 M.Sc. + 10 Ph.D.), Geology (15 M.Sc.), and Chemistry (15 M.Sc. + 10 Ph.D.) written by Shahid Chamran University students from 2005 to 2009. These disciplines were considered as representatives of three major branches of knowledge, namely, Language and Literature as a major branch of Humanities, Health Sciences, and Hard Sciences. It is noteworthy to say that due to the restrictions in offering Ph.D., only one of the disciplines of the nominated academic fields from each branch was chosen for doctoral abstracts. The logic behind the selection of this corpus is that a wide range of disciplines can be claimed to be covered in this study and a comprehensive comparison can be made.

Method of development of Move 2 or the Introduction section of IMRC/D of the abstracts is analyzed based on the definitions and classifications of Theme and Rheme provided by Halliday (1994), Ghadessy (1999) and Eggins (1994). Move 2 has been reported to be the shortest and the most concise Move of Swales’ model in terms of linguistic realization (Swales, 1990; Lorés, 2004). Accordingly, the analysis of Themes of this Move is carried out for both main and dependent clauses because, as indicated earlier, doing any thematic analysis beyond the clause rank would be hardly possible. It is stated earlier that sometimes a whole dependent clause may function as the theme of a bigger chunk [sentence]. Thus, the principle of taking the clause as the unit of analysis for the second phase of the study is sometimes manipulated in order for this principle not to be breached.

There were six Theme types found which were taken to be the characteristic and typical themes in our corpus. Literally, these themes are as follows: Simple Theme, Multiple Theme, Unmarked Theme, and Marked Theme, Predicated Theme, and Non-predicated Theme. These Theme categories fall in three-dimensional network (Eggins, 1994:274). The network includes three variables; a) the type of Theme: simple versus multiple Themes, b) markedness: marked versus unmarked Themes, and c) predicativeness: predicated versus non-predicated Themes. In our analysis, each of these variables was treated separately, and a
cross-disciplinary comparison was carried out. The second stage of this phase involves the identification of the Thematic Progression (Eggins, 1994: Fries, 1983, 2009) of the same clauses shaping the Move 2 and Introduction section of the dissertation abstracts. As indicated in Chapter Two, there are three manifestations of TP. They are theme re-iteration, zig-zag, and multiple-theme patterns.

The significance of the choice of Move 2 and, in other cases, the Introduction section of the dissertation abstracts relies on the fact that by focusing on the inadequacy in previous research, the writers would be able to justify his or her study and find space in current literature.

Concerning thematicity in the clauses in focus, frequency of occurrence of each theme type are computed and tabulated to show the differences of distribution across the nominated disciplines. Chi-square procedure with a significance of \( p = 0.05 \) was also carried out to show the significance of the differences among the disciplines with respect to the saliency of different Theme types of the rhetorical moves of concern. The TP of the rhetorical moves were identified and their frequencies were counted and tabulated.

5. Results and discussion
5.1 Theme types in Introduction section and move 2 of abstracts
According to Eggins (1994), Theme analysis is best undertaken after analyzing the clause for its Transitivity and Mood System. Therefore, we have carried out the analysis of these two strands of meaning, the experiential meaning, realized through the analysis of Transitivity, and the interpersonal meaning realized through the Mood system. Due to space constraints, these analyses are not offered in this study. In what follows, the analysis of the Introduction section and Move 2 of dissertation abstracts in terms of thematic structure at clause level is presented.

(i) Multiple themes
The total number of the clauses shaping the Introduction section and Move 2 of the dissertation abstracts from the six disciplines in this study was 326 clauses. What is evident from the data obtained in the analyses of Theme types is that around 70% of the writers preferred to use the simple (or topical) Theme type as the starting points of their clauses. The highest number of occurrence of this Theme type (around 30% of the total number) was found in Persian Language and Literature.
### Table 1: Frequency of Theme types in the Introduction section and Move 2 of dissertation abstracts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields of study</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple (Topical)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>228</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple (a)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarked</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>259</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marked (a)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(b)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(e)</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>(f)</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>Predicated</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-predicated</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>326</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

About 11% of the clauses in the Introduction section and Move 2 of the abstracts were multiple Themes. As it can be observed from Table 4, the second arrangement of the multiple Themes, that is, type (b) of multiple Themes is the distinctive form of the multiple Themes. In type (b) of multiple Themes, a textual Theme comes before the topical Theme of the clause. Textual Themes fall into two groups. Some of them belong to spoken dialog and are labeled as “Continuity Adjuncts” (Eggins, 1994, p. 281). In this group, we can find such discourse markers as ‘oh, no, well, ok, yes’, etc. The other group includes “Conjunctive Adjuncts” (1994) and, as the name implies, these linguistic elements are used to link clauses or sentences together. Generally, in this latter group, the textual Theme may perform temporal, adversative, additive, and causal functions.

1 Note: the letters (a), (b), and (c) under multiple Themes represent the three different arrangements of multiple Themes. These are (a) interpersonal Theme^topical Theme, (b) textual Theme^topical Theme, and (c) textual Theme^interpersonal Theme^topical Theme (the symbol `^` means ‘is followed by’). Also, the letters under marked Theme stand for the following circumstantial Adjuncts: (a) Extent (duration and distance), (b) Cause, (c) Location (time and space), (d) Matter, (e) Manner (means, quality, and comparison), (f) Role, and (g) Accompaniment (reason, purpose, and behalf) (Eggins, 1994:237-239).
Specifically, most of textual Themes in the present study (14 out of 31) were additive elements that were used in clauses to add another clause without breaking the sentence into two smaller sentences, or were sometimes used to connect similar or sequential processes. Eleven textual Themes in the multiple Themes identified in the corpus were adversative elements, which were mostly used to indicate a gap in Move 2 of abstracts complying with CARS model. This small quantity of textual Themes in the clauses representing Move 2 in the abstracts may hasten us to jump to the conclusion that gap indication step can be best signaled by multiple Themes that begin with an adversative textual Theme. The remaining six textual Themes were causal which signaled a turning point in the process of decision making, where the writer announces taking action with respect to the foregrounding information that was provided in previous clauses. Interestingly, none of the textual Themes in the corpus was witnessed to perform the temporal function. Examples 1, 2, and 3 illustrate textual Themes that signal adversative, additive, and causal elements in multiple Themes, respectively, of the clause analyzed in this phase of the study. In sum, Table 2 shows the frequency of different types of textual Themes, along with a number of examples of these elements:

Example (1): “However, this relationship remains to be studied for alphabetic languages with a more transparent orthography.” (written by a TEFL M.A. student).

Example (2): “Moreover, it was intended to highlight the effects of these feedback types on different grammatical forms.” (written a TEFL M.A. student).

Example (3): “Hence, the removal of these dyes from water sources is a very important task.” (written a Chemistry M.A. student).

Table 2: Frequency of conjunctive textual Themes (%) in unmarked multiple Theme type (b) in Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Textual Themes</th>
<th>examples</th>
<th>frequency (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>first, then, later, after that, afterwards</td>
<td>(0.00%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adversative</td>
<td>but, however, nevertheless, yet, still</td>
<td>(35.50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additive</td>
<td>and, moreover, besides, furthermore</td>
<td>(45.16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>so, thus, therefore, accordingly</td>
<td>(19.34%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was an interesting point about one of the multiple Themes type (b) found in one of the abstracts of Persian Language and Literature that had a causal textual Theme. In this clause, the topical Theme precedes the textual Theme. This often happens in other modes and uses of language too, but this does not violate the principle of having the topical Theme as the border line between Theme and Rheme. This case can be explained by the use of punctuation before and after the word that signal its optional use in the sentence. This is demonstrated in example 4:
Example (4): “The main purpose of this research; therefore, is structuralist narratology.” (written by a Persian Language and Literature Ph.D. student).

The other types of multiple Themes types (a) and (c) in Table 1 had a few occurrences in the corpus. Only in two TEFL and one Veterinary abstracts were there instances of multiple Theme type (a), which has an interpersonal Theme right before the topical Theme. To highlight the term interpersonal Theme, a few preliminary words seem in order. Linguistically speaking, Eggins (1994) believes that the following constituents can function as interpersonal Themes: “the unfused Finite (in interrogative structures), and the four categories of Modal Adjuncts, i.e. Mood, Polarity, Vocative, and Comment” (p. 278). From among these constituents, only Mood and Comment constituents were found in the corpus. It is worth pointing out that the other types have no place in genres like dissertation abstracts. For one thing, these constituents are not typical of these genres. Another reason is that we can rarely find any interrogative structure in genres like abstracts. Examples 5 and 6 vividly show these types of interpersonal Themes that precede topical Themes in the construction of multiple Theme type (a).

Example (5): “It appears that all studies on ulcer is limited to cattle.” (written by a Veterinary M.A. student).

This example has a grammatical metaphor (the bold print part of the example) which functions a mitigator element in the multiple Theme of the clause to lessen the writer’s commitment to the claim stated. This grammatical metaphor lies in the category of interpersonal Themes which are realized by Mood constituents.

Example (6): “Relatively, little research has been done on the effect of the type of text and the use of metacognitive reading strategy use.” (written by a TEFL M.A. student).

In example (6), the word ‘relatively’ is the interpersonal Theme that precedes the topical Theme ‘little research’ to form the multiple Theme type (a) of the entire clause. The word ‘relatively’ bears an attitudinal weight and establishes an interpersonal, subjective exchange between the writer of the text and the readership.

Type (c) of multiple Themes is composed of a textual Theme followed by an interpersonal Theme and finally by a topical Theme. This Theme type was only found once in the corpus (see example 7). In example (7), the word ‘however’ is an adversative textual Theme that occupies the initial position and prepares the reader to expect a challenging idea, but this challenge if somewhat mitigated by the following interpersonal Theme ‘it seems that’, and it finally extends to the topical Theme ‘mysticism’ which is the cut-off point between the Theme and Rheme.
Example (7): “**However, it seems that** mysticism doesn’t occur in the contemporary poetry in this epoch but by one general book.” (written by a Persian Language and Literature M.A. student).

Up to this point, the analyses of *Theme* types suggest that the use of simple *Theme* in the Introduction section and the Move 2 of dissertation abstracts is a distinctive feature of abstracts. This means that there is a high agreement between the functional notion of *Theme* and the grammatical subject in the initial position of the clauses. However, those clauses that had multiple Themes in their initial positions can not be recognized as characteristic elements in these rhetorical moves because they occurred in a small percentage (11%) of the total number of the clauses. Furthermore, most of these multiple Themes contained textual *Themes* preceding the topical *Themes*, and only three of them included an interpersonal *Theme*. Following Martínez (2003:119), who explicitly claimed that there is a high degree of correlation between *Theme* types and the type of language in the ‘results’ and ‘discussion’ sections of RAs, it can be stated that the language of introductory and gap indication parts of abstracts is factual and down-to-earth, rather than theoretical. This is appreciated by the extensive use of simple *Themes* and type (b) of multiple Themes. Therefore, in writing abstracts, building an interpersonal relationship with the readers is not recommended, rather factuality is advised. From another perspective, it is possible to discern that the efficiency of the language of the abstract is an issue that is handed to the reader to be judged and there is no need for an exaggerated interpersonal language.

**(ii) Marked themes**

Sixty eight clauses (20.5%) of the entire corpus had marked *Themes*, with the highest number observed in M. A abstracts of Microbiology, and Persian Language and Literature. One way by which writers thematize a segment of a clause and bring it to the readers’ attention is through using marked *Themes*. These types of *Themes* normally appear in different positions of a clause, except for the initial position. However, for one reason or another, writers occasionally place them in the initial position of the clause. All things being equal, an unmarked *Theme* is chosen to occupy the initial position. An unmarked *Theme* is a type of *Theme* which takes one of the roles of Subject (in declarative clause), Finite (in an interrogative), Predicator (in an imperative), or Wh-element (in a Wh-interrogative). These four categories all belong to the class of Mood system. Naturally, marked *Themes* have to do with Mood system. A marked *Theme*, then, is any type of *Theme* that fills the initial position, but does not take any of the aforementioned roles of the Mood system. Eggins (1994) states that the commonest type of marked *Theme* is the circumstantial Adjunct. This *Theme* takes
the position of a Wh-element in the clause. In addition to circumstantial Adjunct of Extent, shown in the example (8), there are other expressions which can act as circumstantial Adjuncts. These expressions include expressions of the Cause, Location (time or space), Matter, Manner (means, quality, or comparison), Role, and Accompaniment (reason, purpose, or behalf) (Eggins, 1994:237-239). Detailed description of these types of circumstantial Adjuncts is beyond the scope of this study, and those interested in knowing more about these linguistic means are recommended to refer to Eggins (1994, Ch. 7). Theme predication is another way of composing a marked Theme. There was no instance of predicated Theme in this study.

Example (8): “Since the introduction of linguistic politeness by Brown & Levinson 1987, there has been a body of research on the politeness strategies used in the expression of (dis)agreeing phenomenon.” (written by a TEFL M.A. student).

The underlined part of the sentence could have been placed in its original position, which is the final position, because in English, expressions referring to time normally occur at the end of the sentence. However, we see that this circumstantial Adjunct of Extent (temporal) is placed initially. This is perhaps due to the fact that the writer intends to emphasize the origin or, let us say, the history of the linguistic phenomenon at issue, or more conceivably due to the influence of the writer’s first language (Persian). Parenthetically, in Persian, circumstantial Adjuncts pertaining to an extent usually occur in initial position. Therefore, the sentence could have had the form shown in the constructed example (I).

Constructed example (I): “There has been a body of research on the politeness strategies used in the expression of (dis)agreeing phenomenon since the introduction of linguistic politeness by Brown & Levinson 1987”.

(iii) Predicative themes
Interestingly, as stated earlier, no case of predicated Themes was observed in the clauses in focus. This can be attributed to the heavy weight of this construction which is quite rare in academic prose. This type of Theme is one of the strategies for creating marked Theme. The linguistic realizations of predicated Themes are the cleft and pseudo-cleft sentences. These sentences begin by the following expressions:

— It (to be verb) ……… that/who (main verb) ………
— What ……….. (main verb) ………… (to be verb) ………

Two constructed examples are presented here to illustrate these constructions which presumably function as marked Themes. In these examples the underlined parts are of immense concern to the speaker/writer of the sentences. That is why these parts are
prioritized over any parts of the sentences.

Constructed example (II): “It was Peter who knocked at the door and escaped”.

Constructed example (III): “What the nation asks for is the immediate action of the government to expatriate the immigrants from their homeland”.

5.2 Thematic progression

As it was said, Move 2 and the Introduction section of abstracts are the shortest rhetorical moves in the abstracts, and doing any analysis of the TP on these moves was reported to be a failure because these Moves do not extend more that one or two sentences. However, after analyzing the rhetorical structures of the abstracts in the first stage of the study, it was disclosed that carrying out thematic analyses beyond the clause level on these rhetorical moves is possible since 68 (56.6%) of them exceed two or three clauses. In some case, there were eleven clauses found in the Introduction of the abstracts. However, as long as the rhetorical Move 2 is concerned, the claim made by Lorés (2004:293), in which she claims that this rhetorical Move is too short to be analyzed for thematic structure, holds true. It should be pointed out that those rhetorical Moves that were composed of only one clause or two clauses but not analyzable because of the absence of any TP were not considered in this part. As indicated, three TP patterns have been recognized in the literature, and in this study, they were investigated in the corpus. The results are tabulated as follows.

Table 3: Thematic Progression in Introduction section and Move 2 of abstracts across six disciplines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields of study</th>
<th>Thematic Progression patterns</th>
<th>Re-iteration</th>
<th>Zig-zag</th>
<th>Multiple theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M.A.</td>
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<td>M.A.</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>30 (44.11%)</td>
<td>30 (44.11%)</td>
<td>8 (11.78%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results illustrated in Table 3 confirm the findings of previous studies (Nwogu, 1990 and Nwogu & Bloor, 1991 (cited in Lorés, 2004); Ghadessy, 1999; Lorés, 2004). They assert
that Theme reiteration and zig-zag (or what they call linear) patterns of TP are the characteristic TP of abstracts. Two remarkable points; however, were identified in our corpus. The first interesting point which falls in line with Lorés (2004) was that those abstracts containing the rhetorical Move 2 did not constitute any TP because this move was reported to be the shortest rhetorical Move of the abstracts. The second point is that, in this study, around 12% of the abstracts were found to establish multiple Theme pattern. This TP was recognized as the uncommon TP of abstracts in previous studies.

With regard to the application of TP patterns across the fields of studies, Microbiology abstracts were found to possess the highest frequency of TP in the corpus. Chemistry abstracts, on the other hand, had the least frequency of TP patterns in their Introduction section. This may be because of the primary attention paid to the ‘methods’ section in these abstracts that makes most of the introductory parts of these abstracts rarely stretch beyond two or three clauses, and, as a consequence, hard to be analyzed for TP. Our analysis indicated that no significant difference was observed between the ‘masters’ and ‘doctoral’ abstracts in terms of frequency of occurrence of TP patterns. Also, it was found that in ‘doctoral’ abstracts the zig-zag pattern was used more than the other TP patterns. Examples of each of TP patterns are presented below:

Example (9): “(1) This study focuses on writing chats of 100 university students majoring in different fields of study. (2) It analyzes 400 chat samples ….. (3) The study also examines humor and paralinguistic features based on ….. (4) The research investigates nine kinds of …..” (written by a TEFL M.A. student).

Example (10): “(1) Orthobacterium rhinotracheale (ORT) is a pleomorphic, rod-shaped, gram-negative bacterium associated with respiratory disease in poultry. (2) The poultry industry has suffered significant financial losses because of …. infected with this organism. (3) The bacterium primarily infects the trachea, lungs …. as a systemic disease ….” (written by a Veterinary Ph.D. student).

Example (11): “(1) Deafness is a heterogenic disorder which induced by genetical and environmental factors. (2) Genetical deafness disorder is most common hereditary …. (3) The environmental factors such as mutation are also responsible for deafness DFNBI disorder …..” (written by a Microbiology M.A. student).

Example (9) clearly shows how the writer of this abstract has repeated the same Theme in all the clauses. Although the exact wordings of the Themes are not alike, the endophoric lexical substitution (Halliday & Hasan, 1976), a strategy for referring to the same entities in a text, has been applied to signal the reiteration of the same Theme. What is evident in the
example (10) is that each Rheme in one clause is picked and placed in the Theme position of the following clause, therefore, constituting the zig-zag pattern of TP. In example (11), the Rheme of the first clause introduces two factors that need to be elucidated in subsequent clauses. This is achieved by picking each of the bold print words or factors and placing them in the Theme positions of the following clauses. This type of TP is called multiple Theme pattern. This is shown by the italicized words in clauses two and three.

The results of the analysis of the thematic structure revealed interesting differences of thematic choices at the clause level. At first, thematic choices were assigned to three categories according to the multiplicity of Themes, markedness of Themes, and predicatedness of Themes. The differences observed in the choice of Theme types can be explained in relation to the rhetorical goals of the rhetorical units studied. Simple Themes dominated the Theme position of most of the clauses of the Introduction section and Move 2 of the dissertation abstracts. These Theme types perform a descriptive function (Ghadessy, 1999:155) and lay no emphasis on the initial parts of the clauses. This is in harmony with the acknowledged rhetorical goal of these units, which is setting or describing the scene and announcing the purpose of the study. Conversely, multiple themes are known for their textual and interpersonal interventions which they impose on the initial element of the clause. In our corpus, textual Themes were used more significantly than the interpersonal Themes. This indicates that establishing an interpersonal relationship in the Introduction section and Move 2 of dissertation abstracts is not the purported rhetorical goal. In addition, the textual Themes found in the analysis mainly functioned as additive elements that add other parts to the clauses, as shown in Table 2.

The second category included unmarked Themes which have the important function of giving continuity to a text, and thus contribute to the identification of participants (Martin, 2001). The majority of the clauses analyzed in this study were of this type. This suggests that the participants of the clauses (elements of the transitivity metafunction) could be easily identified by their process, material, relational, and existential functions performed by Themes. On the contrary, marked Themes are the means of signaling transition, and they do not signal continuity (Martin, 2001). The rather small number of these Themes in our corpus was exclusively realized by circumstantial Adjuncts. What was observed in the clauses containing marked Themes was not the only indication of transition as Martin (2001) proposes; however, these Theme types were mainly used to indicate emphasis, particularly to signal the focus on the purpose of the studies or to signal insufficiencies in previous studies. Predicated Themes, the third category of Themes, as one of the strategies to create marked
Themes, were totally absent in our corpus. This is because most of the writers of the abstracts did not know the significance of marked Themes in general and the importance of predicated Themes in particular so that they could produce clauses with ‘protruded’ or exaggerated elements.

At the intersentential level, Theme analyses were carried out to reveal the TP of the rhetorical units in focus. The results showed that re-iteration and zig-zag patterns of TP were the typical patterns. However, there were cases in which both these patterns coexisted in those abstracts that had lengthy Introduction units. The purpose of conducting this phase of the study was to see whether there exists any relationship between the different patterns of TP and the recognition of the boundary of the Introduction or Move 2 of the dissertation abstracts. The results of the quantitative analyses suggest that there is a high degree of agreement between the Theme types of these rhetorical units and their boundary identification. Put another way, it can be said that transitional points of Theme types, where a sudden shift is made through the use of a different Theme to mark the movement from one rhetorical unit to another rhetorical unit, have types of Themes that do not belong to the TP of the preceding rhetorical unit. By different Theme type, the use of alternative marked or unmarked, simple or multiple, and predicated or non-predicated Themes is meant in which the method of the development of the rhetorical units changes and different method is pursued. For example, in experimental sciences, the Theme types that are used in the Theme positions in the Introduction section of the abstracts may contain lexical elements that pertain to the objects of the study, names of authors, indexical pronouns, or existential expletive elements, but other Theme positions in other units may have totally different Theme types. The Theme types used in theoretical areas of inquiry may contain lexical elements that bear descriptive weight, such as adjectives and adverbs, which make the language of abstraction dominating language of the introductory section of the abstracts. Another evidence for the abstraction phenomenon is the frequent use of multiple Themes with additive textual elements where the repetition of the same content in the Theme position is aimed by the authors.

6. Conclusion

This study concerned the investigation of Theme types and thematic progression of the Introduction section and Move 2 of the abstracts. The results of the Theme types indicate that simple (topical) unmarked Themes are the common type of Themes in abstracts of all the
chosen disciplines. While a few cases of marked Themes were found in the rhetorical units under investigation, no case of predicated Themes was observed in the corpus. The analysis of the TP yielded interesting results too. It was found that theme reiteration, zig-zag patterns of TP, and sometimes combinations of these two were the common patterns in the corpus. These results confirm our perception that there are transitional points across the boundaries of the rhetorical units in which not only the Theme types would change, but also the TP would change. This shows that the change of Theme types and TP are not random but are purposeful although it seems that most writers have used these mechanics of writing unconsciously.

Taking a functional perspective for analyzing the textual meaning of the abstracts may unravel interesting connections between clauses and the upper level discourse in which they are used. What is actually found in this study shows that different Theme types function differently in clauses and their functions may have considerable effect on the development of the text, and direct relationship with the formation of the genre. These results verify Fries’s (1983:4-5) statement that “thematic content correlates with the method of development of a text and with the nature of that text”.

The effort to determine what academic writing is and what EFL students need to know in order to produce it has led to the development of a number of different approaches to the teaching of writing. Genre-based instruction has been proved to be one of the most recognized and popular approaches in this regard. Nowadays, raising awareness of the rhetorical conventions of the fields of study and setting agendas for novice writers or the would-be researchers is an undeniable practice in many fields of study around the world (Mustafa, 1995; Skulstad, 1999; Martínez, 2002; Rowley-Jolviet & Carter-Thomas, 2005; Afros & Schryer, 2009). Given these facts, register analysis and, at a more general level, genre analysis from Systemic Functional tradition can tackle these types of errors due to the great emphasis put on the system of choice.

Overall, in this study, it is proposed that being assured of the students’ knowledge of grammar and lexis and focusing on an upper level, i.e. rhetorical structure, of organizing texts, or the other way round is a hurried decision in an EFL context. Lack of essential linguistic means for composing appropriate, grammatical clauses to convey the writers’ intended meanings is the immediately perceived deficiency in the writing of most EFL writers surveyed in this study. The Mood system with its building blocks of Theme and Rheme is an influential means by which both clause grammar and discourse grammar can be guaranteed (Martínez, 2003). In brief, the choices at the level of the clause have direct connection with how a body of text is structured at a higher organizational level.
difficulties observed in the construction of the sections of the abstracts investigated in this study involved problems in clause construction.

What was established in this study is that introducing linguistic means at the level of clause accompanied by their defined functions can play a key role in enhancing genre awareness and development. One area by which we can help ESP students acquire the rules of the academic D. C. and the resources employed by its members, thus empowering them to make cognizant decisions is providing them with those linguistic features that have helped the successful writers of their fields. As it can be seen in the literature, the focus on the linguistic features has always been the secondary concern of the researchers since researchers take the learners’ lexical and grammatical knowledge for granted. Moreover, the researchers do not elaborate on the function of the specific linguistic points they make out in their studies.

The present study has raised a number of interesting differences across the disciplines studied, but a larger corpus is needed to establish how far they can be generalized. It remains our conviction that more descriptive and explanatory work needs to be done on the functional linguistic means of abstracts, and that text analysis still has a place in this inquiry. This line of inquiry can be extended and applied to other rhetorical units of abstracts or even to other unexplored academic genres like RA Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. By the same token, other strands of meaning within the Systemic tradition, i.e. Transitivity system and Mood system, can be explored in these genres. Still, another possibility is conducting contrastive analyses on different genres across different disciplines or across different languages with regard to the two dimensions investigated in this study.

References


