# Characteristics of high-rated and low-rated conference abstracts: a genre-based analysis

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## Abstract

Despite its importance for academics, the conference abstract is an underinvestigated text type. In addition, research contrasting successful (i.e. accepted) to unsuccessful (rejected) conference abstracts is scarce. The present study attempts to mend this gap by offering a genre analysis of English abstracts in applied linguistics submitted to an international conference in Greece. The examination of fifteen high-rated and fifteen low-rated abstracts lead to the identification of nine moves: Territory, Reporting Previous Research, Gap, Purpose, Method, Results, Discussion, Means and Importance Claim (cf. Halleck and Conor 2006). There were discrepancies between high-rated and low-rated abstracts regarding frequency of move type, as well as distribution of verb tense and hedging across moves. To a certain extent discrepancies may be accounted for by cultural differences in academic prose, as most of the high-rated abstracts were written by authors from UK institutions (cf. Andersson and Gunnarsson 1994). It is hoped that findings here may help novice non-native writers of academic English to pass the gatekeepers' norms in scientific conferences. Due to the limited scope of this study, further research is necessary to validate the results.

## Introduction

As known, academics are required to publicize their work in conferences. This presupposes the ability to include the main information about one's research in a "stand-alone mini text" good enough to pass the conference reviewing process (cf. Huckin, 2001: 93). Packing information properly for this purpose is not a simple task and even more so for non-native writers. In such cases, ESP practitioners may contribute relevant advice (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). Still, while there is a plethora of studies on the generic make up of abstracts in research articles, there is not much research to enlighten ESP practitioners or novice writers regarding the features of successful conference abstracts. The present study attempts to fill this gap by investigating some characteristics of high-rated and low-rated abstracts related to research in applied linguistics that were submitted to an international linguistics conference in Greece. Pivotal in this investigation is the concept of 'move' employed in the genre analysis framework. 'Move' may be defined as "a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function… At one extreme, it can be realized by a clause; at the other by several sentences" (Swales, 2004: 228--29).

Relevant studies have dealt with abstracts from conferences such as the *College Composition and Communication* (CCC) conference in US (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Faber, 1996), the *American Association for Applied Linguistics* (AAAL) conference (Kaplan, Cantor, Hagstrom, Kamhi-Stein, Shiotani and Zimmerman, 1994), the AILA congress (Andersson and Gunnarsson 1995) and the TESOL conference (Halleck and Connor, 2006; Stein, 1997 cited therein). In what concerns us at this point, findings from most of these studies suggest a rhetorical structure of conference abstracts generally consisting of four moves (*introduction*, *methods*,

*results*, *discussion*). On the other hand, Halleck and Connor (op. cit.) identified ten moves. I refer to this study in detail below. For now note that accepted abstracts have been shown to differ from rejected ones with respect to factors such as timeliness and interest (Berkenkotter and Huckin, op.cit.), linguistic expressions related to 'insider information', for example jargon and citations (Faber, op. cit.), or the number of words per abstract (Halleck and Connor). Importantly, frequency of move types has not been proved a distinctive feature. This aside, other findings in these studies concerned optionality of move types or sequencing of moves, which I discuss later.

Halleck and Connor's analysis of 180 abstracts submitted to the 1996 TESOL conference was based on Swales's (1990) Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model for the analysis of introductions in scientific papers and yielded the identification of the following moves: Territory, Reporting Previous Research, Gap, Goal, Means 1, Means 2, Outcomes, Benefits, Importance Claim and Competence Claim. This model was employed for abstracts related to a variety of fields that represented the various SIGs at TESOL and were broadly categorized by the authors into Research, Pedagogic and Administrative abstracts. Given that the scope of the present study is limited to the rhetorical structure of research abstracts, I adopted Halleck and Connor's model with some modifications. The moves in the present model are the following (cf. Halleck and Connor: 73).

1. **Territory**: establishes the area of research
2. **Reporting Previous Research (RPR)**: involves citations
3. **Gap**: indicates lack of knowledge or a problem in the territory
4. **Goal**: Stating the purpose of the study, research questions and/or hypotheses
5. **Method**: Describes the materials, subjects, variables, procedures,
6. **Results**: Reporting the main findings of the study
7. **Discussion**: (implications) Interpreting the results/findings and/or giving recommendations, implications/applications of the study
8. **Means**: includes methods and procedures to carry out the actual presentation
9. **Importance claim**: presents the goal or findings as particularly important, central or much needed.

Examples of these moves are offered in later sections and in the Appendix.

Genre-based approaches to the analysis of academic abstracts have also dealt with use of tense and hedging in the realization of the various moves. For instance, Salager-Meyer (1992) found a preponderance of past tense in medical abstracts. Moreover, she found that, unlike previous claims, authors did not use the past so much in references to previous research but mainly in the Method and Results moves. Additionally, her study revealed that the present tense prevailed in the expression of "established knowledge" and generalizations, while the present perfect was employed to "introduce a topic of discourse and to imply the authors' disagreement with previous researchers' findings" (: 106). Furthermore, she found that hedging, as expressed through modal verbs, occurred considerably more in the Conclusion, which is the equivalent of Discussion in our study. Pho's (2008) examination of article abstracts from journals in applied linguistics yielded results different from Salager-Meyer's in that the present was the most common tense in the moves Situating the Research, Presenting the Researh and Discussing the Research, while the Past was most common in Describing the Methodology and Summarizing the findings. On the other hand, the present perfect appeared almost exclusively in Situating the Research in references to previous studies like in Salager-Meyer's study.

Although verb tense and hedging have been investigated in research article abstracts, as well as in the macrostructure of articles, there is no similar research regarding conference abstracts, at least to my knowledge. As it is important for students of academic English to be aware not only of rhetorical organization but also of its common linguistic realizations, the present study also investigates the extent to which there are certain differences in this domain between high-rated and low-rated abstracts.

## The study

### *Context and Corpus*

The present study draws on 30 abstracts selected among those submitted to the 17th Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics held at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in Greece, in 2005. According to the guidelines, the abstracts had to be anonymous and 300-500 words long, not exceeding one page (A4) and written in English or Greek. All reviewers were Greek academics and judged abstracts on a scale of one to five for each of the following criteria: argumentation, data presentation, originality and overall impression. The policy of the specific conference was to give as many researchers as possible the chance to present their work, so abstracts that received a total rate higher than 11 were allocated to oral presentation sessions, while the rest were allocated to poster sessions. By these criteria, there were 65 high-rated and 48 low-rated abstracts.

The corpus was built in a pseudo-random process, as it included only English abstracts representing studies related to research in language learning and/or language teaching. It consisted of 9,827 words in total, with 5,461 words in the subcorpus of high-rated abstracts and 4,366 words in the subcorpus of low-rated abstracts. A Mann-Whitney *t*-test showed that difference in length between high-rated and low-rated abstracts only approached significance (p=0.057). Details about the number of words, the number of authors and the institutional affiliation of the authors are provided in Tables 1 and 2 for high-rated and low-rated abstracts respectively.

Table 1. Details of the corpus: High-rated abstracts

| *Abstract No* | *Number of words* | *Number of authors* | *Institutional location* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 393 | 1 | UK |
| 2. | 298 | 1 | Greece |
| 3. | 367 | 1 | UK |
| 4. | 388 | 1 | UK |
| 5. | 332 | 1 | Greece |
| 6. | 374 | 2 | China |
| 7. | 261 | 1 | Greece |
| 8. | 395 | 1 | UK |
| 9. | 360 | 3 | UK |
| 10. | 433 | 1 | Greece |
| 11. | 302 | 2 | China |
| 12. | 398 | 1 | UK |
| 13. | 406 | 1 | UK |
| 14. | 372 | 1 | UK |
| 15. | 382 | 1 | UK |
| *Total* | *5,461* | *19* | |

Table 2. Details of the corpus: Low-rated abstracts

| *Abstract No* | *Number of words* | *Number of authors* | *Institutional location* |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16. | 339 | 1 | The Philippines |
| 17. | 124 | 1 | Greece |
| 18. | 315 | 1 | UK |
| 19. | 172 | 1 | UK |
| 20. | 397 | 1 | Iran |
| 21. | 338 | 1 | Greece |
| 22. | 113 | 1 | Greece |
| 23. | 312 | 1 | France |
| 24. | 384 | 1 | Brazil |
| 25. | 354 | 1 | Greece |
| 26. | 397 | 2 | Spain |
| 27. | 511 | 1 | Cyprus |
| 28. | 176 | 1 | UK |
| 29. | 274 | 3 | Greece |
| 30. | 160 | 1 | Oman |
| *Total* | *4,366* | *18* | |

Table 3 demonstrates the nationality of the authors.

Table 3. Authors' nationality

| *High-rated abstracts* | *Low-rated abstracts* | |
|---|---|---|
| 11 Greek | 11 Greek | 1 Brazilian |
| 4 Chinese | 1 Serbian | 1 Spanish |
| 2 Serbian | 1 Cypriot | 1 Iranian |
| 2 British | 1 Philippino | 1 Omani |

***Moves: types and sequence***

The next analysis concerned how many types of moves were included in each of the abstracts. Table 4 includes descriptive results.

Table 4. Occurrence of move types in abstracts

| Moves | High-rated | Low-rated |
|---|---|---|
| | (N=15) | (N=15) |
| Territory | 14 (93%) | 8 (53%) |
| RPR | 13 (87%) | 6 (40%) |
| Gap | 3 (20%) | 5 (33%) |
| Goal | 15 (100%) | 14 (93%) |
| Method | 15 (100%) | 12 (80%) |
| Results | 13 (87%) | 9 (60%) |
| Discussion | 13 (87%) | 9 (60%) |
| Means | 8 (53%) | 7 (47%) |
| Importance claim | 1 (7%) | 5 (33%) |

These data show that all high-rated abstracts included Goal and Method and most of them had Territory followed by RPR, Results and Discussion. In low-rated abstracts

Goal and Method prevailed too, albeit not as obligatory moves, followed by Results, Discussion and Territory. In addition, RPR occurred more than twice as much in high-rated abstracts than it did in low-rated ones. On the other hand, Gap and Importance Claim were included more in low-rated than in high-rated abstracts. The mean number of move types was 6.4 (range: 5-8) and 5 (range: 2-7) in high-rated and low-rated abstracts respectively. A *t*-test revealed that the distribution of moves in the two categories of abstracts differed significantly (Z=-2.36, p=0.018 two-tailed). A subsequent analysis concerned sequencing and number of moves per abstract (Tables 5 and 6).

Table 5. Move structure of high-rated abstracts

| *Abstract No* | *Sequencing of moves* | *Number of move units* |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | 1-2-1-5-4-5-6-7 | 8 |
| 2. | 1-2-9-4-5-6-7-4-8 | 9 |
| 3. | 4-2-1-2-5-2-6-7-2 | 9 |
| 4. | 1-2-4-5-6-7-8 | 7 |
| 5. | 4-5-6-7-8 | 5 |
| 6. | 1-2-4-5-6-7-8 | 7 |
| 7. | 5-1-5-4-7-8 | 6 |
| 8. | 1-2-4-1-5-2-1-5-6-7 | 10 |
| 9. | 4-1-2-3-5-6-7 | 7 |
| 10. | 1-2-4-5-7-8 | 6 |
| 11. | 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 | 7 |
| 12. | 1-2-4-5-6-7 | 6 |
| 13. | 4-8-1-2-5-6-7-5-6-7 | 10 |
| 14. | 1-4-5-6-8-2 | 6 |
| 15. | 1-2-4-5-6 | 5 |
| *Total* | | *108* |

Table 6. Move structure of low-rated abstracts

| *Abstract No* | *Sequencing of moves* | *Number of move units* |
|---|---|---|
| 16. | 1-2-4-2-5-6-7-8 | 8 |
| 17. | 4-6-8 | 3 |
| 18. | 1-3-4-5-6-7-8 | 7 |
| 19. | 4-1-2-7 | 4 |
| 20. | 1-9-4-5-6-7 | 6 |
| 21. | 4-2-5 | 3 |
| 22. | 4-5-6-8 | 4 |
| 23. | 4-5-4-5-6-9-7-8 | 8 |
| 24. | 1-2-3-4-5-2-1-9-5-7-9 | 11 |
| 25. | 1-3-1-4-5-1-3-5-8 | 9 |
| 26. | 4-1-2-4-3-4-2-5-1-5-6-7 | 12 |
| 27. | 4-1-9-7-4-7-5-6-1-7 | 10 |
| 28. | 9-1-2-3-5-8 | 6 |
| 29. | 4-5-7 | 3 |
| 30. | 4-6 | 2 |
| *Total* | | *96* |

High-rated abstracts included more move units (108) than low-rated abstracts (96) and the range of moves was smaller in the former than in the latter abstracts (5-10 and 2-12 respectively), which was proved an insignificant difference. In addition, the first move was Territory or Goal with two exceptions (abstracts 7 and 28) and most high-rated abstracts (10/15) started with Territory, while the majority of the low-rated abstracts (9/15) started with Goal.

***Tense***

The finite verbs recorded in the corpus were 614 in total with 352 in high-rated and 262 in low-rated abstracts. Cases like (1) and (2) where the finite verb in the main clause was a modal in the past tense without past time reference counted as occurrences of present tense.

(1) Greater input frequency of the impersonal **might** present a problem…
(2) Our main expectation is that the number of errors **should** increase…

The most frequent tenses were the simple present and the simple past, while the present perfect and the future occurred to a much lesser extent. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of these tenses in the two subcorpora.

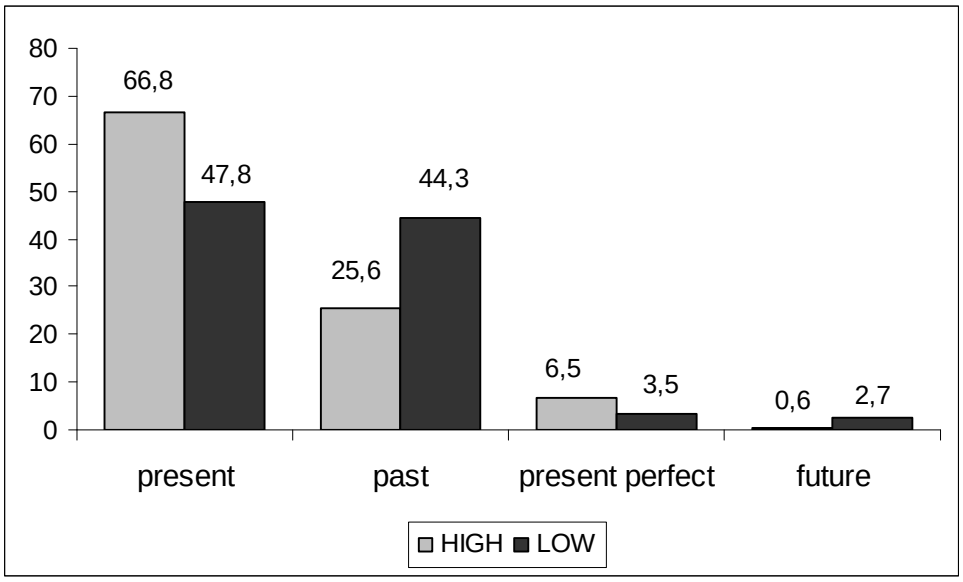


Fig. 1. Distribution of tense in high-rated and low-rated abstracts

Authors of high-rated abstracts used the present tense about three times more than the past tense, while in low-rated abstracts these two tenses were used almost to the same extent. A chi-square test showed that the distribution of tenses in the two categories of abstracts differed significantly ($p<0.001$). Let us now turn to the distribution of the three most frequent tenses per move. Table 7 demonstrates that in both subcorpora the present was predominant in Territory, Goal, Discussion and Means, while the past was the most common tense in Method.

Table 7. Tense per move

| Moves | Finite verbs Number | | Present % | | Past % | | Pr. Perfect % | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *High* | *Low* | *High* | *Low* | *High* | *Low* | *High* | *Low* |
| *Territ.* | 73 | 20 | 93 | 80 | 3 | - | 4 | 20 |
| *RPR* | 44 | 23 | 52 | 78 | 14 | 22 | 34 | - |
| *Gap* | 2 | 6 | 50 | - | 17 | - | 50 | 83 |
| *Goal* | 34 | 36 | 97 | 64 | - | 28 | - | - |
| *Method* | 58 | 72 | 24 | 24 | 76 | 69 | - | 3 |
| *Results* | 77 | 51 | 52 | 12 | 47 | 88 | 1 | - |
| *Discuss.* | 51 | 38 | 92 | 88 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 3 |
| *Means* | 12 | 10 | 83 | 60 | - | - | - | - |
| *Imp. Cl.* | 1 | 6 | - | 67 | - | - | 100 | 33 |

To the extent that a comparison is possible, overall these results are more consonant with Pho's (2008) findings from abstracts representing research articles in applied linguistics than Salager-Meyer's (1992) analogous findings in medical abstracts (see Introduction). Interestingly, the past, which is established as the main tense in the Results sections of research article abstracts, occurred about twice as much in the low-rated than in the high-rated abstracts (88% and 47% respectively). To elaborate more on differences between the subcorpora, in RPR authors of high-rated abstracts used the present slightly more than half of the times (52%) and the present perfect about one-third of the times (34%), while in low-rated abstracts there was a preponderance of the present tense (78%) and no occurrence of the present perfect. Chi-square tests showed that the distribution of tenses in the two subcorpora was significantly different ($p<0.001$) with respect to Territory, RPR, Goal, and Results but insignificant regarding Method, Discussion and Means. The differences observed in tense use with respect to Gap and Importance Claim do not deserve much consideration due to the very small number of finite verbs in these moves.
A noteworthy observation is that in Goal the past tense was employed exclusively by the authors of low-rated abstracts. See (3) for an example.

(3) The core point of interest to this inquiry ***was*** to examine the development of Persian among speakers of language minorities in Iran in order to find out how their academic performance compared with that of Persian native speakers. The secondary goal ***was*** to find out the difference in language proficiency between Persian native speakers and minority speakers by the time they finish the high school. The third aim ***was*** to investigate whether minority students' academic achievement adversely affected by inadequate language proficiency.

Now compare (3) to (4), the latter being an excerpt from a high-rated abstract.

(4) The aim of this study ***is*** threefold: Firstly, it ***aims*** to describe the acquisition patterns of Greek past tense by children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI). Secondly, it ***seeks*** to investigate the relationship between the morphological status and phonological salience of past tense in Greek on one hand and its acquisition by language impaired learners on the other, and thirdly, it ***aspires*** to establish an account on the nature of the impairment by comparing the past tense acquisition patterns exhibited by SLI children with those presented by language unaffected ones

Based on findings from the examination of research article abstracts, Salager-Meyer (1992: 102) suggests that in Goal ("Purpose" in her terminology) "the choice of tense (past or present) is basically a rhetorical or strategic choice rather than an obligatory constraint". Indeed, the use of past tense in (3) does not seem an unconventional choice. The point here is that authors of high-rated abstracts preferred to fulfil the same function using the present tense, which, nevertheless, does not seem plausible to have affected reviewers' judgements. I assume that the same holds for RPR, where research shows that the present perfect is common in literature review sections (see, e.g. Salager-Meyer, op. cit.: 104; Hinkel, 2004: 10) but was used only in high-rated abstracts.

The future occurred twice in high-rated abstracts, once in Goal and once in Means, and seven times in low-rated abstracts, twice in Goal, four times in Means and once in Method (5). To state the obvious, use of future in Method implies that the author of the abstract has not completed the study, which may predispose reviewers negatively. There were also two instances of the past perfect, both in subordinate clauses (e.g. *The finding that some deaf participants had developed phonological awareness*…is consistent with…). Moreover, the present continuous tense appeared twice, once in high-rated abstracts (6) and once in low-rated ones (7). In addition, the latter subcorpus included one sentence with the present perfect continuous tense (8).

(5) The analysis of the data collected ***will be based*** on univariate and multivariate statistical techniques.
(6) The present findings ***are being analysed and evaluated*** so that a clear answer to the critical question whether SLI constitutes a morpho-syntactic deficit rather than a processing one can be established.
(7) An auditive perception test ***is being conducted*** to Greek native speakers who are called to identify from different series of sound files those corresponding to nondialectal (standard Greek) sequences.
(8) I'***ve been analyzing*** the usage of a property of the pro-drop parameter.

Occurrence of the progressive aspect was rather unexpected, given its rarity in academic English (see Hinkel, op.cit. and references therein). However, it is important to note that in the high-rated abstract the progressive aspect was used in the Means move (6), while in both of the low-rated abstracts it was employed in the Methods move (7 and 8), where the choice of this aspect gives the impression that the study was incomplete when the abstract was written.

***Hedging***

An important pragmalinguistic feature of academic discourse is use of expressions that mitigate the strength of a proposition, called 'hedgers' (Lakoff, 1972). The opposite, which is expressions that make a proposition more emphatic, are 'boosters'. Hedgers and boosters can be modal or lexical verbs, adjectives, adverbs and phrases. Most of the following examples are from Hyland (2004: 192)

Hedgers: *may, might, could, would, should, assume, seem, indicate, believe, doubt, inclined, possible, unlikely, uncertain, unclear, plausible, some, about, generally, sometimes, in our opinion, in my view* etc.
Boosters: *must, show, demonstrate, actually, always, establish, prove, know, it is known that, in fact, the fact that* etc.

Hedging is essential in academic discourse, as it enables authors "to present their claims cautiously, accurately and modestly to meet discourse community expectations and to gain acceptance for their statements" (Hyland, 1996: 477). Thus, I considered it interesting to investigate differences in this area between high-rated and low-rated abstracts. Results regarding the overall frequency of hedgers and boosters in the present data are illustrated in Figure 2. Table 8 demonstrates raw numbers of these expressions in the various moves.

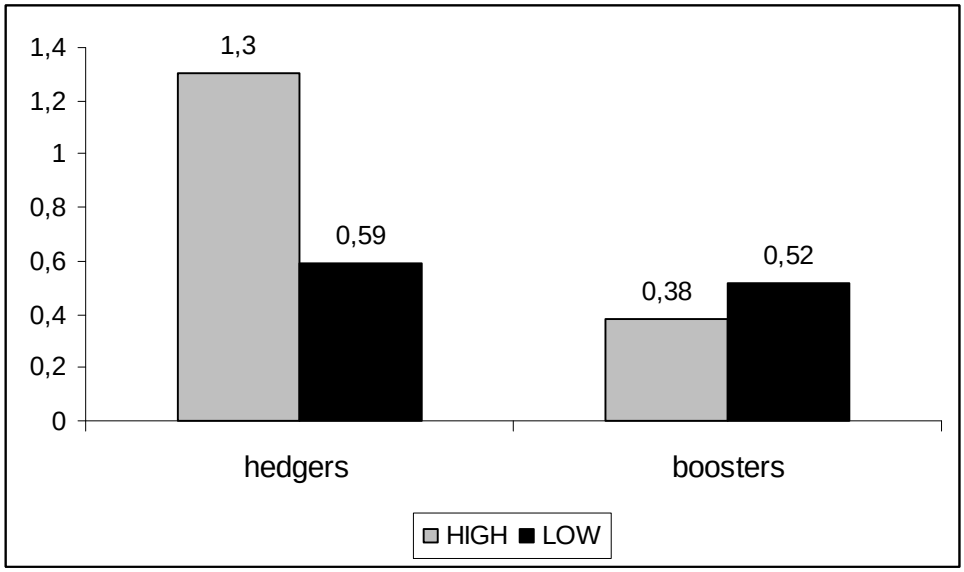


Figure 2. Frequency of hedgers and boosters in high-rated and low-rated abstracts

Table 8. Distribution of hedgers and boosters per move

| | Hedgers | | Boosters | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *High* | *Low* | *High* | *Low* |
| *Territory* | 21 | 18 | 4 | 4 |
| *RPR* | 3 | - | 2 | 1 |
| *Gap* | 1 | - | - | 2 |
| *Goal* | 3 | - | - | - |
| *Methods* | 1 | 1 | - | - |
| *Results* | 9 | 6 | 8 | 7 |
| *Discussion* | 29 | 1 | 7 | 6 |
| *Means* | 4 | - | - | - |
| *Imp. Claim* | - | - | - | 3 |
| Total | 71 | 26 | 21 | 23 |

As shown in Figure 2, there is a marked discrepancy between the two subcorpora. First, hedgers were more than double in high-rated than in low-rated abstracts and second, they were more than triple than boosters in high-rated abstracts (1,3% vs. 0,38%) but only slightly more so in low-rated abstracts (0,59% vs. 0,52%). This difference was highly significant (chi-square test, $p<0.001$). Importantly, results from high-rated abstracts comply with findings in research articles where it has been shown that hedges exceed boosters by nearly 3 to 1 (Hyland, 1996a).

Table 8 shows that in high-rated abstracts the most heavily hedged moves were Territory and Discussion (examples (9) and (10)). In low-rated abstracts, on the other hand, while Territory was the most heavily hedged move too, Discussion contained

only one hedger and six boosters. An example of a very emphatic assertion in a low-rated abstract is provided in (11). In addition, Results came third with respect to hedging in high-rated abstracts but second in low-rated ones. The obvious difference in the distribution of hedging across moves between the two subcorpora was statistically verified (chi-square test, $p<0.001$). Salager-Meyer (1994) studied hedges in medical research articles and case reports and she found that hedging occurred often in Introduction and Discussion but rarely in Methods and Results. This complies more with findings in high-rated than in low-rated abstracts. In Results hedgers are about as many as boosters in both subcorpora. For a typical example, see (12).

(9) For Modern Greek it has been **argued** that…<Territory>
(10) The results **indicate** that… …this is **interpreted** as evidence of <Discussion>
(11) …the interlanguage **will always be** composed by material from three different information sources: UG, L1 and L2. <Discussion>
(12) Overall, the results **demonstrate** that gender features are shared across languages in the bilingual mental lexicon… …**suggesting** that gender information…<Discussion>

**Discussion and Implications**

Results showed that high-rated abstracts differed from low-rated ones with respect to frequency of move types, unlike findings in Halleck and Connor (2006), the only study similar to the one here. Also, Halleck and Connor found that in successful research proposals Territory occurred at 57%, RPR at 26%, and Results ('Outcomes' in their terminology) at 55%, while in high-rated abstracts here these moves occurred at 93%, 87% and 87% respectively (see Table 4). This may be so mainly because they did not distinguish among abstracts representing research in the "Special Interest Groups" (SIGs) of the TESOL conference and as they themselves speculated, "there may not be a consistent rate of rejection across all SIGs" ( :74). The limited scope regarding scientific subfield here may explain discrepancies between the two studies.
Although high-rated abstracts also differed from low-rated ones in use of tense, differences in this area do not seem important regarding the success of an abstract, excepting few cases which concerned the less frequently employed tenses or use of continuous aspect. On the other hand, the discrepancy between the two subcorpora in use of hedgers and boosters overall, as well as with respect to how they were distributed in the various moves, may be an important factor for successful conference abstracts as analogous patterns in abstracts from research articles comply more with findings in high-rated rather than in low-rated abstracts. Of course, research with similar data from other international conferences is necessary to prove this assumption.
The motivation for the present study was a concern for difficulties often encountered in the specific genre by my postgraduate students, so I hope that it has useful pedagogical implications. Vassilieva (1997: 205) points out that hedging "reflects the relation between the writer and reader, not between the writer and the proposition" and relates to "the realization of certain politeness strategies". Essential though it may be, hedging seems difficult for non-native writers (Hyland, 2005: 33) and ESP practitioners can consult a number of studies showing how to include this feature in the curriculum (e.g. Hyland, 1996, 2000). Another norm is probably use of citations, which were significantly fewer ($p=0.001$) in low-rated than in high-abstracts (total 21,

mean 1.4 vs. total 80, mean 5.3 respectively). Students should become aware of the importance of this feature since it involves connecting one's work with earlier research and thus attests to one's scholarship. Culture-specific differences in the discussed genre may explain why certain abstracts were more successful than others in the present research. An analysis of abstracts from the 1993 AILA Congress by Andersson and Gunnarsson (1994) yielded marked discrepancies in the rhetorical structure and the number of scholarly citations between US abstracts and abstracts from other countries in Europe, in Latin America and in Asia. Such findings may relate to results here, since most authors of high-rated abstracts were from universities in UK, while most authors of low-rated abstracts were from non-English academic institutions. For example, consider (13) from a (very) low-rated abstract whose author was from a Brazilian university.

(13) This current work is based on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) most recent approaches, which means its [sic] interested in finding out what is the interlanguage representation status, instead of only speculating about the presence/absence of UG properties and/or L1 material (White, 1998).

Besides its grammatical errors, this extract seems offensively contentious as it insinuates that the author is a pioneer in the empirical investigation of an area where previous researchers have offered nothing but speculations. Ironically, the insinuation appears to be against a leading figure in second language acquisition, probably due to the wrong placing of citation. Another finding that may attest to culture-bound differences in the academia is that almost all authors (11/12) from UK institutions used citations, unlike in the case of authors from non-UK universities. Moreover, these authors differed from the rest with respect to Price's (1986) "recency" factor in the dates of texts cited, as most of them (10/11) included references earlier than five years or less, at least one each (cf. Bloch and Chi's 1995 study on such differences between Western and Chinese academic writers). All this illustrates the importance of cultivating students' awareness of the conference abstract as a text genre with culture-bound norms because, crucially, "Striving for discourse competence means striving above all for recognition of one's field expertise" (Duszak, 1997: 16).

Each one of the features related to the genre discussed here have been analysed with respect to other genres of academic English such as the various sections or the abstracts of research articles. Besides the references given previously, see Anthony (1999), Koutsantoni (2004), Lorés (2004), Samraj (2005) and Ozturk (2007) among others and for a genre pedagogy in English for academic purposes see, for example, Paltridge (2001) and Hyland (2004, 2007, 2008). It is my belief that an ESP teacher equipped with knowledge in this area may better contribute to the combat against "Linguistic inequality in scientific communication today" (see AILA Review, Volume 20, 2007). Fortunately for the ESP practitioners, there is no lack of ideas for classroom applications based on research in academic genres (e.g. Jordan, 1997; Derewianka, 2003; Basturkmen, 2006).

To the extent that my analysis of the data is correct and can be generalised, findings here may aid to mitigate the disadvantages of novice non-native English academics in writing competitive texts such as conference abstracts to pass the threshold level the specific discourse community has for its members (cf. Swales, 1990: 27).

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## Appendix

Examples of moves

A. A high-rated abstract

<**TERRITORY & RPR**> Recent advances in the investigation of the relationship between language and cognition have demonstrated that the way a language marks grammatical number on nouns influences non-linguistic cognitive categorisation of objects in speakers of that language (Lucy, 1992a, 1992b, see also studies in Bowerman and Levinson, 2001, Gentner and Goldin Meadow, 2003). For example, in an object classification task (Lucy 1992b, Imai and Gentner 1997), speakers of Yucatec and Japanese tend to categorise objects based on their material characteristics, while speakers of English tend to categorise objects based on their shape characteristics. The researchers have argued that these choices are guided by how salient grammatical number marking is in different languages. In Japanese and Yucatec, nouns are inherently uncountable and number is not marked directly on nouns. All nouns in their bare form can be interpreted as mass. However, in English there are nouns that lack countability and cannot take morphological number marking (mass nouns), but there are also nouns that have countability as an inherent feature and take obligatory plural marking when quantified (count nouns). This latter class of nouns has an inherent unit reference, which is usually the form or shape of an object.

**<METHOD & RPR>** The present study extends Lucy's (1992b) and Imai and Gentner's (1997) object classification task, comparing monolingual English and Japanese speakers with two groups of bilingual Japanese-English speakers, one of high proficiency in English and the other of intermediate proficiency. The participants had to match a standard object (e.g. a wooden spoon) with one of two alternates, one resembling the standard in shape (e.g. a plastic spoon) and one resembling the standard in material (e.g. a wooden spatula).
**<PURPOSE>** The specific aim was to investigate whether acquisition of a second language which has nouns with countability as an inherent feature (i.e. English) affects the cognitive categorisation preferences of learners whose first language lacks this property (i.e. Japanese), and whether such an effect may be apparent in learners with different degrees of proficiency in the second language.
**<RESULTS>** The results show that the English monolinguals and the high-proficiency Japanese-English bilinguals gave significantly more shape responses than the other two groups. **<DISCUSSION>** These findings demonstrate that there is a restructuring of the mind of advanced second language learners that is likely to be due to the acquisition of specific grammatical properties which are present in their second language but absent in their first language.

B. A low-rated abstract

**<TERRITORY>** The Greeks living in the diaspora have been the object of several studies due to concerns about the ethnolinguistic maintenance of Greek-origin children living abroad. As a result, special provision has been made by the Greek Ministry of Education for the retention of the Greek language and identity. **<GAP**>However, there is lack of research concerning the Greeks living in the Arab Gulf states. **<TERRITORY>** Language surveys suggest that Greeks are highly language-centered and maintain the Greek language for reasons of cultural identity. Greek parents consider that sending their children to ethnic schools is important because they want them to learn the Greek language which is perceived as essential for parent-child communication and family unity. **<PURPOSE>** The study described below attempts to give the profile of the Greek community living in the United Arab Emirates, one of the countries of the Persian Gulf. More specifically, it aims to obtain a picture of Greek parents' concerns, attitudes and priorities concerning their children's ethnolinguistic maintenance. **<METHOD>** A semi-structured questionnaire, based on previous studies dealing with language maintenance, was employed for the study. The questionnaire consisted of questions eliciting demographic information (length of residency in the country, parents' educational level, occupation, mother tongue), language use at home and other domains, parents' attitudes towards Greek language maintenance, as well as children's proficiency in Greek (based on parent's self-rating) and the frequency of formal tuition in Greek. The questionnaires were completed by 43 Greek families having children of pre-school and school education. **<TERRITORY>** The rationale behind investigating parents' attitudes rather than children's is that the majority of the Greek families living in the United Arab Emirates have children of pre-school age. Besides that, it is known from the literature that parents' attitudes and linguistic behaviour plays an important role in language maintenance. **<GAP>** Another important reason is that more research has been done on students' attitudes and interests rather than parental attitudes and interests and thus, this study attempts to fill the gap. **<METHOD>** The analysis of the data collected will be based on univariate and multivariate statistical techniques.

**<MEANS>** On the basis of the results, recommendations will be made for the educational policy concerning these issues.

C. Examples of Importance Claim (not included in the two abstracts above)

1. The role of language proficiency in academic achievement, especially among second / foreign language learners, **has long occupied the mind of applied linguists and educators.**
2. Recently, types of language impairment associated with damage in Broca's area **have been the focus of an increasing number of cross-linguistic studies**.