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Stating the Research Problem: A Genre-based Study of English Language M.Phil. Theses in a Ghanaian Public University

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Abstract

Despite the numerous studies on such academic genres as the research abstract, introduction and literature review, the rhetorical section of the statement of the research problem has received little attention. To fill this gap, we examined the schematic structure and communicative purpose of the statement of the research problem section of Master of Philosophy in English Language theses at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Data which were made up of twenty theses were collected randomly from the Department of English library. Based on Swales's (1990) CARS model, the analysis of the data showed that the statement of the research problem section exhibited two core moves, and that students showed an appreciable knowledge of both the pedagogical and communicative importance of the rhetorical unit. These findings, thus, have implications for further research in genre studies and serves as useful material for instructors in teaching and in bringing to the notice of their students the generic importance of stating the research problem.

Key words: Genre analysis, statement of the problem, rhetorical moves, M.Phil. theses

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Introduction

Originally popularised by Swales (1981, 1990), genre analysis in its traditional sense has over decades focused on the analysis of moves in such genres as the abstract, introduction and conclusion of research articles (Swales, 1990; Bunton, 2002; Afful, 2005). The goal of scholars in this sub-discipline of discourse analysis, despite their individual schools of thought, is to among other things, help apprentice students to know the generic features that typify specific genres. However, despite the exponential increase in the literature, little is known of the genre of the statement of the research problem (henceforth the SRP). Although Jalilifar, Firuzmand & Roshani (2011) have been recently forthcoming in this direction, their study is, nevertheless, outside of the context of Africa in general, and Ghana, in particular. Thus, in this study, we explore the overall communicative purpose and rhetorical moves found in the SRP as an academic discourse in twenty Master of Philosophy of English Language theses at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

Theoretical Framework

Swales's (1990) Create a Research Space (CARS) model is the underpinning framework for this study. The choice of this theory is informed by the fact that this framework has successfully been tried and tested by many researchers the world over (e.g. Samraj, 2002; Afful, 2005; Connor & Mauranen 2005; Jalilifar et al., 2011). The main concern of Swales's genre-based rhetorical approach to the description of text is to identify the rhetorical structure of a genre and relate it to its communicative purpose while recognizing the social context in which it occurs (Afful, 2005). This is why he considers a genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share a set of communicative purposes" (Swales, 1990: 58). Swales's CARS model explains that a genre is

basically organised by obligatory moves and lexico-grammatical features which represent distinctive patterns of discourse that occur usually either within a paragraph or spans a number of paragraphs.

Methodology

The data which comprised twenty (20) Statement of the Research Problem section of Master of Philosophy in English theses were collected in September, 2011 at the Department of English Library, University of Cape Coast, Ghana. Two sampling methods were used, namely, purposive and random sampling. The first sampling method was used in order to select English Language related theses rather than theses with a focus on Literature. The choice of language theses is simply because we are students of language and linguistics. Using the random sampling technique, we then selected 20 out of the available 26 M.Phil in English Language theses for this study.

Data were analysed based on qualitative content analysis. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2000), a person's or group's conscious or unconscious beliefs, attitudes, values and ideas often are revealed in their communications through a rigorous content analysis. In this way, the analysis of the content of the SRP section can help bring to light the moves that M.Phil in English Language students (henceforth MELS) endeavour to observe when identifying gaps in the previous literature to form their own theses. We then applied open and axial coding to summarise the data by pulling together identifiable patterns in order to find conceptual categories in the data. The identifiable patterns were validated by two other persons in order to achieve a degree of inter-coder reliability since qualitative content analysis is "a very personal process because two researchers analysing a transcript will probably come up with different results" (Dawson, 2002: p. 128). (*See Appendix for the various codes used in the in the analysis of the data.*)

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Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the communicative purpose, the rhetorical moves and the lexicogrammatical features found in the SRP section of MELS theses. In identifying the moves, we analyzed the sequence, the frequency and the textual space of the moves.

Communicative Purpose of SRPs in Master of Philosophy English Language Theses

The analysis of the data revealed that the basic communicative function of SRPs is that it dictates the purpose of the research and the questions or the hypotheses that guide the research. The data showed that SRPs help readers to comprehend and appreciate the findings of the research. This observation confirms Riaizi's (2000) claim that the statement of the problem is a major component of a proposal or a thesis, whilst the other sections are the complementary parts with the aim of contextualizing the problem (cited in Jalilifar *et al.*, 2011). Upon a close observation, we found that MELS tried hard to announce quite clearly and concisely the rationale of their study in the SRP section. Hernon and Metoyer-Duran (1993) similarly maintain that the SRP has such qualities as clarity and precision, and must, thus, identify an overarching question and key factors in the research.

Rhetorical Moves in SRPs of Master of Philosophy in English Language Theses

This sub-section presents the moves found in the SRP section of Master of Philosophy in English Language theses. The analysis is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Rhetorical Moves in SRPs of English Language M.Phil Theses

RHETORICAL UNIT	SWALES (1990a)	STEPS IN SRP MOVES	(20)	(100%)
MOVE 1	Establishing a territory	Claiming centrality	12	60

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MOVE 2	Establishing a niche	Restating the purpose	8	40
		Indicating a gap	14	70
		Stating the research problem	6	30
MOVE 3	Occupying a niche	Announcing present research	12	60
		Positive justification	2	10
		Without move three	3	30

In Move 1, establishing a territory, of the SRP, 60% of the data set presented a claim of centrality by giving a brief background to the research whilst 40% restated the purpose for conducting the research. In the second move, establishing a niche, 30% stated the problem of the study categorically, as the remaining 70% indicated a territorial gap in the centrality they have created. In the final move (Occupying a niche), 60% of the data set announced the present research to occupy the territorial gap that has been created, and that 30% of the data set did not observe move three at all. However, a rather unusual move was observed in the data with one MELS painstakingly justifying the rationale for undertaking the research as a third move.

1. ...the research is undertaken because it is generally observed that people's behaviour (here verbal) is interpreted from other people's own background – practices, perspectives and values – and this tends to lead to conflict and misunderstanding... (SRP 2)

Textual Space

According to Afful (2005), the frequency of occurrence together with the textual space allocated to a move could determine the relative importance that students attach to a particular move. In determining the textual space, we, therefore, counted the words in each move across the data set. In counting the words, names of authors cited in a move were not included while compound words

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were counted as just a word. Words in parentheses and research-site related words were also not considered. Table 2 presents the textual space accorded to each move in the SRPs.

Table 2 Textual Space Allocated to Moves in SRPs in M.Phil in English Language Theses

TOTAL	1,074	100%
Number of words in MOVE 1	425	40%
Number of words in MOVE 2	349	32%
Number of words in MOVE 3	234	22%

Table 2 shows that MELs allocated 40% of the total number of words to establishing a territory and 32% to establishing a niche. The 70% of the MELs who observed move three, allocated 22% of the total number of words in the SRP section to occupying the niche. In considering the textual space given to a move by MELs, obviously, move 1 occupies the greatest space, before move 2 and finally move 3 which according to the data, appears to be an optional move.

Sequencing of Moves

In respect of the order of the moves, the data revealed that the SRPs of M.Phil in English Language theses follow the sequence of first establishing a territory, then establishing a niche and finally occupying the niche. In establishing the territory, the Master students either gave a brief background to the study or restated their purpose for the study. To establish a niche, while some created a territorial gap in the background that has been established, others stated categorically the problem of

the study. To achieve move three, some also announced the present research but others did not observe move three at all.

Table 3 Sequencing of Moves in SRPs of Master of Philosophy in English Language Theses

PATTERN	MOVES IN SRPs	PERCENTAGE
3-Move Sequence		
1>2>3	14	70
2-Move Sequence		
1>2>∅	6	30

Table 3 above demonstrates that 70% observed a three-move pattern (1>2>3) while 40% observed a two-move pattern (1>2). However, where only two moves were realized, MELS still followed the sequence of establishing a territory and establishing a niche, where they observed the second step, that is stating the research problem of move 2 being establishing a niche. We can, therefore, conclude that a three-move pattern is preferred in presenting the SRPs of Master of Philosophy in English Language theses, with moves one and two being the obligatory moves. Some examples are shown below:

2.

...

the focus of this paper is the discourse strategies that advertisers use and how elements in the target culture are exploited by advertisers to persuade their audience (**MOVE 1**). Though these discourse strategies are mostly universal, each advertiser makes use of them in such a way as to mirror the worldview of the target audience. (**MOVE 2**) Using a sample of advertisement from print (Graphic and

Times) and electronic media (Peace FM, Joy FM, Adom FM, Gold FM, Happy FM) in Ghana, this study explores how these discourse strategies found in advertisements reflect the Ghanaian worldview. (**MOVE 3**, SRP 4)

As can be seen above, the first move of this SRP observed the second step, which is, restating the research problem of Move 1—establishing a territory. For its second move that focused on establishing a niche, this student indicated a gap in the territory he or she had established, the second step of Move 2: “*Though these discourse strategies are mostly universal, each advertiser makes use of them in such a way as to mirror the worldview of the target audience*”. It should, however, be noted that this attempt was barely explicit because the SRP was not categorically stated compared to other SRPs. In the student’s final attempt to occupy a niche, which is the third move, the student used the first step, that is, announcing present research: “... *this study explores how these discourse strategies found in advertisements reflect the Ghanaian worldview*”. Let us look at another example.

3.

Individuals living and working together in close proximity enforced by an institution like the university have to get on with each other. To do this, they need to use language frequently to make what Thorton (1974) calls social talk. The linguistic situation in the University community of Cape Coast is multilingual. Students and workers are drawn from the heterogeneous ethnic regions of Ghana. Due to the multilingual nature of the University community, the subjects are faced with the problem of code choice. (**MOVE 1**) The research problem is how the inter-personal relationship between individuals of the university affects their choice of code in discourse situations. (**MOVE 2**)

In this extract, the candidate observed the most essential components of the research problem: establishing a territory and establishing a niche. Thus, in the first move, the student developed the research problem by using the sub-move *claiming centrality*, while the second move is further explained through yet another step but this time an explicit attempt was made by the student to state the research problem: *The research problem is how the inter-personal relationship between individuals of the university affects their choice of code in discourse situations.*

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Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of the SRP sections of Master of Philosophy in English Language theses showed two basic findings. The first is that the SRP section of these theses encapsulates two core moves, namely, establishing a territory and establishing a niche. Secondly, the study reveals that the students had quite an appreciable knowledge of the communicative purpose of the research problem in their discipline.

The study bears a number of implications. In the first place, it lends credence to Swales's (1990) CARS model as it brings forth fresh evidence from an African context on the subject. Secondly, the work is a humble contribution to genre studies in academia because it seeks to help inexperienced postgraduate students in stating their research problems, using the stipulated conventions. As well, this study could also assist instructors in teaching and in bringing to the notice of their students the generic importance of stating the research problem. Future studies could also focus on the pragmatic value of lexicogrammatical features such as the use of the verb in stating the research problems.

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Appendix

Nature of Coding

APR:	Announcing Present Research
CC:	Claiming Centrality
IG:	Indicating a Gap
PJ:	Positive Justification
RP:	Restating the Research Problem
SRP:	Stating the Research Problem

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