Investigation Process and Research Focus

10

Abstract

In this chapter, I will outline the process by which I obtained and analyzed the academic conference data that will be discussed in the following sections of the book. This will include an outline of the nature of the events attended, methods of analysis used, means of evaluation, and a short discussion on the application of grounded theory.

10.1 Analyzing the Discourse of Conference Presentations: An Overview

There is a natural tendency to associate the term ESP with specific fields, such as the language of medicine, aviation, tourism, or law. When discussing the language of conferencing, however, we are dealing with not only multidisciplinary texts in terms of field or domain but also with a very event-specific type of 'situated' discourse. In this way, the language of conferencing might be seen as closer to the study of EAP, with its emphasis upon what we might refer to as a 'situated' form of writing. But, as we have mentioned, although the textual analysis of academic writing is well established in ESP/EAP literature and research, much less has been studied regarding the manner in which texts are managed in academic speech, specifically in academic CPs. Swales' (1990) Create a Research Space (*CARS)* model has long served as a well-established synopsis for establishing rhetorical moves in RPs, but, as we have seen, written academic articles vary considerably in style from their spoken CP counterparts. Simple templates cannot be applied across the domain of academic conference presentations.

Advice on improving presentation skills has long been the province of popular literature but, as such, has rarely been backed up by textual or metadiscourse analysis, particularly in terms of the performance of novice academic research presenters and/or NNESs. Due to the influence of popular Anglo-American guidebooks on developing presentation skills, the emphasis of much CP skills teaching is placed upon creating attractive written/visual texts and incorporating paralinguistic features that may be ill-suited to the cultural and/or academic environment of many free paper/parallel session CPs.

While such general or popular advice on effective presentation skills is widespread and easily obtainable, practical advice supported by research, particularly focusing upon how the discourse can be managed to produce better outcomes, is less common. In the following sections, however, I wish to emphasize its crucial role in creating a cohesive flow in CPs. Greater consideration of the role and function of opening gambits, subsequent transitional moves and discourse markers, plus the management of discussion sessions within academic free paper/parallel session CPs would appear to have an enormously positive impact upon performance success, particularly for NNESs.

In order to research the following sections of this book, I thus noted and analyzed the opening gambits, transitional 'moves', and closing strategies (both qualitatively and quantitatively) of 293 academic research CPS performed in English at 6 international medical conferences and 10 applied linguistics/English education conferences which I attended over the course of 2013–2017. Most of the sessions attended were of 7–20 min in length for medicine and of 15–45 min' length for applied linguistics/English education.

About 85% of the presentations observed fell under the 'research report' category. Other noted categories included expository presentations offering overviews or opinions of current issues, reports on local activities and/or conditions, and blends of categories (true of plenary and keynote speeches in particular). 'Hard science' conferences tended to be dominated by the research report category, with under 10% labelled as other categories, whereas just over 20% of those in the humanities were primarily expository or explanations of programs/policies.

Initially, my research focus at the academic conferences was upon the factors governing effective CP performance alone. These CPs included keynote and plenaries, as well as those performed within symposia and other specialized thematically based events, but my attention was largely concentrated upon standard FP/PSs. These sessions tended to be grouped such that four or five thematically connected presentations were presented back-to-back in the same meeting room (as opposed to a larger auditorium), with little or no transition time between them. At 14 of the 16 conferences I attended, over 90% of *all* presentations fell into the parallel or FP/PS category.

My initial research locus in this study was East Asia, and most specifically Japan. In order to offer Japanese and other Asian NNES medical professionals effective and meaningful models for CP competency, as my initial research project specified, I initially attended six Asian International Medical Conferences (three

held in Japan, one in South Korea, one in Thailand, and one in Singapore) where I attended and observed a total of 170 academic presentations performed by medical professionals, primarily from six East Asian nations (Japan, China-Taiwan, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia). I also attended (and participated in) 10 applied linguistics/English education conferences over the same period, these held in 6 different countries, in which I observed and analyzed the discourse structure of 123 more CPs delivered by presenters from 18 countries, 90% of whom would fall under the general classification of NNES. During this time, I also observed several more applied linguistics CPs both as an active and interested participant or as a casual observer, not as a researcher.).

The process used for the analysis of the data is described in Fig. 10.1:

As the above description indicates, my initial purpose when observing CPs was to develop a synoptic understanding of their generic structures, as opposed to creating a taxonomy of specific utterances. As a result, once rhetorical sections and standardized 'moves' were located and defined, at subsequent conferences I was able to concentrate on the specific codes and texts that marked the moves, noting in particular commonly used discourse forms (see Fig. 10.1, above for a general outline of the process). Finally, I began to search for any correlation between the moves, forms, and recurring patterns utilized by presenters and the relative effectiveness or non-effectiveness of the presentation as a whole. Which characteristics tended to result in a CP in which the audience were fully engaged and segued into a robust post-CP discussion session? Conversely, what were the common characteristics that marked those resulting in a muted response or an apparent lack of interest from the viewers?
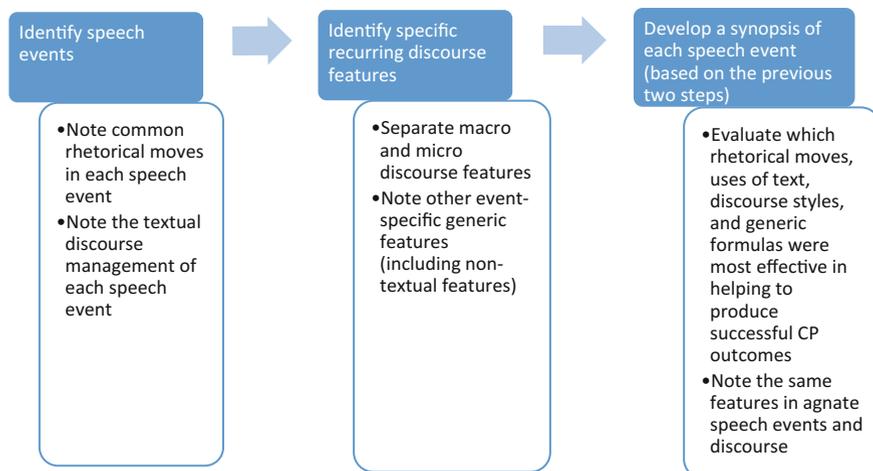

Fig. 10.1 Outline of the author's conference and genre discourse analysis process

Once a synoptic structure was identified, each presentation attended was sub-
sequently notated for the manner in which specific rhetorical moves were carried
out, with a particular focus upon opening gambits and subsequent thematic tran-
sitions. My focus on such moves are loosely based on the type of genre analysis
models pioneered by Swales (1990) and also utilized by Carter-Thomas and
Rowley-Jolivet (2005) in their analysis of CP introductions, in which rhetorical and
lexical devices (discourse markers) used to connect slides or introduce new sections
were noted regarding their efficacy in generating a successful presentation narrative.
Interestingly, these features are often considered peripheral or ignored in popular
'guidebook' literature on the topic.

Because CPs are multimodal events spanning a number of semiotic fields, there
are several possible means of analyzing the discourse (Carter-Thomas &
Rowley-Jolivet, 2003). One is to take a microscopic approach to the syntactical
forms noted in the discourse and address how the syntax choices made by the
speakers helps to establish an interpersonal dimension with the audience and realize
the immediate multimodal nature of the talk. Another is to take a rhetorical
approach and observe any series of recurring rhetorical moves made by the speakers
(while recognizing that such generic structures are rarely, if ever, fixed—categor-
ically separating obligatory from optional CP moves is a near impossible task). This
model illuminates the higher-level structure of the discourse. In my analyses, both
these top-down and bottom-up approaches were utilized.

In short, once genre analysis was applied, discourse analysis followed. At this
point, more of the discrete syntactical micro-features of CP discourse were noted.
Q&A/Discussion sessions were also closely observed as a separate, dialogic, speech
event, which demanded a rather different analytical approach, as these events
involve heightened interpersonal, real-time dynamics.

Observation and analyses of the structure and spoken discourse marking other
'agnate' conference speech events were carried out at the later conferences I
attended, at which the discourse features of symposia/colloquia, workshops,
chairing, poster sessions, and, to some extent, extraneous social chat came under
examination, albeit with a less 'evaluative' focus.

10.2 Evaluating Conference Presentation Performance

When observing CPs, I gave an immediate and thoroughly subjective 'rating' to the
performance of each presenter. A number of factors were considered in determining
this rating, both external and internal. Among the external factors were the
following:

(1) Did the CP hold the audience's attention? Or were many viewers talking,
    texting, napping, or perusing the conference program?
(2) Did it lead to a robust response in the follow-up Q&A session or was the
    follow-up reaction muted?

Among the internal factors considered were

(1) Could I, even when attending as a non-specialist, grasp the general ebb, flow, and direction of the presentation, even if/though I was not knowledgeable regarding the contents?
(2) Did the presenter employ any notable discursive techniques to hold or enhance the audience's attention?
(3) Did the combination of visual (slides) and spoken texts serve to enhance meaning or communication? Or did the verbal text simply reiterate that which was written on the slides?

One crucial element to note here is that the actual quality, novelty, or scientific importance of the research itself was *not* a factor in my determining the effectiveness of the CP, not only because I was not in a position to make such a judgment for scientific presentations, but also because these qualities lie outside the intended scope of this research. A poorly delivered CP could still capture audience interest and result in a robust discussion if the content was considered novel or of particular import. Likewise, well-presented CPs that are lacking in novelty or meaningful application to the field might produce a muted response. In short, good presentation skills do not necessarily make for memorable or academically significant CPs, although they will almost certainly enhance it.

Regardless, it should be emphasized that my ratings were in no way intended to represent any type of objective 'outcome' of my observations, nor were they analyzed in any complex statistical manner. The ratings ascribed I applied to the CPs were not meant to serve as analytical tools in and of themselves. Rather, they merely served as guideposts that allowed me to more readily distinguish the common generic and discursive features of the more viscerally effective presentations from those having a lesser impact, regardless of the quality and/or integrity of the actual research underlying the presentation. My primary research focus was thus based more upon qualitative, rather than quantitative, observations.

10.3 The Use of Grounded Theory for Analysis

The contents of the research-based portion of this book are constructed largely on the concept of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with the attendant coding method based upon the post-objectivist school of analysis (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory involves *not* the typical positing of a research question, about which research data is collected and then analyzed step-by-step, in accordance with established or existing theories. Although grounded theory requires a 'research question' in order to identify the area of interest, the theory ultimately *emerges from* the data—there is no hypothesis testing in the traditional sense; the process is inductive rather than deductive.

Data collection simply represents the start of the analytical process (in grounded theory, data collection and the analysis thereof become merged). Anchor categories are first noted in the data. From these categories, further sub-categories may also emerge. Elements within these categories are further codified, which represents the descriptive stage of grounded theory. By repeatedly analyzing the relationship between the categories and codes, including outlying data, the researcher may now posit a new theory or schema based on the emerging data. Thus, grounded theory implies a constant process of reviewing earlier data, often involving annotated memos detailing the newly emerging results. This dynamic process represents the analytical dimension of grounded theory.

As mentioned earlier, my research objective initially consisted of codifying discourse categories emerging from the various academic conference speech events. These served as discursive 'anchors' before subsequently attempting to connect the various discourses and/or determining the significance of particular generic moves. This approach can be contrasted with the process of starting the inquiry by employing a set, overarching theory from which the data could be deductively analyzed. In practice, this implied a lot of initial 'memoing'—handwritten notes from which recurring discourse categories and patterns could be noted. Finally, these conferencing English 'concepts' were refined and connected, not into an abstract theory, but into categorical suggestions for practical application, as presented in the remainder of this book.

Underscoring this grounded theory approach was a primary concern with the purpose or aims of the conferences and the participants therein (the dissemination of practices and knowledge within a field) and how the participants went about managing discourses to meet these aims. Once I determined the most common conference speech events (CPs, poster sessions, symposia, post-session chat), the management of interactions in these speech events were observed and noted. Gradually, a synopsis of each speech event could be constructed from which codifiable 'moves', or what some call a 'generic code' could be loosely determined. This involved noting not only how the discourse was constructed internally but also how each discourse type was connected rhetorically or semiotically to other speech events and to the academic conference genre as a whole.

However, I should emphasize again, that this book is not intended to be written for applied linguists (although I hope and expect that it may hold areas of appeal to those in the field). My aim was not primarily to construct a comprehensive description of conference English alone but also to consider its application for the novice academic researcher, the graduate student, and/or ESP teacher. While descriptive analysis can tell us how conferences typically inform and help to construct various discourses and interactions, the question as to whether a participant *would* want to or *should* model their own discourse based upon these forms is a separate consideration.

While accurate descriptions may help us understand the playing field or the rules of a particular discourse game better, it should not compel the player to make a prescribed move during an event that is fundamentally dynamic. To do so would merely serve to perpetuate orthodoxy rather than to guide the novice into making sound discursive decisions.

Therefore, my aim in the remainder of this book is to offer some evaluation of the various genre-based discourse moves noted at conferences such that readers may be able to consider their own preferred or alternate courses of discursive action.

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 10

1. What are some of the fundamental precepts of grounded theory and how can they be best applied to an analysis of the type described in this chapter above?
2. In what order do you think the noting, identification, and analyses of speech events, spoken discourse markers, generic forms, and rhetorical moves should be carried out?

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