

CONCLUDING YOUR MASTER'S LEVEL THESIS

Jo Lewkowicz
Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego

ABSTRACT

Students writing a Master's level thesis often seek advice not only on their research but also on how to approach the writing of such a document. This is not surprising as for many writing a thesis is a completely new experience and one that many have to complete in a foreign language. The advice available is often generic and not necessarily appropriate. To help such students we need to better understand the structure of these documents. This paper looks at one section of the thesis, that of the concluding chapter to determine its rhetoric structure and compare it with the advice available to the students within the Polish context in which they are writing.

KEY WORDS: Master's thesis, conclusions, move analysis.

RESUMEN

Los estudiantes que se encuentran en el proceso de preparación de sus tesis de licenciatura con frecuencia buscan asesoramiento no sólo sobre aspectos relacionados con la investigación sino también con la redacción de tales documentos. Ello no es sorprendente si se tiene en cuenta que para muchos de ellos la preparación de este tipo de tesis constituye una experiencia completamente nueva y que en muchas ocasiones lleva consigo la redacción en una lengua extranjera. Las recomendaciones existentes suelen caracterizarse por ser generalizaciones que no necesariamente son las adecuadas. Para ayudar a estos estudiantes necesitamos tener un mayor conocimiento de la estructura retórica de estos documentos. Este estudio examina una sección en particular de la tesis de licenciatura, el capítulo de conclusiones, con la finalidad de determinar su estructura retórica y compararla con las recomendaciones de las que disponen los estudiantes dentro del contexto académico de Polonia en el que redactan sus tesis.

PALABRAS CLAVE: tesis de licenciatura/maestría, conclusiones, análisis de movimientos retóricos.

1. INTRODUCTION

An area of academic discourse written in English that has come under close scrutiny in recent years is that of thesis/dissertation writing (here the terms thesis/dissertation are used synonymously to refer to research reports written at Master's and PhD level). Interest has been at the level of the overall organisation of the

document across different academic disciplines (see, for example, Paltridge, “Thesis Dissertation Writing”), as well as specific sections of the manuscript, for example, the acknowledgements (Hyland, “Graduates”) and the way in which writers acknowledge their own work and the work of others (e.g. Thompson and Tribble). This interest has been primarily spurred by the growing number of EAL students writing a thesis in English and a realisation within the academic community that compiling a thesis in English is a demanding task and that many research students need guidance and support not only in their academic endeavours but also in the writing process. It is, after all, the written document that is examined and ultimately determines whether the candidate succeeds. Therefore, it is important that the text is deemed to communicate effectively with its audience, that is, with the examiners, and others interested in the field of research undertaken by the student.

The growing interest in theses written in English as well as our increased understanding of the complexities involved in this genre has brought assistance to the novice writer in a number of ways. An increasing number of both generic and subject specific course books addressing issues of writing a thesis and guiding students through the writing process are appearing in the market (see, for example, Cooley and Lewkowicz, *Dissertation*; Glathorn and Joyner, *Writing*; Heppner and Heppner, *Writing Publishing*; Swales and Feak, *Academic*). In addition, a variety of approaches to teaching thesis and dissertation writing have been developed and described in the literature (see e.g. Aitchison, “Thesis Writing Circles”; Allison et al., “Dissertation”; Nelson and San Miguel, “Designing”; Paltridge, “Teaching”, Thompson, “Citation”). In some cases graduate students are offered help in the form of one-to-one consultations with a language expert, in others workshops are organised for those wishing to attend while in some universities graduate students are required to attend a thesis/dissertation writing course. Furthermore, universities are increasingly making available help manuals and guidelines on the web. The needs of graduate students are thus progressively being recognised and met and in many universities provision is being made not only to assist EAL students but also to those whose first language is English.

It is worth noting, however, that the studies of theses/dissertations and discussion of how best to address the needs of graduate students’ writing in English have generally emanated from countries where English is the dominant language, such as Australia, the USA and the UK, or from universities where English is the medium of education, such as the National University of Singapore and the University of Hong Kong. Research to date has thus explored the conventions and norms of such writing within these specific contexts. There are, however, numerous students outside what could be termed as Kachru’s (*Alchemy*) inner and outer circles, i.e. within the expanding circle such as those studying at European universities who undertake writing a thesis in English. An example of such a group would be students studying English and applied linguistics at Polish universities. Do they, or indeed should they, accommodate to academic writing conventions that are considered good practice in English-medium universities or are there academic conventions and expectations within their own culture which they conform to when fulfilling the thesis requirement for their degree?



To begin to explore the above issue, this paper investigates the structure of one part of the dissertation/thesis written by Polish students of English Philology or Applied Linguistics. It looks at the thesis conclusion to determine what moves writers make when bringing their Master's level thesis to an end. It then considers whether the moves are similar to those outlined in the literature to date on writing a thesis/dissertation in English and, where differences occur, to what extent these arise from the different expectations of a thesis written in Polish. (The thesis conclusion was selected for analysis as having supervised and examined numerous Master's theses written by Polish students, I gained the impression that they often differed markedly from my own expectations and were therefore worth investigating.)

2. CONCLUDING MOVES

Move analysis (Swales, "Genre Analysis") which looks at the function and purpose of segments of text at the general level and how these are realised through more specific rhetorical steps has contributed significantly to our understanding of text specific discourse and language. It has been applied in analysing various sections of the thesis/dissertation resulting in reports on the structure of introductions (Bunton, "Generic"; Dudley-Evans, "Genre"; Samraj "Discourse"), the literature review (Kwan "Schematic") as well as the discussion (Dudley-Evans, "Genre"). Yet, as Samraj notes most of the reports have related to the PhD document rather than the Masters' Thesis.

The early work on theses' conclusions carried out by Dudley-Evans ("Genre") suggested that this section of a Master's thesis focuses on summarising the main results and claims of the study and then proceeds to recommendations of future work; it is thus fairly simple in its structure. However, Dudley-Evans' analysis was based on theses where the conclusion was part of a larger Discussion section. Yet the conclusion of both the Master's thesis and the PhD is often a separate, stand-alone chapter as has been shown by Paltridge ("Thesis Dissertation Writing") in his analysis of the overall structure of this genre, and when presented as a separate chapter it is likely to vary from conclusions that are integrated into the Discussion (Bunton, "Structure").

Bunton (*ibid.*) analysed 45 PhD conclusions, 42 of which were presented as separate chapters. His analysis revealed that conclusion chapters can be categorized according to whether they are thesis-focused or field-oriented, though the former tend to predominate across different disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Within each type of conclusion certain patterns tend to prevail: in the thesis-focussed conclusion the majority start by restating the aim, purpose or hypothesis of the study (IR), all include a consolidation move (C) and then proceed to recommendations (R). The field-oriented conclusion, on the other hand, either proceeds along a problem-solution text structure or an argument structure. The individual steps within the segments depend on the moves taken by the author, but are generally cyclical in nature. These chapters tend to be more com-

plex and display more steps than the research article and Master's theses conclusions described previously. Bunton (*ibid*) therefore questions the accuracy of many of the guidebooks available which treat the conclusion as an integral part of the Discussion.

3. THE STUDY

This study undertaken on Master's thesis conclusions had two aims. The first was to verify whether conclusions written by Master's level students are presented as stand-alone separate chapters and if so whether the moves they follow are different from those when conclusions are integrated into the longer Discussion section of the thesis. The second aim was to consider whether the conclusions written in English by Master's students in Poland follow the patterns reported in the literature and if there are differences, to what extent these arise from different conventions of writing a thesis in Polish and in English.

The study is based on 15 Masters' level theses submitted between 2005 and 2009 at Warsaw University's Institute of Applied Linguistics. All the theses were on topics related to applied linguistics and language studies, with half of them relating to some aspect(s) of translation. They were examined for their overall structure and in terms of the way the conclusions were written. A similar procedure to that described by Bunton ("Structure"), where the texts were analysed according to length, title of chapter, references cited as well as the moves and steps used by the writers, was adopted. Then, the structure of the conclusions was compared with the findings of earlier studies on theses conclusions as well as advice provided for those writing a thesis in thesis writing guides readily available to Polish students.

3.1. OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE MASTER'S THESES

Most of the Master's theses analysed here do not strictly follow the patterns that have been reported in the literature (Paltridge, "Thesis Dissertation Writing"). Only one could be described as topic-based, consisting of three chapters each of which dealt with a different topic, plus an introduction and conclusion. The remaining 14 displayed characteristics of both topic-based theses as well as elements of the IMRAD structure. All had a brief introduction to the thesis and the topic of interest, an extensive discussion of the literature often made up of several chapters each with its own topic-related title, a study in which there was a brief introduction, then an outline of the study design, findings and discussion of findings. Most (13 of the 15) had a separate concluding chapter, which appears to be more in line with Bunton's ("Structure") findings for PhD conclusions. The structure of these theses could be seen as being made up of two separate parts: a theoretical, literature-based part followed by a practical application. Several of the authors (5 of the 15) actually specified such a two-part division in their table of content.



3.2. MASTER'S LEVEL CONCLUSIONS

All the conclusions are short, varying in length from two-thirds of a page to four and a half pages, with an average length of two pages. In 13 instances they appeared as a separate chapter entitled 'Conclusions' (though only five of these were numbered in sequence with the other chapters). The remaining 2 were part of the chapter reporting on the practical application/study, but with its own heading which in one case was "Conclusions" and in the other "General conclusions." Most probably because of their short length, none were subdivided into sections —the text was continuous. In one of the conclusions, however, key words and phrases were highlighted as a way of helping the reader through the text.

All but one of the theses conclusions were, using Bunton's ("Structure") distinction, thesis-focussed, in other words their overall structure is based around the thesis. One of these was difficult to classify as the author fails to make reference to the thesis until the penultimate paragraph. However, a careful reading of the conclusion shows that the writer was not attempting to problematize a world issue, but rather objectify and so possibly distance herself from the work she had carried out and from her findings. The remaining thesis starts as field-focussed, giving a general introduction to the field before shifting to the thesis and the findings that arise from the carried out study.

3.3. CONCLUSION MOVES

All the conclusions attempted to draw together the threads introduced in the various sections, thus they all could be considered to display a "consolidation move" (C). However, this move did not necessarily set out to consolidate the research space as was the case for the PhD theses studied by Bunton ("Structure"). Some of the authors of the MA conclusions under study used the conclusion to summarise the individual chapters of the thesis, focussing equally, if not more, on the theory introduced than on the research carried out. Thus a distinction needs to be drawn between conclusions *consolidating the research space*, that is, those focussing primarily on the study and its findings, and those *consolidating the thesis as a whole* where the information provided in the separate chapters is summarised and the conclusion functions more like a backward looking signpost.

3.3.1. *Consolidation of Research Space*

Of the 14 thesis-focussed conclusions, 10 were classified as consolidating the research space. Seven of these started with an introductory paragraph in which the aim/purpose of the study was restated. Thus, the consolidation move was preceded by an initial restatement (IR) move.

Typically such conclusions started as follows:

- (1) The aim of the present thesis was to compare...
 This work had as its primary aim to describe...
 As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the primary purpose of the study was to...

The remaining three conclusions that set out to consolidate the research space varied in how they introduced this section/chapter. Two of the authors started by restating their main finding(s), while the other one provided some general background information to the topic under discussion before moving on to presenting a summary of the findings.

The predominant moves in the conclusions analysed so far appear to have been either IR[^]C (2 moves) or C (one move). However, three of the IR[^]C conclusions had a further “recommendation” (R) move suggesting future research, and were classified as displaying a 3 move structure: IR[^]C[^]R. In all cases the progression of moves never varied and the Consolidation move always was the most extensive.

Many of the same Steps that were identified in the Consolidation move of the PhD theses analysed by Bunton (“Structure”) were also present in the Master’s conclusions analysed in this study. The number of steps within the Consolidation move varied from a total of 6 to 29. Unsurprisingly, given the shorter length of the Master’s conclusions, the average number of steps per conclusion of 16.8 was considerably lower and the frequency of occurrence of individual steps (that is the number of occurrences, divided by the 10 conclusions under consideration) was lower (see Table 1). However, the steps were cyclical with a predominant pattern being Finding [^] Claim [^] Explanation [^] Finding [^] Claim.

TABLE 1: STEPS TAKEN WITHIN THE CONSOLIDATION MOVE OF CONCLUSIONS THAT FOCUSED ON CONSOLIDATING THE RESEARCH SPACE

STEP	NUMBER OF THESES IN WHICH THE STEP APPEARS (MAX. 10)	FREQUENCY OF STEP
Findings	10	6
Claims	10	5
Explanation	6	2
Reference to literature	6	1.4
Information	4	0.9
Limitation	2	0.2
Evaluation	4	0.7
Reference to theory	1	0.1
Method	3	0.3

Two notable differences between these Master's and Bunton's PhD conclusions need to be noted. First the method of carrying out the study was only mentioned in three of the Master's conclusions, thus supporting Dudley-Evans' ("Genre") view that this is not a prominent move in Master's level conclusions. Secondly, reference to the literature was relatively infrequent, present in only 6 of the 10 conclusions under consideration and only 9 of the 14 references noted could be classified as specific; the remaining references were to the literature review as a whole or to the chapter reviewing the underlying theory as the following examples illustrate:

- (2) As the overview in the theoretical part of this thesis showed, ...
The literature analysis indicates that...

A final point that needs to be made here relates to the Evaluations included in these conclusions. Their frequency at 0.7 is comparable to that of 0.9 found in the humanities and social science PhDs studied by Bunton (*ibid*). However, whereas in the PhDs the evaluative comment related to the method and/or product, in the case of the Master's theses the evaluation was usually of someone else's work, that of the subject under study as the following examples show:

- (3) eTwinning teachers deserve to be referred to as the teachers of the future...
...I believe that the authors were successful in enabling a Polish audience to...

Alternatively, the evaluation was of the thesis as in the following instance:

- (4) To conclude, ... the main goal of this work has been successfully achieved.

3.3.2. *Consolidation of Thesis*

The remaining four thesis-focussed conclusions, all of which appear as a separate chapter, differ substantially from the others in that they summarize the whole thesis step by step rather than attempt to link the research carried out with the literature and so indicate how the research space has been filled. The authors simply progress through each chapter of the thesis highlighting the most important points. The following introductory phrases of the first 4 paragraphs of one of these conclusions illustrate this point:

- (5) In the first chapter of my thesis I have discussed...
Secondly, I have devoted Chapter Two to...
Furthermore I have elaborated on the issue of...
The main aim of Chapter Three was to...

This author ends with a final paragraph in which she summarizes the summary. Two others, after completing the summary of the practical part of the thesis,



do attempt to extend the conclusion by suggesting what more could be done in the area of their research. Thus, their conclusions can be seen as consisting of two moves, the summary followed by a recommendation. However, at no point does either of the authors attempt to link the summary of the theoretical chapters with that of the study undertaken, so underlining the two part nature of the thesis. The remaining thesis conclusion also ends with another move, this time a short evaluative comment but one relating not to the project at hand but to the level of success with which the translators studied were successful in their endeavours and not the extent to which the study allowed certain claims or conclusions to be drawn.

Unlike the conclusions discussed above that attempted to consolidate the research space in which a number of different steps are taken and findings and claims are presented in cyclical fashion, these conclusions are progressive and the move is determined by the content of the chapter being summarised. Hence there appears little need to conduct a step analysis of these conclusions. A further point worth noting with regard to these conclusions is that in each case the overview of the theoretical part of the thesis is very global and general and there are no specific references to the literature. The following examples are a case in point where the authors simply describe what the chapters contain, as if preparing the reader for the text rather than drawing conclusions or highlighting the main points that they consider important:

- (6) The first chapter contains a historical overview of the most salient approaches to... The emphasis of the thesis is, however, on contemporary theory of [...] which is further developed in chapter two.
I have devoted Chapter Two to the most widely used text patterns, focussing on... I have also mentioned other patterns the recognition of which makes comprehension of the written text easier... I have additionally discussed...

4. DISCUSSION

This analysis of a limited set of Master's level conclusions all from the field of English applied linguistics written in Poland shows that there is considerable variability in how conclusions are written and some of the variability seems to be specific to the context in which the theses were written. Most, though not all, of the conclusions were presented as a separate chapter which reflects the demands of a thesis written in Polish (see, for example, Boć Węglińska). Also in line with the guidelines provided in these handbooks, several of the authors did not number the concluding chapter (or the introduction), thus setting it aside from the rest of the work.

The distinction between thesis-focused and field-oriented conclusions proposed by Bunton ("Structure") for PhD conclusions seems to apply to those written at Master's level, though only one of the 15 conclusions studied here could be classified as field-oriented. Because of the limited data set the analysis of this conclusion has not been presented in detail, but it was found to follow a Field ^ Con-



solidation pattern identified in one of Bunton's (ibid) PhDs. Inevitably, it needs to be ascertained whether other conclusions follow this pattern or whether this one was an exception.

Although in all the remaining conclusions studied the Consolidation move was dominant, how this was approached differed. The majority of authors (10 out of 14) followed the expected pattern of consolidating the research space; others, however, saw the need to focus not on the research but on the thesis as a whole. These latter conclusions read more like extended abstracts or the sort of summary that appears towards the end of an introduction signposting the organisation of the text. It could therefore be argued that these conclusions were inadequate for their purpose. But, given that more than 25% of the conclusions studied fell into this category and they had been deemed acceptable by their examiners, it would appear necessary to try to identify a reason for this approach. One possible explanation is that students perceive the thesis as being made up of two separate parts and not as a single entity and therefore consider that an adequate conclusion requires highlighting the main points of each section rather than tying the whole entity together, coming full circle and mirroring the propositions set out in the introduction. This perception is reinforced in some of the Polish guidebooks on how to write a thesis at Master's level which give the two part thesis made up of a theory section and a practical application prominence. Little mention is made in these guidebooks of the need to narrow-down and focus the literature, an aspect of research writing that is often emphasised in the equivalent guidebooks written in English (e.g. Cooley and Lewkowicz; Swales and Feak). This may, in turn, be why students see the need for an extensive theory section and a downplaying of the actual research study.

Those conclusions that adhered more to the expected norms, that is the 10 that consolidated the research space, were found to be complex in the number of reiterative Steps they took, though less complex and varied than the PhDs studied by Bunton ("Structure"). The 10 conclusions all included findings and claims, and in addition other steps such as explanations and evaluation. They were sparse in specific reference to the literature and in discussion of limitations, but again this seems to some extent reflect the advice given in the handbooks in Polish that advocate a separate chapter for the conclusion (e.g. Boć Węglińska).

It would seem that these Polish students writing a thesis in English may be vacillating between conventions of academic writing in English and advice that is more readily available to them on writing a thesis in Polish. The question remains: what impact is this having on the students and the theses they are submitting?

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