

Written Proficiency in English for Specific Purposes: a Corpus Study of Abstracts in Health Sciences

Ana Luiza Freitas (Federal University of Health Sciences of Porto Alegre, Brazil) and Maria José Bocorny Finatto (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil)

This research explores the development of written proficiency in English (Biber, 2006) for the production of abstracts in health sciences. It also aims at exposing the structural organisation and the sense-making derived from the lexical fragments which make up academic texts. For such purpose, sequences of words perform a fundamental role, both in conveying discursive identity to academic discourse, and in weaving fluent written productions (Biber & Conrad, 2009). This way the investigation aims at contributing to the advances in the studies of English for Specific Purposes (Hyland, 2008) by providing support to the creation of instructional materials and to teacher development, as well. Based on Corpus Linguistics (McEnery & Wilson, 2001), Linguistics for Specialized Languages (Hoffmann, 1987) and English for Academic Purposes (Swales, 1990), the research put together, described and analysed a corpus of 180,170 words, comprised by abstracts in Medicine, Nutrition and Pharmacy. The texts originate from academic productions from four different Brazilian universities, contrasted with abstracts from three major Anglophone journals in the same fields of knowledge. The analytical study units are lexical bundles (Biber, Conrad & Cortes, 2004) for whose extraction and identification through AntConc (Anthony, 2014) an extent criterion of 4 graphic words and a frequency and minimum distribution of 5 occurrences, in at least 5 different texts in each of the two parts of the corpus were established. 96 lexical bundles were extracted from the Anglophone portion of the corpus, which adds up to 90,098 words, whilst 88 recurrent word sequences were obtained from the Brazilian part of corpus, which amounts to 90,072 words. Regarding the metrics of lexical frequency and variability, the two data segments uncovered subtle distinctions which reveal peculiarities in the ways of building a scientific narrative by Brazilian authors when contrasted with internationally-published authors. As such, a larger repetition of word associations and a higher use of lexical bundles to express purpose and to highlight the achievement of the academic endeavour were noticed in the Brazilian corpus. The Anglophone-originated corpus, on the other hand, features more diverse recurrent strings of words, a concise prose and the use of extended collocations to highlight the scientific enterprise in itself. A detailed analysis of those distinctions leads to a realisation of the potential of scientific texts to provide evidences not only about the investigations in their experimental character per se, but also about the scientific narrative in itself, as well as about how scientists can be perceived in the international community and, as such, about how much the use of language enables them to belong or not to a given community. In the final part of the investigation, suggestions for the

application of the findings in the form of teaching tasks are provided. A virtual learning environment under construction to help users of English as an additional language produce abstracts in health sciences is also presented.

References

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