
A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS IN LINGUISTICS RESEARCH ARTICLE INTRODUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the interpersonal nature of academic writing. Research has shown that academic texts are sites for interaction where writers acknowledge, establish and negotiate social relationships in order to engage readers in a dialogic construction of knowledge. This paper investigates how interpersonality is manifested in academic writing through knowledge claims. Knowledge claims represent the most direct way by which academics underline their contribution to the scholarly debate (Hunston 1993). In this paper I take a contrastive approach to analyse how knowledge claims are formulated in a corpus of 30 linguistics research article Introductions written in English by Anglo-American scholars and 30 Introductions in the same genre and discipline written in Italian by Italian academics. While recognizing the methodological difficulty in identifying knowledge claims (Dahl 2008), this paper attempts to describe them in terms of the configuration of claim sequences and their linguistic realizations. The results suggest that there are differences in the two language communities, especially in terms of the frequency of occurrence of claims, as in Italian linguistics RA Introductions the practice of anticipating research outcomes tends to be rather sporadic.

1. Introduction

Knowledge claims (henceforth KCs) are the most direct way by which academics underline their contribution to the disciplinary debate. According to Hunston “a knowledge claim is an item in a research article which the writer puts forward to be *added* to the sum of knowledge agreed upon by the community of that discipline” (Hunston 1993: 133, my italics). This ‘addition’ is accomplished only if the KC is accepted by the rest of the community members. Indeed, in recent approaches to the study of academic discourse, knowledge is seen as the result of a process of social construction based on the attainment of agreement among the members of a particular discipline. From this perspective, one of the major goals of academics is the attempt at generating consensus about the truth-value of their KCs, a purpose that requires making careful rhetorical and linguistic choices. These choices may be seen as reflecting the beliefs of scholars as to what effective and persuasive academic writing is.

The view of a correlation between the writing output of scholars and the expectations of the specific academic community to which they belong is supported by recent research suggesting that social interaction in academic writing varies according

to the disciplinary (Hyland 2000; Becher & Trowler 2001; Hyland & Bondi 2006) and the linguistic community (Mauranen 1993; Vassileva 2000).

Despite the importance of claim-making for producing new knowledge and the likely predisposition of this practice to vary across linguistic communities, KCs have been studied relatively little from a cross-cultural perspective (see Salager-Meyer & Zambrano (2001) for a study of conflicting KCs in English and French medical discourse; Fløttum *et al.* (2006) for a study of “final results” in linguistics articles in English, French and Norwegian). However, given the increasing importance for scholars to be able to operate not only in their local academic context but also internationally, contrastive studies seem particularly welcome as they may contribute to raise scholars’ awareness of variations in linguistic and rhetorical proclivities in different academic settings.

This paper focuses on Research Article (RA) Introductions in English and Italian in the field of linguistics. The purpose is to identify aspects in the formulation of KCs that point to possible distinctive writing expectations in the Italian and the Anglo-American academic communities in the discipline of linguistics.

The choice to look for KCs in RA Introductions was made for two main reasons. First, the Introduction has been recognized as an appropriate section for presenting new knowledge (Bloor & Bloor 1993; Fløttum *et al.* 2006; Dahl 2008). Second, the Introduction was considered as a more reliable *tertium comparationis* (Connor & Moreno 2005) for cross-cultural research than other sections or the whole RA. In most cases, in my corpus no clear Introduction-Method-Result-Discussion-Conclusion sequence was found, the corpus including a variety of research papers and not only experimental RAs.

2. Defining and identifying knowledge claims

As Bloor & Bloor (1993: 156) admit, “what constitutes a knowledge claim is not entirely clear [as] not all truth-conditional propositions could be described as knowledge claims”. Dahl (2008: 1187) seems to suggest that recognizing KCs means distinguishing between previous and new knowledge, since the former “needs to be activated in order for the claim to be recognised and then assessed as such by other members of the discipline”. However, the question arises as to how such a distinction can be made in practice by the analyst who is not an expert in the field. Bloor & Bloor’s (1993) taxonomy of what does not count as a KC seems more operational. They exclude from KCs well-established truths and purely descriptive propositions not presented as research findings concerning real-world states, research processes and methodology.

Bearing Dahl’s definition and Bloor & Bloor’s taxonomy in mind, I analysed my corpus and tried to define the criteria I used to recognize KCs. I considered as KCs truth-conditional propositions *averred by writers* (i.e. not attributed to other researchers) that stemmed from *the research presented in the paper*. I believe that the explicit mention of the author as originator of claims and of the research presented in the paper as opposed to research presented elsewhere makes the recognition of KCs more effective than by simply referring to the idea of ‘new’ knowledge. Indeed, most often KCs are introduced by a range of lexico-grammatical structures (e.g. per-

sonal and impersonal authorial references) that refer to the paper's author or the findings (see section 4). In addition, by considering statements referring to the "research presented in the paper" as a whole and not to "research findings" only, it is possible to count as KCs assertions that concern the model or the methodology adopted, which, as Bloor & Bloor (1993: 157) recognize, "may well constitute serious high-level claims that challenge previous established models or methods".

3. Methodology

The corpus for analysis contains 60 single-authored RA Introductions in the discipline of linguistics, 30 of which are in Italian and 30 in English. The corpus totals approximately 40,000 words (see Table 1).

Corpus	Total number of words
Anglo-American linguistics RA Introductions	18,324
Italian linguistics RA Introductions	20,891
TOTAL	39,215

Table 1. Corpus for analysis

In order to select representative journals (10 in Italian and 10 in English), I consulted an expert informant who provided me with a list of some of the most authoritative Italian journals and also suggested international journals that might be comparable. Since Italian journals are less numerous than international journals in English, the design of the Anglo-American subcorpus was subordinated to the choice of journals in Italian and was built up with the aim of being as comparable as possible to the Italian sample (see the Appendix for the list of articles and journals).

The RAs of the corpus (three articles per journal) were collected randomly. However, for the sake of comparability, when a multi-authored article was retrieved it was excluded so as to obtain single-authored articles only.

KCs were identified through a close reading of the texts. Automatic retrieval methods were excluded because of the difficulty of preselecting a closed class of lexico-grammatical signals of KCs. I classified KCs progressively as they appeared in the Introduction and I glossed them on the basis of the information provided, such as new information on the phenomenon under study, the theory adopted or a particular approach (example 1).

- (1) [KC1 – PHENOMENON] I argue that the more marked an agreement morpheme is in Mordvin, the more likely it is to be syncretic. [KC2 – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK] This hypothesis, I show, can be elegantly captured in an Optimality-Theoretic treatment of syncretism [SL1].¹

¹ The notation in square brackets at the end of the example indicates the article from which the Introduction was taken. Hence "SL1" stands for the first article of the journal *Studia Linguistica*.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Knowledge claims in linguistics RA Introductions in English

The Anglo-American subcorpus comprises a total of 49 KCs. However, given that the number of KCs may depend on the type of study, it is probably more useful to consider the number of Introductions that contain KCs. Out of the 30 texts in English, 20 contain at least one KC. This result suggests that the practice of anticipating research outcomes in linguistics Introductions in English is desirable but not entirely conventionalized. International readers may well expect an Introduction without knowledge claims which will be regarded as falling inside the range of accepted norms.

In the Anglo-American corpus, KCs are generally presented in a single claim proposition (37 occurrences), as in example 2:

(2) [KC1 – PHENOMENON] In the present work I argue that the key factor controlling the direct/inverse opposition and obviation marking (DIO-marking) is linguistic empathy [Lin2].

However, I also found occurrences of KCs (ten instances) stretching over several sentences. Of these, eight claim sequences were increasingly detailed explanations of the original KC, as in example 3:

(3) [KC1 – PHENOMENON] In the Indian case, I will argue, both the target accent and the means of attaining it are contested. [KC1.1 – PHENOMENON] The conflicts to be found in accent training are reflections of more underlying conflicts. [KC 1.1.1 – PHENOMENON] These are: (1) differing perceptions of the prestige accent in India, (2) differing perceptions of international standard English [...], and (3) the beliefs entrenched in business about accents as commodities [...] [WE2].

The remaining two occurrences of claim sequences featured the KC followed by supporting statements, as in example 4:

(4) [KC2 – PHENOMENON] The proposal is that they do so because of a competition of derivations. [SUPPORT] In languages where YNQs are standardly answered by a bare finite verb, a subjectless sentence has two derivations. [SUPPORT] One is the nullsubject derivation, employing a null pronoun (or deleting a pronoun) in specIP. [SUPPORT] The other derivation involves movement of the finite verb to C with deletion of IP. [SUPPORT] In a context forcing polarity focus, the latter derivation wins. [SUPPORT] However, since the context does not provide a good antecedent for a deleted IP in (1), the result is ill formed. [SUPPORT] Thus pronouncing the pronoun is a must [SL3].

Finally, another possible pattern, whose regularity is to be verified in a larger corpus (it was attested only twice in my English corpus), consists in the reiteration of KCs. The KC is first presented in the Introduction as part of the argument and it is restated

at the end of the Introduction, in the so-called ‘roadmap’ of the article, where the writer briefly indicates the content of the various sections of the paper, as in example 5:

(5) First, as indicated in the title, [KC1 – PHENOMENON] I argue that the proposed syllabifications (as in 1) fall out from universal markedness constraints – all of which derive motivation from other languages [...]. This article is organized as follows. [...] Section 4 consists of a formal analysis of the syllabification of sequences of intervocalic consonants as in (1). In that section [KC1a – PHENOMENON] I demonstrate that syllabification can be accomplished given the markedness constraints posited in Section 3 and a language-specific ranking [SL2].

This analysis of the configuration of claim propositions indicates that most often KCs are announced rather than explained or discussed, which is not surprising considering the communicative purpose of Introductions. A study of the body of the RA would be interesting to investigate how the same KCs are presented in the Results, or Discussion section.

As regards the linguistic realizations of KCs, most claim propositions (40 occurrences) are introduced by means of “projection” (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004) (example 6 in italics). This construction in English is sometimes referred to as a *that*-clause (Hyland & Tse 2005):

(6) Here I will once again support a limited capacity hypothesis, but [KC1 – THEORY] *I propose that* the capacity in question is neither attentional nor intentional [IJAL3].

The fact that almost 82% of all KCs in the Anglo-American corpus are introduced by means of a *that*-clause seems to suggest that this structure is an important linguistic signal of KCs in RA Introductions. This hypothesis is corroborated by Hyland & Tse’s (2005) findings on the use of *that*-clauses in a corpus including published research articles in applied linguistics. They found that over 80% of all the *that*-clauses that they identified were used by writers to refer to their own research outcomes. In the Anglo-American linguistics subcorpus, the verbs that are most commonly associated with *that*-clauses are *argue* (12 occurrences), *show* (nine occurrences) and *suggest* (five occurrences). The preference of the discipline of linguistics for “discourse acts” (e.g. *argue*) to present claims, rather than “research acts” (e.g. *find*) or “cognitive acts” (e.g. *believe*), has also been noted for English by Dahl (2008) and Hyland & Tse (2005).

The most recurrent subject in combination with verbal predicates is the first person singular pronoun (23 occurrences). This finding is in line with Dahl’s (2008) study where this typical co-occurrence is also noted. This result is likely to be partly related to the preference for discourse acts: verbs such as *argue* generally require an animate subject. However, the tendency to appear as visible discourse participants when making KCs also suggests the preference of linguists to take the responsibility for their outcomes upon themselves rather than concealing it behind impersonal constructions such as the passive voice (attested 3 times) or abstract rhetors (e.g. *this paper* which was attested 14 times).

The KCs that are not presented by means of projection are factual statements describing the phenomenon under study, the theory adopted or the results obtained in general. In these instances too, however, it is possible to find direct or indirect metadiscourse references to the writer or the research presented in the paper (in italics in example 7):

(7) [KC2 – PHENOMENON] *As will be discussed*, the correlation between the possibility of a null subject in (1) and the form of reply to YNQs is difficult to establish in some cases, and [KC2.1 – PHENOMENON] clearly does not hold in some other cases [SL3].

Finally, the few examples not containing any direct or indirect reference to the writer or the research are statements constituting the claim sequence that follows the KC proper to clarify or specify it (see example 3 above).

One of the most investigated aspects of KCs is the phenomenon of hedging, i.e. strategies to tone down assertions (Myers 1992; Bloor & Bloor 1993; Salager-Meyer & Zambrano 2001). In my corpus, hedges are rarely employed in association with KCs and are mainly found in connection with claims related to seemingly controversial topics, as in example 8 (hedge in italics):

(8) Rather than viewing the issue of third-party reciprocity as complicating investigations of courtroom discourse, [KC1 – APPROACH] I am *suggesting* that it expands our notion of ‘participant’ in speech events [...] [JS2].

Overall, however, in the Anglo-American subcorpus, most instances of claim propositions are unhedged, as in:

(9) [KC2 – PHENOMENON] I shall argue in this article that the initial rise in zero is triggered by the effect on information structure of modifier-like uses of epistemic verbs [ELL2].

This result is partly in conflict with Myers’ (1992) findings. Myers noted that when linguists use the verb *show* in Introductions, they tend to hedge it (i.e. *try to show*). However, the adoption of a self-confident, assertive tone, which I noted in my subcorpus of linguistics RA Introductions in English, has also been observed by Dahl (2008) in her study of KCs in the same genre and discipline. One possible explanation might be that in the lapse of time since Myers’ study, the international research and publishing environment has become more competitive. Increased competition, as has been suggested (Lindeberg 1997), is often reflected in the attempt to underscore one’s contribution to the academic debate.

4.2. Knowledge claims in linguistics RA Introductions in Italian

In the Italian subcorpus, out of 30 RA Introductions, only five contain KCs and the total number of claim propositions is eight. Because of the paucity of data, any comment on the structures used in Italian to put forward KCs is to be intended as a hypothesis on language preferences and is subject to further verification.

Out of a total of eight KCs, I observed six instances formulated as a single claim proposition. In three of them, the writer presents his/her KCs as potentially conflicting with existing knowledge and uses a cautious tone, e.g. *I will try* in example 10:

(10) Vorrei invece mostrare che ci sono buone ragioni per dubitare di questa tesi: [KC1 – PHENOMENON] cercherò di fare vedere come la dipendenza contestuale dei nomi propri sia molto più simile a quella delle parole omonime che a quella dei deittici [LL1].

Instead, I would like to show that there are good reasons to have doubts about that hypothesis: I will try to show that the contextual dependence of proper nouns is much more similar to that of homonyms than that of deictics.

The remaining two occurrences of the eight instances of KCs found are claim sequences presenting research outcomes in increasing detail (example 11):

(11) [KC1 – THEORY] È possibile elaborare un modello che soddisfa tali requisiti adottando una versione stocastica della Teoria dell'Ottimalità (Optimality Theory, OT). [KC1a – THEORY] Le simulazioni computazionali riportate nelle sezioni che seguono [...], hanno anche lo scopo più ampio di illustrare la possibilità reale di un sincretismo epistemologico tra la teoria formale della sintassi, lo studio degli universali funzionali nella lingua e l'elaborazione di modelli computazionali [...]. [KC1a.1 – THEORY] Senza voler annullare o ridurre le differenze tra le visioni del linguaggio a cui questi paradigmi di ricerca si ispirano, è possibile infatti ampliarne gli aspetti di convergenza esaltando così le potenzialità che possono derivare da una loro maggiore integrazione [SSL3].

[KC1 – THEORY] It is possible to devise a model that meets those requirements by adopting a stocastic version of Optimality Theory. [KC1a – THEORY] The computational simulations reported in the following sections [...] also have the more general aim to illustrate the real possibility of an epistemological syncretism among the formal theory of syntax, the study of language universal functions and the elaboration of computational models [...]. [KC1a.1 – THEORY] Without cancelling or reducing differences in the views of language offered by those paradigms, it is possible to expand the convergence among them thus enhancing the potentials which might derive from a greater interaction.

In example 11, it is possible to note that KC1a.1, which is a comment on KC1a (a reiteration of KC1), includes a 'dialogue' with the readers aimed at anticipating possible criticism and misunderstandings arising from the writer's claims. Given these configurations of KCs in my Italian corpus (see also example 10), it appears that when KCs are anticipated, Italian writers tend to do so by problematizing issues and using impersonal and hedged constructions.

As regards linguistic realizations of KCs in Italian, here too projection is the most recurrent construction (four occurrences). In addition, three times out of four, projection is associated with first person references, as in example 12:

(12) [KC1 – PHENOMENON] In questo contributo intendo *dimostrare che* [...] [SGI1].

In this paper I aim to demonstrate that [...].

Because most Introductions in Italian do not contain KCs, it is interesting to try to understand in what way those texts are different from the English ones. The most frequent type of Introduction in Italian (15 out of 30) only features ‘preview’ sentences informing readers about the aims of the paper, but not anticipating results, as in example 13:

(13) In tal senso, seguendo un approccio descrittivo, verificheremo sino a che punto il costrutto in esame abbia compiuto questo percorso di grammaticalizzazione [...] [RID1].

In that sense, by taking a descriptive approach, we will verify to what extent the construct under analysis has accomplished that grammaticalization process [...].

I also found Introductions presenting claims that could not be considered as high-level KCs because they were truth-conditional statements based on the literature or the reiteration of well-known positions to the specialist audience, as in example 14:

(14) Alla base di queste due diverse formulazioni lessicali del concetto di “vero/ità” stanno evidentemente due concettualizzazioni diverse, ma non conflittuali e anzi coerenti tra di loro [...] [SLL1].

Clearly, at the basis of these two different lexical formulations of the concept of “true/truth” there are two different conceptualizations, which, however, are not conflicting, but consistent with each other [...].

Finally, three Introductions seem to start *in media res* as if the first section were not an Introduction proper. For instance, example 15 is the opening sentence of the article [SdLI2], which is about the history of the word ‘Afro-American’ in Italian. As can be seen, no background to the study is provided nor any justification for the research. The writer starts right from the analysis, which is based on the consultation of several documents and dictionaries:

(15) La prima occorrenza nell’italiano scritto dell’aggettivo *afro-americano* potrebbe essere individuata in una lettera inviata il 21 gennaio 1895 da Louis Casabona [...] ad Arcangelo Ghisleri a Cremona: la data precede di circa quarant’anni quella indicata dal *GRADIT*, dallo Zingarelli e dal *GDLI* [SdLI2].

The first occurrence of the adjective Afro-American in written Italian could be traced back to a letter sent the 21st January 1895 by Louis Casabona [...] to Arcangelo Ghisleri in Cremona: the letter dates back approximately forty years before the date indicated by GRADIT, Zingarelli and GDLI.

5. Comparison between the two data sets and concluding remarks

The most notable result obtained from the analysis of KCs in English and Italian linguistics RA Introductions is that while Anglo-American scholars are inclined to present their main KCs in the Introduction and to do so in a rather direct, assertive tone, Italian linguists prefer not to anticipate KCs and, if they introduce them, writers tend to problematize issues and to adopt hedging devices. Due to the pilot nature of this study, no definitive interpretations of this result can be provided. One

hypothesis to be verified in further research is that Italian linguists perceive the activity of putting forward claims in the Introduction as a marked choice that needs to be mitigated so as not to seem stylistically and pragmatically inadequate.

The findings also raise some questions on the actual comparability of linguistics RA Introductions in English and Italian and the sampling technique. In this study, I assumed that the opening sections of RAs in English and Italian were equivalent texts and I did not distinguish between introductory sections explicitly titled "Introduction" and those with topic titles or no title. It is therefore possible that the texts that I collected are not exactly the same type of 'object' despite occupying the opening position in linguistics RAs in both languages. It would therefore be interesting to further investigate linguistics introductory sections in English and Italian from a genre analysis perspective to verify whether significant divergent features can be found other than KCs. A stratified *ad hoc* sampling technique (Moreno 2008) in place of a random collection of texts would help in the attempt at describing other distinguishing features, as subcorpora could be built consisting of articles with the same superstructure (e.g. articles conforming to the Introduction-Procedure-Discussion configuration *vs* articles in which topic section titles are used). It should be pointed out, however, that when comparing languages that have unequal chances of being employed for the same purposes, it may be difficult to collect maximally comparable corpora consisting of a large number of texts so as to provide statistically significant results. The scarcity of maximally comparable texts, however, would be itself an interesting datum to examine, especially considering the current globalized context of knowledge construction and dissemination in which peripheral forms of knowledge risk being eroded by dominant epistemologies (Ammon 2001).

Finally, the issue of the interference of "confounding factors" (Moreno 2008) that may affect results, such as the superstructure of RAs, may also be addressed by using ethnographic methods such as interviews with Italian linguists. There are aspects that potentially affect the written output of academics and that may be difficult, if not impossible, to control through sampling. Among these are variables such as age, writing expertise, international writing habits (e.g. whether the writer uses English, how often and in association with what genres). Using interviews, it would be possible to investigate the relationship between the formulation of KCs and individual factors that potentially influence the output of scholars even if they belong to the same writing culture.

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Appendix. Research articles in the corpus

A.1. Anglo-American subcorpus

- [L1] Janke V. 2008. Control without a subject. *Lingua* 118/1: 82-118.
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- [L3] Wallage P. 2008. Jespersen's cycle in Middle English: parametric variation and grammatical competition. *Lingua* 118/5: 643-674.
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- [AL2] Hyland K. 2007. Applying a gloss: exemplifying and reformulating in academic discourse. *Applied Linguistics* 28/2: 266-285.
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A.2. Italian subcorpus

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