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# **Research article abstracts in English and Italian: Generic and cross-linguistic variation over the last 20 years**

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## ABSTRACT

The paper examines comparatively and diachronically the generic structure of research article abstracts written in English for international scientific journals and abstracts written in Italian and published in Italian journals in the field of linguistics, with the aim of exploring generic and cross-linguistic variation over the last 20 years. The data consist of two small corpora of English and Italian linguistics research article abstracts spaced at ten-year intervals, namely 1997, 2007 and 2017. The analysis shows that the generic structure and rhetorical organisation of abstracts written in Italian conforms to the international conventions based on the norms of the English academic discourse community. However, they are rhetorically less complex than English abstracts. Diachronic variation has also been observed in the frequency and distribution of every single move across the two language corpora over the decades.

Keywords: research article abstracts, genre analysis, cross-linguistic (English and Italian), diachronic variation.

## **1. Introduction**

The importance of research article (RA) abstracts in academic writing is widely acknowledged and has generated a significant number of studies over the last 20 years. Early scholarly research focused on its textual structure. The most representative contributor in this field is Bhatia (1993: 78-79), who identifies four moves, reflecting Swales' (1990) Introduction-Method-Results-Discussion (IMRD) research article structure: 1) "Introducing purpose";

2) “Describing methodology”; 3) “Summarizing results”; 4) “Presenting conclusions”. Compared to the four-move model, Dos Santos (1996: 484-490) postulates a fifth move, preceding all the others: “Situating the research”. Similar to Dos Santos, Hyland (2000) suggests that an ‘Introduction’ move is needed, where the context of the paper and research motivation are provided. The move referred to as “Introduction” and “Situating the research” by Hyland and Dos Santos, respectively, provides “a justificatory context for the research”, to be differentiated from the “Purpose” move, which “outlines the intention behind the paper” (Hyland 2000: 67).

Considerable research interest has been invested in tracking disciplinary variation in the textual structure of RA abstracts. Attention has been paid to abstracts written in English within single disciplines. Salager-Meyer (1990), for example, investigated medical abstracts and found that only 62% contained Bhatia’s four-move model, whereas Anderson and Maclean (1997) identified five moves in the medical abstract: Background, Purpose, Methods, Results and Conclusion. Huckin (2001) found that biomedical abstracts often exclude the Purpose move. Lorés Sanz’s (2004) analysis of abstracts from linguistics journals revealed two major types of rhetorical organisation: the IMRD structure and the CARS pattern (Create a Research Space, Swales 1990). Samraj’s (2005: 152) study of abstracts from biology showed that they “share a number of moves, which have been traditionally ascribed to this genre, namely, a statement of purpose, results, and conclusions”, but that they “fail to mention the methods employed in the study, implying that this genre is not a simple summary of the full-length article”. In her study of academic law abstracts, Breeze (2009: 13-14) pointed out that their macrostructure differs from “abstracts in other areas, reflecting the priorities of legal academic culture”. For example, she noted that the prominence of the issue statement, as she calls it, “which acts as the principal ‘hook’ to attract the reader, appears to be peculiar to legal academia, appealing to a discourse community in which the ‘issue’ is the crucial focus of any discussion”. Tankó (2017) found that RA abstracts in the field of literature have a non-hierarchical eight-move structure (Outcome, Purpose, Background, Method, Topic, Conclusion, Niche, Implications) with four stable moves, whose functions are to present the background, purpose, methodology and outcomes of the research.

Research interest has also been extended to cross-disciplinary variation. Pho (2008), for example, focused on abstracts written in English in the fields of applied linguistics and educational technology. Cavalieri (2014) investigated the move structure of abstracts in English across applied linguistics and medicine. Hatzitheodorou (2014) compared law with business. Further

research has been devoted to cross-linguistic variation. There are papers comparing English with Spanish (Martín-Martín 2003, 2005; Lorés Sanz 2009; Sandoval Cruz 2015), French (Van Bonn – Swales 2007; Cavalieri – Preite 2017), Italian (Diani 2014; Cavalieri – Diani 2018), Portuguese (Johns 1992; Feltrim et al. 2003), German (Busch-Lauer 1995), Swedish (Melander et al. 1997), Arabic (Alharbi – Swales 2011), and Chinese (Duan – Wei 2021).

Parallel to the synchronic studies discussed above, generic variation in RA abstracts has also been investigated from a diachronic perspective. Scholarly investigation has mainly focused on changes in the textual structure of abstracts in English within single disciplines. Atkinson (1992) offered a detailed analysis of the evolution of medical papers, including the abstract, published in the *Edinburgh Medical Journal* between 1735 and 1985. Bondi's (1997) study traced the development of abstracts in economics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bondi and Cavalieri (2012) investigated the changes in the generic structure of the abstract in the field of applied linguistics over a time span of twenty years (1988-2008). Similarly, Gillaerts (2013) examined the move structure of abstracts from the *Applied Linguistics* journal from 1987 to 2007. Although these previous studies offer invaluable insights into diachronic variation across disciplines, the RA abstract may also display diachronic changes in its rhetorical strategies across languages. Yet, relevant research is still lacking.

This paper is meant to contribute to filling this gap, by examining comparatively and diachronically the generic structure of RA abstracts written in English for international scientific journals and abstracts written in Italian and published in Italian journals in the field of linguistics, with the aim of exploring generic and cross-linguistic variation in the rhetorical preferences that characterise the members of the international and Italian scientific communities in this domain over the last 20 years. The context for this analysis is provided by a previous study by the author (Diani 2014), which looked at the rhetorical organisation of English and Italian linguistics RA abstracts published in 2007 in two leading journals of Italian and English linguistics. The purpose now is to extend the analysis to English and Italian RA abstracts published in their 1997 and 2017 issues. To this end, the paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What generic variation can be observed in the English and Italian linguistics RA abstracts over the last 20 years?
2. What cross-linguistic variation can be identified in the moves of the English and Italian abstracts over the decades?

The next Section provides a short description of the materials used for the study as well as the method adopted. A diachronic overview of the move structure of English and Italian linguistics RA abstracts is provided in Section 3. Section 4 presents the results emerging from the comparative analysis of each single move across the two language corpora over the decades under investigation. The paper concludes with a summary of the findings (Section 5).

## 2. Materials and methods

The present study is carried out on two small corpora of English and Italian RA abstracts taken from two international and three Italian journals in the field of linguistics spaced at ten-year intervals over the past 20 years: 1997, 2007 and 2017. The 2007 English and Italian corpora include abstracts of a previous work (Diani 2014). The compilation of the 2007 Italian corpus was conditioned by the fact that most Italian linguistics journals publish abstracts written in English, although the associated papers are written in Italian. This is a policy practised by many journal editorials who require abstracts in English for papers in other languages (Ventola 1994a, 1994b). Of the twelve leading journals of Italian linguistics I consulted, only two were found to publish abstracts in Italian fairly regularly and the associated papers are written in English, French or German: *Linguistica e Filologia* and *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*.<sup>1</sup> From these, I took all the abstracts available from the 2007 issue, for a total of 34 (about 5,700 words). The same criteria were followed for the compilation of the 2017 Italian corpus. Since neither of the two journals published abstracts in Italian in their 1997 issues, this decade was excluded from the analysis. Since the 2017 *Linguistica e Filologia* issue only published one abstract in Italian, I created the 2017 Italian corpus by taking abstracts from *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata* and *Italiano LinguaDue*, founded only in 2009. The corpus consists of 35 abstracts (5,861 words). To compile the English corpus, two leading international journals were selected: *Applied Linguistics* and *English for Specific Purposes*. The English corpus consists of 148 abstracts (28,937 words), divided into three subsets, comprising all the abstracts available in the 1997,

<sup>1</sup> The Italian linguistics journals considered are: *Annali d'Italianistica*, *Archivio Glottologico Italiano*, *Bollettino d'Italianistica*, *Itals/Didattica e Linguistica dell'Italiano come Lingua Straniera*, *Lingue e Linguaggio*, *Linguistica e Filologia*, *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*, *Rivista Italiana di Dialettologia*, *Rivista di Linguistica/Italian Journal of Linguistics*, *Studi e Saggi Linguistici*, *Studi di Lessicografia Italiana*, *Studi di Grammatica Italiana*.

2007 and 2017 issues: 39, 47, 62, respectively. Tables 1 and 2 give an overview of the English and Italian corpus characteristics.

Table 1. The English corpus characteristics over the last 20 years

English Journals	1997	2007	2017	Total
<i>Applied Linguistics</i>	20	22	35	
<i>English for Specific Purposes</i>	19	25	27	
Total number of abstracts	39	47	62	
Total number of words	7,067	10,500	11,370	28,937

Table 2. The Italian corpus characteristics over the last 10 years

Italian Journals	2007		2017	Total
<i>Linguistica e Filologia</i>	14	<i>Italiano LinguaDue</i>	29	
<i>Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata</i>	20	<i>Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata</i>	6	
Total number of abstracts	34	Total number of abstracts	35	
Total number of words	5,700	Total number of words	5,861	11,561

An analysis of the move structure of the English and Italian linguistics abstracts was carried out by following previous work that has examined English RA abstracts in applied linguistics based on a modified version of Bhatia’s (1993) four-move model for abstracts (Purpose-Method-Results-Conclusion). More specifically I adopted Dos Santos’s (1996: 481) five-move model for the structure of abstracts in applied linguistics, which includes:

- Move 1, ‘Situating the research’, realised by ‘Stating current knowledge’ (Submove 1A), and/or ‘Citing previous research’ (Submove 1B), and/or ‘Extending previous research’ (Submove 1C), and/or ‘Stating a problem’ (Submove 2);
- Move 2, ‘Presenting the research’, realised by ‘Indicating main features’ (Submove 1A), and/or ‘Indicating main purpose’ (Submove 1B), and/or outlining hypotheses or questions, ‘Hypothesis raising’ (Submove 2);
- Move 3, ‘Describing the methodology’ (“describes the study design”);
- Move 4, ‘Summarizing the results’ (“states the major findings”);
- Move 5, ‘Discussing the research’ realised by ‘Drawing conclusions’ (Submove 1) and/or ‘Giving recommendations’ (Submove 2).

In order to conduct a move-structure identification and classification of the abstracts, I first manually tried to associate each sentence with the

communicative functions corresponding to the moves and submoves characterising Dos Santos's model. I then proceeded to see, in a preliminary analysis, whether these moves were present in both the English and Italian subsets and track cross-linguistic variation and change over the decades.

### **3. Move analysis in English and Italian linguistics RA abstracts: A diachronic overview**

The move analysis reveals that the five-move abstract model, as described by Dos Santos (1996), is rare in the two diachronic language corpora analysed. In fact, only two abstracts contain all five moves in the Italian corpus: one in 2007 and one in 2017, respectively. This is also the case for the English subsets, although there is a slightly greater frequency in 2017, in which 11 abstracts contain the five moves compared to 2007 and 1997, when only one and three used all five moves, respectively. Overall, the results here echo those of Hyland (2000), who found that the presence of all five moves is quite rare in humanities abstracts.

The findings show similarities in frequency distribution of these moves across the diachronic corpora, although statistical differences appear to exist. If we take an overview to the distribution of the moves in the two diachronic language corpora (see Tables 3 and 4), undoubtedly the most striking (albeit predictable) feature is the predominance of the 'Presenting the research' move in both languages over the periods under investigation. As for the English data, the overall occurrence of the move demonstrates a steady increase in its use over the last 20 years, with a 6% rise between 1997 and 2017. Similarly, in the Italian subsets, the percentage rises between 2007 and 2017 (94.11% vs 100%). Another level of similarity can be observed in the frequency distribution of the 'Describing the methodology' move in both languages in the 2007 subsets, occurring in 44.68% of the English abstracts and in 38.23% of the Italian abstracts. Diachronically, on the contrary, there is a substantial increase of 37% in the use of the move from 2007 to 2017 in the English data, rising from 44.68% to 81.45% in 2017, whereas the 2017 Italian subset shows no significant variation: the frequency amounts to 40% compared to 38.23% in 2007.

However, the analysis points to diachronic variation with respect to the other moves. A significant difference exists in the frequency of occurrence of the 'Summarizing the results' move in both languages over the decades. The Italian abstracts show a much lower frequency of this move with 52.94%

and 51.42% in the 2007 and 2017 subsets compared to 80.85% and 100% in the 2007 and 2017 abstracts in English. Interestingly, when focusing on the English data, we see a substantial increase in the use of the move over the last 20 years, with a massive 31% rise between 1997 and 2017. Yet variation is particularly evident in the ‘Discussing the research’ move. This move only appears in 8.82% and 11.42% of the 2007 and 2017 Italian subsets in contrast to 48.93% and 35.48% of the 2007 and 2017 English abstracts. Even though a discussion of the research is an important aspect of a RA, it is omitted in the Italian linguistics abstract, suggesting that Italian linguists are less inclined to anticipate what conclusions can be drawn from their study. As regards the ‘Situating the research’ move, its frequency of occurrence in the three English subsets does not emerge as being significantly different over the last 20 years (56.41% in 1997, 53.19% in 2007, 56.45% in 2017). On the contrary, we see a decrease in the use of the move in the Italian abstracts between 2007 and 2017 (61.76% in 2007 as opposed to 48.57% in 2017).

Table 3. Frequency distribution of moves in English abstracts over the last 20 years

Moves	EN 1997 (n = 39) %	EN 2007 (n = 47) %	EN 2017 (n = 62) %
Move 1 Situating the research	56.41	53.19	56.45
Move 2 Presenting the research	92.30	93.61	98.38
Move 3 Describing the methodology	41.02	44.68	81.45
Move 4 Summarizing the results	69.23	80.85	100.00
Move 5 Discussing the research	43.58	48.93	35.48

Table 4. Frequency distribution of moves in Italian abstracts over the last 10 years

Moves	IT 2007 (n = 34) %	IT 2017 (n = 35) %
Move 1 Situating the research	61.76	48.57
Move 2 Presenting the research	94.11	100.00
Move 3 Describing the methodology	38.23	40.00
Move 4 Summarizing the results	52.94	51.42
Move 5 Discussing the research	8.82	11.42

The analysis of data suggests that there are differences in the preferences in move sequences across the two diachronic language corpora.



Table 5. Frequency distribution of move sequences in English abstracts over the last 20 years

Move sequences EN 1997	(n = 39) %	Move sequences EN 2007	(n = 47) %	Move sequences EN 2017	(n = 62) %
Pr-M-R	12.82	Pr-M-R	17.02	Pr-M-R	22.58
Sr-Pr-R-D	5.12	Sr-Pr-R-D	14.89	Sr-Pr-R-D	3.22
Sr-Pr-R	12.82	Sr-Pr-R	14.89	Sr-Pr-R	4.83
Pr-R-D	10.25	Pr-R-D	10.63	Pr-R-D	3.22
Pr-M-R-D	12.82	Pr-M-R-D	10.63	Pr-M-R-D	11.29
Sr-Pr-M-R	7.69	Sr-Pr-M-R	8.51	Sr-Pr-M-R	25.80
Sr-Pr-D	7.69	Sr-Pr-D	6.38	Sr-Pr-D	0.00
Sr-Pr	15.38	Sr-Pr	4.25	Sr-Pr	1.61
Pr-M-D	0.00	Pr-M-D	4.25	Pr-M-D	0.00
Pr-R	0.00	Pr-R	0.00	Pr-R	8.06
Sr-Pr-M-R-D	7.69	Sr-Pr-M-R-D	2.12	Sr-Pr-M-R-D	17.74
Sr-M-R	0.00	Sr-M-R	2.12	Sr-M-R	3.22

Sr = Situating the research; Pr = Presenting the research; M = Describing the methodology; R = Summarizing the results; D = Discussing the research

Table 6. Frequency distribution of move sequences in Italian abstracts over the last 10 years

Move sequences IT 2007	(n = 34) %	Move sequences IT 2017	(n = 35) %
Sr-Pr	32.35	Sr-Pr	31.42
Pr-R	14.70	Pr-R	8.57
Pr-M-R	11.76	Pr-M-R	20.00
Sr-Pr-R	11.76	Sr-Pr-R	11.42
Sr-M-R	5.88	Sr-M-R	0.00
Sr-Pr-M-R	5.88	Sr-Pr-M-R	2.85
Pr-M-D	5.88	Pr-M-D	0.00
Pr	2.94	Pr	5.71
Sr-Pr-M-R-D	2.94	Sr-Pr-M-R-D	2.85
Pr-M	2.94	Pr-M	8.57
Sr-Pr-M	2.94	Sr-Pr-M	0.00
Pr-R-D	0.00	Pr-R-D	2.85
Pr-M-R-D	0.00	Pr-M-R-D	5.71

Although the results in Tables 5 and 6 show that the move structure Presenting the research-Describing the methodology-Summarizing the results (Pr-M-R) shows a steady increase in both language corpora across the periods (EN 12.82% in 1997, 17.02% in 2007, 22.58% in 2017; IT 11.76% in 2007, 20% in 2017), the corpora display preferences for different move sequences. In the English abstracts a general preference is for Situating the research-Presenting the research-Describing the methodology-Summarizing the results (Sr-Pr-M-R), showing a substantial increase of 18% over the last 20 years, rising to 25.80% in the 2017 data, and also initially for Presenting the research-Describing the methodology-Summarizing the results-Discussing the research (Pr-M-R-D), despite the overall decline from 1997 to 2017 (from 12.82% in 1997 to 10.63% and 11.29% in 2007 and 2017, respectively). In the Italian data, on the contrary, the tendency is for a two-move abstract Situating the research-Presenting the research (Sr-Pr), with frequencies that have been fairly uniform over the last 20 years (32.35% and 31.42% in 2007 and 2017, respectively). Like the Italian data, the sequence Situating the research-Presenting the research is present in the English corpora, but it tends to be considerably lower in terms of frequency (4.25% in 2007 and 1.61% in 2017). This initial examination indicates that the Italian abstracts are rhetorically less complex than the English ones over the last 20 years. They only present some of the basic structural moves which constitute the different sections of the underlying RA, whereas the English abstracts reflect these moves more closely.

I now examine the five moves in order to explore whether their use and frequency have changed over the past 20 years.

#### **4. Detailed analysis of moves in English and Italian linguistics RA abstracts: A diachronic comparison**

##### **4.1 Move 1 'Situating the research'**

As Table 4 shows, this move is the second most frequent move in the 2007 Italian corpus (61.76%), while it ranks as the third in the 2017 subset (48.57%). As regards the three English subsets (see Table 3), in both the 1997 and 2007 English data it ranks as the third most frequent move (56.41% and 53.19%, respectively), while it ranks the fourth in the 2017 corpus (56.45%). In spite of these different distributions, the writers of the English and Italian abstracts use the same submoves connected to the move, as described by Dos Santos (1996), and no instances of submoves outside the parameters of this model are found in the samples analysed.

Table 7. Frequency distribution of submoves in the 'Situating the research' move in English abstracts over the last 20 years

Move 1 – Situating the research	EN 1997 (n = 39) %	EN 2007 (n = 47) %	EN 2017 (n = 62) %
Submove 1 A – Stating current knowledge and/or	68.18	44.00	57.14
Submove 1 B – Citing previous research and/or	9.09	4.00	5.71
Submove 1 C – Extended previous research and/or	0.00	0.00	0.00
Submove 2 – Stating a problem	9.09	16.00	8.57
Merging of Submove 1 with Submove 2	13.63	36.00	28.57

Table 8. Frequency distribution of submoves in the 'Situating the research' move in Italian abstracts over the last 10 years

Move 1 – Situating the research	IT 2007 (n = 34) %	IT 2017 (n = 35) %
Submove 1 A – Stating current knowledge and/or	76.19	88.23
Submove 1 B – Citing previous research and/or	0.00	0.00
Submove 1 C – Extended previous research and/or	0.00	0.00
Submove 2 – Stating a problem	0.00	0.00
Merging of Submove 1 with Submove 2	23.81	11.76

As can be seen in Tables 7 and 8, for both groups of linguists, the move is most commonly realised through submove 1A 'Stating current knowledge' to identify their research field and topic over the 20-year period. In Italian, this is present in 76.19% of the cases in 2007 and in 88.23% in 2017. In English, the overall occurrence of submove 1A demonstrates a fluctuating trend through the three subsets. It falls significantly from 1997 to 2007 (from 68.18% to 44%, respectively) and then rises in 2017, amounting to 57.14%. Examples from both language corpora are given in (1) and (2).

- (1) The validity of instruments appropriate for eliciting L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) speech act data has been widely debated.

Over the past decade, investigations devoted to establishing L2 learners' socio-pragmatic competence and performance, discourse completion tests (DCTs) have become increasingly common as instruments for comparative analyses of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) socio-pragmatic behaviors. (EN 1997)

- (2) La combinazione italiano-tedesco è stata nel 1983 al centro di uno degli studi più noti, ma in seguito più discussi nell'ambito della ricerca sul bilinguismo precoce. (IT 2007)

[In 1983 the Italian-German combination attracted much attention from scholars interested in research on bilingualism at an early stage.]

For the other submoves in the three English subsets, low frequencies of submove 1B 'Citing previous research' and submove 2 'Stating a problem' are found over the period as a means of realising Move 1, as (3) and (4) illustrate.<sup>2</sup>

- (3) The introductory it pattern, as in it is important to remember the differences, is a functionally diverse pattern of great importance to academic discourse. *However, previous studies have found that using the pattern in an expert-like manner can prove challenging in particular for non-native-speaker students.* (EN 2017)
- (4) *Despite the impact of the ESP genre-based framework of teaching discipline-specific writing to L2 learners, especially to L2 graduate students, the writing performance of learners in such a framework is still not fully explored.* (EN 2007)

The overall occurrences of both submoves show a fluctuating trend through the three English subsets. 1B falls from 1997 (9.09%) to 2007 (4%) and then rises in 2017 (5.71%). Submove 2, on the contrary, rises from 1997 (9.09%) to 2007 (16%) and then drops in 2017 (8.57%).

An interesting point to note is that there is a tendency in both languages to merge submove 1A 'Stating current knowledge' with submove 2 'Stating a problem', as a means of realising Move 1, in order to indicate that the research field under investigation has not been thoroughly successful or complete. In 2007, this rhetorical strategy is reported in 36% of the English cases and in 23.81% of the instances in Italian. But it records a decrease in its use in both languages in 2017, totalling 28.57% and 11.76%, respectively.

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<sup>2</sup> For purposes of illustration, examples of the linguistic exponents are italicised.

All the examples of this move begin with an adversative sentence, mainly introduced by the connectors *however*, *but* and its Italian equivalent *tuttavia*. Two representative examples are given in (5) and (6).

- (5) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes are burgeoning in European school contexts due to the widespread belief that they help to significantly improve foreign language learning while content learning is not negatively affected. *However, some of its purported benefits still need to be empirically confirmed.* (EN 2017)
- (6) Visto il suo ruolo centrale nella comunicazione, l'abilità interattiva nell'uso e apprendimento della lingua 2 è stata ampiamente rivalorizzata dal CEF (2001:14). *Tuttavia, lo spoken interaction spesso non ottiene il focus che merita nei curricula TESOL [...].* (IT 2007)  
[Because of its fundamental role in communication, ability in second language acquisition has been widely reconsidered by CEF (2001:14). However, spoken interaction is often ignored in TESOL syllabuses.]

## 4.2 Move 2 'Presenting the research'

This move is the most frequent in both English and Italian abstracts, showing a steady increase across the periods (EN subsets: 92.30% in 1997, 93.61% in 2007, 98.38% in 2017; IT subsets: 94.11% in 2007, 100% in 2017). A common practice in both diachronic language corpora is that linguists describe the general purpose or an outline of their research immediately after the 'Situating the research' move (EN subsets: 56.41% in 1997, 54.35% in 2007, 56.46% in 2017; IT subsets: 59.37% in 2007, 48.57% in 2017). Although less frequent, another generalised tendency in both languages is to open directly an abstract with this move, thus omitting the 'Situating the research' move (EN subsets: 43.59% in 1997, 45.65% in 2007, 43.54% in 2017; IT subsets: 40.63% in 2007; 51.42% in 2017).

The move is realised in both languages predominantly through two submoves as described by Dos Santos (1996): submove 1A 'Indicating main features' or submove 1B 'Indicating main purpose'. The first option is favoured by writers in both English and Italian data: 77.42% of the abstracts in English over the last 20 years and 64.88% of the Italian abstracts over the last 10 years. While submove 1A remains the preferred option for the writers in both language corpora, the data indicate frequency changes across the periods. As regards the English subsets, there is an increase of 12% in its use from 1997 to 2007 (from 74.35% in 1997 to 86.95% in 2007), but a decrease of 16% in 2017,

falling to 70.96%. In the Italian subsets, on the contrary, its use increases by 17% between 2007 and 2017 (from 56.25% in 2007 to 73.52% in 2017).

As for submove 1A ‘Indicating main features’, in both the English and Italian abstracts there is a preference for using an inanimate noun referring to the present work (*paper, study, research, analisi* [analysis], *contributo* [paper], *saggio* [paper], *articolo* [article], *lavoro* [work]) followed by a verb signalling cognitive processes such as *examine, explore, investigate, analyse, report, present, describe, studiare* [study], *presentare* [present], *descrivere* [describe]. Writers of both English and Italian abstracts favour the practice of using those verbs in the present tense across the periods. There are only two instances of a verb in the future tense in the Italian 2007 subset (*in questo articolo verranno analizzate* [in this article X will be analysed]; *in questo intervento analizzerò* [in this paper I shall/will analyse]), and one instance in English in 2007 (*this paper will examine*). In addition, 13 instances of past tense are found in the English subsets over the last 20 years (1 occ. in 1997, 4 in 2007, 8 in 2017, respectively). Typical linguistic exponents of this submove in English and Italian are: *the study examines, this paper explores, il presente contributo studia* [this paper studies], *questo articolo describe* [this paper describes]. Such usage has been shown to be a typical feature of scientific language (Prelli 1989; Master 2001).

Although much less frequent (only 10 instances in English and three instances in Italian), there are cases in which the writers of English and Italian abstracts use first-person pronouns (*I/io* and *we/noi* for multi-authored abstracts) to introduce their research: *I/we explore, I analyse, we present, analizzerò* [I shall/will analyse]. Interestingly, this use has increased over the decades in English, from 1 instance in 1997 to 4 and 5 instances in 2007 and 2017, respectively. This result is in line with the general increasing trend in RA abstracts of the same discipline during 1990 and 2010 observed by Bondi (2014) and Li (2021). In Italian, on the contrary, the instances are only found in 2007.

As regards submove 1B ‘Indicating main purpose’, the writers of both English and Italian abstracts exhibit a clear preference for using a noun indicating the purpose of their studies across the periods (*the aim of this paper/article, the purpose of this paper, the main objective, l'intento di questo lavoro, scopo di questo articolo* [the aim of this work/article]), followed by verbs that typically mark intentions such as *aim, proporre* [intend]. Only two abstracts in the Italian data contain the subject form of the first-person pronoun in this submove (*ci proponiamo* [we intend]; *in questo contributo intendiamo* [in this paper we intend]). As for the English data, one abstract of the 2017

subset uses *our objective* and, interestingly, no instances of *I/we* pronouns are present. This finding shows that in both English and Italian abstracts writers tend to conceal their presence when stating their purposes. This behaviour is particularly evident in Italian, where the preference is for impersonal forms realised through the impersonal *si* constructions (Renzi et al. 1988), as shown in (7) and (8):

- (7) Nel presente contributo *si intende mettere in evidenza* la relazione che esiste tra genere filmico, strategie traduttive e acquisizione di una lingua straniera. (IT 2007)  
[In the present article we intend to highlight the relationship between film, translation strategies and foreign language acquisition.]
- (8) In questo studio *si presenta* una proposta di intervento didattico mirato alla consapevolezza degli aspetti pragmatico-prosodici in apprendenti di italiano lingua seconda. (IT 2017)  
[In this study we present a teaching proposal aiming at developing awareness of pragmatic-prosodic aspects in learners of Italian as second language.]

As can be seen in the examples, although the *si* constructions indicate an unspecified referent, it is clear that the voice coincides with that of the writer. In explaining their use, I cite evidence from a study by Molino (2010: 95) on the use of personal and impersonal authorial references in English and Italian RAs, which showed that these constructions “have to do with the need to background the agent in order to guarantee an impersonal and objective tone which is expected in Italian in formal registers such as scientific writing”. As observed by Molino, their use can be compared to the so-called *pluralis majestatis*. In terms of frequency changes over the decades under investigation, the use of *si* shows no variation: the overall occurrence is fairly similar and stable over the last 20 years: 10 instances in 2007 and 11 in 2017.

### 4.3 Move 3 ‘Describing the methodology’

This move shows a substantial increase of 38% in its use in English over the last 20 years, rising to 81.45% in the 2017 data (from 41.02% in 1997 to 44.68% and 81.45% in 2007 and 2017, respectively). This evolution may indicate that authors are more oriented towards a specialised readership. Although much less frequent, the move exhibits an increase of 2% in the Italian data: from 38.23% in 2007 to 40% in 2017.

Methodology is the most frequently occurring move after the 'Presenting the research' move in 78.56% of the three subsets analysed in English and in 74.18% in Italian over the decades. Two representative examples are given in (9) and (10):

- (9) *The study involved two business English courses for university students in Hong Kong. The data sources included questionnaire surveys and samples of learners' language produced during role-plays.* (EN 2017)
- (10) *La complessa problematica è esemplificata attraverso lo studio delle parole chiave in un corpus di testi di argomento turistico [...].* (IT 2007)  
[This complex topic is investigated through the analysis of keywords using a corpus of texts on tourism.]

However, on other occasions, and as reported by other authors such as Dos Santos (1996) and Anderson and Maclean (1997), this move merges with the 'Presenting the research' move, into a single sentence, as the following examples illustrate:

- (11) *The present study, based on a corpus of simulated sales negotiations involving American and Japanese participants, focuses on differences in back channelling, repair, repetition, pausing, and private speech among the two groups of subjects, relating these features to norm differences in negotiating and to the management of face wants.* (EN 1997)
- (12) *Attraverso l'analisi di (n)ostalgiche pubblicità tedesco-orientali degli anni Novanta, ci si propone qui di esemplificare come la semiotica possa contribuire alla comprensione della relazione tra testi e cultura.* (IT 2007)  
[Through the analysis of East-German nostalgic ads of the '90s, we aim at illustrating how semiotics can contribute to an understanding of the relation between text and culture.]

This merging is reported in 21.44% of the English abstracts over the decades and in 25.82% of the 2007 and 2017 Italian subsets, suggesting that this strategy is favoured by the linguists of both languages due, perhaps, to lack of space.

We also find that in three instances in Italian and one in English this move merges with the 'Summarizing the results' move into a single sentence in the 2007 data:



- (13) *Two hundred and fifty-one questionnaires completed by graduates from 1998 to 2000 revealed a distinct profile for competent language users compared with incompetent users, based on the six-level Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [...] (EN 2007)*
- (14) *Un campionamento da diversi corpora di italiano L2 mostra infatti un'alta percentuale di errori e di omissioni nella selezione dell'ausiliare anche per quanto riguarda i core verbs. (IT 2007)*  
 [A pilot study of different corpora of Italian L2 does reveal a high percentage of mistakes and omission of auxiliary verb. This is also the case with core verbs.]

Just as in English applied linguistics abstracts, as described by Dos Santos (1996), linguistic features that typically characterise the 'Describing the methodology' move in the English abstracts analysed over the last 20 years are the past tense and passive voice, as shown in (15):

- (15) Intermediate to advanced adult ESL learners (N = 33) *participated* in the study. *They completed* four picture-based narrative tasks under the two planning conditions over a two-week period via text-chat. Two tasks *were used* as experimental tasks to gauge immediate planning effect on L2 production and the other two as new tasks to gauge L2 development (EN 2017).

In terms of frequency distribution, linguists appear to prefer the passive voice. However, it shows significant diachronic variation. It exhibits a remarkably higher presence in the earliest decade (86.6% in 1997) than in the two later decades, in which the percentage drops sharply (52.38% in 2007 and 46.15 in 2017). In 2007 and 2017, writers also use the past tense (9.6% and 30.75% respectively) and the present tense (38.09% and 17.94% respectively).

Italian linguists, on the contrary, opt for the use of the present tense, as shown in (16) and (17):

- (16) *I dati analizzati consistono* in produzioni testuali orali e comprendono sia testi in lingua materna (L1) sia testi in lingua seconda/straniera (L2). (IT 2007)  
 [The data consist of oral texts in L1 as well as L2.]
- (17) *Il corpus su cui si basa il lavoro proviene* da un progetto di pragmatica transculturale dedicato all'atto linguistico del rifiuto a un invito. (IT 2017)  
 [The corpus on which the paper is based derives from a pragmatic transcultural project devoted to the speech act of refusing an invitation.]

Only one instance in which Italian linguists use the *passato prossimo* (formally equivalent to the present perfect) is found in the 2007 subset, as (18) illustrates:

- (18) *Abbiamo allestito un corpus di titoli di giornali di economia inglesi e spagnoli al fine di esaminare il linguaggio figurato utilizzato in entrambe le culture. (IT 2007)*  
 [We collected a corpus of English and Spanish newspapers headlines and aimed at exploring the use of figurative language across the two cultures.]

A high level of similarity can, therefore, be observed between this move in the English and Italian linguistics abstracts across the decades under investigation.

#### 4.4 Move 4 ‘Summarizing the results’

This move exhibits significant diachronic variation in its occurrence across the two language corpora over the decades under investigation. The Italian abstracts show a much lower frequency with 52.94% and 51.42% in the 2007 and 2017 subsets compared to 80.85% and 100% in the 2007 and 2017 abstracts in English. Apart from this difference, the results are stated most frequently in both languages by means of a sentence beginning with a noun which makes reference to the function of this move (*results, analysis, risultati* [results], *analisi* [analysis]), followed by verbs signalling results such as *show, reveal, indicate, find, rivelare* [reveal], *mostrare* [show]. The only distinctive feature that is worth noting is that the prevalent practice of using such verbs in the present and past tense or passive voice in the English abstracts (*showed, reveal, indicate, it was found that, it is shown that*) is not so clearly favoured by the Italian linguists. These show a significantly higher incidence in the use of the present tense (*rivelano* [reveal], *mostra* [shows]), representing 94.44% of all the tenses in 2007 and 88.88% in 2017. The passive construction is used in only one instance in this move in 2007 (*viene mostrato che* [it is shown that]) and in three instances in 2017. In terms of the specific tenses in the three English subsets, the present tense has been predominant all over the decades. It accounts for 33% in 1997, but increases to 44% in the two later subsets (77.5% in 2007 and 77.04% in 2017, respectively). Over the last 20 years, frequencies of the past tense fall by 9% (from 25.92% in 1997 to 16.12% and 19.67 in 2007 and 2017, respectively). The passive voice exhibits a greater presence in the earliest decade (40.74% in 1997) than in the two later decades, in which it drops sharply (10% in 2007 and 3.27% in 2017).

Differences across the two groups of texts can also be noted in the type of personal references used by the linguists in this move. So far, we have seen that in both the English and Italian abstracts, first-person references are not the favoured choice. But this is not the case with this move in the three English subsets, where on some occasions the main findings are presented by means of a sentence beginning with personal pronouns so that writers promote themselves in the text (4 occ. of *I* and 4 occ. of *we* in co-authored abstracts in 2007; 1 occ. of *I*, 7 occ. of *we* and 5 occ. of *our* in 2017). These figures show that co-authors are now becoming more likely to intrude into their abstracts than single authors.

- (19) *We found that* these texts all have a three-part structure consisting of introduction, body, and conclusion. (EN 2007)
- (20) *Our main results indicate* that despite the fact that English majors are motivated to enhance their abilities in professional writing, only a third of them seem to possess the ability and willingness to control their writing processes despite the fact that self-regulatory strategy use is linked to an increased level of motivation and self-efficacy and to a decreased level of writing anxiety. (EN 2017)

On the contrary, in Italian no instances of personal pronouns are found in this move in the 2007 and 2017 subsets. As observed for Move 2 'Presenting the research', Italian linguists seem more eager to employ impersonal *si* constructions (5 occurrences in 2007 and 9 occurrences in 2017):

- (21) Dall'esame *si osserva* la coesistenza e l'interdipendenza degli elementi linguistici dell'indeterminatezza e della precisione linguistica nei contratti, nonostante questi ultimi non debbano rispondere espressamente alla necessità di garantire la più generale applicabilità. (IT 2007)  
[The analysis shows the coexistence and inter-dependence of elements such as linguistic indeterminacy and precision in contracts, even though these kinds of texts do not have to meet the need of conveying general applicability to the extent that laws, rules and statutes must.]
- (22) A supporto e complemento della sezione operativa in cui si guida il lettore nell'analisi, *si presentano* i risultati di un lavoro di ricerca glottodidattica nel quale la scheda di osservazione proposta è stata applicata a una selezione di manuali di diverse L2. (IT 2017)

[To support and complement the Section in which the reader is guided in the analysis, the results of a language teaching study on a selection of different L2 textbooks using the proposed observation grid are presented.]

Again, the overall impression is that the preference is for a more objective and detached interpersonal style in Italian writing.

The ‘promotional’ aspect of the abstract as one of the most important features of the genre (Dahl 2000; Hyland 2000) is also signalled through overt evaluative lexical items related to the promotion of findings in the English corpus. The adjectives *significant*, *important*, *interesting*, *useful*, and the adverbs *significantly*, *interestingly* are the commonest. Their use culminates in 2007, accounting for 12 occurrences, compared with 3 instances in 1997 and 6 in 2017. The same result was noted in a study by Melander et al. (1997) on the use of persuasive strategies in RA abstracts, which showed that American linguists used promotional elements in such texts.

- (23) Analysis of the corpus reveals that elaboration is a complex and *important* rhetorical function in academic writing, and that both its use and meanings vary according to discipline. (EN 2007)
- (24) Results evidence an *interesting* finding regarding the full-sentence title construction which appears not only as a generic peculiarity of RPs but also as a disciplinary peculiarity of Biology RP titles. (EN 2007)

In the Italian corpus no instances of evaluative language are found.

#### 4.5 Move 5 ‘Discussing the research’

A significant difference exists in the frequency of occurrence of this move in the Italian and English linguistics abstracts across the periods, as it is present in 8.82% and 11.42% of the 2007 and 2017 Italian subsets in contrast to 48.93% and 35.48% of the 2007 and 2017 English abstracts. The move is most commonly realised through submove 1 ‘Drawing conclusions’ as Dos Santos (1996) calls it. A common linguistic strategy used by the linguists in both languages to signal the initiation of this move consists in explicitly using a noun which makes reference to the function of this move, e.g. *the article/paper concludes*, *the paper suggests*, *lo studio suggerisce* [the study suggests]; *si conclude che* [we conclude that]. Typical verbs in this move in both languages are *suggest*, *conclude*, *discuss*, *suggerire* [suggest], *concludere* [conclude], used predominantly in the present tense. In English,

the present tense significantly rises from 1997 (45%) to 2007 (73.07%) and then slightly falls in the following decade (72.72% in 2017). The passive voice is also used and shows significant variation over the three periods: it displays a higher frequency in 1997 (50%) than the present tense, but then sharply drops in the following decades (26.92% and 27.27% in 2007 and 2017, respectively). The typical verb used is *suggest* (*it is suggested that*). As regards the Italian data, in the seven Italian ‘Discussing the research’ moves (3 in 2007 and 4 in 2017), there are only instances of verbs in the present tense.

Similar to the linguistic realisation of this move in the English samples analysed, there are cases (only 10 instances) in which linguists present their conclusions by means of a sentence beginning with personal pronouns like *I/we* followed by verbs such as *argue*, *suggest*, *conclude*, introducing an argumentative proposition. This gives a good indication of the writer’s role in writing the abstract. His/her role is that of a writer who clearly assumes an ‘arguer’ role, to borrow Fløttum’s (2003) terminology. By using these verbs, the writer indicates her/his position in relation to his/her own research findings.

- (25) Basing our assumptions on the reported pedagogical skills gained by the trainee teachers and the favorable reactions of the Precourse ESOL students, *we suggest* that such a joining of forces is of unequivocal benefit to both parties. (EN 1997)
- (26) Based on the analysis, *I argue that* the significance of genre-based learning can be captured more fully through observing how learners recontextualize their genre awareness in their writing. (EN 2007)
- (27) *We conclude* that intense engagement with a foreign language may put the native language at risk for temporary attrition, but studying with a foreign-language as the medium of instruction does not. (EN 2017)

The very clear signalling of author position in the English linguistics abstracts corroborates the general picture emerging from other studies that “the English linguists take on the arguer role in the abstracts to a great extent” (Dahl 2009: 131).

Although less frequent (6 instances over the decades), we also find that the English linguists use submove 2 ‘Giving recommendations’, as described in Dos Santos’s (1996) model, with the function of outlining suggestions for future research:

- (28) The results are explained in terms of the working memory constraint, and *directions of further research are discussed*. (EN 1997)
- (29) The paper concludes with a discussion of the utility of ESP work in medical discourse and *sets a research agenda for further work* in the communicative setting and tasks of IMGs. (EN 2007)

## 5. Conclusion

This diachronic study shows that the move structure of RA abstracts written in Italian in the field of linguistics conforms to the international conventions based on the norms of the English academic discourse community. However, they are rhetorically less complex than the English abstracts. Most of the Italian abstracts adopt a two-move model, whereas the English ones exhibit a tendency for a four-move pattern. We could account for these differences on the basis of several socio-cultural factors: different intellectual styles and cultural patterns, or the influence (or lack) of academic writing instruction.

More specifically, the analysis reveals that the generic structure of the English RA abstract has a diachronic evolution towards a “mini-article”, as Gillaerts and Van de Velde (2010: 136) call it, in the sense that there has been a steady increase in the use of the four-move model ‘Situating the research-Presenting the research-Describing the methodology-Summarizing the results’ over the last 20 years. This result tends to confirm Gillaerts’s (2013: 58) claim that “the abstract has become more important for information retrieval”. The tendency for the four-move model thus reflects the “informative” function of the abstract (Lorés Sanz 2004). In the Italian data, on the contrary, there is a tendency for a two-move abstract ‘Situating the research-Presenting the research’, with frequencies that have been fairly uniform over the last 10 years. The fact that Italian scholars give more importance to ‘Situating and Presenting the research’ rather than the other moves may respond to their intent of being more “indicative” (Lorés Sanz 2004). But this may depend on the context of publication and the relationship between the writer and the discourse community. Considering that abstracts in Italian address a small community and are included in local or national publications, Italian writers may not see themselves in competition with their peers, thus placing less emphasis on the need to negotiate their findings with their colleagues. They seem to be more interested in situating their research in context and outlining the purposes of the research. In contrast, as the abstracts for international publication have a much wider audience

than the Italian abstracts, writers feel the need to be persuasive as there is more competition to publish and consequently a greater need to justify their work and meet the expectations and norms of the international discourse community. Novel ideas and originality may have to be emphasised more strongly when scholars address a wider, international readership than when they write for a smaller, national peer group.

Finally, a cross-linguistic feature where we see the clearest difference between the two diachronic language corpora is the use of personal references. There is little use of personal pronouns in the Italian abstracts over the past 10 years. Only five instances are found in comparison with 42 instances in the abstracts in English in the 20-year span. The Italian linguists seem to prefer a more detached interpersonal style by opting for impersonal *si* constructions (41 instances). Hence it appears that, compared to their colleagues writing in English, they tend to be invisible. The choice not to appear as visible authors may be related to the Italian style of formal language or to the need to produce a text which conforms to the level of writer invisibility expected within a particular discourse community. Such trends match those of Bondi and Nocella (this issue), who found that Italian academic writing tends to avoid personalization, while Anglophone writing norms seem to be more open.

The specificity and small size of the corpora analysed here calls for more diachronic investigation across disciplines which could explore the cultural/linguistic differences identified so as to gain a better understanding of the complex interplay between “big” and “small” disciplinary cultures (Holliday 1999; Atkinson 2004). Nevertheless, it can be tentatively concluded that the generic variation observed through the two language corpora might reflect differences in cultural writing conventions, but also differences in the relationship between the writer and the discourse community s/he addresses. As rightly noted by Hyland (2000: 75), the variety of patterns represents the writer’s choice of “how best to convince others of their work, given the particular circumstances of their research, their individual goals and considerations of discipline membership”.

Editorial policies about abstract writing of the linguistics journals from which the abstracts have been sampled may influence our findings to some degree. Further work might take into consideration editorial guidelines that the RA abstract authors are asked to comply with from cross-disciplinary and diachronic perspectives so as to explore whether discipline-specific diachronic variations exist. The study might also be expanded by data from interviews conducted with a small sample of authors to better understand how they approach their writing within the boundaries of academic conventions. In

any case, as Schmied et al. (this issue) suggest, academic writers alone are responsible for deciding whether they find trends functionally convenient in their discourse communities and follow, or whether they see them as unnecessary universals and reject them.

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