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English MA theses at a German university before and after the Bologna reform: Comparing global rhetorical structures and stance in Linguistics and Cultural Studies[1]

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ABSTRACT

This contribution analyses changing practices of academic writing with special reference to MA theses. It considers theses as the central genre that introduces students to independent academic writing and thinking and the first step towards an academic writing career. A small empirical case study compares 20 MA theses written at Chemnitz University of Technology after the introduction of the Bologna reform (2012-20) with 20 Magister theses written before (2002-12). Two well-known metadiscourse variables are analysed: global rhetorical structures, i.e., IMRAD, from Introduction/issue, Methodology, Research (question) to Discussion or conclusion, and the expression of personal evaluation through metalanguage, i.e. stance. The focus is on a particularly interesting stance variable, evaluative *that* complement clauses (e.g., *suggest that, claim that*) and their functions indicating different strengths of authorial stance. A corpus-linguistic analysis reveals important differences between the English subdisciplines. The MA theses show similar teaching-induced trends, though to a different degree. Linguistics follows the patterns and perceived standards in international social science models more than Cultural Studies. This can be interpreted as functional adaptation to changing rhetorical situations in a wide social context.

Keywords: MA theses, global rhetorical structures, stance, *that* complements, explicitness, writer identity, Bologna reform.

1. Introduction

This contribution focusses on the beginning of academic writing at German (and European) universities, the longest texts (60+ pages) in Humanities studies in Germany, called Magister thesis before and Master theses after the Bologna reform. These texts are the first research attempts by young graduates, who have to come to terms with their own personal topic, combine a digested literature review with their own analyses, and deliver a complex readable pattern of sections and paragraphs to their supervisors. Thus their thinking and writing is narrowed down from a seemingly infinite variation of structures to what they perceive as the most presentable text in a given institutional context. These theses usually anticipate their first research articles, which have been the focus of academic writing research over the last few decades. This is the formative period for academic novices, in which they experiment with developing their identity as academic writers and which (together with their PhD supervision afterwards) is the beginning of "shaping rhetorical subjects" (cf. Paré – Starke-Meyerring – McAlpine 2011).

One specific feature of the genre has to be mentioned here: in theory, MA students write for a wider academic audience; in practice they may attempt to please their supervisors and thus reproduce their models to fulfil their expectations probably more than when writing for a journal or conference. This is important for developments in academic genres, which have become more dialogic, both rhetorically and structurally, at the surface (with pronouns addressing the reader) and at a deeper level of organisation (with argumentative structures). As other qualification texts from BA to PhD theses, the dialogue widens, until other core genres like conference presentations, reviews and journal articles address theoretically the entire research community in the subdiscipline. English departments in Germany usually include at least the four sections Literature and Cultural Studies, Linguistics and Methodology and, although there may be considerable overlap (especially between the first two and the second two), they all have their specific research practices and functional conventions and thus are called (sub-)disciplines here (Schmied 2015: 11). In the overview by Pérez-Llantada (2021: 28), MA theses are not listed, because they are written not only before the tenure-track genres, but also even before the early career-related genres, which start with PhD theses; hence, MA theses are under-researched, although they are the decisive test whether a student should venture an academic career.

The Bologna reform (since its declaration in 1999) offered the opportunity to modernise degree programmes more radically than before, not only taking account of the teaching experience at home, but also of discussions with European colleagues:

> The Bologna Declaration … aims to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that … stipulates comprehensible and comparable degrees, a two-cycle system of study programmes, the introduction of a credit transfer system (ECTS), quality assurance mechanisms and enhanced mobility, and the development of an European dimension in HE [Higher Education]. (Kuhlee 2017: 301)

The second cycle was explicitly defined as scientific, thus, the MA theses analysed here represent the beginning of the personal development as young scientific writers. The reform included an inherent tension between creating a uniform EHEA and maintaining the diversity of national HE systems. The resulting simultaneous process of convergence with and divergence from Anglophone academic writing norms led to hybridization (Péréz-Llantada 2013: 264) or 'glocalization' (Swales 2004: 11; Sancho Guinda 2015: 29) of the discourse of non-Anglophone scholars. The diversity of culture-specific non-native variants of academic English was particularly aptly grasped by the term 'alternative academic written English*es*' (Mauranen – Pérez-Llantada – Swales 2010: 671).

However, apart from globalisation, digitalisation has also changed higher education in Germany: online access to different academic genres has made it much easier to find models for discipline-specific theses, self-study materials and complete lectures on academic writing, etc. All this may influence students' rhetorical choices and cannot be controlled in a small corpus. The trend towards digitalisation is linked to the trend to Americanisation, for instance in text processing, where American spelling and style rules are default, and in style sheets, where APA conventions have become standard in Linguistics like MLA conventions in Literary Studies.

Finally, recent trends in scientific work have focused on replicability, e.g., in the context of the Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure (CLARIN) as part of the European Open Science Cloud. Here new digital affordances are linked with new political perspectives that see academic knowledge not as a commercial commodity, but as a general public good (Luzón – Pérez-Llantada 2019). This cumulative pressure of technological and societal challenges on all members of the academic

community to adapt to these trends has caused accelerated publication and citation cycles in a "publish in English or perish" world (Pérez-Llantada 2012), which is particularly challenging for young non-native writers. This has led to altered academic discourse trends and developments: especially young authors have to aim at enhancing their visibility and credibility as members of a research community by increasing their promotional writer identity, producing individual texts characterised by informativeness and surveyability. This can be achieved by adding features of explicitness (i.e., *that* clauses, stance markers, etc.) and reader-oriented metadiscourse (see below, elaborated in section 3.3), following modern professional (sub-) disciplinary specific conventions in dominant discourse communities and prestigious journals, especially when texts are presented and read only in digital form in direct competition with similar publications.

2. Pre- and post-Bologna systems at German universities: Conventions

Although the length and preparation time of the final theses can vary slightly across German universities and disciplines, the general structure of the Magister, Bachelor and Master programmes were harmonised by documents compiled by selected university professors in the name of the German Rectors Conference (HRK). Table 1 is based on the study regulations of the English Studies programme at Chemnitz University of Technology, as the data analysed in this paper come from the same university as part of the ChemCorpus (Schmied – Dheskali 2015). This database comprises student academic works over 20 years and is especially useful for the internal analysis of metadiscourse (Schmied 2015).

Table 1. Magister, Bachelor and Master studies structure at Chemnitz University of Technology

Magister	Bachelor
• Introductory studies (1st-4th semester) • Main studies (5th-8th semester) • Magister thesis (80-120 p., 24? weeks)	• Main studies (1st-5th semester) • Bachelor thesis (6th semester, 40-60 p.,16 weeks)
	Master
	• Main studies (1st-3rd semester) • Master thesis (4th semester, 60-80 p., 23 weeks)

Before the Bologna reform, the most common university qualification as a first degree in Humanities was Magister, which lasted at least four years and consisted of four semesters of introductory studies up to an "intermediate exam", followed by at least four semesters of main studies. After a sufficient number of course certificates were collected from a wide range of options, the studies were completed by a Magister thesis as well as written and oral exams. After the Bologna reform, a two-tier structure was implemented: Bachelor with six semesters of main studies including a Bachelor thesis in the final semester, and Master with four semesters of main studies including a Master's thesis in the final semester. The new system was modularised in a European Credit Transfer System (with 30 points every semester) to make it more coherent or strict and to adapt study times and content to international European standards to make international mobility simple and fully integrated. Apart from the obvious length differences (more years, but shorter theses), the teaching programme has undergone changes in structure and general academic skills, especially in academic writing instruction. The effects of these changes are explored in this paper by comparing 20 Magister with 20 Master's theses, written by students with German as their major (academic) language and mostly as their first language (18/20) in non-native, academic *lingua franca* English in the subdisciplines (and MA specialisations) Linguistics and Cultural Studies. This choice is motivated by departmental conventions, but also by the focus of Cultural Studies on native English cultures from a literary or social science perspective and the focus of Linguistics on a more global empirical perspective.

3. Review of key concepts

3.1 Global rhetorical structures: Moves

Global rhetorical structures (Pérez-Llantada 2013) have been analysed and compared since Swales' seminal work (e.g., 1990, 2004). His Creating a Research Space [C.A.R.S.] Model is based upon his analysis of journal articles (representing a variety of discipline-based writing practices) and attempts to explain and describe the organizational pattern of writing the introduction to scholarly research studies. It has been expanded to a complete sequence of rhetorical moves. It has also been used in teaching for decades (e.g., Swales – Feak 2012 [1994], cf. Pérez-Llantada 2021: 161-197). Table 2 presents the model outlined by Pho (2013: 31) and also the Discussion/Conclusion moves by Yang and Allison (2003: 378). Although the database and the categories

of research articles and their abstracts may not always be identical with that for MA theses, they are, slightly adapted, a good basis for our comparison.

Table 2. Research article moves (adapted based on Pho 2013: 31 and Yang & Allison 2003: 378)

Section	Moves	
Abstract	M1: Situating the research	
	M2: Presenting the research	
	M3: Describing the methodology	
	M4: Summarizing the findings	
	M5: Discussing the research	
Introduction	M6: Establishing a territory	
	M7: Establishing a niche	
	M8: Presenting the present work	
Methods	M9: Describing the data and data collection procedure	
	M10: Describing the data analysis procedure	
Results	M11: Preparing for the presentation of the Results section	
	M12: Reporting specific/individual results	
	M13: Commenting on specific results	
	M14: Summarizing results	
Discussion–Conclusions	Pho (2013: 31)	Yang & Allison (2003: 378)
	M15: Preparing for the presentation of the Discussion section	M15: Background information
	M16: Summarizing the study	M16: Reporting results
	M17: Highlighting overall research outcome	M17: Summarising results
	M18: Discussing the findings of the study	M18: Commenting on results
	M19: Drawing conclusions of the study/Stating research conclusions	M19: Summarizing the study
	M20: Evaluating the study	M20: Evaluating the study
		M21: Deductions from the research

Like in many other European universities, these principles of research writing were introduced at Chemnitz University of Technology with

the new 2-year MA programme in the English department in 2006. They were taught to all MA students in their first semester, but they were not emphasised by all supervisors in the practical research seminars at the end of the programme when students wrote their Master's theses. A teaching example is Table 3, which summarises the research article AIMAC structure, based on Schmied's revised IMRAD model (Schmied 2015: 6).

Table 3. Research article AIMAC structure – revised IMRAD model (based on Schmied 2014: 6)

Structure	Substructure	Key lexemes/phrases (as indicators)
A = abstract	Keywords in context	Focus, discuss, approach
I = issue	New	Not enough research yet
	Relevant	Important, practical application
	Focused	Concentrate, emphasise, purpose
M = methodology	Previous research, i.e., lit. review incl. evaluation	Concept developed, review, refer to, proceed to, claim
	Hypotheses possible?	Research question
	Data base	Corpus, data collection
	Tests/procedure	Calculate
A = analysis	Examples as evidence	Illustrate, show, prove
	Statistical tables as summaries	Table, figure, diagram, graph, bar
	Significance to generalise	Significant
C = conclusion	Summary	In conclusion, finally/at last, we have shown, discussed above
	Interpretation	This proves that
	Contextualisation	In a wider perspective, apply
	Limitations	More data, beyond the scope
	Outlook	Further research is necessary, predict, application of results

Finally, the new emerging pattern of rhetorical structures is partly reflected in the titles and subtitles of the linguistics theses. Data come to the fore, occasionally through an explanatory prototypical title quotation (1) and partly

through explicit mention of well-known international data collections (2) or parallel own compilations (3):

(1)   "Want to see more?" Null subjects in Facebook status updates (MAL12Ft_DB)

(2)   Modals in Kenyan English: A contrastive corpus analysis of modals in the ICE-K and the ICE-GB (MGL04Ft_KS)

(3)   Sentence Connectors in English Academic Writing – An Empirical Comparison of Research Articles by German and Native English Writers (MGL08Ft_EW)

Table 4 shows the clear differences between the MA theses in the two periods, which have to be seen parallel to the developments in related genres. Thus, it is not surprising that the Czech research articles (Dontcheva-Navratilova this issue) show a parallel development in the functional focus (Table 4) as well as the formal complexity of titles (Table 5). The increasing complexity of thesis titles can be seen in the choice of subtitles and complex phrases with compounds and other noun phrase complexities in general – all can be seen in a Linguistics title like (4), whereas simple titles can still be found in Cultural Studies (5). Even so, Cultural Studies titles have generally become longer and thereby more similar to those of Linguistics, as evident from Figure 1 and examples (6) and (7). This increases the specificity of a text and the individuality of young writers, features that seem desirable to those who wish to establish an academic identity in today's competitive academic world.

(4)   Corpus-Linguistic and Cognitive Approaches to Determiner Usage in Chinese Student Writing. Testing the Fluctuation Hypothesis (MAL16Mt_SA)

(5)   Devolution and National Identity in Wales and Scotland (MAC11Mt_ES)

(6)   Britain and the transatlantic slave trade (MGC07Ft_ID)

(7)   Lobbyism during the Prohibition Era of the United States – The Impact of Organized Crime on Federal Politics between 1919 and 1933 (MAC14Mt_MM)

Table 4. Content-related features of MA theses titles

Degree	Topic	Topic + Dataset	Topic + Example	Topic + Method	Topic + Results	Topic + Conclusion
Cultural studies	**20**	**8**	**2**	**3**	**8**	**1**
Magister	10	3	1	1	4	1
Master	10	5	1	2	4	0
Linguistics	**20**	**14**	**3**	**13**	**6**	**1**
Magister	10	6	0	7	4	0
Master	10	8	3	6	2	1
Grand Total	**40**	**22**	**5**	**16**	**14**	**2**

Table 5. Formal features of MA theses titles

Degree	Nominal	Prep. phr.	V-*ing* phr.	Compound	Subtitle	Length (M | SD)	
Cultural studies	**9**	**18**	**4**	**4**	**15**	**12.3**	**4.28**
Magister	3	8	2	2	7	10.9	3.70
Master	6	10	2	2	8	13.7	4.55
Linguistics	**14**	**18**	**4**	**13**	**18**	**14.6**	**5.07**
Magister	7	9	1	5	8	14.5	3.84
Master	7	9	3	8	10	14.7	6.29
Grand Total	**23**	**36**	**8**	**17**	**33**	**13.45**	**4.78**

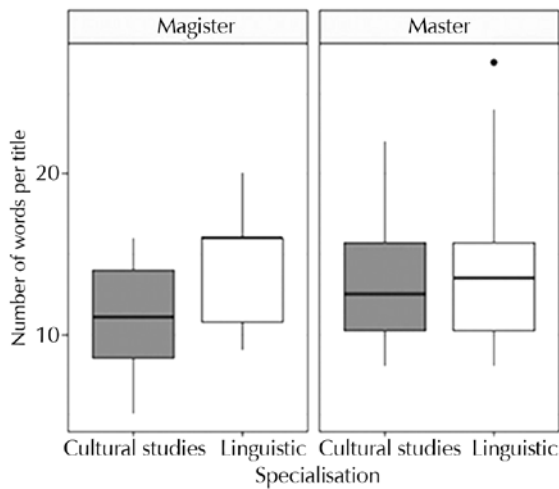

Figure 1. Word count of Magister and Master's thesis titles in Cultural studies and Linguistics

3.2 Stance

Stance indicates the emphasizing or softening of a speech act's illocutionary force (Holmes 1984: 346). It can be classified in terms of affect (positive or negative stance) and evidentiality (certainty or doubt) (Biber – Finegan 1989: 98). It channels the writer's textual 'voice'– how writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments (Hyland 2005a: 176). It conveys "attitudes that a speaker has about information, how certain they are about its veracity, how they obtained access to the information, and what perspective they are taking" (Biber 2006: 87). Stance establishes dialogistic positioning (Martin – White 2005: 97), a negotiation of the discussed information and an implicit dialogue with the scientific community.

        In the vast literature on stance, there are different views on the scope of stance. In appraisal theory, all utterances are seen to be in some way stanced or attitudinal (Martin – White 2005: 92). Other works identify emotive and nonemotive controlling words (Pho 2013: 37), which implies an existing neutrality. Expressing attitude or stance can be viewed as an act of evaluation (Thompson – Hunston 2000). Evaluation has been widely studied; for instance, attention has been paid to how peer reviews and book reviews express praise and criticism; here Diani (2004, 2017) showed that this is often achieved through adversative connectors. Evaluation in professional digital communication is another interesting case – while consumer reviews obviously differ generically from academic open peer reviews, they share similarities in the negotiation of praise and criticism through concession (Ivanova 2020; Schmied 2021). Although Thompson and Hunston (2000) could not include recent developments in professional digital communication, the close connection between stance and evaluation was mentioned explicitly in their definition:

> evaluation is the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values. (Thompson – Hunston 2000: 5)

3.3 Stance in *that* complement clauses

In the long lists of metadiscourse features (e.g., Hyland 2005b: 218-224), *that* complement clauses are hardly analysed quantitatively, although or because

they are used very frequently. Even though authors may be less aware of this stance feature, it is a particularly interesting variable in metadiscourse corpus-linguistic analyses (Hyland – Tse [2005a] and Kim – Crosthwaite [2019]), since they are used more often in disciplines that place greater emphasis on authors generating their arguments than on authors presenting "facts". From a functional perspective, *that* complement clauses are powerful structures commonly used for evaluation through extraposition. Hyland and Tse (2005a) refer to them as "evaluative that-structures" and define them as "a grammatical pattern in which a *that* complement clause is contained in a higher super-ordinate clause to complete its construction and which together project the writer's attitudes or ideas about something" (Hyland – Tse 2005a: 40). The evaluated entity is postponed through extraposition (Quirk et al. 1985: 1391-1393). Example (8) from a Master thesis shows the evaluated entity in the complement clause (*that meronymy and hyponym are not used in their data…*) after the critical evaluation (*claim*) and its source (*the researchers*).

(8)   the researchers claim | that meronymy and hyponym are not used in their data… (MA16Ft_JZ)

        super-ordinate (matrix) clause: source and evaluation | complement clause: evaluated entity

Biber (2006: 106) found that *that* complement clauses generally are more common in the spoken university registers than in the written registers, where, more specifically, certainty verbs (*know that*) and likelihood verbs (*guess that*) were most common. Related research on the use of reporting verbs to express stance and evaluation in academic writing can be found on expert and learner level. Bondi (2009) investigated monologic and dialogic evaluation through reporting verbs in book reviews and found cultural variation: the English corpus had more dialogic representations, while the Italian had more monologic expressions. In student writing, Dontcheva-Navratilova (2008) found increased use and variation of reporting verbs in Czech English graduate theses compared to undergraduate theses. These research results are relevant here when we want to observe whether these trends are confirmed in our theses.

In the rich literature, we find at least three major frameworks on the expression of stance through *that* clauses – the categorisations of Martin and White (2005: 97-98), Hyland and Tse (2005b: 134), and Pho (2013: 37-38). In our analysis, we take the most recent complex classification system by Pho (2013), although the earlier ones would probably have produced similar

results. The framework's structure is visualized in Figure 2. According to Pho (2013), emotivity (positive/negative/neutral) "refers to the writer's attitude or feeling towards the proposition or the original authors" (Pho 2013: 38). A word like *show* expresses a positive attitude as in example (9) while *claim* expresses a negative attitude (10). There are also nonemotive words like *state* (11) and ambiguous words which depend on the context, for instance *imply* can express a negative implication like a hidden suggestion (12) or a positive implication like a suggested research finding (13).
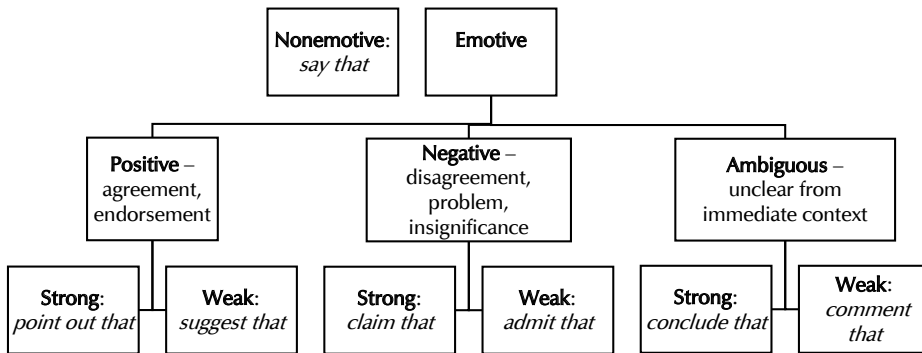
Nonemotive: *say that*	Emotive

Positive – agreement, endorsement	**Negative** – disagreement, problem, insignificance	**Ambiguous** – unclear from immediate context
Strong: *point out that* / **Weak:** *suggest that*	**Strong:** *claim that* / **Weak:** *admit that*	**Strong:** *conclude that* / **Weak:** *comment that*

Figure 2. Categorisation of stance expressed through *that* clauses based on Pho (2013: 37-38)

(9) The present findings *show that* object coordinates conjoining 2sg. you and 1sg. I/me are far less prone to non-normative case marking than subject coordinates and largely employ standard objective case. (MA12Mt_SS)

(10) Connectionists *claim that* the mind contains network maps from the stems of all verbs to the past tense forms of their representatives (Patterson, McClelland; 2002: 464). (MA14Ft_MD)

(11) Other sources *state that* the so-called "punishment attacks" have also been an issue in local papers from time to time. (MAC13Ft_CW)

(12) Although their research tends to *imply that* writing quality can be measured by analysing grammatical and lexical cohesion, the linguists are aware that other factors have an influence on quality as well (genre, audience, etc.). (MAL16Ft_JZ)

(13) Still, the results of the analysis *imply that* high quality texts use more lexical cohesive devices and more complex ones than low quality texts do. (MAL16Ft_JZ)

Controlling words are also classified in terms of the commitment to the proposition into strong and weak words (Pho 2013: 39) – e.g., *demonstrate* expresses strong commitment (14) whereas *suggest* expresses weak commitment (15).

(14)   With respect to each groups' feeling of closeness to their own group as presented in Table 2 and Table 3 with the background of rating the importance of "race" for the respondents, numbers *demonstrate that* Blacks are generally more likely to feel closer to their own group than Whites. (MAC14Ft_CH)

(15)   These findings *suggest that* race relations have the potential to improve, but that Whites are considerably weaker in their perception of differences among the races, which limits their support for race-based remedies. (MAC14Ft_CH)

As numerous examples of stance can be found in all theses, it was necessary to concentrate on structural elements where stance was expressed regularly and systematically. Thus, the focus of this small study is on the combination of the global structure, the function stance and the form *that* complements, since in modern academic writing the trend is towards explicit tentative hypotheses in certain sections of the thesis (and even the abstract). In such cases, the *that* clause becomes a central part of the entire thesis and indicates scholarly thinking in a nutshell. This is also the reason why *that* clauses also occur frequently in abstracts, especially when central claims or research hypotheses are formulated and research results reported (cf. Ivanova this issue). Global rhetorical structures and stance *that* complements are two central characteristics of academic literacy: they indicate a comprehensive discourse strategy and a researcher identity or authorial persona or voice. Both sociocognitive skills are extremely important for researchers intending to be accepted into a research community.

4. Corpus and method

4.1 The ChemCorpus as data

The ChemCorpus contains 497 (anonymised) academic texts (6.9 million words): Magister, Bachelor, and Master's theses as well as Bachelor term papers and project area reports. As described in Table 6, the sample used for

this study consists of 4 times 10 Magister and Master's theses in Linguistics and Cultural Studies (1.16 million words):

Table 6. ChemCorpus (Schmied & Dheskali 2015-2020) sample for this study

Field	Magister theses (2002-2013)		Master's theses (2012-2020)		Total words
	texts	words	texts	words	
Linguistics	10	321,967	10	265,088	587,055
Cultural Studies	10	324,137	10	254,106	578,243
Total	20	646,104	20	519,194	1,165,298

As Master's theses are considerably shorter than Magister theses, results are usually normalised to 100,000 words, which also allows comparisons to other studies. The advantage of the ChemCorpus is that it can be used as a comparative basis, e.g. to analyse cultural differences with other non-native (academic *lingua franca*) theses, such as African or Chinese in a similar formative training programme (Schmied 2015). The ChemCorpus has also been used as a reference corpus in a pilot study on Cameroon English dissertations (Cosmina 2020), which analyses the literature review in 30 theses (3×2×5) in Linguistics, Literature, and TESOL by Anglophone and Francophone writers (150,000 words). The findings on the differences in the subdisciplines will be compared to this study.

The current study compares texts from the same institution; this means that the teaching staff and approach is fairly similar, the major change was the new curriculum. The main variable in this study is the course content at two different periods of time, before and after the "Bologna" reform, which introduced the BA and MA programmes in Germany (i.e. the MA thesis is the second thesis written whereas the Magister thesis was the first, albeit after the same time of studies) – and of course, the parallel development of conventions as perceived by the teachers and supervisors responsible. The institutional background is the same, probably typical of a small modern English department in Germany. Thus, the corpus is controlled for the general teaching (and related personal consultation) in the 1st MA semester, but not for the 4th MA semester personal consultation with the final supervisor. It includes only exam texts with a good grade to control developmental stages in written C1 proficiency. Other factors influencing academic writing cannot be controlled, such as exposure to external academic instructional texts that autonomous learners were encouraged to read. The small time frame of less

than 20 years also ensured that global changes in academic writing conventions were kept to a minimum, but they cannot be excluded since the digitalisation of universities over the last 20 years has had vast influences on their work, in their communication, but also in their teaching and research practices. This comparison is thus a case study in the effect of formal instruction to young scholars, which has been advocated for a long time (as Paltridge 2020 reiterates).

4.2 Corpus linguistic methodologies

The methodologies used in this study must be combined: manual annotation, automated retrieval, and manual verification. The global structure elements of the texts were manually recorded according to the keywords signalling the detailed moves in Issue, Research Question/Hypothesis, Methodology, Analysis, and Conclusion outlined above.

The *that* clauses in the texts were analysed with AntConc (Anthony 2020). The keyword "that" was used for the query and the results were manually cleaned, excluding unrelated uses such as in relative clauses and as determiners/demonstrative pronouns. The remaining thousands of *that* complement clauses had to be categorised manually. The list of reporting verbs or *verba dicendi* (in a wide sense) in the literature (cf. Fig. 1 above) made this relatively easy.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Global rhetorical structures

The most important result of our analysis of the global structure of the theses is that strong disciplinary variation can be found in the Methodology and Analysis sections. Mainly, there are more theses in Cultural Studies without an explicit Methodology description. As can be seen in Figure 3, Cultural Studies writers continue structuring their theses with implicit Methodology sections even in the Masters' studies, whereas in Linguistics there are barely any such theses, especially since the new MA programme was introduced. The comparison shows that structures of Linguistics theses have changed more than others in a direction that had started before, i.e., making headlines and structures explicit. Still, it should be noted that theses without explicit Methodology description do have a methodological approach. The method can be specified in the Introduction, as in the following example:

(16) The employed method of analysis is based on the examination of different approaches towards understanding Americanization developed in the course of social debates. (MA15Ft_IL)
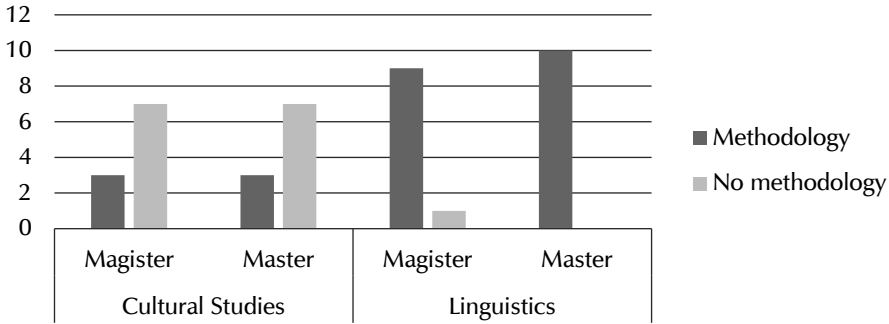

Figure 3. Number of theses with and without an explicit methodology section (N = 40)

Even if the Methodology structure remains similar in both specialisations, graduate theses display variation in the analysis section after the Bologna reform. Analysis sections become more explicit and uniform (Figure 4):
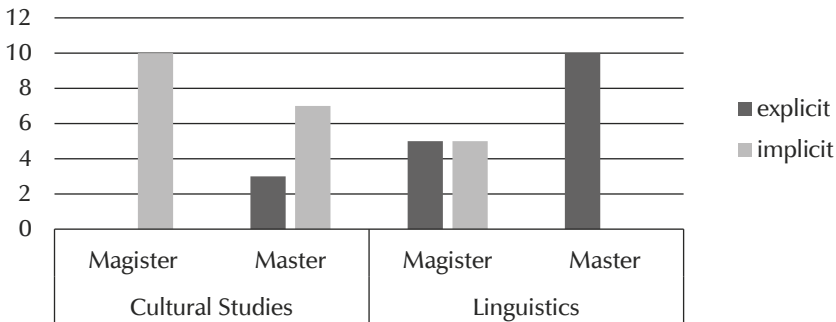

Figure 4. Number of theses with an explicit and an implicit Analysis section (N = 40) showing a growing explicitness and uniformity of thesis structure after the Bologna reform

Examples of explicit analysis sections include: "Results and Discussion", "Research Results", "Findings", "Analysis and Discussion", "Results", "Results and Interpretation". Examples of implicit analysis sections include: "Pre-War England: Women's Position in Society and Its Reflection in Football", "Italian Immigration to the United States", and "Testing Explanatory Effectiveness". These section headlines clearly show that explicit structures also depend on

the topic – and many topics can be dealt with from a more hermeneutic or a more social science perspective.

Similar trends can be identified for the use of research questions and hypotheses. As evident from Figure 5, the use of research questions (RQs) or the combination of RQs and hypotheses increases in both disciplines, the sole use of hypotheses decreases. RQs and hypotheses can be presented explicitly as a list and implicitly as part of the reading flow. When they are listed, they are used as signposts to structure the thesis as in this example:

(17)   Consequently, I will try to answer the following research questions:

1. What are types and numbers of different lexical cohesive devices used in Cameroonian M.A. theses?
2. Are there any differences between Cameroonian male and female M.A. students in the usage of lexical cohesive devices in their M.A. theses?
3. Does the usage of lexical cohesive devices influence writing quality in Cameroonian M.A. theses?
4. Are there any differences between Cameroonian anglophone and francophone M.A. students in the usage of lexical cohesive devices in their M.A. theses? (MA16Ft_JZ)

When RQs and hypotheses are embedded in the reading flow, they can still function as reference:

(18)   Contrary to my hypothesis that the learners would clearly prefer the overt relative pronouns who/which > that > zero, learners seem to handle who and which differently. (MA13Ft_SK)
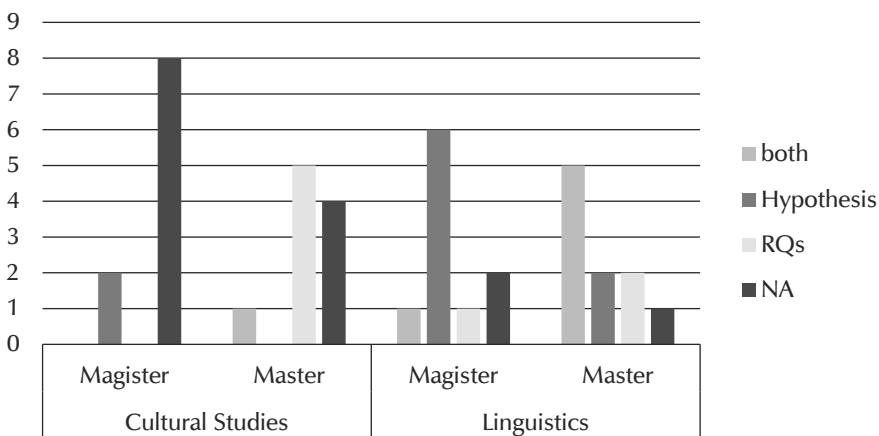

Figure 5. Occurrence of hypotheses and research questions in the theses (N = 40)

5.2 Stance in that clauses introduced by verbs

A comprehensive overview of *that* clause type per thesis type and discipline can be found in Table 10 in the Appendix. Table 7 is only a summary of the development in the use of *that* clauses before and after the Bologna reform:

Table 7. Relative frequency of *that* clause verb types in Magister and Master's theses

that clause type	Magister per 100,000	Master per 100,000
negative weak	46	48
negative strong	**34**	**67**
ambiguous weak	55	68
ambiguous strong	79	87
positive weak	68	142
positive strong	154	256
nonemotive	166	277
Total	603	947

There is a noticeable increase in the use of all controlling verbs from 603 to 947 occurrences per 100,000 words. This indicates a higher accordance with international academic writing conventions. It also shows that student academic writing becomes more dialogic – the students feel as part of a community. Parallel, there is an evident rise in negative strong and positive weak and positive strong verbs. This means that young scholars start to employ more expressive stance. Still, the most frequent choice in all text categories are neutral, nonemotive verbs, i.e. students continue to rely on them to avoid expressing evaluation. These results contradict the findings in Hyland and Jiang (2017), who noticed a decreasing of stance markers throughout the years. One reason for this difference is probably the different time scale of analysis – while Hyland and Jiang compare research articles from 1965, 1985 and 2015, the Magister and Master's theses in our study span between 2002 and 2020. Another possible reason may lie in our research focus on non-native student works. Non-native academic writing tends to be more explicit in terms of cohesive devices (Schmied 2011: 10), so it could be expected that students rely on *that* clauses as a convenient structuring device. A replication study comparing native and non-native writers from different academic levels would be an interesting endeavour for future research.

Table 8 shows the use of *that* complement clauses in the two specialisations, Linguistics and Cultural Studies, which generally includes theses in literary studies in this perspective (but only 3/10 Magister theses in this subcorpus):

Table 8. Relative frequency of *that* clause verb types in Magister and Master's theses from Cultural Studies and Linguistics

that clause type	Cultural Studies per 100,000	Linguistics per 100,000
negative weak	42	52
negative strong	**61**	**40**
ambiguous weak	62	61
positive weak	**73**	**137**
ambiguous strong	93	74
positive strong	**181**	**229**
nonemotive	201	243
Total	713	836

Students in Cultural Studies use more negative strong and ambiguous strong verbs, whereas those in Linguistics clearly use more positive (weak and strong) verbs. These results are similar to the findings of the pilot study by Cosmina (2020: 28), where linguistic theses by Cameroon writers also include more positive verbs. Positive verbs are seen to make conclusions more compelling and help promote the value of their findings or of the reported proposition. In this case, they are used to convey a clear and positive strong attitude to the other author's original proposition (Cosmina 2020: 49). However, in the current study the overall number of verbs in the disciplines is similar in contrast to Cosmina (2020: 24), who counted a higher number of reporting verbs in harder disciplines (Linguistics) than in softer disciplines (Literature, TESOL).

Table 9 presents an alphabetical summary of the top 20 verbs controlling *that* complement clauses per thesis type (left) and per discipline (right). The most general result of our study comparing stance in *that* complement clauses before and after the Bologna reform is – as expected – an increase in the subset totals: higher frequencies in Master than in Magister and higher frequencies in Linguistics than in Cultural Studies. This result correlates with developments in other genres like research articles (cf. Dontcheva-

Navratilova 2023). If we look at the most frequent lexemes, we notice the use of strong verbs, mainly of *show* (positive strong) in Master's theses, predominantly in Linguistics, as well as *claim* (negative strong). This indicates are higher awareness of author identity, which may be teaching induced and corresponds to international trends in the subdiscipine (cf. Dontcheva-Navratilova 2023). Few verbs are significantly more used in Cultural Studies, e.g., *believe* (ambiguous weak) and *demonstrate* (positive strong). The overall absolute and relative figures for the top 20 verbs can be found in Table 11 in the Appendix.

Table 9. Top 20 verbs controlling that complement clauses per thesis (left) and per discipline (right) in alphabetical order

Verb	Evaluation type	Magister per 100,000	Master per 100,000	Cultural Studies per 100,000	Linguistics per 100,000
argue	ambiguous strong	37	53	52	38
assume	negative weak	34	33	26	41
believe	ambiguous weak	11	17	22	7
claim	negative strong	29	59	50	38
conclude	ambiguous strong	18	16	16	18
demonstrate	positive strong	6	18	20	4
explain	nonemotive	8	10	12	6
imply	ambiguous weak	20	21	12	29
indicate	positive weak	19	41	17	43
know	positive strong	13	5	15	3
mean	nonemotive	41	61	55	46
note	nonemotive	26	37	23	40
point out	positive strong	33	22	24	31
reveal	positive weak	7	19	6	21
say	nonemotive	27	51	37	40
see	nonemotive	3	28	4	27
show	positive strong	49	128	61	116
state	nonemotive	36	65	51	49
suggest	positive weak	27	51	24	54
think	positive weak	8	20	21	7
Total		450	754	548	656

6. Conclusions

Since the Bologna reform, scientific writing conventions have been spreading from the natural and social sciences into English Studies and its subdisciplines (here Linguistics and Cultural Studies), i.e., from 'hard' to 'soft' fields (cf. Hyland – Bondi 2006).

The analysis of global rhetorical structures shows a trend towards more uniformity and explicit structuring, which confirms the changes identified in previous studies. There is a rise in the explicit formulation of research questions and their combination with hypotheses. The IMRAD / AIMAC structure is becoming more popular, often signalled through explicit section labels in headlines and references (such as *Methodology*, *Analysis*). These explicit labels can also be found in abstracts and titles, contributing to their complexity and specificity, which also allows authors to distinguish themselves more clearly from related writers and their texts. For young academics, whom such formulas can help to write more systematically, these smaller chunks may be an important scaffold, if the writing process gets difficult. The stereotypical form does look uniform and even unimaginative, but it can be individualised by more specific phrasing later in the career.[2]

The metadiscourse case study showed that after 2012, non-native thesis writers from English Studies rely significantly more on *that* complement clauses to express their stance. Their writing has become more evaluative through the increasing use of positive and negative strong verbs but students still rely extensively on nonemotive expressions. From the reviewed disciplines, theses in Linguistics tend to incorporate more positive verbs (e.g., *show*), both in the German and the Cameroon context (Cosmina 2020). This may mean that empirical linguistics fits better into the

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[2]   This balance between genre-specific standard patterns and individual creativity is particularly important in view of the new sophisticated "chatbots" like ChatGPT, which were hotly discussed in universities and beyond in early 2023. The large language models combining huge text databases and neural networks created texts that passed exams and thus obviously met the (minimum) expectations of academic teachers. Many were surprised about the "quality" of texts produced by "Artificial Intelligence", which is, strictly speaking, neither "art" or "intelligent", but rather "craft" and "statistics", because algorithms are used to "predict" most likely patterns and word combinations, irrespective of truth value and semantic creativity. OpenAI warns in the limitations section of its ChatGPT website that "ChatGPT sometimes writes plausible-sounding but incorrect or nonsensical answers" (https://openai.com/blog/chatgpt/). Instead of excluding such complex text bots from university, they could be used to create rough stereotypical drafts and students could be trained in adding individuality and specificity to personalise their texts within expected genre conventions as analyzed in this contribution.

international science patterns or that young linguists feel a greater need to adapt to international conventions.

The developments described in this study imply that student writing will continue being influenced by professional international publication models. This will take place both on a global structural scale (IMRAD) as well as in local signposting of the sections (in titles, abstracts, and headlines). For the discussion of genre development, these very early career texts allow us to observe a researcher and a learner perspective at the same time: on the one hand, changes are likely to be based on the perception of changes in genre conventions by teachers, who then incorporate the detected conventions not only into their own writings, but also into their teaching; on the other hand, changes must be evaluated positively by young writers, either because they are taken over from their teachers or from other models in the literature. This process of academic knowledge dissemination leads to convergence in a highly competitive market of young graduates, whose MA theses serve as evidence of qualification for doctoral and further careers.

This case study used a small but consistent dataset, one which had only 40 cases for the variable global rhetorical structures, but over 4000 for the variable *that* complement clause. Thus, it needs to be supplemented by comparable studies from other universities and countries[3]. In many academic contexts, it is still difficult to find the appropriate data, but the digitalisation of university exams makes open repositories possible and allows them to be exploited (as demonstrated by Schmied 2013 for South Africa). However, it is safe to say that the academic writing principles discussed here as well as the changes traced in the variables analysed (more IMRAD, more research questions/hypotheses, more stance in *that* complements) show basically the same patterns as in other genres, especially in research articles (cf. Bondi – Nocella, Ivanova, Dontcheva-Navratilova, all this issue). In contrast to published research articles, MA theses leave the final decision on IMRAD structures, for instance, to the writers; while editors can finally decide on the publication of articles, supervisors cannot control the submission of theses, only the students decide. This suggests that the decisions to change academic writing (as analysed here) are laid in modern MA degree programmes already; they are made by academic novices who write to develop their authorial identities in their academic discourse communities. This case study

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[3]   From a cultural perspective, it is interesting that the well-discussed contrast between German and English discourse structure (Clyne 1987, 1993) is not prominent in the texts written in English by German students.

is only a small stone in a large mosaic that illustrates much wider changes, as has already been argued by Shaw – Vassileva (2009: 300):

> Some of these linked sets of developments are shared by all the journals – that is, the same sorts of change seem to happen over the period in all the journals. One such set has the effect of making the articles more explicit. There is less reliance on the reader's background knowledge of recent publications and issues: the reader gets more guidance as to how to read the article, and how to place it in the disciplinary debate. Thus references have become conventionalised and explicit in form, the initial sporadic and non-standardised division into sections has become obligatory and uniform, and introductions have become more explicit in stating aims, article structure, and connections to current issues in research and/or policy.

Finally, it remains to be studied whether the changing discourse features indicating explicitness and writer identity analysed in this case study can be found on a similar timescale in other academic languages, like German or French. This could be used as an empirical basis to discuss whether they are essential features of a particular dominant national or language culture or functional adaptations to changing rhetorical situations, new sociocognitive responses to technological affordances and community needs.

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APPENDIX

Table 10. Stance of *that* complement clauses controlled by verb in Magister and Master's theses in the two subdisciplines. *Note*: Table ordered by relative frequency of the clause total (last column)

that clauses controlled by verb	Magister Cultural Studies		Magister Linguistics		Master Cultural Studies		Master Linguistics		Total	
	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000
nonemotive	264	**81**	273	**85**	303	**119**	419	**158**	1259	**108**
positive strong	238	**73**	261	**81**	274	**108**	393	**148**	1166	**100**
positive weak	77	**24**	142	**44**	125	**49**	247	**93**	591	**51**
ambiguous strong	162	**50**	95	**30**	110	**43**	117	**44**	484	**42**
ambiguous weak	77	**24**	99	**31**	96	**38**	80	**30**	352	**30**
negative strong	45	**14**	64	**20**	120	**47**	53	**20**	282	**24**
negative weak	71	**22**	79	**25**	52	**20**	74	**28**	276	**24**
Total	934	**288**	1013	**315**	1080	**425**	1383	**522**	4410	**378**

Table 11. Top 20 verbs controlling that complement clauses in the corpus sample ordered by relative total frequency

Verb	Evaluation Type	Magister Cultural		Magister Linguistics		Master Cultural		Master Linguistics		Total	
		Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000	Σ	per 100,000
show	positive strong	70	**22**	87	**27**	99	**39**	237	**89**	493	**42**
mean	nonemotive	77	**24**	54	**17**	80	**31**	78	**29**	289	**25**
state	nonemotive	55	**17**	60	**19**	87	**34**	81	**31**	283	**24**
argue	ambiguous strong	79	**24**	40	**12**	71	**28**	67	**25**	257	**22**
claim	negative strong	33	**10**	62	**19**	102	**40**	49	**18**	246	**21**

suggest	positive weak	33	**10**	55	**17**	36	**14**	97	**37**	221	**19**
say	nonemotive	45	**14**	41	**13**	59	**23**	73	**28**	218	**19**
assume	negative weak	46	**14**	64	**20**	29	**11**	57	**22**	196	**17**
note	nonemotive	31	**10**	53	**16**	34	**13**	63	**24**	181	**16**
indicate	positive weak	8	**2**	53	**16**	38	**15**	70	**26**	169	**15**
point out	positive strong	43	**13**	62	**19**	27	**11**	30	**11**	162	**14**
imply	ambiguous weak	11	**3**	53	**16**	23	**9**	32	**12**	119	**10**
con-clude	ambiguous strong	27	8	31	10	19	7	23	9	100	9
see	nonemotive	4	**1**	5	**2**	6	**2**	67	**25**	82	**7**
believe	ambiguous weak	33	**10**	4	**1**	30	**12**	14	**5**	81	**7**
think	positive weak	21	**6**	5	**2**	36	**14**	15	**6**	77	**7**
reveal	positive weak	4	**1**	19	**6**	11	**4**	39	**15**	73	**6**
demon-strate	positive strong	15	**5**	4	**1**	39	**15**	7	**3**	65	**6**
know	positive strong	37	**11**	4	**1**	8	**3**	4	**2**	53	**5**

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