Comparing Genres of Academic Writing: Abstracts and Summaries

Cornelia Ilie

This is a presentation of an ongoing project whose aim is to distinguish the major features that are shared and that differentiate various genres of academic writing by using a rhetorical and discourse analytical approach. The paper discusses a number of multilevel distinctions between academic abstracts and academic summaries with regard to drafting and editing processes, as well as evaluating practices. Significant aspects of these two academic genres are investigated: focus (highlighting the importance of a research area and outlining relevant aspects of the investigated issue), goal (raising the reader’s awareness and interest for a particular research issue and problematization), audience orientation (targeting junior and/or senior scholars, a national and/or international audience and so forth), contextualization in time and space (e.g. adjusting the discursive content and form for a particular occasion or moment in time — starting with an introduction of the subject, ending by summing up the results/conclusions; and for a particular socio-cultural space — a research seminar, a national/international scientific conference and so forth).

Although abstracts and summaries are basic academic genres in the sense that we often encounter them either as readers or as writers of academic texts, the similarities and differences between the two are under-researched. They are often mentioned and commented on in books on academic writing (Bhatia, 2004; Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003; Swales, 1990). Certain ‘how-to’ books for academic writers take a prescriptive approach (Cremmins, 1982). An in-depth study on this topic was carried out by Kaplan et al. (1994) who used five parameters to analyse abstracts submitted to a ‘call for papers’: thematic structure, clause structure, pragmatic moves, propositional organization and lexical cohesion. Their study is based on a teaching experience with graduate students in a course in written discourse analysis. However,
the results cannot be generalized because they apply only to sub-samples of the whole corpus and have a pedagogical bias.

While there is no consensus about a universally acknowledged definition of an academic abstract, there are tacitly accepted practices for writing abstracts in various academic and professional settings in keeping with disciplinary conventions and constraints. As a rule, an abstract is conceived of as a very short outline of a research article, thesis, report, conference paper, etc. pertaining to a particular discipline, which is supposed to provide the essential ideas, methods and results in concentrated form.

The basic purpose of the abstract is to tell readers what to expect, that is to foreground the news value of the paper. It is often used to help the reader to quickly ascertain the writer’s intention as to the purpose and scope of a piece of writing. This is why the abstract always appears at the beginning of a manuscript, acting as the point of entry for any scientific paper or report.

A summary is often regarded as a short final survey of a longer text, such as a research article, a conference paper or a book. It is expected to review the main ideas, methods and conclusions/results in a nutshell.

Unfortunately, non-specialists tend to use the terms abstract and summary interchangeably, which may often create a lot of confusion. In order to better understand the particular scope, structure and functions of these two genres, five basic parameters have been used to outline the distinctions:

(i) A first parameter concerns their respective length and selectivity: The abstract is normally very short (and selective: from two to three sentences to one paragraph), whereas the summary tends to be longer and normally contains an abbreviated version of the most important points in an academic study, paper, article, etc.

(ii) A second parameter concerns the authorial presence and evaluative attitude: The abstract is normally non-evaluative, whereas the summary often includes the writer’s critical assessment and evaluative reasoning. The author of a summary is seen to convey an overall evaluation of the study and its ensuing results (new findings, confirmed or disconfirmed hypotheses, etc.).

(iii) A third parameter concerns time-related framing: The abstract is often written before the main text — directing the reader’s attention to the prerequisites of the original investigation and thinking process; the summary is necessarily written after the main text and is based on the main text, directing the reader’s attention to the results/finality of the investigation.

(iv) A fourth parameter concerns the position slots of abstracts and summaries in relation to the text they represent: Summaries are usually placed at the end of a chapter or an article, highlighting the major point of the piece and outlining significant findings. Abstracts are normally placed at the beginning of the text that they introduce and briefly describe in terms of aims, hypotheses, etc.

(v) A fifth parameter concerns the content and scope of abstracts and summaries: Abstracts have a restricted scope in that they state the research problem, indicate the key themes and anticipate the main issues developed in the text of the article,