An Analysis of Dissertation Abstracts In Terms Of Translation Errors and Academic Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at evaluating English abstracts of MA and PhD dissertations published in Turkish language and identifying translation errors and problems concerning academic style and discourse. In this study, a random selection of MA and PhD dissertation abstracts both from the dissertations of Turkish speaking researchers and English-speaking researchers were used. The corpus consists of 90 abstracts of MA and PhD dissertations. The abstracts of these dissertations were analyzed in terms of problems stemming from translation issues and academic discourse and style. The findings indicated that Turkish-speaking researchers rely on their translation skills while writing their abstracts in English. Contrary to initial expectations, the results of the analysis of rhetorical moves did not indicate great differences in terms of the move structures, from which we concluded that there might be some universally accepted and attended rhetorical structure in dissertation abstracts.

1. Introduction

English language is now considered a global language and a lingua franca. The language has become so widely used that it now dominates every type of international field. Therefore, the studies produced in English-speaking countries, and by academicians speaking English become more easily widespread and known all around the world. Not being able to communicate one's ideas or brain work in English Language might be hindering the potential success of non- English speaking people on the international arena. When published in English language, academic studies are more likely to be acknowledged and appreciated internationally and this enables academicians from all over the world to have a say on the international arena.

As a result of this undeniable fact, academicians from all over the world feel the need to publish their work in English language, as well as in their native language. According to an article published online, this has long been the case in France:

> Institute officials explained that almost l00% of the articles submitted to the journal in 1987 were in English, compared to about 15% in 1973. The officials also noted that the journal's French title gave researchers the impression that it was not open to the international scientific community. As a result, papers were submitted elsewhere.
> ("The English Language: The Lingua of International Science", 1991)

Mauranen (2006) also points to the same phenomena:

> Academia is one of the domains which have most eagerly adopted English as their common language in international communication. The development has been particularly fast since the Second World War, after which English has increasingly dominated research publishing. Although

academic mobility or the existence of an academic lingua franca is not a new phenomena, the present scale of mobility and the global rule of English, which has spread to degree programs in non- English-speaking countries, are unprecedented (p.146).

This has brought about many benefits for the scholars and researchers, as well as for all the people of the world. The use of a common language, a lingua franca, made the spread of human knowledge quite rapid and commonplace (Flowerdew, 1999).

However, in addition to the conveniences it provides, the lingua franca also brought along some other concerns. As is stated in Lezsnyák (2004), "linguistic and cultural diversity in lingua franca interactions may involve rather complex situations and lead to interpretation problems" (p. 18). This is especially apparent in academic writing. Academic studies in almost every country are published in English so as to be a part of international literature. Duszak & Lewkowicz (2008) also point to the same phenomenon as follows:

> On one hand, publishing in English is a way to gain international recognition; on the other, non-native speakers may face numerous linguistic, formal, organizational, and ideological barriers which may influence their decision to look to the local market for publishing opportunities" (p. 109).

Vold (2006) argues that the necessity to write in a foreign language makes academic writing much more challenging and adds that since English has become the lingua franca of academic discourse, researchers must be able to express themselves in English to be fully accepted members of the international academic community.

Today, one of the prerequisites of becoming a member of the international academic community is to be able to publish in English language. However, this is not all

about one's competence in English language. There is another crucial dimension to the problem, which is competence, or at least an awareness, of academic discourse. Zamel (1998) states that what is understood from the phrase 'academic discourse' is a specialized form of reading, writing and thinking done in the academy or the schooling situations. She adds that academic discourse is itself a language with its "own vocabulary, norms, sets of conventions and modes of inquiry" (p. 187) and thus, it can be considered a separate culture, each discipline forming a separate cultural community. Researchers of non-native English speaking communities are likely to transfer the writing conventions of their own discourse systems and this is likely to result in a mixed or "hybrid" (as is put by Canagarajah, 2002) discourse. According to Canagarajah (2002), a mixed discourse would be considered a sign of incompetence. He adds to his argument asserting that "if a student does not adopt the established discourses of a discipline, than she simply loses her claim for membership in that community" (p. 32).

In Turkey, academic studies of students who graduate from English-medium universities are written and published in English. In Turkish-medium universities, the academic studies are not written or published in English, but in Turkish. However, it is a must to write the abstract of the study in English along with the Turkish version.

Abstracts are universal in academic writing. Not a single dissertation is published without an abstract, the section where the author of the study presents a brief summary of the study. Due to the fact that abstracts represent original research articles, the accuracy of the abstract is imperative because they are readily available in national dissertation corpora or even online to readers who may not have access to the full-text of the article or the dissertation. Furthermore, even if the reader gets access to the full text, it is likely that he or she will compare the information in the abstract with the information in the full-text dissertation, which might lead to concerns about the reliability of the study. Therefore, it is particularly important that the abstract reflect the article faithfully.

This study has been inspired by the opinion that valid contributions of non-native speakers of English to international literature should be encouraged. Therefore, an analysis of published studies of non-native speakers of English might shed light on the prospects of non-English speaking scholars. Motivated by these notions, this paper attempts to find how effective Turkish-speaking researchers are in communicating their knowledge in English language, in terms of competence in English language and in academic discourse conventions of English-speaking world.

2. Literature Review

The language used in research studies and dissertations has attracted the attention of researchers lately. Some of these studies have aimed to explore the nature of research papers and dissertations. Hyland (2008), for instance, conducted a study on academic clusters in research papers and dissertations. In his study, he employed three electronic corpora of written texts which comprised research articles, PhD dissertations and MA/MSc theses from four disciplines selected to represent a broad cross-section of academic practice. He followed a two-step procedure in his study. First, he identified the lexical bundles creating a word list for each genre and then he used a 'concordancer' to find the textual contexts of examples and to determine the functions

of the clusters. Then, he compared the frequencies and patterns across the different corpora to determine the similarities and differences in the expert and student genres. Hyland (2008) found that different groups of researchers such as professional academicians, PhD students and MA students preferred differed in terms of the number of clusters used and the resources they draw on to present and support their arguments.

In another study, Hyland & Tse (2004) examined the acknowledgements in graduate dissertations. Their study is based on a corpus of acknowledgements in 240 dissertations written by students at five Hong Kong universities and on interviews with student writers. They analyzed the acknowledgements for their move structures and patterns of expression to determine how the student writers expressed thanks. They developed coding categories using text analysis and the concordance program, MonoConc Pro, and then, they entered the data into a database to determine the frequencies and relationships between categories. In addition to these, they interviewed two MA and two PhD students to get a better command of the text data and to discover the students' thoughts on acknowledgment practices. The study concluded that the postgraduate researchers did not receive sufficient instruction on how to write the acknowledgments part, which, according to Hyland & Tse, can hinder their chance to make a positive impression as a researcher on their readers.

Another study conducted on academic texts is Vold's (2006) article on epistemic modality markers in research articles. For her study, she selected 120 research articles written in English, French and Norwegian and belonging to the disciplines of medicine and linguistics. She used an electronic database consisting of 450 research articles to collect data. Then, the research articles were distributed over six subgroups. She selected the markers based on frequency in an exploratory corpus consisting of 30 articles. Then, all epistemic modality markers were written down and counted; the most frequent epistemic modality markers were submitted to a quantitative analysis of the corpus as a whole. She states that precise criteria have been formulated in order to classify the markers more accurately. Vold (2006) found significant differences between English-and Norwegian-speaking researchers and French-speaking researchers with regard to their uses of hedging strategies and suggested that an awareness of such differences might prevent culturally-oriented misunderstandings and misjudgments.

Altun & Rakicioglu (2004) conducted a study on abstracts in academic writing and they evaluated the abstracts published in national and international refereed academic journals in English in terms of lexical and tense use preferences. They conducted their study on a randomly selected set of 52 research articles from Turkish and English-medium refereed academic journals. Half of the articles on their corpus were written by native speakers of English and half by Turkish researchers who wrote their papers in English language. They used a concordance software program to analyze the abstracts in terms of frequency. They concluded that the abstracts they analyzed did not significantly differ in terms of tense use, but in terms of lexical preferences and discourse conventions.

All these studies have greatly contributed to the field of English for academic purposes. However, there are not many studies in the literature focusing on the abstracts of MA and PhD dissertations and

not many studies have been conducted on the studies of Turkish researchers. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to contribute to the literature by providing insights into the nature of abstracts of MA and PhD dissertations produced by Turkish researchers.

3. Data and Methodology

The corpus used in the study consisted of 90 randomly selected MA and PhD dissertation abstracts. 30 of these abstracts were written by Turkish speaking researchers who graduated from English Language Teaching Departments and English Literature and Language Departments of English-medium universities in Turkey; another set of 30 abstracts was written by Turkish-speaking researchers who graduated from faculties of engineering in Turkish-medium universities, and still another set of 30 abstracts were written by native speakers of English (as judged by their names and the names of their institutions). The abstracts written by the Turkish- speaking researchers were taken from the online database of The Council of Higher Education of Turkey (www.yok.gov.tr) and the abstracts written by English-speaking researchers were taken from the Linguist List, a free website addressing linguists (www.linguistlist.org) and the online database of the University of Pennsylvania, (repository.upenn.edu/dissertations).

The Council of Higher Education of Turkey asks for the authors' consent before putting their dissertations on the online database. Therefore, the authors have not been informed about the study, considering that they have already signed a consent form. Still, the names of the authors are kept anonymous for ethical concerns. The writers of the abstracts taken from the Linguist List and the database of the University of Pennsylvania are kept anonymous, too, since it would not have been possible to contact the writers one by one. Nevertheless, these web sites are accessible to everybody; you can get access to the abstracts without having to log in or to subscribe.

The collected data were analyzed in two stages so as to serve for both dimensions of the study. In each of the stages a comparative investigation of dissertation abstracts was conducted. The investigation included a thorough analysis of texts in terms of linguistic features and rhetorical moves. In the first stage of the study, 60 of the abstracts, the ones produced by Turkish-speaking researchers, were used; 30 abstracts of English-medium university graduates and 30 abstracts of Turkish-medium university graduates. At this stage, the texts were analyzed in terms of linguistic features in an attempt to identify linguistic errors, seemingly resulting from translation procedures. The abstracts were analyzed through multiple readings. Then, all sentences including linguistic errors were extracted, cut and pasted on a word file. The errors were grouped in two categories as lexical errors and grammatical errors. Lexical errors category included ill-formed sentences occurring as a result of incorrect word or phrase choice. Grammatical errors category included ill-formed sentences occurring as a result of an incorrect choice of verb tense, phrase structure, sentence structure, and word order and so on. The erroneous sentences for both categories were put in tables. The tables were divided into three categories as "*As it occurs in the text, Suggested correct usage* and *Intended meaning in Turkish*". Then, the entries in the "*As it occurs in the text*" were reviewed by a bilingual speaker, Assist. Prof. Trevor Hope, a native speaker of English and a speaker of Turkish as a second language.

Then, the suggested correct usage samples were put in the table under the *"Suggested correct usage"*. The intended Turkish meanings of the entries were also given in the table.

The second stage of data analysis attempted to identify the organization of rhetorical moves in abstracts produced by Turkish-speaking researchers and English-speaking researchers. The first aim of this stage was to find out whether Turkish researchers employed the same structural organizations in their Turkish and English abstracts. Doing so, we tried to see whether or not Turkish researchers changed their organizational structure according to the 'standards' of English-speaking academic community. Out of the 60 abstracts produced by Turkish speaking researchers, a random set of 30 abstracts was formed, 15 from Turkish-medium graduates and 15 from English-medium graduates. Afterwards, the 30 abstracts, written by native speakers of English, 15 from linguistics and 15 from engineering dissertations, were analyzed in the same fashion. And as the final step of this stage, the organizations of rhetorical moves in both sets were compared.

On the whole, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most frequent translation error types in the abstracts?
2. Do the errors hinder the communication between the author and the reader?
3. Do the abstracts follow the same fashion as the abstracts produced by native speakers of English in terms of the organization of the text and academic discourse criteria?

The results of the contrastive analysis of the dissertation abstracts are provided in the following section.

4. Results

Linguistic Errors

The first part of this section presents the findings of the first stage of the study. In this stage, the texts were analyzed in terms of linguistic features in an attempt to identify linguistic errors. The aim of this analysis was first to find whether the English abstracts were essentially translations of the Turkish abstracts or whether they were totally different texts. Another aim was to find about the effectiveness of the English abstracts in terms of communicating the body of knowledge summarized in the abstracts.

The results of the analyses revealed that all of the English abstracts produced by Turkish-speaking researchers were one-to-one translations of the Turkish versions; a few of the abstracts included one or two sentences that are not available in the Turkish version. The translated sentences, in general, failed to effectively communicate the information in the Turkish versions of the abstracts. We can conclude from this that Turkish researchers could not conform to the norms of English language while translating. According to Vivanco et al. (1990), "translation implies two types of "knowledge": One refers to knowing how to interpret the designation and the meaning of a text in a given source language and the other refers to knowing how to "re-produce" (to render) the designation and the meaning of a text in a given target language" (p. 540). Based on this quotation, we can conclude that Turkish researchers seem to be lacking the "knowledge" for translation.

The identified linguistic errors were divided into two categories as lexical errors and grammatical errors. As for lexical errors, the results showed that researchers graduating from Turkish-medium engineering faculties tend to make more errors in terms of lexical choice than

researchers graduating from English-medium departments. All in all, 59 entries were extracted from the English abstracts of researchers graduating from Turkish-medium engineering faculties, while 12 entries were extracted from the English abstracts of researchers graduating from English-medium departments.

As for grammatical errors, the same tendency can be said to be valid. 66 entries were extracted from the English abstracts of researchers graduating from Turkish-medium engineering faculties, compared to 15 entries extracted from the English abstracts of researchers graduating from English-medium departments. Table 1 presents the number of entries for both categories for each group of abstracts.

Table 1: Quantitative Distribution of the Number of Entries for Linguistic Errors

	Lexical Errors	Grammatical Errors
English-medium graduates	12	15
Turkish-medium graduates	59	66

Length

The range and the average number of paragraphs in both sets of abstracts are presented in Table 2 below. As can be seen from the table, the number of paragraphs in the abstracts of Turkish-speaking researchers ranged from one to six paragraphs. The abstracts taken from engineering dissertations were mostly written in one single paragraph (13 of 15 abstracts), whereas the abstracts of language and literature dissertations were composed of multiple paragraphs (two of the 15 abstracts included one paragraph only). This might be considered a significant difference between the two disciplines.

The number of paragraphs in the abstracts of English-speaking researchers ranged from one to four paragraphs. Similarly, the abstracts of English-speaking researchers were composed of one to four paragraphs. The abstracts taken from engineering dissertations (The University of Pennsylvania) were absolutely uniform in terms of the numbers of the paragraphs; all of them were written in one paragraph. The abstracts of linguistics dissertations, on the other hand, ranged from one to four paragraphs (five of the 15 abstracts were written in one single paragraph).

We can conclude from this analysis that there is a parallel between the abstracts of the same disciplines regarding the numbers of the paragraphs, regardless of the native language of the researchers.

Table 2: Paragraphs

Number of paragraphs	Abstracts of Turkish-speaking researchers	Abstracts of English-speaking researchers
Number of paragraphs in an abstract (range)	1-6	1-4
Number of paragraphs in an abstract (average)	4	3

Move Structure

The rhetorical structure of the abstracts was analyzed in terms of the moves employed and the order of the moves. As a result of the analysis, 13 different moves were identified. Some of the headings for the moves were adopted from Yakhontova (2006): *Outlining the research field, Justifying the study, Introducing the study, Highlighting the outcomes of the study.* The rest of the moves were named by the researchers. It should be noted that the identification of the moves was rather subjective since it was at times difficult to identify the type of the moves or to draw distinct boundaries between certain moves.

Table 3 presents the quantitative distribution of rhetorical moves in the abstracts produced by Turkish researchers.

Table 3: Quantitative Distribution of Rhetorical Moves in the Abstracts Produced by Turkish Researchers

MOVES	English-medium graduates (out of 15)	Turkish-medium graduates (out of 15)	Total (out of 30)
Introducing the study	15	12	27
Introducing the subject area of the study	0	1	1
Introducing the scope of the study	3	1	4
Introducing the population of the study	2	0	2
Introducing the data collection and analysis instruments	2	6	8
Justifying the study	1	4	5
Outlining the research field	7	8	15
Outlining the data analysis procedures in the research field	0	1	1
Summarizing the main chapters of the study	6	0	6
Highlighting the outcomes of the study	7	7	14
Summarizing the data analysis method/s and procedures	1	2	3
Summarizing the study procedures	0	8	8
Suggestions	1	1	2

As seen from the Table 3, 13 different moves were identified in the abstracts of Turkish researchers. It should be noted here that the order of the moves in the Turkish and English versions of the abstracts was exactly the same in both sets of the data from Turkish researchers, regardless of the discipline, probably as a result of translation process.

The table reveals that some of the moves were more prominent in engineering dissertations such as *Introducing the data collection and analysis instruments* and *Summarizing the study procedures. Summarizing the main chapters of the study* is a more prominent move in language and literature abstracts.

Three of the identified moves were predominantly employed in both sets of the abstracts. These are *Introducing the study, Outlining the research field,* and *Summarizing the outcomes of the study.* However, the order of these moves in both sets of abstracts varied. Eight of the abstracts from language and literature dissertations started with *Introducing the study,* and five of them started with *Outlining the research field.* Two of them

started with *Introducing the aim of the study.* Seven of the abstracts from engineering dissertations started with *Introducing the study;* six of them started with *Outlining the research field,* one started with *Justifying the study* and one with *Introducing the subject area of the study.*

Table 4 presents the quantitative distribution of rhetorical moves in the abstracts produced by English-speaking researchers.

Table 4: Quantitative Distribution of Rhetorical Moves in the Abstracts Produced by Native Speakers of English

MOVES	Linguistics (out of 15)	Engineering (out of 15)	Total (out of 30)
Introducing the study	14	11	25
Introducing the scope of the study	4	0	4
Justifying the study	3	3	6
Outlining the research field	7	11	18
Summarizing the main chapters of the study	2	0	2
Highlighting the outcomes of the study	11	12	23
Summarizing the data analysis method/s and procedures	12	12	24
Suggestions	4	0	4

As can be seen from the table, eight different moves were identified in the abstracts of English-speaking researchers. As for the organization of the moves, the abstracts from engineering dissertations were uniform. Three of them started with *Outlining the research field* and the remaining 12 abstracts started with *Introducing the study.* The abstracts from linguistics dissertations showed a similar tendency. 11 of these abstracts started with *Introducing the study* and the remaining four abstracts with *Outlining the research field.* We can conclude from this analysis that abstracts written by English-speaking researchers are more consistent and are parallel to each other in terms of the moves used at the beginning of the abstracts, compared to the ones produced by Turkish-speaking researchers.

The overall quantitative distribution of the identified moves is given in Table 5.

Table 5: Quantitative Distribution of Rhetorical Moves in both Sets of Abstracts

MOVES	Turkish-speaking researchers (out of 30)	English-speaking researchers (out of 30)	Total (out of 60)
Introducing the study	27	25	52
Introducing the scope of the study	4	4	8
Justifying the study	5	6	11
Outlining the research field	15	18	33
Summarizing the main chapters of the study	6	2	8
Highlighting the outcomes of the study	14	23	37
Summarizing the data analysis method /s and procedures	3	24	27
Suggestions	2	4	6

As is shown in the table, the majority of the 60 abstracts included the move, *Introducing the study,* although the move appeared in different parts of the abstracts. The second predominantly occurring move is found to be *Highlighting the outcomes of the study*, which is usually placed at or through the end of the abstracts. The third predominant move is *Outlining the research field*. This move, the length of which ranged from one sentence to a paragraph, is generally placed at the beginning of the abstract. In one of the abstracts produced by Turkish-medium engineering graduates, the whole abstract, a one-paragraph abstract, was made up of *Outlining the research field.* One move that is predominantly occurring in abstracts by English-speaking researchers is *Summarizing the data analysis method and procedures* (24 as opposed to three).

5. Conclusion

This study was designed to analyze the abstracts MA and PhD dissertations written by non-native speakers of English and it tried to find out how effective Turkish-speaking researchers are in communicating their knowledge in English language, with regard to competence in English language and in academic discourse conventions of English-speaking world.

The findings indicate that Turkish-speaking researchers rely on their translation skills while writing their abstracts in English. All of the analyzed English abstracts of Turkish- speaking researchers were one-to-one translations of the Turkish version. Due to the differences between sentence structures in English and Turkish languages, researchers mostly failed to present their knowledge in well-formed sentences in English language. For example, because Turkish is an agglutinative language and because in Turkish language you can show the subject of the sentence using a suffix added to the main verb of the sentence, some sentences in the English abstracts did not have subjects at all. As for lexical errors, the researchers failed to identify little nuances between some words in English language; therefore, the word choice in general seemed to be problematic. E.g. The sentence "*it was observed that there was a **meaningful** difference and recovery between the performances of students before and after the education periods*" was identified to be erroneous. The suggested correct version of the sentence was "*it was observed that there was a **significant** difference and recovery between the performances of students before and after the education periods.* The error seemed to have occurred due to the fact that the two words, *meaningful* and *significant*, refer to one word, "*anlamlı*", in Turkish, considering this particular context. The analysis of lexical errors, along with grammatical errors led us to the conclusion that the English abstracts produced by Turkish- speaking researchers were not effective enough to communicate the body of knowledge summarized in the abstracts.

The analysis of the rhetorical structures of the abstracts and the comparison of them with the abstracts produced by English-speaking researchers revealed similarities and differences in the abstracts compared. The move structures and their places in the texts were analyzed in both sets of abstracts. The result of the analysis of the dissertation abstracts engineering postgraduates revealed that there are cross-culturally shared characteristics within one discipline, especially when it is a technical field such as engineering. The organization of the moves in the abstracts and the number of the paragraphs were quite similar. However, the number of paragraphs in the abstracts of linguistics dissertations varied more (one to six, with an exception of an extreme 10-paragraph abstract). In terms of the moves identified, the abstracts from linguistics dissertations seemed to employ more varied moves. For example, only the abstracts from linguistics dissertations included the move, *Summarizing the main chapters of the study.*

Contrary to initial expectations, the results did not indicate great differences in terms of the move structures, from which we can conclude that there is some universally accepted and attended rhetorical structure in dissertation abstracts. The reason for these similarities can be that these researchers keep up with the developments in their field mostly through research articles and studies published in English language. This finding seems to be consistent with the findings of Buckingham's (2008) study, in which she investigated the perceptions of 13 Turkish scholars of the development of their discipline-specific academic writing skills in the second language.

Explicit awareness of general conventions in the field and, in particular, the specific conventions and expectations of potential publishers seemed to be an important strategy of many respondents when aspiring to develop 'publishable' research, with many respondents claiming to have studied the organization and layout of published papers in journals of their subject area (p. 9).

The most significant finding of this study seems to be the identification of linguistic incompetence of Turkish-speaking scholars in English language. Despite the fact that English courses are compulsory part of curricula at all levels of education in Turkey and despite the fact that these scholars received considerable level of exposure to English language, they still seem to be facing significant difficulties expressing their knowledge in English language. As a result of these, one possible suggestion of this study might be to include academic writing or translation courses in the syllabuses of these faculties, regardless of the fact that they are Turkish-medium or English-medium faculties.

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