Nominalization as Rhetorical Organization: A Discipline-specific Study of Academic Discourse

The present study sets out to investigate the roles of nominalization in academic writing. Previous studies on the use of nominalization in academic writing have observed three main pragmatic purposes of the device: cognitive, textual, and interactional. Specifically, nominalized forms package higher information content, maintain cohesion in texts, and convey an impersonal tone. While nominalization has attracted much interest concerning its functions in academic discourse (e.g. Baratta, 2010; Biber, 1988; Charles, 2003; Francis, 1994; Gao, 2008; Guillen Galve, 1998; Halliday and Martin, 1993; Hartnett, 2004; Hyland, 2006.), little research has been dedicated to the usage of nominalization with respect to different moves and steps in distinct sections of journal articles. To fill this gap, we mainly followed the IMRD model of the abstract section in Swales (1990), and built a corpus composed of abstracts in New England Journal of Medicine during the year of 2010, totaling 52 abstracts, for quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Given that academic writers tend to choose the nominal forms of verbs that treat processes and events as abstract entities, this study zooms in on a specific subtype of lexical nominalization: eventive nouns derived from verbs. Based on Allerton (2002) and Plag (2003), five derivational suffixes particular to deverbalized nouns with an eventive meaning were selected for analyses: –age (e.g. coverage), -al (e.g. survival), -ance/-ence (e.g. occurrence), -ion (-ation/-ition/-ution/-tion) (e.g. stimulation), -ment (e.g. treatment). A frequency count of the occurrences of eventive nouns with the above suffixes in different moves was conducted, accompanied with manual checks to screen out improper data (e.g. segment and condition). The results of our pilot study indicate that eventive nominalizations are used more frequently in the moves of INTRODUCTION/PROBLEM STATEMENT and DISCUSSION/CONCUSSION/RECOMMENDATION than in those of METHOD/APPROACH and RESULTS. The findings shall not only illuminate the discipline-specific linguistic features regarding rhetorical organization in journal articles but also have pedagogical implications for academic English instruction

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