

Rhetorical Organizations of English Research Articles Written by Japanese Researchers

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Abstract

This paper examines what characterizes English research articles written by Japanese researchers, with the reference to a comparative study on rhetorical characteristics of research articles written in English by Anglo-American researchers and those written in English by Finnish researchers. In their introduction section, Japanese researchers follow the universally accepted standard of placing the main point at the end or toward the end of the section. In the conclusion section, however, they place the main point of the section not at the beginning, but at or toward the end of the section, which is different from the standard, or Anglo-American, rhetorical organization: placing the main point at the outset of the section.

I

In some genres of writing, there is a fixed set of organizational standards that writers of that genre are supposed to follow. In the genre of research articles (RA, hereafter), the so-called IMRD organization is rather widely accepted and followed by researchers mainly in the fields of empirical sciences (Swales 134). Of the letters IMRD, "I" stands for "Introduction," "M" for "Method," "R" for "Result" and "D" for "Discussion" and writers of RAs, reporting the results of their experiments, typically begin their RAs with introductory sections, followed by sections on method and result, and finish with discussion or conclusion sections.

Introduction sections are reported to have another fixed organization. Swales divides introduction sections into three "moves." "Moves" are functional textual elements that play a rhetorical function in the text. According to Swales, introduction sections consist of Move 1 that "establishes a territory," Move 2 that "establishes a niche" and Move 3 that "occupies the niche" (Swales 140-142). In other words, in Move 1, RA writers tell readers what research fields

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his/her articles deal with, usually citing relevant previous RAs. Then, in Move 2, they write about what problems there are in those specific research fields. Last, in Move 3, questions to be answered or the purposes of their own research are detailed.

II

In expository texts, the category to which RAs belong, each paragraph is said to have a topic sentence. The topic sentence is the sentence which informs readers of what the paragraph is about. If the sentences making up each paragraph are not equal in their semantic significance, the topic sentence must be placed high in the semantic hierarchy, but not highest. This is because the sentence telling readers what the writer asserts about the topic must be more significant than the sentence that merely tells what the topic is.

While the sentence that tells the topic of a paragraph is called a topic sentence, what the writer thinks most important is called the main point, the core content of the message that is being expressed, of a paragraph or of a textual unit longer than a paragraph (Mauranen 203). In some books on reading or composition, a topic sentence is said to be the most important sentence, and the identification and placement of a topic sentence, usually the first sentence of a paragraph, to be everything. But a topic sentence, in the literal sense of the word, is merely the sentence that tells readers what the topic of that paragraph is and does not mean anything further.

III

Mauranen claims that RAs are answers to questions and questions are usually posed explicitly in introduction sections and answers in discussion or conclusion sections (Mauranen 210). Thus, she regards the main point in introduction sections to be a question and that in the discussion or conclusion sections to be the answer to the question posed in the introduction sections.

In her comparative study of rhetorical characteristics of Anglo-American RAs (RAs written in English by Anglo-Americans) and Finnish RAs (RAs written in English by Finns), Mauranen concludes that one of the main differences between the two writer groups is that Finnish writers place what is important later than their Anglo-American counterparts (Mauranen 252). For example, in RAs written by Finnish researchers, the main points are placed later than in those written by Anglo-American researchers. (Finnish is not only a non-Germanic language, but a non-Indo-European language) This is particularly manifest in discussion or conclusion sections. Most Anglo-American writers start discussion or conclusion sections with their main points while most Finnish writers place them in a later part of the discussion or conclusion sections.

In introduction sections, however, both Finnish and Anglo-American writers place their research questions (i.e. the main points of the introduction sections) later in the section. This is because the rhetorical organization of introduction sections are established universally enough

that even Anglo-American writers place their main points in Move 2 or Move 3 in the introduction sections. In other words, we could argue that the RA rhetorical organization of introduction sections is universally accepted and followed by the majority of researchers so that they organize their RAs in the same way, whatever their first language may be.

Some researchers place their main points at the head of their introduction sections. Swales calls this as “fronted Move 3”: research questions or the purposes of the research are mentioned at the beginning of the introduction section (Swales 165-166). He suggests that this is because, at the risk of discouraging non-specialist readers from reading their RAs, they think they need to emphasize the importance or novelty of their research right at the beginning of their RAs, to attract the attention of specialists who, for example, are in charge of deciding who gets a grant.

There are several rhetorical patterns, each supposed to explain the rhetorical organization of discussion or conclusion sections, but none of them seem to be universally established. In other words, without any universally accepted pattern, each writer group tends to show their characteristic rhetorical strategy rather explicitly in discussion or conclusion sections.

According to Mauranen, in discussion or conclusion sections, Anglo-American researchers tend to place conclusions at the outset of these sections as assertions and these are followed by explanations (Mauranen 235-236). On the other hand, Finnish researchers tend to place conclusions at the end of the sections and these are preceded by premises. Whether main points are placed at the beginning or at the end does not depend on a difference in logic but in a difference in rhetorical strategy. Anglo-American researchers assume that placing main points at the beginning is more rhetorically persuasive than placing them at the end while Finnish researchers think the other way round. This choice of strategy must have been the result of a lot of factors: differences in culture, differences in the instructions given to composition classes at school, differences in skill in English writing, etc. The purpose of this paper, however, is not to scrutinize the reasons and these will not be examined further.

IV

In this paper, the introduction sections and discussion or conclusion sections of nine RAs in the *Kawasaki Journal of Medical Welfare* (three from the Journal Vol. 3, No. 1 and six from Vol. 3, No. 2), all of which were written in English by Japanese researchers, are analyzed. (All the articles have been corrected by a native speaker of English. But most of the corrections were on the level of sentence structure and grammar and any correction beyond that level is so rare that the RAs analyzed in this paper could be regarded as purely written by Japanese writers as far as their rhetorical organizations are concerned.) These articles are from a variety of fields: public health, biochemistry, optics, social welfare and English education. Not all of them are categorized under empirical sciences, but all of them have the IMRD organization, reporting the results of their experiments or surveys.

First, introduction sections of these RAs were analyzed and the result was that all of the RAs

open with Move 1, giving readers information on the general background of the research field. Seven RAs go on to describe what problems will be dealt with, Move 2, and, then, to detail questions that will be answered or the purposes of the research, Move 3. Two RAs, however, go on to Move 3 directly from Move 1, skipping Move 2. These two RAs have the shortest introduction sections and this probably explains their elliptic organization.

The other rhetorical characteristic is that two of the RAs do not mention any reference to previous work. Swales claims that reference to previous research is an obligatory step in Move 1 (Swales 148). These two RAs, however, are reports of the writers' surveys and, as the writers claim, both surveys seem to focus on fields that no other researchers have yet explored so that there was no relevant previous research to mention

The discussion or conclusion sections of the same nine RAs were analyzed and it was found that only one of them opens the discussion or conclusion section with its conclusion while in five of them their conclusions come at or toward the end of the section. This shows that RAs written by Japanese researchers are very much like those by Finnish researchers in that the conclusion comes at or toward the end of the discussion or conclusion section of a research article. Besides the tendency to place the main point later in a textual unit, Japanese researchers also tend to spread out their main points. In three out of nine RAs, their conclusions are spread out through the conclusion or discussion sections. All of them report the results of surveys and, in the discussion or conclusion sections, the results are detailed. There are no concluding sentences that explain or could be deduced from the results of the surveys.

V

Mauranen's research is not a statistical study and only concludes that Anglo-American researchers have a tendency to choose a particular rhetorical strategy while Finnish researchers have a tendency to choose another strategy. The present paper is not a statistical study either and we could only argue that Japanese researchers have a tendency to choose the same rhetorical strategy as Finnish researchers. Though not statistically substantiated, it confirms our intuition that Japanese writers or speakers begin with something indirect or peripheral and proceed to give the main message later. As written above, it is not logically wrong not to write the main point first. But as long as the Anglo-American way of persuasion represents the main stream and is accepted as the standard, it does not do any researcher any good not to follow the standard way of persuasion.

The accepted rhetorical organization of the introduction sections is followed rather strictly by Japanese researchers. Or Japanese researchers might find it very natural to begin with background information before going on to detail their main point. This rhetorical strategy is accepted universally because, when introducing something new and attracting the attention of readers, it is more persuasive to begin with background information before directly claiming a main point.

In discussion or conclusion sections, though there is no universally accepted rhetorical organization, the Anglo-American way of main-point-first persuasion strategy, seems to be dominant. RAs might not be thought to be “logical” if their writers writing RAs did not choose the main-point-first strategy. RAs whose conclusions are spread out through the discussion or conclusion sections might be regarded as “not logical” in that the results of their experiments are presented as conclusions and there is no logical generalization deduced from the results nor any logical explanation explaining the results explicitly detailed.

A lot of RAs are written in English by Japanese researchers now and especially in empirical sciences to write RAs in English seems to be a must if they hope to be regarded as full-fledged researchers, let alone win international fame. It is true that almost all of these RAs are corrected by native speakers of English. But most of the corrections suggested are on the level of intra-sentential grammar and it is very rare for corrections to be on the level of inter-sentential grammar except for some corrections on the inter-sentential use of reference. Rhetorical organization, however, plays a rather important role from the standpoint of readers trying to understand RAs. When there are universally accepted rhetorical styles of organization and it is universally common to write in those ways, researchers are advised to write their RAs according to accepted standards. To revise RAs so that their rhetorical organization conforms to the universal standard may cause both revisers and writers a lot of work. But, even RAs without any mistakes on the level of sentential grammar could be regarded as hard to understand or sheer illogical if they are organized in a different way from the accepted standard.

Research is the most important thing to any researcher, but how to make the results of one's research known is also important and the rhetorical organization of research papers plays a significant role in this. More studies on other rhetorical characteristics of RAs written in English (and Japanese) by Japanese researchers are needed to make more effective the process of letting the world know what Japanese researchers are doing.

References

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