

A structural analysis of English thesis abstracts in Slovak academic setting

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Kľúčové slová: akademické písanie, akademický diskurz, analýza písomného diskurzu, žánrová analýza, abstrakt, anglický jazyk v slovenskom akademickom prostredí, záverečná kvalifikačná práca

Key words: academic writing, academic discourse, written discourse analysis, genre analysis, abstract, English in Slovak academic setting, final thesis

1 Introduction

The genre of abstract represents an integral part of the process of academic writing. In today's consumer society, one can compare abstracts to the technology of product advertising. Metaphorically speaking, abstract is a cover that can attract possible customers' attention and represents the first and only contact with potential readers of the whole piece of writing. In order to sell the product, a seller, in this specific case an author, should therefore develop his or her abstract-writing skills at maximum.

Abstract writing is a highly specialised form of academic writing. It requires a clear and concise writing style that conveys compact information in a limited amount of space. With its most important communicative purposes of selection and indexing¹, the fact that about ten to five hundred times more people read an abstract than its associated article or attend a presentation² is not surprising. Thus, if done well, it induces a reader to learn more about the whole work.

Despite the parallel mentioned above, there is an outstanding inequality: while the art of advertising is undoubtedly one of the most influential branches within the contemporary society, the art of abstracting is, on the other hand, still underestimated, especially by non-native academic writing traditions.

This pilot study aims at covering the first level of intended dissertation topic, i.e. the theoretical and structural research on thesis abstracts written in academic settings. The subsequent lexico-grammatical structures and the applied translation processes from a Slovak variant to an English one are not completely excluded from the study but beyond the primary scope of the present paper. The purpose of the present pilot study is to define abstract as an academic genre in terms of its significance and distinguishable characteristics. It is the characteristic of distinctive abstract structure which is aimed to be outlined in a complex way in order to apply the most suitable structure, the model introduced by Koopman, as a basis for the comparative analysis of the selected Bachelor's and Master's thesis abstracts. Since the research is focused on the sub-genre of thesis abstracts, the paper offers a detailed view on the position of these abstracts in the Slovak higher education. The subsequent analysis of the corpus of thirty-two thesis abstracts written by a sample of the selected Slovak academic community aims at answering the following research questions: Do English thesis abstracts written in the Slovak academic setting follow the Anglophone model of structuring? Do they reflect Koopman's checklist for abstracts in their structure? Are there any structure peculiarities distinctive in the Slovak academia? Are there any differences between Bachelor's and Master's thesis abstracts?

2 The genre of abstract and its typology

The complexity of the term genre and its cross-disciplinary nature cause several problems in establishing a generally acceptable definition. Historically, the important step was made by the move of prevalent interest in genres from the area of literature, sociology and rhetoric to linguistics. At that time, discourse analysis itself witnessed the important progress from surface-level approach known as register analysis to deep language description as explanation embodied within genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993) that called for a complex description of the concept of genre. It was Swales (1990) who successfully elaborated the definition which has become generally acceptable despite the limitation connected to psycholinguistic aspect which was pointed out by Bhatia (1993).

Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterised by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalised with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value. These constraints, however, are often exploited by the expert members of the discourse community to achieve private intentions within the framework of socially recognised purpose(s). (Swales, 1990, 58)

More than two decades after Swales' description of genre, its condensed working form is still used as follows: "[genre is] a recognised type of communicative event" (Swales and Feak, 2000, 7) that dictates its content and style and whose internal structure is characterised by certain linguistic features (Stašková, 2005, 8). This basic definition further varies with regard to the degree of (un)preparedness, the network of open and supporting (close) genres and the medium (spoken/written, or both) (Swales, 1990, 61-67; Swales and Feak, 2000, 7-8). Consequently, a placement of abstract within the scale provides the present study with efficient characteristics defining this particular genre. It can be therefore summarised that abstract is a prepared, written and open academic genre fulfilling the communicative purpose of a faithful and accurate summary which is representative of the whole original writing.

From the formal point of view, abstract has occupied a prominent position at the beginning of full academic writings since the 1950s. The length of abstracts usually ranges from one hundred to two hundred words and it is recommended to write a single-spaced abstract in 12pt font; however, the specific requirements depend on a particular policy.

While compiling an abstract, the author faces the two initial problems which are connected to the procedures of the redundancy elimination and the relationship between abstract and the original text. As to the procedures of the redundancy elimination, the choice is predominantly subjective, because it is the addresser who omits, generalises, combines and compiles a coherent and cohesive abstract. Concerning the latter problem, a type of relationship is mainly influenced by the communicative purpose that the original writing is aimed to fulfill.

Based on the differences in communicative purposes of original academic works, Swales (1990, 2000) and Bhatia (1993) described the two major sub-genres of abstract, viz. research article and conference abstracts, which serve different aims and audiences³. The reason of emerging these sub-genres resides in applying the writer's discriminative strategies in the process of abstracting as well as an important variable within the writing process that is the notion of time. While conference abstract is required well in advance of an actual piece of writing or presentation, research article compilation is done prior to its abstract. Apart from the difference in time of compiling these abstracts, the contrast is seen in communicative purposes which

influence the text-organisation of abstracts, too. In order to fulfill the aim of presenting the future study or presentation, conference abstract is supposed to generally outline the author's motivation, methods, hypotheses and intentions of the research, but it is naturally not able to include any pieces of information on results and conclusion. On the other hand, research article abstract needs to be a representative of the original writing and reflects all important parts of the original work, such as introduction, methods, approach as well as findings, conclusion and future implications. According to the chosen academic setting, the present analysis is based on a particular type of research article abstracts, viz. thesis abstracts, and we suppose that their structure is to follow the actual textual organisation of the final thesis. The problem here is that over the course of time, abstract has been approached in different ways by various academic disciplines and researchers that underlined the importance of different components of the actual academic work. This diversity of approaches set the stage for typology of models of abstracts which are portrayed in the subsequent section of the present paper in order to incorporate thesis abstract into the typological system and to choose a representative model of abstract which would correspond to the required structure of the analysed thesis abstracts.

The initial model of abstract designed according to the three functional categories of introduction, problem and conclusion served as an independent discourse stressing the purpose of summarising (Van Dijk, 1980). Later on, it was replaced by abstract representing a well-structured combination of an elaborated title and crystallised full article (Salager-Mayer, 1990). By the end of the twentieth century, Čmejrková et al. (1999) compiled an outline of typology of abstracts according to which, abstract is ideally represented by linear and informative (rhematic) structure that copies the organisation of the original academic work following the four-part pattern of problem, methods, results and conclusion(s). According to Graetz (1985), the prominent emphasis is placed on the third part – results – which should be demonstrated in the most elaborated way. Another structure of abstract is linear and inductive (thematic) which aims at presenting the main topic analysed in the academic work without demonstrating the results. Finally, there are non-linear thematic types of abstracts, which do not follow the structure of the original text; they are called global abstracts (Čmejrková et al., 1999, 72-80; Gopnik, 1972, 108-109). It is important to mention here that the majority of authors tend to combine more forms of abstracts with the dominance of one type, hence linear rhematic-thematic abstract. According to this typology, thesis abstract is to be linear, informative (rhematic) and include the components of problem, methods, results and conclusion(s).

Although the four-part pattern of informative abstract compilation was well established, an outstanding change introduced to scientific journals has provoked a change in the structure of abstract, too. It was IMRAD formula⁴ (Stašková, 2005, 33) the original writings started to be based on which has been reflected in the structure of informative abstracts. However, this was long restricted to the genre of medical journals, and only in the course of the recent decades, there have been visible attempts to apply this formula into the other academic genres in different fields of study. As it was mentioned above, the clear IMRAD structure has been reflected into the writing process of abstracts as well and by the time even an elaboration of the formula was recommended by James Hartley⁵ (1997, 2004, 2008) who, what is more, expanded the structure of the five parts while using them separately with the titles: background, aim, method, results and conclusion (Hartley, 2008, 31-36). Hartley's elaborated framework was further inspirational for Dos Santos's move analysis based on the following pattern⁶: Move 1 motivates the audience to read the original academic work by introducing the topic and current state of the problem; Move 2 presents the research by demonstrating the focus or purpose; Move 3 outlines the study design;

Move 4 shows the most outstanding findings; and Move 5 concludes the research and offers further implications and recommendations (Dos Santos, 1996, 482, cited in Stašková, 2005, 35).

Finally, while compiling abstracts, writers definitely come across Koopman's checklist of components that works as a general model applicable to all scientific disciplines. The model is adapted from his article *How to Write an Abstract* (1997) and includes the following components: motivation, problem statement, methods, procedures and approach, results and conclusion(s). The individual parts represent the elaborate answers to different questions (see Table 1).

Why do you care about the problem and results?	MOTIVATION
What problem are you trying to solve? What is the scope of your work?	PROBLEM STATEMENT
How do you go about solving or making progress? What do you use for analysing the data? What is the extent of your work?	METHODS PROCEDURES APPROACH
What are the findings?	RESULTS
What are the implications of your answer? Are your results general or specific to a particular case?	CONCLUSION(S)

Table 1: Koopman's checklist for abstracts

To sum up the table, the first section includes the importance of work and the impact it may have in the future, the second one describes the scope of work, whether solving a generalized or a specific situation. Occasionally, the first two sections can be interchanged if the problem is recognised as generally significant. The third part is focused on the approaches, processes or programmes used, data analysed, variables controlled, etc. In the fourth section, the author should put stress on the evident results thus avoid vagueness. And finally, conclusion is a potential link between the actual results and a new research motivation, thus its goal is to present the significance of academic work, to offer implications and recommendations for the future development of the problem and, ideally, to motivate to carry out further research.

Although Hart (1986) claims that genre analysis is pattern seeking and not pattern imposing (cited in Bhatia, 1993, 40), and the primary aim of the present analysis is to find a pattern and distinctive features of the structural organisation of English thesis abstracts written by the sample of the Slovak students', one needs to consider the constraints of the genre and existing models. The advantages of the last foregoing structural move-model are that it is not restricted to a specified field of study and includes a clear-cut set of questions helping to compile an abstract. Since it corresponds to the expected outline of thesis abstracts in terms of their linearity and rhematic structure, Koopman's model provides a basis for the comparative analysis in the research.

3 The genre of abstract in Slovak higher education

For an overwhelming majority of Slovak authors, be they students or researchers, abstract tends to be the only part of text written in the English language within their academic work which is required to follow international norms which are based on the Anglophone writing traditions.

In the Slovak academic setting, the aim of providing academic writing standards is fulfilled by the document *STN ISO 214 Abstrakty (referáty) pre publikácie a dokumentáciu*⁷ which focuses on the subject, definition, purpose, elaborating and presenting abstracts, be they Slovak or English ones. According to *STN ISO 214*, the concept of abstract is defined as a brief, exact presentation of the content of an academic work without an interpretation or reference to the author of abstract. According to the document, the type of abstract should be informative,

possibly combined, informative-inductive. Moreover, the document recommends the following parts, while their order is not determined: the aim, methods, results, conclusion(s) and the additional information.

In order to focus on a particular language community representing a peculiar academic setting, the present study is aimed at analysing the abstracts written in the English language by non-native English speakers whose Bachelor's and Master's theses are written in Slovak. Their authors are students of the University of Prešov, the Faculty of Management⁸. All Prešov University faculties and departments follow the document *STN ISO 214*; besides, Presov University provides students with its own guidelines for final theses⁹. In Art. 6, Sect. 5, the document *STN ISO 214* states that abstract includes information on the aims of the thesis, its brief summary, accomplishment of the aims, methodology, results and conclusions.

From the formal point of view, the standards in the Slovak University setting correspond to the requirements of the Anglophone writing traditions mentioned in the previous section. According to *STN ISO 214*, abstract is placed separately prior to the full work and its length typically ranges from one hundred to two hundred and fifty words, exceptionally up to five hundred words. Generally speaking, an abstract forms one paragraph and is obliged to be written in Slovak and English respectively along with three to five keywords at its end. Both versions of abstract are expected to follow the model consisting of motivation (a brief summary), problem statement (aims of the thesis), methods, procedures and approach (methodology, accomplishment of the aims), results and conclusion(s), which is in accordance with Koopman's checklist for abstract.

4 Analysis

4.1 Methodology, procedure and aims

In order to compile a corpus for the analysis, the following three criteria were used. It is important to mention here that the selected criteria were also influenced by the future aim of the analysis that is to study distinctive features of English as a Lingua Franca in the Slovak academic setting. The first criterion was the language of the studied abstracts which was English since according to the document *STN ISO 214* the two versions of abstracts are required in final theses, one is to be written in the language of the academic writing, the second one in other world language, predominately English. Secondly, the abstracts in the corpus were written by non-native English-speaking academic community of students of the Faculty of Management at Prešov University and finally, the abstracted Bachelor's and Master's theses were written in other language than English, in the analysed sample, it appeared to be Slovak.

The overall objective of the research was to demonstrate the structural preferences of a particular Slovak University setting by answering the following research questions: Do English thesis abstracts written in the Slovak academic setting follow the Anglophone model of structuring? Do they reflect Koopman's checklist for abstracts in their structure? Are there any structure peculiarities distinctive in the Slovak academia? Are there any differences between Bachelor's and Master's thesis abstracts?

Based on the criteria and research questions, the individual texts of the compiled corpus were analysed and their structures were compared to the chosen Koopman's model of abstracts. All components adduced by Koopman's checklist for abstracts were identified by manual analysis of the empirical data and quantitatively and qualitatively summarised as follows.

4.2 Results of the pilot study

In order to fulfill the objective, a sample of sixteen abstracts of Bachelor's theses and sixteen abstracts of Master's theses was compiled on the basis of the foregoing criteria. All the abstracts were written in one paragraph and, with the exception of one abstract¹⁰, fitted into the restriction of words with the average number of 173. When comparing the individual types of analysed final theses, the research showed the slight difference of 24.5 words between Bachelor's (161) and Master's thesis (185.5) abstracts.

By way of the sample analysis of the individual moves based on Koopman's model, the component reflecting the initial step in cognitive structuring of abstract, viz. motivation, occurred in 25% of all analysed abstracts among which one instance placed this move to the final position.

As to the components of problem statement and methods, procedures and approach, the research of the selected abstracts displayed a tendency of authors to focus on them; more specifically 53.1% of all abstracts comprised exclusively these two components. Interestingly enough, it was the component of problem statement which occurred in all of the studied abstracts.

The most important component of results with the power of "selling" the original discourse was stated in only 18.6% of the sample. The percentage included only Master's thesis abstracts as none of the analysed Bachelor's thesis abstracts presented the findings. On the other hand, 37.5% of the analysed abstracts included the component of result in a further unspecified reference (cf. the abstract 24). Another example of unspecified results is the abstract (2) where the move, which was intended to represent the result component, included a lexico-grammatical form of "may". The modal verb generally implies the functional value of vagueness which is unacceptable in a well-structured abstract since it does not fulfill the communicative purpose of the genre. In other words, the unspecified results were therefore not classified as independent moves or components; they were embedded within the component of methodology, procedures and approaches.

(2) "The results of the survey *may* show the importance of each factor in the selection and choice of bank deposit and loan products that can be used to improve the quality and attractiveness of these services."

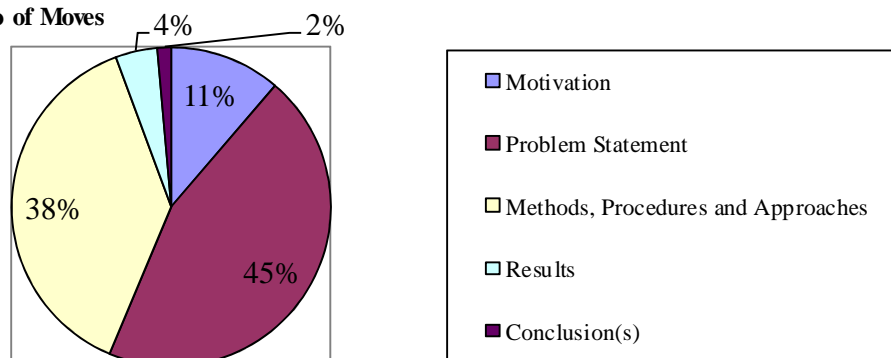
(24) "The result of this work is a series of recommendations and proposals that can help to design a product and would increase the interest about the rural tourism and agrotourism by its character."

The final move of conclusion could be hardly displayed in the studied abstracts without the previously stated results and one cannot be surprised by its percentage of 0.06.

Surprisingly enough, only one abstract from the compiled corpus demonstrated all five elements, but it is important to point out that its perfect-picture move-structure did not reflect the expected lexico-grammatical organisation, thus its functional value was violated.

Overall, Figure 1 shows a ratio of moves in the analysed abstracts where problem statement and methods, procedures and approach represent the major moves within the process of abstracting. Concerning the content, these elements were limited to the introductory information of the thesis aims and to the description of its structure. Based on the fact that the components of results and conclusion(s) stand for an insignificant minority, it can be stated that authors of the analysed abstracts, in spite of the guidelines, preferred an inductive, i.e. thematic type of abstract.

Figure 1: A Ratio of Moves



By way of conclusion, the examined language community of authors of English abstracts written in the Prešov academic setting showed a preference, regarding the cognitive text-structuring, to focus on the problem statement and methods, procedures and approach elements. The motivation component was infrequently presented at the beginning of abstracts. On the other hand, results and conclusion(s), the two most important elements with the power of fulfilling the communicative purposes of the genre and with a significant influence on future readership, were nearly completely ignored.

As to the differences between the abstracts of Bachelor's and Master's theses, the selected sample did not show any substantial variances, with the exception of the infrequent presence of results and conclusion(s) exclusively in the analysed Master's thesis abstracts and one instance of a full five-move organisation abstracting the Master's thesis, too.

Accordingly, the study demonstrates that 90.7 % of the analysed abstracts in the academic community sample of the students of the Faculty of Management were compiled in linear, inductive (thematic) type common in conference academic setting. Since there is a difference in the communicative event of conference and thesis abstracts, it is not acceptable to interchange them. As adduced in the theoretical preliminaries, conference abstract writing is pressed for time, thus merely outlines a future written academic discourse. On the other hand, thesis abstract is compiled in order to submit the overall information on original work with the emphasis on its significant findings and further implications. The communicative purpose of thesis abstract is reflected in the need for linear, informative (rhematic) abstract and as the overwhelming majority of the studied abstracts did not display the rhematic structure, they did fulfill their communicative function only partially.

This finding can be understood in two ways, as the instance of peculiar text-organisation of the sample of thesis abstracts written in the Prešov academic setting or as the evidence of a certain gap in academic writing instruction, be it Slovak or English in the Slovak academic setting. The question of education definitely requires a more detailed view in the future research, but at this point we can sum up that, for the examined abstracts, the fact stated in the introduction that the process of abstracting is still underestimated, especially by non-native authors, is univocally proved.

5 Conclusion

First and foremost, the study offered a brief theoretical outline ranging from defining abstract as a genre of academic discourse with an emphasis on its communicative function, through the typology of abstract-structuring and its position within the Slovak University setting. The consequent empirical analysis aimed at answering the research questions posed in the

introduction, viz. Do English thesis abstracts written in the Slovak academic setting follow the Anglophone model of structuring? Do they reflect Koopman's checklist for abstracts in their structure? Are there any structure peculiarities distinctive in the Slovak academia? Are there any differences between Bachelor's and Master's thesis abstracts? The corpus analysis consisting of thirty-two final thesis abstracts was manually carried out and subsequently compared to the selected structural criteria of Koopman's model.

Based on the sample of abstracts, the process of abstracting in the Slovak University setting is evidently underestimated. The posed research questions can be therefore answered as follows: from the text-organising point of view, the corpus of English-written abstracts displayed a tendency to be compiled on the basis of the two elements, i.e. problem statement and methods, procedures and approach. Hence the analysed abstracts tended to be limited to the description of the purpose and the individual chapters of the theses, and absent from the motivation for the writing the thesis, its results or conclusion. This structure is one of linear, inductive (thematic) type and displayed a distinctive departure from the five-move Koopman's model the studied abstracts were compared to. This means that the majority of the analysed abstracts fulfilled the communicative purposes only partially without a considerable difference between the Bachelor's and Master's thesis abstracts, except for two instances (cf. 4.2).

The findings imply an overall need for a more significant position of teaching academic writing in the Slovak University setting that heretofore has received little attention. Although the question of the improvement of education which arose out of our research was beyond the scope of the present article, it can be an interesting springboard for further discussion and research in the field of genre analysis. However, this study took the initial step and provided the readership with the introductory information which can be used as a guide to construct a clear, coherent and informative abstract, and therefore contribute to a quality increase in students' academic writing.

Notes

[1] The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available at: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/abstracts/>

[2] Abstract Writing, available at: <http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing/gradhandouts/Academic%20Tasks%20-%20Abstract%20Writing%20-%20Presentation.pdf>

[3] A more detailed view on research abstracts is proposed by Swales (1990). The conference abstract is analysed in English in *Today's Research World* by Swales and Feak (2000).

[4] The acronym is an abbreviation of four English words: Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion. The formula was developed in the second half of the 20th century and accepted as a standard model for research articles in 1979 (Čmejrková, 1999, 88).

[5] Is it appropriate to use structured abstracts in non-medical science journals? Available at: <http://jis.sage.pub.com/content/24/5/359.abstract>

[6] A slightly modified five-move pattern is proposed by Yakhontova (1998) for conference abstracts; her proposal includes outlining the research field, justifying a particular piece of research/study, introducing the paper to be presented at the conference, summarising the paper and highlighting its outcomes / results (Swales & Feak, 2000, 32).

[7] Author's translation: Abstracts (Reports) for Publication and Documentation. Available at: <http://www.pulib.sk/kis/kucianova/Spracovanie2/SpracII2.pdf>

[8] The reasons for choosing a sample of abstracts from the Faculty of Management are connected with the assumption that the students' English is at the intermediate level (B1-B2), which is guaranteed by the compulsory English courses instructed in the course of their study.

[9] Available at: <http://www.pulib.sk/web/data/pulib/subory/stranka/ezp-smernica-2013.pdf>

[10] The Master's thesis abstract number 26 is written in two sentences (thirty-eight words) only, describing the aims, i.e. the component of problem statement. According to the guidelines, this abstract is not acceptable, therefore it is not further analysed in the study.

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Resumé

Štruktúrna analýza anglických abstraktov záverečných prác v slovenskom akademickom prostredí

Akademické písanie v angličtine je celouniverzitne prítomné vo forme abstraktu, ktorý predstavuje prvý kontakt medzi vedeckou prácou a jej potenciálnymi čitateľmi. Abstraktu ako žánru sa dlhodobo neprikladal v akademickej obci nerodených hovoriacich angličtiny hlbší význam, no vplyvom anglofónneho systému akademického písania a všeobecnej potrebe medzinárodnej komunikácie a výmeny informácií si aj rozsahom kratšie žánre akademického diskurzu získavajú náležitú pozornosť v procese písania ako aj v edukačnom priestore. Predkladaný článok skĺbuje teoretické východiská žánrovej analýzy abstraktu s empirickou štúdiou abstraktov písaných v rámci časti prešovskej akademickej komunity. Úvodné teoretické zameranie zahŕňa aplikáciu definície žánru na koncept abstraktu a poskytuje prehľad typologických a štruktúrnych prístupov zohrávajúcich významnú úlohu vo formovaní tohto žánru, čo umožňuje následnú komparáciu žánrových a jazykovo-štylistických noriem anglofónnej a slovenskej akademickej tradície. Empirická analýza, ktorá tvorí pilotnú časť autorkinej dizertačnej práce, skúma konkrétne štruktúrne osobitosti v rámci korpusu tridsiatich šiestich anglicky písaných abstraktov bakalárskych a magisterských prác študentov manažmentu na Prešovskej univerzite v Prešove. Jej výsledky si kladú za cieľ potvrdenie alebo vyvrátenie predpokladu, či študenti dodržiavajú stanovené normy akademického písania v univerzitnom prostredí. V prípade nedodržiavania pravidiel indikáciu typológie, ku ktorej inklinuje daná vzorka autorov, a následnú definíciu jej špecifik. Zo záverov vyplýva, že analyzovaný korpus abstraktov študentskej akademickej obce Prešovskej univerzity selektívne kladie dôraz na dva konkrétne textové komponenty: vymedzenie problému a metodológiu. Tieto komponenty však neplnia komunikatívnu funkciu abstraktu v plnom rozsahu, a tým výrazne vybočujú od požiadaviek smernice pre písanie záverečných prác. Potvrdenie získaných výsledkov si vyžaduje rozšírenie korpusu abstraktov Prešovskej univerzity, pričom je potrebné zamerať sa na širšiu škálu kvalifikačných záverečných prác na dosiahnutie komplexnej žánrovej štúdie. V neposlednom rade sa na základe záverov predkladanej štúdie vynára otázka efektívneho vyučovania písania akademických diskurzov.

Note: The publication of the paper is supported by the KEGA 030PU-4/2014 grant project.