Syntactic Feature of EFL Speakers' Conference Presentations: The Case of Passive Voice and Pseudo-Cleft

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Abstract

Acquiring proficiency in academic genres is a key factor in research community. Among various genres in academic discourse communities, spoken genre, especially Conference Presentations (CPs), play a crucial role in research communities, though investigation on this important genre is in its infancy or is relatively under-researched. Therefore, the present study aims to shed light on the importance of two most frequently used structures in CPs, passive voice, and pseudo-cleft. To this end, 600 minutes of Iranian international CPs were recorded and then transcribed. The rate of employment of the structures, and the effect of gender and university degree of presenters were estimated. The results of the chi square analysis of the data suggested that although rate of use of passive voice was higher than pseudo-cleft, the differences between males and females, and graduates and postgraduates were minor and hence gender and university degree did not significantly influence the rate of use of the structures. Since passive voice and pseudo-cleft are two of the most important structures in academic genre, the results of the present study have obvious importance in increasing conference presenters and lecturers' awareness of the employment of the structures efficiently.

Keywords: EFL Speakers' CPs, Academic Genre, Spoken Genre, Passive Voice, Pseudo-Cleft

Introduction

Functions and organization of scientific texts, especially research articles have been among the main concerns of discourse analysis practitioners (e.g., Hyland, 2000; Trosborg, 2000). Among various academic texts and genres, CP stands out as one of the critical ones, since it is the product of a whole conference experience which will hopefully lead to a published research paper. It is a complex genre which has been situated in a conference paper genre chain as the last and one of the important genres (Raisanen, 1999, 2002). However, due to its complicated nature, some scholars consider CP much more than a mere genre. As noted by Ventola (1999), genre or intertextuality cannot do justice to explain the complexity of CP. She further suggested the concept of semiotic spanning to indicate the complexity of this universe of discourse.

However, spoken academic genres such as seminars, conferences, presentations, etc. have not been subject to investigation in terms of traits and disciplines (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003). According to Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003), one of the key spoken genres that researchers need to specialize in is the CP genre. Essential role of CPs in community of research should not be neglected, though working on this crucial genre has been relatively faced with lack of interest and studies on spoken academic discourse are still in their infancy (Rowley-Jolivet, 1999). As a matter of fact, it has been written genre that researchers have concentrated on (Ventola, Shalom, & Thompson, 2002). The main reasons for neglecting spoken genre might be the difficulties of gathering spoken corpus, comprehending these genres (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003), and presumably, its dependence on board range of factors existing in the whole conference experience (Shalom, 2002). This study aimed to account for the issue of investigation carried out by the researcher to highlight the importance of spoken genre, more specifically CP. Among a number of important and common structures and features, this study narrowly dissected the rate of application of passive voice and pseudo-cleft structures, and the effect of gender and education on the use of the structures.

Literature Review

Clarifying contextual and functional features of CP aids researchers to reach to a framework for further analysis (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003). Genre analysts widely agree on the notion that CP is a communicative event which falls in a particular socio-cultural context with a particular communicative function (Swales, 1990). In fact, it has been suggested that CP is influenced by other speech events and the whole conference process (Ventola, 1999). Raisanen's (1999) study of CP genre further indicated that how CP is a part of chronological conference paper genre and is intertwined with other genres such as "call for abstracts", "conference abstracts", etc. (Raisanen, 1999, p. 112).

According to Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003), CPs are mostly prepared and practiced in advance; they are live events which occur in real-life situations. Meanwhile, the density of information that speakers need to adapt is considerable; that is to say, every lecturer has to handle both production and comprehension. The other important factor is time which can be a limiting factor. Lack of time can cause difficulty and limitation in delivering related content (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003). Furthermore, the existing relationship between the audience and the lecturer needs to be considered as well. Despite the physical presence of the audiences in the CP, the performances are in one-sided monologue forms which require appropriate interpersonal strategies. As a matter of fact, CPs are audio-visual in nature, visual signs and symbols, or any nonverbal aids, can be crucial help for linguistic semiotic means to bring about efficient understanding (Morell, 2015). It means that in conferences visual means (PowerPoint displays and slides) accompany lecturers' words and discourse; therefore, audiences can simultaneously listen, see, and read the information. Therefore, the integration of visual and verbal information is what a lecturer should perform appropriately (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003). Moreover, language proficiency of the presenter can be an issue as well (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013), especially in case of non-native speakers who must manage both presentation and follow-up questions and discussion with limited language command (Querol-Julián & Fortanet-Gómez, 2012). The aforementioned features undoubtedly have effects on the language and the choices of textual features which can be analyzed by various approaches such as syntactic approach, rhetorical approach, and multimodal approach.

Syntactic approach, as the name suggests, has been utilized to analyze syntactic patterns used in CPs (Carte-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2001). In a study carried out by Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2001), a corpus of CPs performed by native speaker researchers has been analyzed. Evaluating contextual factors, syntactic choices, and patterns applied in each CPs was the purpose of their study. They found a framework through which speakers, on the basis of the clauses which carried information and the effect of those informative clauses, try to manipulate syntactic patterns. It has been observed that specific syntactic means such as "there" and "inversion" are frequently used to provide audience with information in CPs. However, other structures such as "passive voice" are applied infrequently by lecturers. It has been stated that the main reason of the absence of this structure might be the nature of these types of genres, live communicative event. In other words, impersonality as the main function of passive voice is not common in oral presentations, therefore lectures and speakers utilize high range of personal pronouns which require active voice in the sentences. Thus, speakers of CPs consider themselves responsible for the decisions and interpretations of their studies. Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003) have stated that the explained approach is a microscopic approach which operates at sentence level; in other words, rhetorical and discursive structure, and communicative purpose of CPs have been ignored in this approach. Later, Carter-Thomas (2004) compared the syntactic patterns such as passive voice, pseudo-cleft, etc. in introduction section of CPs with introductory

sections of proceedings articles. She found that due to their different purposes, these two genres have different structure; for example, the use of passive voice and extraposition are not that common in CP introductions, since these structure might prevent from more personal relationship with audience which is one of the aims of CP introductions; on the other hand, pseudo-cleft and rhetorical questions are commonly used as the presenter aims to engage the audience in the discussion. Following studies on the structure of CPs considered rhetorical and discursive aspects as well and did not suffice to syntactic features only.

Rhetorical approach deals with genre analysis with the purpose of going through and examining moves employed in CPs (Samraj, 2002). Move analysis has been exclusively used to study moves in wide range of written genres, therefore, the possibility of analyzing moves in spoken genres has been a great concern for researchers (Dudley-Evans, 1994). As Thompson (2003) puts it, identifying sections of CPs, introduction, method, discussion, etc. is one of the main problems to deal with, since this type of genre is a spoken monologue and in spoken genre it is probably not easy to identify where each section finishes. The main reason has been elaborated by Thompson (2003) that lecturers rarely use transactional markers, such as *well, so*, etc. to shift from a section to the other.

There exists a variety of models or patterns by scholars on analysis of different parts of a CP (e.g., Berkenko & Huckin, 1995; Dubois, 1980; Faber, 1996; Halleck & Connor, 2006; Kaplan et al., 1994; Swales, 1990; Thompson, 1994) which are employed as a guide for analyzing spoken genre. Though these models have been introduced by aforementioned scholars, there are faults lay with them. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2003) stated that these models are appropriate for specific type of disciplinary corpus, not a mixed or multi-disciplinary CP. Faber's (1996) model included introduction, problem, objectives, product, method, and citation. This model is similar to Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) model with a slight difference in which their model included problem, method, findings, and conclusion. Kaplan et al's (1994) model on the basis of the research they carried out on 249 presentations on Applied Linguistics included establishing the field, summarizing previous research, preparing for present research, and introducing the present research. Later, Raisanen (1999) studied on corpus of joint conferences which were performed in 1994. She identified two main and necessary moves, and three optional moves in conferences. Obligatory moves are territory, results, and conclusion or implication. After applying some changes on the mentioned models Halleck and Connor (2006) proposed the following model which include different parts such as *territory*, *reporting previous research*, *gap, goal, means 1*, *means 2*, *outcomes*, *benefits, importance*, *competence*. More recently, Guest (2018a) analyzed the linguistic rhetorical features of CP introductions and reported the frequent use of rhetorical questions, presenting background information, appropriate body language, etc.

Occasionally, CP studies using rhetorical approach analyze the functions of a specific discursive structure or discourse marker. For instance, Webber (2005) studied the interactive features in CPs by analyzing discourse markers such as *I*

think among others that implicate personal references. Lin (2010) investigated the uses of different discourse markers including *you know*, *actually*, and *sort of* in academic lectures and reported promoting intimacy, interactions, common ground, etc. as their main functions. Fernández-Polo (2014) explored the role of *I mean* in 36 CPs of ELF presenters. He found that ELF speakers tend to commonly repair their mistakes and be explicit in their CPs, therefore they use this discourse marker to correct themselves and improve their relationship with the audiences. However, in spite of the superiority of the rhetorical approach over the syntactic one, it is not providing a complete picture of CPs and their different features for us. The aforementioned approaches on discourse analysis of CP genre have separately analyzed different aspects of this genre. Still, communication is not only about considering language by its bits but also it should take into account rhetorical and visual features. Simply put, a much more complete method is a necessity to be accounted in which both aspects of spoken genre are analyzed together (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003).

The multimodal approach, according to Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, and Tsatsarelis (2001), investigates different factors or the main semiotic modes which are involved in spoken genre. These modes are language, genre, action, and visual communication whose roles and values might change depending on the context of the communication. It has been believed that being aware of these modes and employing them appropriately can enhance the quality of presenters' talks (Kress, 2003; Morell, 2015). The most important modes as Kress et al. (2001) stated are language, visual communication, and gestures. Language concerns with both the written language on slides, and the language which is used by the lecturer. Slides, pictures, charts, etc. are included in visual modes and pointing to the slides, pictures, and charts during the presentation in gesture mode. Thus, language, visual display, and gestures function as a means of expressing ideas that integration of their functions aids lecturers to perform appropriately and naturally. Later, Morell (2015) proposed another multimodal model for CPs which linked different modes of communication such as spoken, written, nonverbal, and body language with systemic functional linguistic. The interplay between different modes is not fixed, since within a particular discourse and specific genre, or even different moves of a presentation different range of importance might be attached to one of the modes rather than the other ones (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002). For instance, in introduction part, language mode is more noticeable, while in result section salience of visual mode cannot be disregarded. Though different modes gain variety of importance in different sections of a CP. It has been stated by researchers that language mode gains more salience among these three modes (Kress et al., 2001; Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2001, 2003). Due to this fact, syntactic approach which has been elaborated in the previous section has been the main approach for researchers to analyze CPs.

Despite the previous studies on language mode, it seems that research on this particular mode in EFL contexts has received scant attention. As a result, the present

study traced to examine syntactic traits, use of passive voice, and pseudo-cleft of CPs in EFL context. To this end, the following questions were raised:

1. What is the rate of employment of passive voice and pseudo-cleft in CPs among EFL graduate and postgraduate lecturers?

2. Is there any significant difference between male and female EFL graduate and postgraduate lecturers and their university degree in their use of passive voice and pseudo-cleft in CPs?

Method

Corpus

The spoken data used for this study comprised of twenty pieces of 30-minute conference presentations in the field of Applied Linguistics performed in Urmia, Iran by Iranian non-native English speakers. The length of each presentation varied from about 1350 to 2540 words. The CPs were selected from both female and male presenters (female = 10, male = 10). They included M.A. students or holders as well as Ph.D. students or holders of the Applied Linguistics field from different Iranian universities.

Data Collection Procedure

The data was gathered during an international conference held in Urmia, Iran in April 2013. The presentations were audio recorded in three days, and then fully transcribed in order to be thoroughly analyzed.

Data Analysis

In order to investigate the rate of application of passive voice and pseudo-cleft in the current study, frequency, percentages, and standard residuals of each category in all the selected CPs were calculated. Afterward, the chi-square test was run to investigate whether there was any difference in the use of the passive voice and pseudo-cleft by males and females as well as M.A. and Ph.D. holders among Iranian non-native conference presenters in EFL context.

Result

Presenters' Degrees and the Rate of Use of the Structures

In order to find the rate of use of pseudo cleft and passive voice among the presenters with different degrees, Chi-square analysis was conducted. The results of the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 3.64$, P > .05) indicate that there was not any significant difference between the EFL graduate and postgraduate lecturers' use of passive voice and pseudo-cleft.

Table 1. Chi-Square of Pseudo-Cleft and Passive Voice by Degree

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Continuity Correction	3.646	1	.056

Moreover, the frequencies, percentages, and standardized residuals for the Ph.D. and M.A. lecturers' use of pseudo-Cleft and passive voice are displayed in Table 2. The former two statistics are descriptive based on which no inferences can be made; however, the standardized residual (Std. Residual) can be used to make statistical inferences. Any Std. Residual values beyond the ranges of +/- 1.96 indicate that the item is significantly used beyond or below what was expected.

None of the Std. Residuals are beyond +/- 1.96, thus it can be concluded that the passive voice and pseudo-clefts were employed by M.A. and Ph.D. presenters randomly.

Table 2. Frequencies, Percentages and Std. Residuals, Pseudo-Cleft, and Passive Voice by Degree

			Section		Total
			Passive Voice	**Pseudo-Cleft**	
Degree	**Ph.D.**	Count	305	151	456
		% within Degree	66.9%	33.1%	100.0%
		Std. Residual	.8	-1.1	
	M.A.	Count	216	143	359
		% within Degree	60.2%	39.8%	100.0%
		Std. Residual	-.9	1.2	
Total		Count	521	294	815
		% within Degree	63.9%	36.1%	100.0%

Presenters' Genders and the Rate of Use of the Structures

For the purpose of understanding the difference between male and female EFL graduate and postgraduate lecturers in their use of passive voice and pseudo-cleft in CPs, the same analysis was conducted. The results of the chi-square test ($\chi^2 = .20$, $P > .05$) indicate that there was not any significant difference between the male and female lecturers' use of passive voice and pseudo-cleft. The first null-hypothesis is supported.

Table 3. Chi-Square, Pseudo-Cleft and Passive Voice by Gender

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Continuity Correction	.020	1	.889

Furthermore, as depicted in Table 4, none of the Std. Residuals are beyond +/- 1.96, thus it can be concluded that the passive voice and pseudo-clefts were employed by male and female presenters randomly.

Table 4. Frequencies, Percentages and Std. Residuals; Pseudo-Cleft and Passive Voice by Gender

			Section		Total
			Passive Voice	**Pseudo-Cleft**	
Gender	**Male**	**Count**	261	145	406
		% within Gender	64.3%	35.7%	100.0%
		Std. Residual	.1	-.1	
	Female	**Count**	260	149	409
		% within Gender	63.6%	36.4%	100.0%
		Std. Residual	-.1	.1	
Total		**Count**	521	294	815
		% within Gender	63.9%	36.1%	100.0%

Discussion

The present study was conducted to investigate the rate of use of pseudo cleft structure and passive voice among Iranian conference presenters. On the basis of above findings, it can be concluded that CPs contained a total of 521 (63.9%) passive structure; Ph.D. holders or candidates 305(66.9%) and M.A. holders or students 216 (60.2%), and a total use of 294 (36.1%) of pseudo-cleft structure; Ph.D. holders or candidates 151 (33.1%) and M.A. holders or students 143 (39.8%). The analysis of the corpus in the present study indicates that CPs consisted of 815 passive and pseudo-cleft structures, 456 and 359, by Ph.D. and M.A. holders and students respectively.

Regarding the gender of the presenters, it can be inferred that though there was no significant difference between males and females' use of passive structure, presentations contained a total of 261 (64.3%) and 260 (63.6%) passive structure by males and females respectively. The presenters' use of pseudo-cleft structure indicated different results. The structure applied slightly more by females (149, 36.4%) in comparison with males (145, 35.7%).

Findings from this research clearly demonstrate that there was a difference between the amount of passive voice and pseudo-cleft structure employed by conference presenters. Many reasons can be accounted for the difference. One strong reason for variation in use, particularly the preference given to passive voice structure, is related to the nature of academic writings and presentations (Swales, 1976). Since the genre of academic texts is scientific, passive voice structure was used more frequently than pseudo-cleft structure. This might show that presenters were approximately familiar with the most common used structure in academic genre. However, the use of passive structure might not be that common in presentations in general. As noted by Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2001) and Carter-Thomas (2004), passive voice is not that much preferred by conference presenters. One of the possible reasons for this conflict might be due to the fact that, unlike the present study, the presentations analyzed in their study were produced by native speakers. It has been long assumed that since the construction of the passive voice seems much more complicated than active voice, only more proficient speakers can easily employ it (see Dąbrowska, & Street, 2006). However, research

results evidenced the contrary. As reported by Hinkel (1997), during an analysis of native and nonnative speakers' academic writing samples, apparently passive voice is not used that often by native speakers of English. Similarly, Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas evidenced the pervasive use of this structure by nonnative speakers in their CPs as compared with native speakers.

Regarding pseudo-cleft structures which are the other focus of the present study, it needs to be mentioned that the total rate of use of them is less frequent as compared with passive voice, notwithstanding presenters' university degree and genders. However, it has been noted that pseudo-clefts are common structures used in academic genres and CPs (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Joviet, 2003; Guest, 2018b), since they help presenters to move back and forth through their presentation and refer to their previously stated points (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Joviet, 2003). These structures are called "importance claim" by Halleck and Connor's (2006) model and considered as a way that presenters and lecturers can use to emphasize the novelty of the conducted study (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Joviet, 2001). According to Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Joviet (2001), Connor (2000), Connor and Mauranen (1999), Connor, Helle, Mauranen, Ringbom, Trikkonen-Condit, and YIi-Antola (1995), one reason for this less use of pseudo-cleft structure could be lack of familiarity of the presenters with the structure among native speakers and nonnative speakers, regardless of university degree, gender, and the effect of context (EFL or ESL). The results of the current study are along with previous studies in this regard.

The aim of scientific texts and scientific studies is not only constructive but also rhetorical with the purpose of persuading skeptic audience by referring to the novelty of the studies. This purpose is clarified in "importance claim" move in which results and importance of a study are highlighted by the means of pseudo-cleft and passive voice structures. "Importance claim" move and the structures seem to be productive formats in which a set of hypotheses or questions would be previewed by a researcher. Furthermore, it could provide presenters (researchers) with opportunities to promote their studies in CPs. It means that in spoken genres, the relationship between the researcher and audiences is crucial (Hood & Forey, 2005). Spoken genre, especially CPs, which are well-suited to communicative settings by comparison with other presentations which are detached monologues, the physical presence of audience has an important role in setting the presenter with accord and agreement. Therefore, setting an interpersonal relationship with the audience is significant. Presenters can establish a friendly image when they use personal pronouns and active voice (see Carter-Thomas, 2004). In addition, application of personal pronouns and active voice can increasingly provide collaborative environment for following discussions at the end of a presentation (Morell, 2004). Therefore, high frequency of application of personal pronouns and active voices could be directly related with creating opportunities for a dynamic environment.

On the other hand, though conference presenters are almost prepared and their speeches are rehearsed, live nature of presentations puts the high levels of pressure

on them. Besides, as it is stated by Carter-Thomas and Rowley-Jolivet (2003), presenters are involved in production and comprehension simultaneously which leads to consecutive adaptation of information of their presentations. Furthermore, informational content of their presentations should be comprehensive by audience. Application of shorter clauses, active voice structure, and personal pronouns facilitate information processing, hence comprehension (Carter-Thomas, 2004). Consequently, creating opportunities for higher comprehension would make higher degree of personal involvement, interpersonal relationship, promoting the study, and exchanging ideas. Though the use of aforementioned structures can benefit both researcher and audience, passive voice and pseudo-cleft that are two of the main structures of scientific genre are not utilized properly. Moreover, this imitation draws underused application of other structures that are the main features of scientific genre. One point to mention is the fact that use of personal pronouns is to demonstrate the presenters' authority and involvement in the process of the study (Fernández-Polo, 2018; Morell, 2004; Rowley Jolivet & Carter Thomas, 2005; Webber, 2005).

Finally, the effect of social setting which has direct relationship with culture is a point that its influence on the use of words and discourse patterns needs to be noticed. However, reaching to a convincing conclusion in this issue requires further studies. Cultural differences can be a reason to draw researchers' attention of this field to contrastive rhetoric and pragmatic differences (Hincks, 2005). Studies on discourse patterns have revealed similarities and differences between writing and speaking style between two languages in order to understand how writing and speaking conventions in one language influence how a language user writes or speaks in another (Connor & Connor, 1996; Duszak, 2011); therefore, it can be concluded that application of some structures is influenced by cross-cultural differences. While informal styles, use of active voice, and personal pronouns in this study are considered inappropriate, recent trends are towards more informal and conversational styles in presentations. Consequently, lack of familiarity with spoken style which is a matter of cultural and linguistic differences might cause misunderstanding.

Conclusion and Implication

Presentations in national and international conferences can be a challenge for young and inexperienced researchers, especially in case of EFL speakers who need to communicate with their audiences by means of a foreign language. The present investigation aimed at analyzing the rate of employment of passive voice structure and pseudo-cleft in CPs among Iranian EFL graduate and postgraduate presenters, and the effect of gender and university degree on the use of aforementioned structures. Due to the nature of academic genre, especially academic CPs, lecturers in this study employed specific features and structures which are commonly used in all academic presentations. Regarding two of the main and the most frequent structures, the findings documented that passive voice and pseudo-cleft structures

are inherent to academic genre. In view of the significance of these two structures, frequency of passive voice structure was higher than pseudo-cleft regardless of gender and university degree of the presenters; however, the differences were minor and hence not significant. Since passive voice and pseudo-cleft structures play crucial roles in academic genre, methods to increase presenters and lecturers' awareness should be applied to enhance their proficiency in using the structures properly and effectively.

The results and implications of such studies can be quite beneficial for EFL speakers who wish to present their research in conferences. Being aware of the common mistakes of other presenters and its comparison with their native speaker colleagues can help individual presenters realize their problems and solve them. It can also give insights to language teachers, especially ESP teachers, who strive to improve EFL learners' linguistic competence. Finally regarding the limitations, it needs to be mentioned that this study was confined to particular types of structures, passive voice, and pseudo-cleft. Future research should be conducted to reveal the role of other common structures in academic genre, for example reverse RWH-cleft, and cataphoric role of "this" or "that".

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