



### بررسی گرایش نوع ادبی در عنوان مقالات و پایان نامه های زبانشناسی کاربردی

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#### چکیده

عنوان، هویت کار تحقیقی بشمار می رود که بدون آن اثر تحقیقی جایگاه مناسبی در جامعه علمی نخواهد داشت. تاکنون مطالعات بسیاری در زمینه ویژگیهای عنوان مقالات و سمینارها به انجام رسیده است که همگی به تفاوت بین رشته ها، فرهنگ ها و زبانهای مختلف پرداخته و تفاوت احتمالی موثر از گونه زبانی (ژانر) و نیز تفاوت درون رشته ای نادیده گرفته شده است. از اینرو بعلت لزوم انجام مطالعات بیشتر در این زمینه، تحقیق حاضر به نقش عنوان در مقالات و پایان نامه ها در رشته زبانشناسی کاربردی پرداخت. مقالات و پایان نامه ها بعلت داشتن اهداف مختلف ساختارهای متفاوتی را در عنوان نشان می دهند. در این تحقیق، ۹۹۷ عنوان مقاله از ۷ مجله بین المللی زبانشناسی کاربردی و ۸۷۴ عنوان پایان نامه از دانشگاه های معتبر ایران انتخاب شد. عنوان ها بر اساس ساختار دستوری و بیان جنبه های مختلف تحقیق از نظر کمی و کیفی مورد بررسی قرار گرفتند. نتایج نشان داد که نویسندگان مقالات و پایان نامه ها ساختارهای دستوری متفاوتی در عنوان ها بکار می برند. عنوان در پایان نامه جنبه های بیشتری از تحقیق را در مقایسه با عنوان در مقاله ارائه می دهد، در حالی که تنوع بیشتری در ساختار دستوری مقاله وجود دارد. بنظر می رسد یکی از مهمترین علل این تفاوت ها ناشی از تفاوت مخاطب و اهداف هر ژانر باشد. البته دلایلی دیگر از جمله تاثیر زبان اول و مهارت نویسنده هم در این امر بی تاثیر نیستند. این تحقیق به بررسی علل این تفاوت ها پرداخته و راهکارهای آموزشی در این زمینه ارائه می دهد.

**واژگان کلیدی:** عنوان، آموزندگی، گستره، زبان شناسی کاربردی

# An Exploration of Generic Tendencies in Applied Linguistics Titles

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## Abstract

Realizing the need for empirical investigation, this study explored the generic structure of titles of theses and articles in Applied Linguistics. The study took into account 1871 thesis and article titles, assuming that titles of theses and articles have little in common as far as their communicative purposes are concerned. Categorization of the titles was made according to their varying structural constructions and informativeness. The thesis titles appeared to be more informative while the article titles demonstrated greater variation in their structures. An in-depth understanding of a genre which can, to some extent, be brought about by the works done in this area seems unavoidable. This study can definitely increase students' awareness of the effects of the generic differences on the conventions of writing which consequently helps them operate effectively in a certain genre.

**Keywords:** Applied Linguistics; Informativeness; Scope; Title

## 1. Introduction

Title is perhaps the first place where readers may be encouraged or discouraged to continue reading any academic piece of work. In the last three decades, there has been a growing interest in titles and their characteristics in different genres, for example, dissertations (Dudley-Evans, 1984), research articles (Goodman, 2000; Haggan, 2004; Haig, 2004; Soler, 2007; Wang & Bai, 2007), review papers (Soler, 2007), conference



presentation abstracts (Yakhontova, 2002), and lectures (Gelbes, 2007). Investigations into titles are important, in that a title is the first point that captures the reader's eye, the point from which he may decide whether a text is worth reading or not. This makes title writing a crucial step in documenting research.

If only attractiveness mattered in title formation, it would be of little help to the readers, because it would not contain any clue to what the article is about. Furthermore, if a title is not informative, it cannot be indexed in the proper databases (Haggan, 2004). An appropriate title is assumed to have three requirements. To fulfill its functions, a title should indicate the scope of the research, introduce the topic of the research, and be self-explanatory (Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 205). These three aspects contribute to the informativeness of a title. Having these requirements, a title might attract the right audience; otherwise, it loses its effectiveness and hence its addressees. Lester (1993, p. 138) mentions that a clearly expressed title is like a good thesis sentence that can guide one's writing and keep the researcher on course. He presents a number of strategies for writing a title, all of which in one way or another indicate the topic of the research, as well as the information through which the reader can decide on the usefulness and relevance of the research article (RA) to his or her own area of interest.

Different publications have distinct writing conventions (determined by different academic settings, authors, and audiences) and peer review processes. For example, article writers should follow the guidelines and strategies that are set forth by the journals as the essential prerequisite for publishing their articles, whereas theses are subject to be reviewed only by supervisors and referees of the theses. Titles in these genres, therefore, despite their common features, echo different purposes and exhibit divergent characteristics. The problem of composing a title may be worse for graduate students because there are few guidelines for writing a thesis title, and so students might generalize the suggestions for RA titles to writing titles for their theses. Moreover, considering the huge task of writing a thesis, graduate students might take writing a title for granted.

Contemporary studies on title writing have focused, especially, on article titles or conference presentation titles, and they have made generous contributions to these two (Gelbes, 2007; Goodman, Thacker, & Siegel, 2001; Haggan, 2004; Haig, 2004; Soler, 2007; Wang & Bai, 2007; Yakhontova, 2002). These studies have, in general, pointed to the generic peculiarity of titles, their syntactic structure, which is at the service of



economy or conciseness, and the authors' construction of their ethos out of the choices that are made available to them by the institutional context that they are attached to.

However, despite the attention given to culminating genres of graduate students (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998; Belcher, 1994; Belcher & Hirvela, 2005; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Bunton, 2005; Connor & Mauranen, 1999; Dudley-Evans, 1984; Kwan, 2006; Paltridge, 1997; Samraj & Monk, 2008; Shaw, 1991), the study of the titles of theses does not share the same privilege. This is especially evident in Applied Linguistics, and thus more empirical investigation seems to be needed in this area. As a matter of fact, the requirements of a good article title suggested by Swales and Feak (1994, p. 205), and the title writing strategies set forth by Lester (1993) may also be applied to thesis titles. Though writing a thesis title may appear a narrow topic, Dudley-Evans (1984) believes in a prescriptive approach to teaching titles to nonnative speakers of English, by examining in-depth the various aspects of the genre and drawing conclusions.

Previous studies have shown conflicting views as to what makes a title an effective one (Goodman, Thacker, & Siegel, 2001; Haggan, 2004; Soler, 2007; Wang & Bai, 2007). Almost all of these studies dealt with the interdisciplinary variations of title formation and neglected the generic differences of titles within a discipline. This study aims to address a less charted area—titles in theses and articles in Applied Linguistics—inspecting the structural configurations commonly found in each genre to see if they meet the important requirements of informativeness. Hopefully, this study may help students and those who wish to disseminate the findings of their own research in the leading international journals, and offer them clues on effective title writing in academic settings. The following questions, targeting informativeness and structural configuration, are thus posed in this study:

1. Can titles be structurally distinct across theses and RA titles in Applied Linguistics?
2. Can titles differ in terms of their informative and self-explanatory features?



## 2. Method

### 2.1. Instrumentation

The selected titles were coded based on a combination of syntactic units (e.g. phrases, sentences, or compound constructions) earlier deployed by Haggan (2004), Soler (2007), and Yakhontova (2002). The choice of syntactic analysis as the point of departure for title investigation was motivated by the fact that titles are the only part of articles that are, physically and linguistically, disjunct from the context, and this makes studying the contextual functions of titles essential.

Semantically, the titles were analyzed based on their informativeness. General classifying words describing actions (e.g. investigating, study, analysis, etc.), indicating results of the study (e.g. effect, impact, problems, etc.), or pointing to different aspects of a study (e.g. area, scope, topic, or method) are usually used to improve the informativeness of titles. To preclude any problem of interpretation, these aspects were defined based on current views in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as follows:

1. **Area:** Mackey and Gass (2005) classify SLA research into different areas, namely, formal models, processing-based models, interaction-based models, strategies and cognitive processes, and sociolinguistic-based models, which might be explicitly mentioned in an RA title.
2. **Scope:** The scope of Applied Linguistics has different domains such as Language Teaching, Psycholinguistics, Language Learning, and Sociolinguistics that are influenced by linguistic or learning theories, as well as by cultural or political issues (Kaplan, 1980). Limitations are often imposed on the scope of the research in a title. Sometimes, the title covers what takes place in the classroom and, at times, it includes what happens in natural, untutored environments (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).
3. **Topic:** The main focus of a research, the topic, should be narrow enough to be dealt with in one particular study.
4. **Method:** The method is the way the research questions are investigated and the hypotheses are tested. Historical, descriptive, and experimental methods are the three major classes of research methods (Farhady, 1996).



## 2.2. Materials and Procedure

The corpus comprised 997 article titles from the electronic versions of six Applied Linguistics journals, namely, *Applied Linguistics (AL)*, *English for Academic Purposes (EAP)*, *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*, *English Language Teaching (ELT)*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics (InJAL)*, and *System (SYS)* across a span of 8 years (2002-2009). These are considered the most popular and well-grounded journals, indexed in various journals and libraries and read by many researchers.

The second set of data included 874 M.A. and Ph.D. thesis titles (between 2002 and 2009) in the same discipline from local Iranian universities (*Islamic Azad University: Ahvaz Science and Research Branch (SRCA)*, *Tehran Science and Research Branch (SRCT)*, *Tarbiat Modares University (TMU)*, *University of Yazd (UY)*, *University of Shiraz (US)*, *University of Isfahan (UI)*, *Al Zahra University (AZU)*, *Shahid Beheshti University (SBU)*, and *Shahid Chamran University (SCU)*). These universities are prestigious and accept a good number of M.A. and Ph.D. candidates for postgraduate studies. Therefore, the theses written in these universities can be regarded as representative of theses with the above average quality written across the country. The choice of the most recent data for this study was to find the tendencies of the researchers for the current structures in title formulation in both genres.

The study aimed to provide quantitative and qualitative analyses of the titles in terms of length, structural configurations, and informativeness. To guarantee the reliability of analysis, 200 titles were randomly chosen and all analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively by the researcher and an experienced applied linguist separately. Inter-coder reliability (0.98) ensured uniformity in the coding procedure, and the rest of the corpus was analyzed by the researchers themselves. The final stage was the comparison made between thesis and article titles to arrive at general trends in title formulation in the two genres in focus.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Table 1 provides basic statistics for all the RAs and theses investigated. It can be inferred from the table, the thesis titles were longer than the article titles. The average title length in the articles (10.60) was closer to Haggan's finding (9.9), as compared to Soler's title length (7.98), whereas the average





length of the thesis titles was 14.09. The titles in the journal *ELT* had the shortest average length. On the other hand, the shortest average length in the thesis titles in *Tehran Science and Research Branch* (12.75) was greater than the average length of the titles in the journal *ESP*, which used longer average titles than journals. The results of *t* test ( $t = 4.92$ ;  $df = 13$ ;  $t_{crit} = 2.160$ ;  $p = .000$ ) suggested a significant difference between the titles in both groups.

Table 1

*Basic Statistics of Journals and Universities*

		Number of Issue	Number of Title	Number of Words	Shortest Title	Longest Title	Mean
Journals	AL	29	156	1712	2	26	10.97
	EAP	28	139	1590	3	29	11.43
	ESP	30	160	1954	4	23	12.21
	ELT	29	198	1441	2	15	7.27
	IAL	20	98	1053	4	24	10.74
	SYS	29	246	2825	2	24	11.48
	Total	164	997	10575	2	29	10.60
Universities	UY	-	28	400	8	21	14.28
	US	-	70	919	5	27	13.12
	SRCA	-	83	1229	5	26	14.80
	SRCT	-	252	3215	3	30	12.75
	SCU	-	23	337	7	23	14.65
	TMU	-	133	1831	5	26	13.76
	SBU	-	27	399	6	28	14.77
	AZU	-	64	1088	9	37	17.00
	UI	-	194	2900	4	30	14.94
	Total	-	874	12318	3	37	14.09

The articles in Applied Linguistics exploit compound constructions far more than any other grammatical construction. More than half of the structures in the article titles were compound constructions consisting of different syntactic units whereas only about one fifth of the thesis titles incorporated this structure (Table 2):



Table 2  
*Structural Constructions in Thesis and Article Titles*

Structure	Article Title		Thesis Title			
	<i>F</i>	(%)	<i>F</i>	(%)	$X^2$	<i>p</i>
Noun Phrase	353	(35.40)	622	(71.16)	74.216	0.000
Verb Phrase	92	(9.22)	26	(2.97)	36.915	0.000
Prepositional Phrase	12	(1.20)	41	(4.69)	15.868	0.000
Sentence	10	(1.00)	0*	(0)	7.364	0.007
Compound Structure	530	(53.15)	185	(21.16)	166.469	0.000

Critical value = 3.84

\*Cell counts increased from 0 to 1 to allow for chi-square test.

Compound construction in the article titles was contrary to Haggan's (2004) and Soler's (2007) findings, in which about one third of the Linguistics titles in their data followed this structure. The chi-square result showed a significant difference between the two groups of titles in all constructions. The highest *chi-square* result was attributed to compound constructions indicating that this structure was a distinctive feature of the article titles. In contrast, the thesis writers showed more tendencies toward the use of noun phrases (NP), which confirms Dudley-Evans's (1984) finding. Although NP was the second most frequent construction in the article titles, its occurrence in about half the thesis titles made NP a distinctive feature, contrary to Haggan's (2004) finding where phrases were shown to have a greater contribution to the formulation of article titles.

Other structures were rather variously realized in both groups of titles, with occurrence of less than 10%. For instance, verb phrases (VP) in the article titles (9.22%) were over three times the corresponding number in the thesis titles (2.97%), contrary to the generalization made by Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (2000) that VP is the most frequent structure in academic writing. This view may hold true in academic writing except for titles, in some if not all disciplines. It seems that, at least, Applied Linguistics has to be excluded from this generalization. Prepositional phrases (PP) were also occasionally used as the initiating phrase in the titles. The absence of single sentence constructions (SEN) in the thesis titles and its few (1%) occurrences in the article titles confirm Haggan's (2004) finding regarding the Linguistics titles, but it contradicts the generalization made by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), who believe in the growing tendency toward the use of full sentence titles in all disciplines.





The dominant compound construction was NP/NP followed by VP/NP in both datasets. Though several structures were entirely absent from the thesis titles, a closer look at Table 3 reveals a greater diversity involved in the grammatical structure of the article titles. For instance, the structural configurations such as NP/VP, SEN/NP, NP/SEN, and VP/VP made important contributions (more than 12 % overall) to the distribution of titles:

Table 3

*Structural Constructions of Compound Titles*

Compound Title	Article Thesis		Thesis Title	
	<i>F</i>	(%)	<i>F</i>	(%)
NP/NP	262	(26.27)	143	(16.36)
NP/VP	38	(3.81)	9	(1.02)
NP/PP	11	(1.10)	-	(-)
NP/SEN	29	(2.90)	2	(0.22)
NP/CLAU	-	(-)	2	(0.22)
VP/NP	85	(8.52)	22	(2.51)
VP/VP	19	(1.90)	3	(0.34)
VP/PP	3	(0.30)	-	(-)
VP/SEN	8	(0.80)	-	(-)
VP/CLAU	2	(0.20)	-	(-)
PP/NP	13	(1.30)	3	(0.34)
PP/VP	4	(0.40)	-	(-)
PP/PP	2	(0.20)	-	(-)
PP/SEN	1	(0.10)	-	(-)
SEN/NP	36	(3.61)	1	(0.11)
SEN/VP	9	(0.90)	-	(-)
SEN/PP	1	(0.10)	-	(-)
CLAU/NP	7	(0.70)	-	(-)

Another criterion in the analysis of the titles was informativeness. The distribution of these aspects in the thesis and article titles is summarized in Table 4 which makes it clear that different informativeness aspects of the research are realized more explicitly in the thesis titles than the article titles.



Table 4

*Research Aspects of Informativeness in Thesis and Article Titles*

Structure	Article Title		Thesis Title			
	<i>F</i>	(%)	<i>F</i>	(%)	$X^2$	<i>p</i>
Topic	986	(98.89)	874	(100.00)	6.744	0.009
Scope	714	(71.61)	820	(93.82)	7.325	0.007
Area	147	(14.74)	195	(22.31)	6.737	0.009
Method	80	(8.02)	97	(11.09)	1.633 <sup>ns</sup>	0.201
Result	145	(14.54)	475	(54.23)	175.645	0.000
Action	263	(26.37)	273	(31.23)	0.187 <sup>ns</sup>	0.666

 $p < 0.05$ 

Critical value = 3.84

*ns* = Based on the defined critical value, the chi-square amounts are not significant.

Both groups of titles tend to set forth the topic and scope more than other aspects, a point that researchers recommend as the prerequisites for an acceptable title (Goodman, Thacker, & Siegel, 2001; Lester, 1993; Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 1994; Zeiger, 1991). The results of chi-square confirmed the significance of the differences in relation to all aspects of informativeness save for *method* and *action*. Analysis of the data revealed more informativeness associated with the thesis titles, which indicated that the thesis titles incorporate more elements that reflect on various aspects of a study. Table 5 also summarizes the overall chi-square results of informativeness, suggesting a statistically significant difference between the two datasets:

Table 5

*Chi-Square Results of Informativeness in Thesis and Article Titles*

	$X^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Informativeness	31.407	1	0.000

 $p < 0.05$ 

Critical value = 3.84

**3.2. Functional Analysis**

The first two examples that follow represent the longest and shortest titles in theses, and the next two examples display the article titles:

1. "The Writing of This Thesis Was a Process That I Could Not Explore with the Positivist Detachment of the Classical Sociologist": Self and Structure in New Humanities Research Theses (EAP)



2. Bidirectional Transfer (AL)
3. The Effect of Four Different Modes of Presentation (Text-definition Alone, Text-definition with Still-pictures, Text-definition with Instructional Video Clips, and Text-definition with the Combination of Still-pictures and Instructional Video Clips) on L2 Vocabulary Acquisition of EFL Learners (AZU)
4. The Best-Selling Translations (SRCT)

Title (1), the longest article title of the data, is a compound construction consisting of a quotation which is likely to be a motivator followed by an NP presenting the topic (Self and Structure), scope (New Humanities), and the corpus (Research Theses). Title (2), one of the shortest article titles, is an under-informative one, in that, like most short titles, it is not self-explanatory and offers only the topic, so flouting the maxim of quantity (Grice, 1975).

Title (3) is the longest thesis title including an NP with an embedded parenthetical explanation which is apparently added to make it more self-explanatory but has made it over-informative by offering more information than needed, a disadvantage in a title. Unlike the longest article title, the longest thesis title contains repeated words. On the other hand, Title (4), the shortest thesis title, is again under-informative in that it provides the reader with no useful details about the content. A vast array of structures was observed in the titles through which facts and ideas were modified by different syntactic units. Below, an explanation of each structure is presented.

### 3.2.1. Sentence Titles

In the data, a less preferred structure was the single sentence construction. As illustrated in the following examples, a few article titles (e.g. Title 5) were statements indicating the general findings of the study whereas several others were Wh or Yes/No questions in abridged or full forms (Titles 6-8) dealing with the research focus. These titles, despite their varying structures, imply that the contents of the papers contain reasons for the problems posed in the titles by the use of “*What... for?*” in Title (6), “*Does...?*” in Title (7), and “*... or ...?*” in Title (8), whose answers are surely not a simple Yes or No.

5. Transfer of Reading Comprehension Skills to L2 Is Linked to Mental Representations of Text and to L2 Working Memory. (AL)
6. What Do We Want EAP Teaching Materials for? (EAP)



7. Does Instruction Work for Learning Pragmatics in the EFL Context?  
(SYS)

8. EAP or TEAP? (EAP)

All sentence titles were stated in the present tense which “emphasizes the note of confident optimism being projected by the writer that what he is reporting stands true for all time or is not simply a one-off occurrence” (Haggan, 2004, p. 297). Few instances of reporting the results in the article titles confirmed Haggan’s finding, implying that results are to be discussed only in the text of the article itself. Interestingly, no thesis titles were cast in this way.

### 3.2.2. Phrase Titles

Phrases were predominantly realized in the thesis titles; however, their occurrence as the second most frequent structure in the article titles cannot be neglected. Researchers (e.g., Biber et al, 2000; Leech, 2000) believe that reduced structures are more common in speech than written grammar, but in titles, they are the most frequent ones in titles (Haggan, 2004).

**Noun phrase titles:** The ability to compact information in an economical way through various pre and postmodifiers (Wang & Bai, 2007) makes NP more informative and explanatory than other structures (Yakhontova, 2002), and a popular one in titles of theses and articles. In line with the findings of Wang and Bai (2007), the NP titles included uni-head, bi-head, and multi-head constructions. Past and present participles, PPs, infinitives, and clauses are used as the postmodifiers of the NPs, as in the article Title (9) where “that clause” offers the topic and scope of the research:

9. Factors That Lead Some Students to Continue the Study of Foreign Language Past the Usual Two Years in High School (SYS)

The titles with bi-head nominal groups consisting of two NPs connected by *and*, *or*, and *vs.* were also popular (10). This title is modified by an apposition which capitalizes on the novelty of the investigation (Yakhontova, 2002, p. 86). NPs were also widely used in the thesis titles but with a limited range of head nouns such as *effect*, *role*, and *relationship*, as in Title (11). Other titles used words denoting the method of study such as *comparative*, *cross-sectional*, and *contrastive* as is the case in Title (12) which is modified by *as*:

10. Attitudes and Strategies as Predictors of Self-Directed Language Learning in an EFL Context (IAL)



11. The Effect of Vocabulary Learning Strategies on the Reading Comprehension of Iranian Learners of English (YZ)
12. A Contrastive Discourse Analysis of Lexical Cohesion as a Cohesive Device in English & Persian (TMU)

**Verb phrase titles:** Present participle, as the next most frequent structure in both genres, is a way of increasing conciseness and attractiveness (Wang & Bai, 2007). A number of titles contained this form of VPs called *grammatical metaphor* (Halliday, 1994), a structure used more in written language, by turning verbs into nouns, as in the following examples derived from the international articles in the present study:

13. Enhancing Automaticity Through Task-Based Language Learning (AL)
14. Addressing the Issue of Teaching English as a Lingua Franca (ELT)

Each verb in the VP titles indicates a different aspect. In Title (13), the VP indicates the result whereas in Title (14) it implies the topic. By indicating actions in almost all cases, the VP thesis titles showed less variation in their functions. Like the article titles, all the VPs were present participle modified by PPs or infinitive clauses, as in Title (16). Wang and Bai (2007) state that infinitive clauses introduce a future action and concisely indicate the nature of the research.

15. Investigating the Construct Validity of the FCE Reading Paper in the Iranian EFL Context (UI)
16. Using Concordances to Explore the Impact of Inductive and Deductive Instruction on Teaching Grammar in EFL Classes (AZU)

**Prepositional phrases (PPs):** PPs were very common in both genres as the postmodifying phrase which, according to Biber et al. (2000), is a good way of presenting information in the shortest possible way, but it was one of the least common initiating phrases of the titles. Yakhontova (2002) used the term *incomplete sentences* to refer to PPs. Consider the following examples of article titles from the present study:

17. Through the Looking Glass and into the Land of Lexico-Grammar (ESP)
18. On the Historical Origins of Nominalized Process in Scientific Text (ESP)

Title (17) consists of two PPs, of which the second leads readers to the content, whereas the other seems to be used to make the title more interesting. PPs might also function as modifiers through which the scope of the topic is narrowed down, as in Title (18). Unlike the postmodifying PPs



which make use of different prepositions, almost all the PP thesis titles were initiated by *on* (in a rare case *toward* was used). Contrary to the PP in the article titles, almost in all the thesis titles the postmodifiers served the topic by presenting different aspects of the study (see Title 19).

19. On the Possibility of Excluding Phonological Recoding from the Process of Reading (TMU)

### 3.2.3. *Compound Titles*

Haggan (2004) believes that compound constructions are the common type of titles. The results showed that compound structures were more frequent and diverse in the article than the thesis titles, in which the dash, hyphen, comma, colon, full stop, exclamation point, and question mark are used to separate the different parts. Consider the following article examples:

20. Language Play, a Collaborative Resource in Children's L2 Learning (AL)  
 21. How Rude! Teaching Impoliteness in the Second-Language Classroom (ELT)  
 22. Letters to the Editor: Still Vigorous after All These Years?: A Presentation of the Discursive and Linguistic Features of the Genre (ESP)

Title (20) is a compound title whose two parts are complementary and linked by a comma. In fact, this title would be a sentence if the punctuation mark were a verb. Other titles have structurally independent parts, as in Title (21), where an abridged sentence is accompanied by a VP. In a few other titles (e.g. Title 22), more than two parts shape the title.

As in the article titles, the most common compound title in the theses was the combination of two NPs. However, less variation was detected in the punctuation in the thesis titles, with colon being the most frequent. Titles with semicolon as the linking device were rare (e.g. Title 23) and, in a few titles, no punctuation was used; instead the two parts were typed on two different lines.

23. Cross-linguistic Acquisition of Tens and Passive Constructions from a Generative Perspective ; a Morphological Variability Study (UI)

### 3.2.4. *Informativeness*

The overarching pragmatic aim is to quickly inform readers of an article whether or not the paper is relevant to their area of interest, and this can be effectively done in the title. A good title should indicate the topic and the main point of the study in a clear and concise way (Zeiger, 1991), so that it





can be informative to readers. At least, an article title should adequately describe the topic of the text that follows it.

A few instances of article titles with no clear indications of topic were seen (see 24-26) where the reader cannot make any sound assumption about the topic. Considering the needs of readers in finding the required information in the shortest possible way, writing ambiguous titles would not be very reader-friendly, because readers do not usually decide on the topic by trial and error, and they would simply overlook these titles:

24. Looking Outwards, Not Inwards (ELT)

25. Facilitator Talk (ELT)

26. From Elegy to Ology (ELT)

A frequent feature in the article titles was using more than one topic, a general and a more specific one, similar to what Swales and Feak (1994) suggest for presenting the information content of the research in a title. Title (27) includes two topics where the italicized term is the general topic and the one in bold is the more specific one:

27. *Writing in Business Courses*: An Analysis of **Assignment Types**, Their Characteristics, and Required Skills (ESP)

Compared to the article titles, very few thesis titles contained two topics. Take the following title where the general topic is narrowed down into three specific ones.

28. A Comparative Study of *Question Strategies* in Testing Reading Comprehension: **Prequestioning**, **Postquestioning** and **Infixing** (SRCA)

Topic-method, as in (28), was a popular construction in the thesis titles. The topic is a pivot part (italicized in the example) narrowed by other parts with different degrees of importance.

29. *Ego Identity* of Language and Language: A Comparative Study (SU)

The article titles with topic-method structure (e.g. 29) also limit their topics by a PP (bold in the example) presenting the scope of the study and adding to their informativeness.

30. Writing Titles **in Science**: An Exploratory Study (ESP)

A less frequent aspect in both groups is the area. Title (30) is an informative thesis title where almost all aspects of the study, including even the less common aspects of area (bold in the example) and method are explicitly presented. This aspect was rarely included in the article titles.

31. **A Cognitively-Based** Exploration of Language-Switching in the Written Performances of Iranian EFL Learners (UI)



About half of the thesis titles incorporated general classifying words in their initial phrases (e.g. *impact, role, relationship, effect, etc.*) to indicate the results of the study. Another frequent group of words indicated the actions taken by the researchers such as *study, investigation, describing, and analysis*. Some thesis titles even applied both of them (31). This kind of title was also seen in only one article title (32).

32. The Study of the Relationship between Iranian EFL Students' Expectations of Their Teachers and Achievement Scores, Their Expectations and Self-evaluation; and Their Achievement Scores and Self-evaluation (SRCT)

33. An Investigation of the Relationship between Forms of Positive Interdependence, Social Support, and Selected Aspects of Classroom Climate (SYS)

Title (32) needs extra revision because of the unnecessary repetition misconstrued as informativeness; furthermore, four occurrences of the function word *and* is convincing enough to repair it because function words are often omitted to enhance economy and compactness. It seems that thesis writers commit themselves to the use of NPs under any condition. Title (33) is an NP title with an embedded parenthetical PP that could simply be separated by a punctuation mark to keep its informativeness.

34. The Relationship between Participants' Role (in Learner-Learner vs. Teacher-Learner Interactions) and Speaking Skill Performance (SRCT)

Contrary to the diversity involved in the structure of the article titles, the results indicated that thesis titles follow a fixed format, usually picked from earlier theses, available to novice researchers, where these copies are stored. For example, most thesis titles of one university were NPs beginning with either *the effect* or *the relationship*. The thesis titles of another university, on the other hand, tended toward the use of the action word *study*.

An important difference between the article and thesis titles was the use of amusing or pithy wordings in the article titles, a feature that was totally absent from the thesis titles. The following example starts with a quoted sentence followed by different aspects of the research which seem to be likely to make readers aware of the content:

35. "I'd Love to Put Someone in Jail for This": An Initial Investigation of English in the Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) Industry (ESP)



#### 4. Discussion

Whereas the common belief regards economy as an indispensable element of titles, the present study argues for the absence of this feature in thesis titles. Soler's (2007) generalization is to some extent in line with our findings regarding article titles but not thesis titles. Thesis supervisors, at least in Iran, are often concerned about the information content rather than the size of the title. On the other hand, article writers demonstrate their concern for the physical size of a title because most journals set limitations on the number of words in a title. What seems to be lacking in the existing literature on titles is that no possible reasons are offered for the length differences across the two genres. Some researchers (e.g., Swales & Feak, 1994), however, believe that title length is a disciplinary feature. The results of this study point to genre differences emerging even within one discipline.

The difference in the length of titles lies at two ends of a continuum. At one end, limitation is imposed on the number of words in a title due to the limited space available to article writers, and, at the other end, in thesis titles, there is little to constrain length, because the purpose is to enhance informativeness.

In addition, the audience and its size have an important influence on the conventions of writing (Koutsantoni, 2006; Yakhontova, 2002); titles, as a part of academic writing, cannot be excluded from this effect. In order to obtain membership of a discourse community, writers use rhetorical strategies and conventions of the discipline to show that they are aware of the expectations of the genres; otherwise, they would fail to fit into that community. Thesis writers often write for national audiences of the same linguistic background. They primarily address their thesis supervisors and advisors and only secondarily other readers. Their concern is to convince the first party on the nature and context of their work and to show that they are aware of the boundaries and variables involved in it.

Article writers, on the other hand, are experts who address international audiences, many of whom are professional informants in their own fields. This position might "counterbalance the power and status asymmetries and give expert authors more room to present themselves as experts and address gatekeepers as equals" (Koutsantoni, 2006, p. 21), making article writers more confident about their claims and giving them more courage to lend individual style to their titles through the use of less formal patterns. This is not true of thesis writers who are required to be more formal and conservative in presenting their claims, even in their titles, which might be



the result of the perceived distance, in terms of power and professional status, between thesis writers and their supervisors. In fact, English proficiency and experience may be two important factors that constrain the Iranian thesis writers' ability to craft *creative* titles. If supervisors and other national audiences care more about informativeness, it may not be easy to persuade thesis writers to work on the *creative* aspect of titles.

The linguistic choices employed in title writing seem to be a generic peculiarity (Haggan, 2004). The results of the present study also indicate that NPs are a feature of thesis titles, a result which confirms the study by Dudley-Evans (1984), whereas compound constructions are a characteristic of article titles which is in line with the findings of Soler (2007). This leads one to conclude that the structural configuration plays a distinguishing role between the two groups of titles and that structural variation is most probably caused by genre influences. Genres as frames of *social action* and *environments of learning* offer a special form to their members to interact with by shaping their thoughts (Bazerman, 1997). Therefore, the titles of both genres may possess distinct communicative purposes which are realized through a specific structure for a specific community.

Titles, in one way or another, seem to reflect the contents of the research. But content is more explicitly echoed in thesis than article titles. Explicitness is linked to informativeness, that is, the more explicit a title, the more informative it would be. Postmodifying PPs—a characteristic of science research article titles (Haggan, 2004)—are regarded as an appropriate strategy of being more explicit in terms of reflecting on the content by the thesis writers. The article writers, on the other hand, tend to apply both pre and postmodifiers as a strategy of explicitness. Some of these premodifiers were the unclear parts of compound constructions which were illustrated by the postmodifiers or even left unmodified. Take the following example where the title starts with an unclear part carrying no information as regards the content of the study, which is then clarified in the next part of the title:

36. Tape it Yourself: Videotapes for Teacher Education (ELT)

When an article title begins with a premodifier, it creates a limbo in the reader's mind which is, then, disambiguated by the following part. This strategy is certainly a distinguishing feature between article and thesis titles because it was rarely used in the latter titles. Therefore, article titles tend to be more ambiguous compared to thesis titles by the use of specific structures. However, to prove this genre peculiarity of the Applied Linguistics article titles, more studies are required:



Quotations, as one of the widely used elements in article titles, despite their rather uninformative appearances, serve different functions. When writers make use of quotations in their titles, they lead their readers into a web of intrigue. Sometimes, as in the following title, the quotation represents a part of the topic which is later dealt with in the paper.

37. "I Would Like to Thank my Supervisor": Acknowledgements in Graduate Dissertations (IAL)

Title (37) needs further specification because the scope of the study is not mentioned. Some other article titles use intriguing elements that shroud ideas in figures, such as analogies, idioms, metaphors, allegory or allusions, and proverbs (titles 38-42 respectively) which are rarely discussed in the existing literature on titles. These elements function as a conduit through which personal ideas are imparted. This way, the illocutionary meaning of a title, besides the propositional content, is communicated, which brings one common force, namely reading the paper, or at least scanning its content.

38. "It's Like a Story": Rhetorical Knowledge Development in Advanced Academic Literacy (EAP)

39. Criteria for Re-Defining Idioms: Are We Barking Up the Wrong Tree? (AL)

40. In the Same Boat? On Metaphor Variation as Mediating the Individual Voice in Organizational Change (AL)

41. Big Brother Is Helping You: Supporting Self-Access Language Learning with a Student Monitoring System (SYS)

42. "Just What the Doctor Ordered": The Application of Problem-Based Learning to EAP (ESP)

In only one case, Title (43), an idiom initiated a thesis title where the topic is idiomaticity.

43. A Piece of Cake or a Hard Nut to Crack: Investigating Intermediate and Advanced EFL Learners' Performance on Different Tests of Idiom Type (UI)

Ambiguous expressions as a characteristic of article titles are either used as stand-alone titles, (44), or followed by other parts functioning as clarifications to the enigma created by the writer, to impress and arouse the readers' curiosity. Even some titles, such as Title (45), started or ended with an esoteric non-English expression:

44. Looking Outwards, Not Inwards (ELT)

45. 'Lego My Keego!': An Analysis of Language Play in a Beginning Japanese as a Foreign Language Classroom (AL)





Such titles might not meet the requirements of a good title suggested by different scholars, but they are eye-catching enough to persuade the reader to scrutinize their content, which might be the result of the interpersonal function communicated through this kind of rhetoric. The proverbial or idiomatic frameworks and abridged sentences which are a feature of spoken discourse make article titles more reader-friendly by establishing a closer tie between the reader and the writer who, despite the physical distance, uses more informal structures in deference to the interpersonal functions of titles. In contrast, thesis writers report the results and rely on the propositional meaning at the cost of establishing a rapport with the readers and the interpersonal functions of the titles.

Concerning the second research question, achieving informativeness by mentioning all aspects of a study would be at the expense of losing economy and conciseness. This would probably result in over-informativeness, violating the cooperative principle (Grice, 1975) because one needs to present as much information as is needed in order to keep to Grice's maxims. Observing informativeness as an effective way of reflecting on content, by offering the necessary information, while keeping economy and conciseness: such is the ideal approach to title writing. The following example is a thesis title on the discussion sections of research articles:

46. A Comparative Study of Research Article and Ph. D. Dissertation Discussion Sections: Variations across Sub-Disciplines of Applied Linguistics (SRCA)

Now, compare it with the following article title with a similar point of focus:

47. Communicative Moves in the Discussion Section of Research Articles (SYS)

Both titles are informative in terms of introducing the topic, but Title (46) is more informative because more angles of the research—method, corpus, and scope—are mentioned. It is asserted that titles that give more details, more accurately, better serve the needs of readers in finding relevant information. But the question is: Should informativeness be regarded as the only feature of an effective title? Economy and informativeness are two features that have to be taken into account. To economize means to have one eye on informativeness, that is, relative informativeness would be enough for writing an effective article title, though this is not necessarily so for a thesis title. In fact, economy and informativeness are incorporated with different degrees in writing both kinds of title. Where economy is more important,





then some salient information from the title is removed, and where informativeness matters, then economy is partially lost.

Some researchers (e.g., Zeiger, 1991) emphasize writing clear titles neglecting other more important functions of titles, such as originality and humor, and their effect on the advisory committees or journal gatekeepers responsible for the acceptance or rejection of titles. More interesting titles, however, seem to receive more attention and probability of acceptance. Thesis titles are free from this concern, because they only have to suit the supervisors and the examiners, who seem to care more about informativeness.

The marked differences in writing academic titles and the dearth of accepted standards for title writing (Soler, 2007) suggest that there is room for provision of more comprehensive guidelines to researchers.

## **5. Conclusion and Implications**

An in-depth understanding of titles is useful, because novice researchers might experience difficulties in meeting the title requirements of the genre in which they write. It seems that supervisors take thesis titles very seriously and expect students to write titles that explicitly reflect the content of the thesis with little creativity and innovation. Therefore, in research writing courses, the syllabus should contain guidelines on title writing through which students experience different structures and learn how to write effective titles. The linguistic features of titles should be incorporated into academic writing courses at postgraduate levels to prepare student researchers for participation in the world of publication.

The title of any academic article mirrors its content and acts as a medium through which the communicative purposes of a specific genre are conveyed. This mirror should be clear enough to reflect what it is supposed to show. To serve this purpose, and in order to learn the proper ways of title writing, one should be aware of the genre, scope, area, and context of the research. Furthermore, enough information is needed about the variables under study and their relationship, so that one can consider and then effectively recapitulate all aspects of the research at one glance. This awareness, if developed in class, can be a source of inspiration for novice writers. One way through which title writing can be enhanced is by analyzing article titles of leading journals, published as they are under strict requirements and after careful scrutiny. This would make them a reliable source for student researchers.



Graduate students should be encouraged to express a personal voice in their thesis title even though their conventional genres may not use personal language. It might be the right time to free thesis writers from the cliché frames of titles and let them practice more creativity. It might take the genre community quite a while to accept such changes but these changes, if made for the better, would eventually be accepted. Partly, this change might be made by teachers who will affect the way in which a particular genre changes. Sometimes, a tiny change in an aspect might be the starting point of a revolution in the genre, or even in the field.

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