

Lexical Bundles in Academic Presentations Given by PhD level EAP Students: A Literature Review¹

Paquetes Léxicos en las Exposiciones Académicas de Estudiantes de Doctorado en un Curso de Inglés para Propósitos Académicos: Una Revisión Bibliográfica

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Abstract

Lexical bundles are multiword units that perform a variety of discourse functions and are a characteristic of academic discourse genres. Their use is considered a marker of linguistic proficiency and necessary for successful adaptation to academic communities. This literature review, which is part of a proposal for the analysis of lexical bundles use by Colombian PhD-level EAP students in their academic presentations, (a) explores the concept of lexical bundles in academic discourses and (b) presents potential areas for their study in the academic presentation genre. The review makes particular emphasis on the lack of studies on lexical bundles use in the academic presentation as a genre as well as the lack of studies on spoken genres in situations in which English is used as a foreign language by PhD-level EAP students, particularly, in the Colombian context.

Key words: lexical bundles, academic presentations, academic discourse, English for Academic purposes (EAP), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), corpus linguistics

Resumen

Los paquetes léxicos – expresiones compuestas de varias palabras que desempeñan diversos tipos de funciones discursivas– son una de las características propias de los distintos géneros del discurso académico. Su

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uso se considera como un indicador de suficiencia lingüística y necesario para la adaptación exitosa a una comunidad discursiva particular. Esta revisión bibliográfica, que es parte de una propuesta de investigación para el análisis del uso de paquetes léxicos en las presentaciones orales de estudiantes de doctorado de una clase de inglés para propósitos académicos, (a) explora el concepto de paquetes léxicos en discursos académicos y (b) presenta unas áreas en las que potencialmente se podría dar el estudio de paquetes léxicos en el género de las exposiciones orales. La revisión hace un énfasis especial en (a) la falta de estudios sobre el uso de paquetes léxicos en la exposición oral como género particular y (b) la falta de estudios en géneros académicos orales en situaciones en las que el inglés se usa como lengua extranjera por parte de estudiantes de doctorado que la aprenden para propósitos académicos, particularmente en el contexto colombiano.

Palabras clave: paquetes léxicos, exposiciones académicas, discurso académico, inglés para propósitos académicos (EAP), inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), lingüística de corpus

Resumo

Os pacotes léxicos—expressões compostas de várias palavras que desempenham diversos tipos de funções discursivas – são uma das características próprias dos diferentes gêneros do discurso acadêmico. Seu uso se considera como um indicador de suficiência linguística e necessário para a adaptação bem sucedida a uma comunidade discursiva particular. Esta revisão bibliográfica, que é parte de uma proposta de pesquisa para a análise do uso de pacotes léxicos nas apresentações orais de estudantes de doutorado de uma aula de inglês para propósitos acadêmicos, (a) explora o conceito de pacotes léxicos em discursos acadêmicos e (b) apresenta umas áreas nas que potencialmente se poderia dar o estudo de pacotes léxicos no gênero das exposições orais. A revisão faz uma ênfase especial em (a) a falta de estudos sobre o uso de pacotes léxicos na exposição oral como gênero particular e (b) a falta de estudos em gêneros acadêmicos orais em situações nas que o inglês se usa como língua estrangeira por parte de estudantes de doutorado que a aprendem para propósitos acadêmicos, particularmente no contexto colombiano.

Palavras chave: pacotes léxicos, exposições acadêmicas, discurso acadêmico, inglês para propósitos acadêmicos (EAP), inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL), linguística de corpus

The Study of Academic Discourse

Academic discourse has received a great deal of attention from applied linguists over the last 30 years, with special emphasis on academic English. Biber (2006) points out that the description of academic genres within universities should be carried out before developing materials and methods to meet university students' language needs. In this description, the linguistic features of such genres are of special interest for language researchers. Pioneering studies such as Halliday's (1988) on the language of physical science, Swales' (1990) on genre analysis of English in academic settings, or Hyland's (1994) on hedging mechanisms in academic writing and EAP books have pioneered the study of linguistic traits of discourse in academia. These three decades of special emphasis on academic genres has seen more studies on written varieties than on spoken ones. Nonetheless, the availability of large corpora like CANCODE (Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English), MICASE (Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English), BASE (British Academic Spoken English) and others has allowed researchers to explore the linguistic features of academic spoken genres. Recent studies on spoken academic English include genres such as conversations between tutors and students (Evison, 2013), informal interviews with English majors (Larsson Aas, 2011), and academic lectures (Deroy & Taverniers, 2012; Lin, 2012).

Lexical Bundles in Academic Discourse

Among the breadth of possibilities to approach academic genres, given the availability of corpora and corpus exploration tools, the study of lexical bundles (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999) seems to be a preferred one. Lexical bundles are defined as "... the multi-word sequences that occur most commonly within a given register" (Biber & Barbieri, 2007, p.264). Moon (2000) states that multi-word sequences or multi-word items (MWIs) are strings of two or more words that are semantically and/or syntactically whole and inseparable. Other multi-word sequences apart from lexical bundles, also referred to as lexical chunks (Khuwaileh, 1999) or lexical phrases (DeCarrico & Nattinger, 1988), include idioms and collocations. For Biber and Conrad (1999), idioms are the most invariable type of multi-word items, and are usually syntactically and semantically complete while collocations are the result of highly statistical, non-idiomatic associations between two words. Lexical bundles, according to these authors, "... can be regarded as extended collocations of three or more words that show a statistical tendency to co-occur (*e.g., in the case of*

the..., do you want me to..., I said to him...)” (Biber & Conrad, 1999, p. 183). Unlike idioms or collocations, a great deal of lexical bundles cannot be ascribed to traditional syntactic or semantic categories, but their high frequency and specialization in registers make them be considered as “basic building blocks for constructing spoken and written discourse” (p. 188).

Biber, Conrad, and Cortés (2004), in their paper describing lexical bundles in university teaching and textbooks, propose a lexical bundle taxonomy according to three rhetorical functions. First, stance expressions (*e.g. I don't know if...*) refers to bundles that express attitudes or assessments of certainty towards a specific idea; second, discourse organizers (*e.g. in this chapter we...*) are expressions that help to organize and monitor parts of discourse, and third, referential bundles (*e.g. that's one of the...*) identify entities or parts of the text where they are used. Each category of bundles includes further subcategories. In their study comparing lexical bundles in university classroom teaching and textbooks, Biber and colleagues found that more bundles are used in classroom teaching than in conversation, academic writing, or textbooks. In fact, they observed that classroom teaching goes beyond the expected norms and uses more stance bundles than conversations, and more referential bundles than academic writing.

According to Hyland (2008) lexical bundles, and in general MWIs, are “... important for fluent linguistic production and a key factor in successful language learning” (p. 5). Hyland also asserts that these expressions help learners in the creation of meaning of texts and in the identification of registers, *e.g.* academic vs. legal. Also, lexical bundles “...are familiar to writers and readers who regularly participate in a particular discourse ... community,” and their absence or lack of knowledge might be an indicator of lack of fluency or being new to such a community.

Research Trends on Lexical Bundles

Hyland's previous remark explains research efforts to understand academic discourse from a lexical bundle approach. Successful adaptation to discourse communities might depend on factors such as variation from expected academic discursive standards, among those, standards in the use of lexical bundles. The lexical bundle method is one of the three methods to approach multiword units in second language acquisition; the other two being the phraseological method and the comprehensive method (Erman, Lewis, & Fant, 2013). A typical tendency of studies on lexical bundles is to seek to understand

variation across different variables of academic discourse. Studies in the different types of variation that have been studied from the lexical bundles include the following:

- recurring combinations in academic writing by native speakers and nonnative speakers (Annelie & Erman, 2012), or in academic speaking (De Cock, 2004; Larsson Aas, 2011);
- variation across disciplines in written texts at the Master and PhD level (Hyland, 2008);
- variation between written and spoken, and academic and non-academic registers at the university level (Biber & Barbieri, 2007);
- variation in disciplinary writing between expert published writing in comparison to students' writing (Cortés, 2004),
- variation between published L1 writing versus L1 and L2 students' writing (Chen & Baker, 2010),
- variation across proficiency levels of ESL students' writing (Staples, Egbert, Biber, & McClair, 2013),
- variation between textbooks and classroom teaching (Biber, Conrad, & Cortés, 2004),
- variation across published writing in history journals between languages, Argentinian Spanish and American English (Cortés, 2008), among others.

The pedagogical importance of these studies lies on the fact that successful adaptation to an academic community depends on understanding how the members of such community, field experts, or Successful Users of English, SUEs (Prodromou, 2003), create and articulate discourse. Lexical bundles in their three types seem to be definite aspects in this adaptation process, something that concerns EAP/ESP students and teachers.

Lexical Bundles in Spoken Discourse: Potential Areas of Study

The above-mentioned studies on lexical bundles cover several important aspects of discourse in academia; however, as pointed by Biber et al. (2004) and Biber and Barbieri (2007) spoken academic discourse has received considerably less attention than written academic discourse; this assertion also applies to studies on lexical bundles in

academic genres. There seem to be other areas of academic discourse that could potentially be explored from a lexical bundle method.

One potential area of studies in the spoken genres is the study of lexical bundles in the academic presentation. Studies on lexical bundles in academic spoken genres have mainly focused on interviews (Larsson, 2011; De Cock, 2004), academic lectures (Nesi & Basturkmen, 2006; Deroey & Taverniers, 2012), classroom instruction (Biber, Conrad, & Cortés, 2004); conversation (Conrad & Biber, 2004), and labs, office hours, study groups, service encounters (Biber et al., 2004). However, the academic presentation appears to be one of less analyzed areas with the lexical bundle method, and is usually addressed from other linguistic and academic approaches.

Hyland (2009) classifies the conference presentation as a spoken genre within the research genres. Other genres which could fall into the category of academic presentation are the oral presentation (undergraduate genre) and the viva voce defense (postgraduate genre), but the author classifies them into the category of student discourses, as opposed to research and instructional discourses. In either case, Hyland also admits that there is little research in this area given the difficulties that emerge by having to videorecord and transcribe data, and also, by the inclusion of nonverbal data.

Academic presentations have also been analyzed as monologues from conversation analysis based on (a) their turn – taking aspects (e.g., talk vs. non-talk), (b) nonverbal aspects such as engagement with the audience through visual contact or body posture, and (c) interaction with objects (Rendle-Short, 2006). Rendle-Short also admits that in the area of conversation analysis, regarding the structure of monologic talk and nonverbal aspects of this type of institutional talk “... no research ha[d] been carried out with respect to academic presentation...” (p. 2).

In 2002, a textbook based on MICASE corpus information, *Giving Academic Presentations* (Reinhart), published by the University of Michigan Press, made a very interesting contribution to the study of the academic presentation but from a pedagogical perspective. This book presents different types of academic presentations classified into types of speeches: presentation of a speaker, object, procedure, concept, chronology, and problem solution. Each type of speech is exemplified with models taken and adapted from MICASE; additionally, the book illustrates the different parts of the speeches and explains specific strategies that are used to convey information. In this book, the three types of bundles that Biber, Conrad, and Cortés (2004) propose are identifiable and are overtly taught; however, they are not referred to as

bundles. An example of this is in the problem-solution speech chapter, in which some strategies like providing an overview to organize talk are presented in the form of discourse organizing bundles (e.g. I'm going to...) (p. 134). What is interesting about the textbook is that there is no specific claim about it being based on a particular series of studies although the use of MICASE is mentioned in several parts of the book.

Another area in which lexical bundles have not been deeply explored is the study of these multiword units in EFL L1 Spanish contexts. A search for studies in the use of lexical bundles in academic speaking by L1 Spanish students of EFL yielded only two results: the first (Sánchez, 2013) focuses on the variation in interviews with L1 and L2 undergraduate students and a comparison to previous studies (Chen & Baker, 2010), and the second (Torres, 2013) discusses the importance of including lexical bundles in CLIL instruction in Colombian universities.

A third area in which there can be an interesting exploration of the use of lexical bundles in academic presentations is in the comparison of different languages. The studies of language varieties, "... can show the difference in frequency of particular features, [and] are often used to demonstrate the lack of direct equivalence between apparently similar aspects of related languages" (Hunston, 2006). Again, as in the other underexplored areas, there appear to be few studies related to the topic of lexical bundles in the academic presentation. One study that is close to this topic is Bellés (2006). In this study, the author contrasts the use of discourse markers between Spanish and North American lectures. This study, which takes a contrastive rhetoric form, focuses on the differences in the use of micro-markers, macro-markers, and operators between these two types of lectures. Although the constructs used in this study come from other frameworks, we can find equivalences that could be translated into the lexical bundle approach proposed; for example, macro-markers (Chaudron & Richards, 1986, as cited in Bellés, 2006) can be correlated to discourse markers bundles (e.g. *Another interesting development was...*). However, as stated above, this research analyses the lecture, a genre typical of professors, not of students.

The research proposed in this study intends to focus on these areas of potential study to contribute further knowledge to the topic of lexical bundles as used in academic presentations in EAP/EFL contexts. To achieve this, it will focus on academic presentations in English given by Colombian PhD-level EFL students as compared to their own presentations in Spanish and to presentations given by English-speaking counterparts.

Conclusion

Based on the literature reviewed, it possible to conclude as to the benefit of studying lexical bundles in the academic presentations of Colombian PhD-level EAP students. On the one hand, the review demonstrates that this particular genre has been underexplored not only from a lexical bundle type of methodology but also from other kinds of traditional discursive analysis. On the other, the review also highlights the fact that this lack of exploration can also be said of contexts where English is used as a foreign language. Other particular aspects of potential study of lexical bundles in the academic presentation that are presented here and that justify the project include: (a) academic presentations given by PhD level students, (b) academic spoken English in the Colombian EFL context.

The proposed research, which this literature review is part of, has the potential to make several theoretical and pedagogical contributions in the fields of corpus linguistics, and foreign language learning and teaching. In the area of corpus linguistics, this research will contribute a description of lexical bundles use in an academic discourse that has not been explored in depth: the academic presentation. This will contribute new information or help to confirm previous studies on similar academic spoken genres such as lectures or seminars. Second, it will make an original contribution to the study of academic spoken English in the context of Colombian universities; as explained above, there are no accounts of descriptions made of this genre in the Colombian context. It will then pave the way for corpus linguistics studies in second language learning in Colombia; corpus linguistics studies have been mainly carried out in the study of institutional discourses or regional varieties of Colombian Spanish.

From a practical standpoint, the results of this research will be directly relevant to the Colombian education tertiary system in regards to the learning of foreign languages. Today, university level institutions are more concerned with providing their students with foreign language learning that accounts for their students' language needs regarding the divulgation of their work and the adaptation to international academic communities. These institutions can benefit from this research in several ways. First, the results of insights into the use of lexical bundles by Colombian learners can inform pedagogical decisions related to what language (vocabulary) should be learned. For example, in the case of high occurrences of negative transfer from L1 to L2 (e.g. *in this order of ideas, which the author has identified as a commonly used discourse bundle*), more standard discourse bundles to perform the same communicative function would be selected (e.g. Based on the above....

Following this train of thought...). Second, information about transfer from L1 to L2 can be used to facilitate the learning of lexical bundles; for example, teachers might foster cases of similarity and warn or take variability cases as pedagogical aids for teaching. Third, information on lexical bundle variation correlated to language proficiency can be used to create cut-scores in program level description; for example, and following Hyland (2009), it is expected that more proficient learners use a higher amount and more complex (more than two words) lexical bundles than less proficient learners, which could serve as an aspect to describe different levels of proficiency related to vocabulary knowledge and use. Finally, although not necessarily the objective of this research, corpus linguistics analysis of bundles might foster the use of corpora and corpus tools as pedagogical aids for class instruction.

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