

CHAPTER 12

Move and Step Types in Swales' Genre Analysis Model: A Study of Problem Statements in Master of Arts Dissertations

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Abstract

This study examines the genre of the *Statement of the Problem* in Master of Arts dissertations submitted to Information Technology Department, Modibbo Adama University, Yola, drawing on six (6) dissertations from the 2021, 2022, and 2023 academic sessions. Anchored within the tradition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), the analysis employs Swales' Create-A-Research-Space (CARS) model to identify the rhetorical Moves and Steps used in constructing the problem statements. The findings indicate that, although the writers display a foundational awareness of the CARS framework, notable genre-related difficulties occur across sessions. The dissertations produced in 2021 show challenges in *claiming centrality* and establishing the wider significance of their research topics. The 2022 dissertations

demonstrate weaknesses in *counter-claiming*, particularly in engaging with conflicting literature and presenting alternative perspectives. The 2023 dissertations frequently fail to articulate the research niche and contributions, resulting in problem statements with limited contextual depth and academic justification. Across all three years, the inability to convincingly situate studies within existing scholarly traditions and to articulate clear knowledge gaps is a persistent concern. Overall, the study highlights the need for enhanced academic writing support, especially in strengthening rhetorical awareness, improving structural organisation, and fostering greater clarity and precision in the production of ESP-aligned problem statements.

Keywords: *Genre, Genre Theory, Moves, Steps, Discourse*

Introduction

Academic writing is a fundamental medium through which scholars construct arguments, communicate ideas and engage with disciplinary knowledge. It is inherently complex, requiring advanced skills of synthesis, analysis and critique. At the postgraduate level, its role becomes especially critical as it not only shapes scholarly identity but also facilitates full participation within specialist academic communities (Hyland, 2018). Scholars such as Olmos-Lopez (2021) and Hewings et al. (2020) describe academic writing as a process of socialisation, in which novice researchers are gradually inducted into discourse communities, the network of individuals bound by shared values, beliefs and communicative conventions (Jones, 2024). Within these communities, writing practices are governed by genre-

specific conventions that preserve disciplinary traditions while enabling knowledge construction.

Among the genres central to postgraduate research, the dissertation problem statement holds particular importance. As a rhetorical feature, it establishes the foundation for research by situating the study within existing scholarship, identifying knowledge gaps, and clarifying the direction of inquiry. Azad and Pandya (2021) emphasise that articulating the research problem is the keystone of any scholarly activity, shaping goals, research questions and methodological choices. Despite this significance, the rhetorical structure of problem statements has received limited scholarly attention, particularly in postgraduate writing from emerging academic contexts.

Conceptual Explication

Genre analysis highlights how academic texts are shaped by the communicative purposes and expectations of discourse communities, revealing how writers negotiate social situations through patterned and strategic linguistic choices (Wayar, 2020) and how genres coordinate form and function to achieve rhetorical goals, with newer approaches such as relational genre analysis emphasising their continual reshaping by community values, identities and epistemic practices (Moreno, 2022); yet, despite extensive scholarship on academic genres, the Statement of the Problem in postgraduate dissertations remains underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding how writers articulate research problems and meet disciplinary expectations at a crucial stage of academic development, a gap the present study addresses by analysing the rhetorical structure of Master of Arts

dissertation problem statements at Modibbo Adama University using Swales's Move framework to examine the presence, sequencing and communicative functions of rhetorical moves, thereby offering insights into how emerging scholars construct the problem space and contributing to writing pedagogy, supervisory practice and ESP curriculum design.

This study is motivated by the scarcity of research on this crucial component of academic writing and asks what common rhetorical moves and steps appear in Master of Arts dissertation problem statements and why, situating these questions within an expanded understanding of genre that has grown from classical literary classifications to a socially grounded framework spanning literature, media, rhetoric, linguistics and professional communication, where genre is seen not merely as textual categorisation but as a means of performing recurring social actions (Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010), and where contemporary perspectives emphasise its dynamic, socially situated, and ideologically active nature shaped by functions, contexts, and discourse-community expectations (Martin & Rose, 2008), with key concepts such as structural norms, intertextuality, and socio-cultural appropriateness illustrating how genres guide meaning-making and communicative purposes and how conventions, interpretation, production and socio-cultural contexts interact (Martin & Rose, 2008).

Linguistic traditions approach genre analysis through three major schools: Systemic Functional Linguistics, which views genre as a staged, goal-oriented process shaped by field, tenor and mode, and emphasises context-appropriate linguistic choices (Halliday, 1994; Martin & Rose, 2007); New Rhetoric, which defines genre

as social action arising from recurrent situations and prioritises sociocultural context and rhetorical purpose over textual structure (Miller, 1984; Devitt, 2004); and English for Specific Purposes (ESP), influenced by Swales (1990), which focuses on academic and professional genres, particularly in second-language contexts, using Move analysis to examine structural patterns in relation to communicative purpose. Although differing in emphasis, SFL on linguistic features, NR on social action, and ESP on teachable structural organisation: all three view genre as socially embedded and functional, a perspective strengthened by Swales's influential work which defines genres as communicative events shaped by shared purposes within discourse communities, clarifies key distinctions such as task, genre and discourse community, and provides detailed analyses of academic texts that integrate linguistic, rhetorical and social-constructivist insights. Genre analysis, a key approach in applied linguistics and ESP, examines how language varies across social and cultural contexts and posits that second-language mastery requires understanding the genres used by discourse communities with specific communicative goals and structural conventions (Crossley, 2007; Dong & Lu, 2020). It identifies linguistic and organisational patterns that distinguish genres and helps learners recognise how texts reflect norms, relationships, power structures and intent (Bhatia, 1993). Within this tradition, Swales (1990) developed a method that breaks texts into rhetorical Moves and Steps, each serving a communicative purpose.

i. Move 1 – Establishing a Territory

This Move introduces the broader research area to signal its importance. It may include:

- a. Claiming centrality (Step 1)

- b. Making topic generalisations (Step 2)
- c. Reviewing previous research (Step 3)

These Steps help persuade readers of the significance of the topic.

ii. Move 2 – Establishing a Niche

This move narrows the focus and justifies the need for the current research. It may involve:

- a) Counter-claiming (Step 1a)
- b) Indicating a gap (Step 1b)
- c) Raising a question (Step 1c)
- d) Continuing a tradition (Step 1d)

This Move links prior research to the current study.

iii. Move 3 – Occupying the Niche

At this point, the author presents the current research contribution using the under listed steps:

- a) Outlining research purpose (Step 1a)
- b) Announcing the study (Step 1b)
- c) Presenting key findings (Step 2)
- d) Indicating article structure (Step 3)

Swales' model, in which the author actively presents their own work, has been widely validated and adapted since 1990, though subsequent studies show disciplinary variation in how its Moves and Steps are realised. Central to this framework is the notion of a discourse community, a group sharing common goals, communicative practices and ways of constructing knowledge through language, bound together by shared genres, terminology and conventions that

enable effective participation (Swales, 1990), and understood as dynamic and socially situated, with norms that evolve alongside changing goals, technologies and social conditions (Bazerman, 1994), relying on established rhetorical conventions and shared linguistic resources to negotiate meaning and achieve action, especially in academic contexts where texts function to maintain and transform disciplinary knowledge (Swales, 1990; Bazerman, 1994); discourse communities are essential for knowledge sharing, identity formation, socialisation, professional development and cultural preservation; they span academic, professional, online, sporting and socio-cultural domains, uniting members through common goals, knowledge and communication practices (Harris, 1972; Wayar, 2016; Hyland & Jiang, 2020).

Methodology

This study used a descriptive, quantitative research design to examine the rhetorical structure of Statement of the Problem sections in six purposively selected MA dissertations from the Department of Information and Technology, Modibbo Adama University Yola, spanning the 2021–2023 academic sessions. The sections were extracted verbatim and analysed using a modified version of Swales's (1990) CARS model with operationalised definitions for identifying the presence, absence and sequencing of Moves and Steps supported by a coding guide refined through a pilot coding of one text, after which each dissertation was systematically examined for Moves such as establishing a territory, identifying a niche and occupying the niche, including their corresponding Steps and any overlapping or ambiguous functions, and the quantitative descriptive analysis employed comparative patterning and

frequency counts to evaluate how well students conformed to academic genre norms, interpret findings through Swalesian genre theory, and assess how effectively authors identified research gaps and positioned their studies within contemporary scholarly discourse, with all identifying information removed to maintain ethical standards despite the documents being publicly accessible.

Analysis

The analysis uses the modified CARS model to segment each Statement of the Problem into Moves and Steps, identify their presence and sequencing, and calculate their frequencies. This reveals distribution patterns, variations and disciplinary tendencies, showing how postgraduate students employ rhetorical strategies to establish a research space in academic writing.

Table 1 Frequency of Moves and Steps in Excerpt I

Moves		Steps	Frequency
Move 1. Establishing a territory	a	Step (1) Claiming Centrality	1
		Step (2) Making Topic Generalisation	4
		Step (3) Reviewing Previous - Research	2
Move 2. Establishing a niche	a	Step (1a) Counter Claiming	0
		Step (1b) Indicating a Gap	3
		Step (1c) Question Raising	0
		Step (1d) Continuing a tradition	1

Move 3.	Occupying a	Step (1a) Outlining Purpose	1
niche		Step (1b) Announcing Present Research	1

Excerpt 1

The performance of secondary school students in English language in West African Examination Council, Nigeria has been poor generally (Oguguo and Uboh,2020). According to Uwadiae (2011), the results released for May/June 2015 for the West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) indicate that majority of the candidates who sat for the Examination recorded mass failure as only 3.3% had five credits with English Language. Speaking at a press conference, the head of WASSCE national office lamented on this mass failure and admitted that the poor performance is mainly from public senior secondary schools in the country.

The Head of the National Office further disclosed that out of 1.5 million candidates who sat for the May/June,2015 WASSCE examination, only 472,906 candidates obtained five credits which include English Language and Mathematics. The implication of this result reveals that only 3.3% would be eligible for admission into tertiary institutions. This is quite disturbing to parents, guardians, teachers, counsellors and educationists in Nigeria, particularly in Adamawa State.

Over the years, the majority of students that sat for the May/June West African Examinations Council (WASSCE) have been recording mass failure, not only in the area of overall performance of the students but the most worrisome aspect of this is the failure in the core subject like the English language. The poor performance in this subject is attributed to many factors such as inadequate teaching materials, inadequate skilled teachers of English and ineffective utilization of information and communication technology to teach the students above all, the students themselves lack interest in reading and writing. Not only that, students usually face difficulties in reading, speaking and listening, they equally find it difficult constructing correct sentences while writing. This is an issue as essays require student's ability and competency in writing English so as to express themselves effectively.

Excerpt I strongly foregrounds Move 1 by establishing background and significance, uses Move 2 mainly to indicate research gaps without counterclaiming, and applies Move 3 moderately through outlining purpose and announcing the study. While it aligns with Swales' CARS model, it remains heavily background-focused and offers limited justification of the study's distinct contribution.

Table 2 Frequency of Moves and Steps in Excerpt II

Moves	Steps	Frequency
Move 1. Establishing a territory	Step (1) Claiming Centrality	1
	Step (2) Making Topic Generalisation	3
	Step (3) Reviewing Previous -Research	2
Move 2. Establishing a niche	Step (1a) Counter Claiming	0
	Step (1b) Indicating a Gap	2
	Step (1c) Question Raising	0
	Step (1d) Continuing a tradition	1
Move 3. Occupying a niche	Step (1a) Outlining Purpose	1
	Step (1b) Announcing Present Research	1

Excerpt II

Language is used for the purpose of communication between individuals. When a common language is lacking, communication becomes a problem. This study attempts to contribute to the existing literature on Nigerian Pidgin in line with Gani-Ikilama, (2005) who observes that, Nigerian Pidgin is spoken in market places, barracks, campuses, etc. And that this variety of Nigerian Pidgin is predominantly a market language used in buying and selling interactions. Very little has been done on the extent to which pidgin is used for economic or business transactions in Jimeta/Yola markets especially as it is used

simultaneously with other languages such as Hausa, Standard English, Broken English and non-indigenous languages spoken in the study area. Nigerian Pidgin, as a contact language, is currently witnessing ambivalent shift in status. As a result of diachronic development over the years, the use of Nigerian Pidgin is becoming popular among many speakers than before. Nigerian Pidgin has undergone a lot of modifications and re-modifications over the years by drawing its rich lexicons from various Nigerian indigenous languages as well as the contact language (English). The historical contact of the indigenous languages with English language has metamorphosed into what we know today as Nigerian Pidgin, (Balogun,2013). The dynamic and generative capacities of Nigerian Pidgin to create from a finite set of lexical items have continued to foster communicative process and interaction among Nigerians. It has also afforded mutual interest and understanding between indigenous citizens and foreigners. In a multiethnic state like Nigeria of over 130 million inhabitants (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008), with over 400 indigenous languages (Bamgbose, 1971), Nigerian Pidgin has emerged as the most widely spoken language of inter and intra communication among Nigerians and across diverse ethnic groups that do not share a common language.

Excerpt II relies heavily on Move 1 for contextual framing, uses Move 2 moderately to identify gaps, and gives minimal attention to Move 3. Overall,

the statement prioritises background information over clearly justifying the study or defining its aims.

Table 3 Frequency of Moves and Steps in Excerpt III

Moves		Steps	Frequency
Move 1. territory	Establishing a	Step (1) Claiming Centrality	1
		Step (2) Making Topic Generalisation	2
		Step (3) Reviewing Previous Research	1
Move 2. niche	Establishing a	Step (1a) Counter Claiming	0
		Step (1b) Indicating a Gap	2
		Step (1c) Question Raising	0
		Step (1d) Continuing a tradition	0
Move 3. niche	Occupying a	Step (1a) Outlining Purpose	1
		Step (1b) Announcing Present Research	1

Excerpt III

Transitional Markers are connecting words or phrases that strengthen the internal cohesion and coherence in texts. Transitional markers attract many studies from different aspects of compositions. Many researchers found Transitional markers interesting for investigation in students' essay. Little has been done on newspaper reportage particularly the Nigerian tabloid.

This assertion calls for more studies on newspaper writing particularly Nigerian newspapers in order to investigate transitional markers used by Nigerian journalists in crafting their articles. In an attempt to fill up the gap, this study found few studies carried out on transitional markers. However, the studies were not anchored on Nigerian newspapers on sports and politics which is the focus area of this study. Based on the foregoing, this study intends to fill the gap by examining the transitional markers in selected Nigerian newspapers on sports and politics.

The analysis of Excerpt III shows that MA students most often use Move 1, especially through topic generalisation and occasional references to prior research, effectively setting the context for their studies. Move 2 appears moderately, mainly through identifying gaps, but the absence of counterclaiming reflects a cautious approach with limited critique of existing work. Move 3 is minimally present, expressed through outlining purpose and announcing research but lacks research questions or references to tradition, leaving contributions underdeveloped. Overall, author establishes the research territory well but struggle to fully justify the study or clearly define the goals of the study, reducing the effectiveness of the problem statement.

Frequency of Moves and Steps in Excerpt IV

Moves	Steps	Frequency
Move 1. Establishing a territory	Step (1) Claiming Centrality	1
	Step (2) Making Topic Generalisation	2
		1

		Step (3) Reviewing Previous - Research	
Move 2.	Establishing a	Step (1a) Counter Claiming	0
niche		Step (1b) Indicating a Gap	1
		Step (1c) Question Raising	0
		Step (1d) Continuing a tradition	0
Move 3.	Occupying a	Step (1a) Outlining Purpose	1
niche		(1b) Announcing Present Research	1

Excerpt IV

Language is so powerful that it can influence behaviour and actions of humans. It is a general belief that politicians use language to woo, mislead and divert the opinion of the masses. In relation to this, Hodges (2015) points out that pronouncements made by administrative officials with legal recognition are given more attention by the public in comparison to pronouncements made by ordinary citizens. However, such authoritative pronouncements in and of themselves should be insufficient to elevate the claims to the status of widely accepted as truth. This necessitates investigations on such speeches. The study of language use has been widely carried out by various scholars in different fields. More importantly, presidential discourses have been the field of interest for many researchers

for a long time. For instance, Abuya (2012) carried out a pragma-stylistic analysis of President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan's inaugural speech. Also, Adedun and Atologbe (2011) worked on A Discourse Analysis of President Obasanjo's farewell speech to Nigerians. Indeed, Presidential discourses are influential in the organization and management of societies. Presidential discourses are messages addressed to a whole country, region, continent or even the whole world. Presidential discourses affect people at different levels of organizational structures of societies. In fact, discourse-semantic analysis is quite important as it helps to decode meaning from any type of speech. Linguists have written on speeches of President Mohammodu Buhari using different approaches as: Koutchade, (2015, 2017). But little has been done on Discourse-Semantic Analysis of President Muhammadu Buhari's speeches, more especially the 2015 and 2019 inaugural speeches.

The analysis shows that while Move 1 is moderately present through claiming centrality, topic generalisation and reviewing past research, Move 2 is only partially realised as the writer often indicate gaps but rarely use counterclaiming, limiting critical engagement. Move 3 appears through outlining purpose and announcing research, but the absence of question raising and continuing a tradition weakens justification and broader relevance. Overall, the statements demonstrate awareness of rhetorical Moves but lack full development, reducing its academic persuasiveness.

Table 5 Frequency of Moves and Steps in Excerpt V

Moves	Steps	Frequency
Move 1. Establishing a territory	Step (1) Claiming Centrality	1
	Step (2) Making Topic Generalisation	2
	Step (3) Reviewing Previous - Research	1
Move 2. Establishing a niche	Step (1a) Counter Claiming	0
	Step (1b) Indicating a Gap	1
	Step (1c) Question Raising	1
	Step (1d) Continuing a tradition	0
Move 3. Occupying a niche	Step (1a) Outlining Purpose	1
	(1b) Announcing Present Research	1

Excerpt V

There is no doubt that COVID-19 is a new pandemic that distorts human and their activities ranging from fear of their lives, fear of being infected among other things. Government on their part also are struggling in providing measures that can help in controlling the said pandemic policies such as banning of international travelling, social gatherings, work from home, social distancing, use of face mask, use of sanitizers are some of the measures taken by government in its bid to control the pandemic disease that claimed many lives and stops many

businesses worldwide. These are by no means the full list of the policies made by government. Additionally, professionals, governments and individuals alike constantly use media in educating citizens on how many people are infected, cured, and died. Issues pertaining the state of art as in other related vaccines, drugs, and other related medical researchers are all reported through media. These reports are undoubtedly written or broadcasted using language. And language has an aspect called registers. And some of the registers use in reporting this pandemic disease are new to the audience which can create communication gap between media and the audience. Moreover, the kind of words chosen in a given discourse can help the audience in decoding the intended message. However, when words used in the reports are not properly arranged or the audience are not familiar with the words then, the audience may not decode the text as intended by the report writer. This issue of lexical choice has a direct link with sentence formation which equally can affect meaning of a text. Apparently, from wide reading and listening of COVID-19 reports from different media organization. It is evident that there are new coinages of novice words found in the COVID-19 discourse.

The excerpt shows that the problem statement typically begins with background and topic importance, supported by references to previous research. While the writer identifies gaps to justify the study, limited use of counterclaiming weakens critique of existing work. Move 3 is strongly applied through outlining

purpose, announcing the study and including a research question which improves clarity. Overall, the writer relies heavily on Moves 1 and 3 while underusing Move 2, thus reducing the argumentative strength of the justification.

Table 6 Frequency of Moves and Steps in Excerpt VI

Moves		Steps	Frequency
Move 1. Establishing a territory	a	Step (1) Claiming Centrality	0
		Step (2) Making Topic Generalisation	9
		Step (3) Reviewing Previous Research	0
Move 2. Establishing a niche	a	Step (1a) Counter Claiming	0
		Step (1b) Indicating a Gap	4
		Step (1c) Question Raising	0
		Step (1d) Continuing a tradition	0
Move 3. Occupying a niche	a	Step (1a) Outlining Purpose	2
		(1b) Announcing Present Research	0

Excerpt VI

It is no news that Nigeria of late has had her share of security challenges which have so far overwhelmed the capacity of the present security outfits such as the Police and the Military. Crimes such as kidnapping, maiming and killings are frequently

being perpetrated by "armed bandits", "herdsmen", "insurgents", "militants" and the likes on defenceless communities all across Nigeria. The spate of these crimes are the reasons behind the call by the South West governors for the formation of community policing outfits from various affected quarters in Nigeria through press release. So far, the most prominent of such agitation is by the governors of all the six (6) states from the South Western region of Nigeria which are: Kayode Fayemi (Ekiti State), Babajide Sanwo-Olu (Lagos State), Dapo Abiodun (Ogun state), Rotimi Akeredolu (Ondo state), Gboyega Oyetola (Osun state), and Seyi Makinde (Oyo State). This led to the formation of a security outfit code named "AMOTEKUN" which Rotimi Akeredolu the Oyo State Governor stands as the chairman up to date. AMOTEKUN is a Yoruba word for leopard, meant to protect every community in Yoruba land from attacks by armed bandits, herdsmen, insurgents and other criminal elements as contained in the Press Releases by the governors. This gives the impression that the proposed security outfit has regional and tribal dimensions. This presents the need to carry out a discourse analysis on the Press Releases by the South-West governors on the subject 'AMOTEKUN'. This is because, there seems to be existing number of literatures on discourse analysis in selected Press Releases from different fields or disciplines using linguistic or stylistic analyses such as; Discourse Analysis and Leadership (Arriaza & Giberto 2015), Ideology, Rationality and

Reproduction in Education: A Discourse Analysis (Lim & Leonel 2014); The Construction of Cultural Values and Beliefs in Chinese Language: A Discourse Analysis (Liu & Yongbing 2005), Discourse Analysis of Advertising: Implications for Language Teacher Education (Turhan, Burcu, Okan & Zuhail 2017) to mention a few.

The analysis shows that problem statements effectively use topic generalisation, gap identification and purpose outlining, but often omit claiming centrality, literature review, counterclaiming and question-raising. This lack of critical engagement weakens their rhetorical balance, clarity, coherence and overall academic rigour.

Results and Findings

The results in this study reveal that MA students commonly frame their problem statements through topic generalisation, beginning with broad context before narrowing to specific issues, and consistently highlighting research significance by identifying knowledge gaps. While all statements adhered to Swales' CARS model and employed its three main rhetorical Moves, variation emerged in application, with strategies like "claiming centrality," "counterclaiming" and "occupying the niche" used infrequently. Instead of directly engaging with existing literature, students preferred to stress gaps, though they often struggled to clearly articulate how their work addressed them. Overall, the findings suggest that while students effectively establish research importance, their problem statements could be strengthened by explicitly

defining contributions, raising research questions, and engaging more critically with prior studies.

Conclusion

This study examined the rhetorical structure of dissertation problem statements using Swales' CARS model, focusing on the Moves, Steps, and language features employed. The analysis found out that while all authors stated the problem and justified their investigations, they relied heavily on Move 1 (topic generalisation and identifying gaps) while giving less attention to Moves 2 and 3, meaning they did not fully follow the model. Many Moves and Steps were absent across the excerpts, as such, weakening the rhetorical structure and suggesting that limited awareness of proper conventions affects clarity and persuasiveness. The study concludes that postgraduate students need explicit instruction on rhetorical strategies to improve the effectiveness of their problem statements.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, postgraduate students should take part in academic writing workshops that emphasise problem statement construction, paying special attention to CARS model Moves like claiming centrality, counter-claiming, and creating a research niche. These workshops should also include interactive exercises and peer-review activities to improve rhetorical awareness. The department should also create a discipline-specific writing guide for ESP dissertations that includes strategies for placing research within scholarly traditions, common pitfalls, and examples of effective problem

statements. This will serve as a useful resource for both supervisors and students. Lastly, to help students improve the clarity, contextual depth, academic justification and overall quality of postgraduate dissertations, structured mentorship and formative feedback from supervisors and seasoned faculty members should be put in place.

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