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FUNCTIONS of “SHELL NOUNS” as COHESIVE DEVICES in ACADEMIC WRITING: A COMPARATIVE CORPUS-BASED STUDY

This study compares the functions of abstract nouns previously defined as “shell nouns” (Schmid, 2000) to create cohesion in academic texts written by international graduate students and professional published authors. To make this comparison, two corpora of research papers, one by international students and one by published authors, were collected from 6 different academic disciplines (Art and Design, Biology, Computer Science, Economics, Environmental Engineering, Physics and Astronomy), and 35 shell nouns, *approach, aspect, category, challenge, change, characteristics, circumstance, class, difficulty, effect, event, experience, facet, fact, factor, feature, form, issue, item, manner, method, phase, problem, process, purpose, reason, result, stage, subject, system, task, tendency, topic, trend, type*, were investigated in order to find out the most frequent ones in each corpora. The shell nouns identified as the most common ones were qualitatively compared between published authors’ and students’ writings, and further analyzed for cohesive functions in the two corpora. Specifically, the functional analysis was conducted to find out how these shell nouns function in different lexico-grammatical patterns (*th-be-N, th-N, N-be-cl, N-cl*) as cohesive devices in both corpora. The findings of this study indicated that the two groups of writers used shell nouns at almost the same rate of frequency. In addition, they employed various functions for these nouns as cohesive ties in the text. Finally, the analysis of frequency, lexico-grammatical patterns, and function of these shell nouns used by the two groups of writers provided some information about the use of these nouns as cohesive devices in academic writing, and possibly raised an awareness for their cohesive functions that could eventually be applied in English for Academic Purposes courses.

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