
Tense of Reporting in Dissertation Literature Reviews *

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ABSTRACT: The tense realization of reporting verbs in each literature review (LR)¹ is, in a sense, individualistic and particular to each situation. In spite of this, LRs follow certain patterns shared by the peers and the audiences of the writer, since one of the writer's primary goals in writing a dissertation LR is to convey his mental imagery to his peers and his audiences. This article shows that tense choice is an important element not only in dissertations but also in LRs in all the disciplines. Thus, it is important to make students and novice writers of academic research aware of such usage and able to construe their writing on the bases of the prior research, by commenting on advantages and drawbacks, pointing out gaps and establishing their own research spaces.

KEY WORDS: tense, reporting verbs, literature review

The background

Reporting plays a pertinent and indispensable role in the buildup of any human language (Jacobson 1985: 96). Reporting verbs (refer to Appendix 1) in LRs represent a significant rhetorical choice, not only because of their high frequency (Chen 2008:126), but also because of the perspective realized by each reporting verb, as the choice of reporting verbs reflects the degree of writer/author commitment. Selecting an appropriate reporting verb, and its tense and voice in a particular context is one of the best ways for the writer to present his work appropriately and to communicate effectively with others in the academic community. This paper studies the tense alternation after careful examinations of reporting verbs used in 100 native English speakers' dissertations from PQDD (ProQuest Digital Dissertations) (<http://proquest.calis.edu.cn/>), ten from each of the ten disciplines² (see Appendix 2). It intends

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¹ 'Literature Review' here refers to a separate chapter in a dissertation, equal in status with other chapters like Introduction, and is abbreviated as LR henceforth.

² Disciplines and text extracts are coded as Ling. (linguistics), Soc. (sociology), Phil. (philosophy), Mkt. (marketing), Bio. (biology), Phy. (physics), Eng. (engineering), Eco. (economy), Chem. (chemistry) and Comp. (computer). Ling.2 refers to Dissertation 2 in Linguistics in the studied data which is shown in Appendix 2.

to make students and novice writers aware of such usage and able to construe their LR on the bases of the prior research, by commenting on advantages and drawbacks, pointing out gaps and establishing their own research spaces.

1. Tense alternation in similar studies

In reporting, tense-alternation is often studied together with voice (Oster 1981; Malcolm 1987; Shaw 1992). Past tense and active voice tend to be associated with reporting detail, while passive-perfect verbs often initiate new subtopics. The writer exploits temporal reference to strategically manipulate generality. The simple present tense-present perfect tense-simple past tense scale covers over 90 percent of finite reporting verbs. This represents increasing distance of various kinds from the reported finding (Swales 1990). Tense-alternation is the speaker's strategic device that encodes informational and attitudinal contrasts of reporting in discourse, i.e. the speaker's attitude (e.g. empathy to participants and to speech event), and the contextual information (e.g. human relations, participants' psychological states) (Sakita 2002).

Sakita's (2002) research can shed some light on the study of tense in academic writing. Tense-alternation phenomena of reporting verbs reflect how a speaker perceives the past scenes that existed in his memory and are now being recollected. For example, Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988: 117) analyse the pattern of an Introduction in the thesis. According to Hopkins and Dudley-Evans (1988), an Introduction is a cyclical pattern with the components outlined as follows.

- i. Statement outlining variable 1.
- ii. Description of the previous research relating to variable 1.
- iii. An evaluation of this research (optional).
- iv. Statement outlining variable 2.
- v. Description of the previous research related to variable 2.
- vi. An evaluation of this research (optional).

In the step of 'Statement outlining variable 1', the present tense is often used, and in the step of 'Description of the previous research relating to variable 1', past tense is mostly employed. Although in Hopkins and Dudley-Evan's (1988) pattern, the step of 'An evaluation of this research' is optional, the current study finds it in nearly all of the 100 LRs. And it is in this part of LRs that variation of tense use of reporting verbs occurs more often than in other steps. Below is an example analyzed by using Hopkins and Dudley-Evans' (1988) pattern (only the main structures of the sentences are shown).

- (1) Prior research has addressed different aspects of marketing coordination separately.
(Statement outlining variable 1)

For example, researches have considered the specific case of coordinating prices across multiple products in a related bundle (e.g. Nalebuff 2000); have looked at the macro-level organizational issues associated with marketing multiple products (e.g. Homburg, Workman and Jensen 2000); and have looked at coordinating marketing decisions with other functional areas (e.g. Griffin and Hauser 1996).

- (Description of the previous research relating to variable 1)

However, there is no research that examines the economic value of coordination on its own, relates that value to the organizational issues of marketing decision-making. (Mkt. 2)

(An evaluation of this research)

In Step i of Example (1), present perfect tense is used, while in Step ii, present perfect tense is used most of the time. Tense variation in Step iii indicates that an evaluation of the previous research is presented. It should be pointed out that, sometimes an Introduction does not follow the sequence of the pattern strictly, and there are cases when an evaluation is presented after more than one description of the previous research are portrayed. This example shows that tense alternation is a common phenomenon in LRs.

As far as the current study is concerned, the simple present tense, the simple past tense and the present perfect tense of reporting verbs are the three commonly used tenses in LRs (see Tables 1a, 1b and 1c). Although in the current study, tense realization in each LR is, in a sense, individualistic and particular to each situation, LRs follow certain patterns shared by the peers and the audiences of the writer. The basic temporal meaning of a tense remains constant regardless of its use in particular contexts (Comrie 1985). That means, the interpretations a tense may receive in a specific context are best accounted for linguistically, not solely in terms of its contextual uses, but rather in terms of the interaction between context-independent meaning and context-dependent use. Sometimes, tense usage may be related to rhetoric purposes. The writer can choose the time location that best suits his purposes, as will be shown in the following section.

2 Tense of reporting verbs in LRs

This section focuses on the tense of reporting verbs in LRs. First, distributions of tenses of reporting verbs in the 100 LRs are investigated, and then, tense usage in LRs is examined followed by a brief summary.

2.1 Distributions of tenses of reporting verbs in the 100 LRs

While writing a LR, the writer does not simply report the previous studies as a linear enumeration of neutral information. Rather, the writer encodes his judgments of the type of reported information into his own reports. Tense-alternation between past and present (*reported* vs. *reports*) functions as the writer's strategic device which effectively conveys these delicate but crucial aspects of the linguistic phenomenon of reporting in a flow of information.

Because of the length of PhD LRs, and because of the complexity of the cyclical patterns, it is hard to find the steps one by one in the studied data, but tenses of reporting verbs, and their total number and percentage can still be found. Table 1a and Table 1b show tenses of reporting verbs in the LRs of humanities and science discourses respectively. A brief analysis and a comparison will be made based on the distributions of the tenses.

Table 1a Tenses³ of reporting verbs in humanities LRs: total number and percentage

| Discipline | present | past | perfect | other tenses | Total |
|-------------|---------|-------|---------|--------------|---------------|
| Linguistics | 1941 | 231 | 125 | 91 | 2388 |
| Sociology | 1795 | 541 | 200 | 78 | 2614 |
| Economy | 760 | 105 | 51 | 54 | 970 |
| Marketing | 932 | 205 | 75 | 55 | 1267 |
| Philosophy | 2285 | 561 | 211 | 117 | 3174 |
| Percentage | 74.0% | 15.8% | 6.4% | 3.8% | 10413 100% |

Table 1b Tenses of reporting verbs in science LRs: total number and percentage

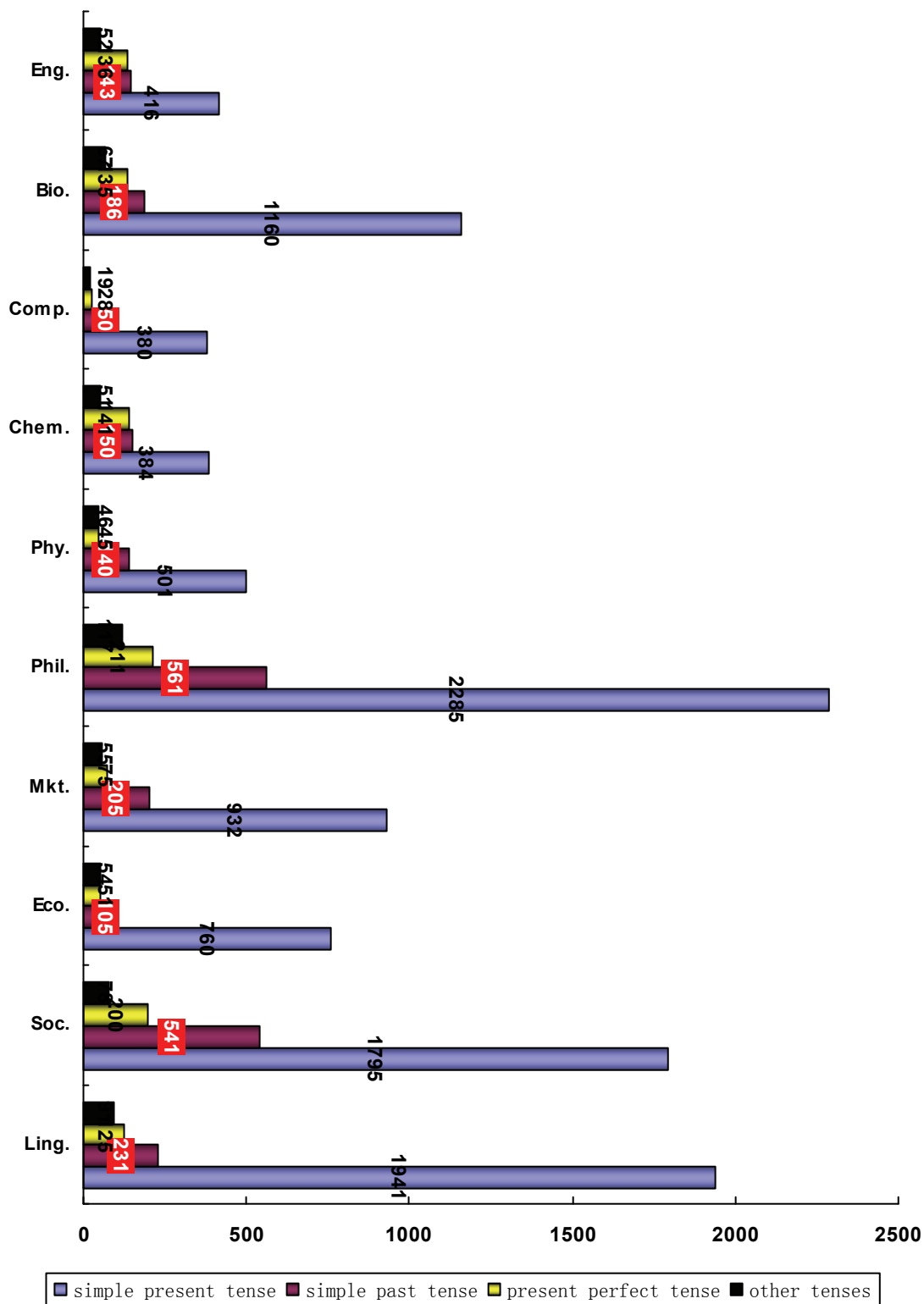
| Discipline | present | past | perfect | other tenses | Total |
|-------------|---------|-------|---------|--------------|--------------|
| Physics | 501 | 140 | 45 | 46 | 732 |
| Chemistry | 384 | 150 | 141 | 51 | 726 |
| Computer | 380 | 50 | 28 | 19 | 477 |
| Biology | 1160 | 186 | 135 | 67 | 1548 |
| Engineering | 416 | 143 | 136 | 52 | 747 |
| Percentage | 67.1% | 15.8% | 11.5% | 5.6% | 4230 100% |

Table 1c Tense of reporting verbs in the 100 LRs

| Discipline | present (%) | past (%) | perfect (%) | other tenses (%) | Total (%) |
|------------|-------------|----------|-------------|------------------|-----------|
| Humanities | 74.0 | 15.8 | 6.4 | 3.8 | 100 |
| Sciences | 67.1 | 15.8 | 11.5 | 5.6 | 100 |
| Average | 70.6 | 15.8 | 8.9 | 4.7 | 100 |

Tables 1a and 1b can be diagrammed as:

³ In Tables 1a, 1b and 1c, 'present' refers to simple present tense, 'past' refers to simple past tense, and 'perfect' refers to present perfect tense.



Figure

1 Tenses of reporting verbs in sciences and humanities LRs: total number and percentage

Table 1c can be diagrammed as:

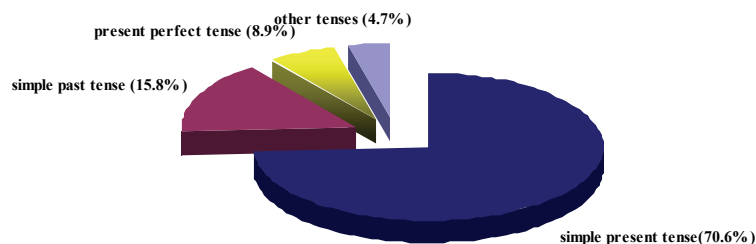


Figure 2 Tenses of reporting verbs in the 100 LRs

It can be seen from these tables and figures that the proportions of tenses are quite different among the reporting verbs. Most of the verbs (70.6% of the total) are in the simple present tense, 15.8% are in the simple past tense, 8.9% of the total are in the present perfect tense, and the rest 4.7% are in other tenses. The present tense is the most frequently used tense in all the 100 LR. This is due to the characteristic features of this special genre. In the four elements⁴ of LR, Element 1 is for the writer to make topic generalizations. In this element, the writer chooses reporting verbs which can mark his general comments on a subject under investigation, and at the same time, he makes generalizations about the topic. General comments and generalizations are usually made by the use of the simple present tense of the reporting verbs. In Element 2, the writer reviews the previous studies on a subject. In this element, the writer uses various reporting verbs to present the previous studies and at the same time, shows his attitudes towards these studies. It is a convention that the writer employs the simple present tense in reporting the previous studies, because by the time he writes his LR, the information he has about the subject has become part of established knowledge. Thus, he may acknowledge this by referring to it in the simple present tense. In Element 3, the writer indicates research gaps after he comments on the previous studies of a subject in detail. This element is based on Elements 1 and 2, but different from them in that the writer's focus here is on research gaps, flaws, drawbacks or weaknesses of the previous studies. In doing so, the writer may choose the simple present tense of the Critical verbs or the negative forms of other reporting verbs. In announcing the present research (Element 4), the writer employs either the simple present tense or the present future tense of reporting verbs. Therefore, the simple present tense of reporting verbs is the most commonly used tense in LR.

This tense preference may also be explained as follows. In English science writing, “proper use of tense derives from scientific ethics” (Matthews et al 1996: 104). Put simply, the change of status of a piece of information from being a finding in a particular experiment to being a tenet of science is accompanied by a tense change. Findings are first reported in the simple past tense in a research article, because at the time of writing, the results are still research-specific: they have

⁴ As for the four elements in a LR, Chen's (2008) study shows that Element 1. Making Topic Generalization(s); Element 2. Reviewing Items of the Previous Research; Element 3. Indicating a Gap; and Element 4. Announcing Present Research.

not yet been accepted by the discourse community and become part of shared scientific knowledge. Used this way, the simple past tense is thus a hedging device (Hyland 1998). But once published in a reputable journal, the information becomes part of established scientific knowledge. Henceforth, other scientists may acknowledge this by referring to it in the simple present tense (cf. Burrough-Boenisch 2003). Generally speaking, the simple past tense signals the methods used and the results obtained in a given experiment or research project. This is partly proved in our data. When the writer reviews the specific methods used and results obtained from the previous studies in Element 2, he sometimes uses the simple past tense.

Whereas some scientists (e.g. Day 1995; Matthews et al. 1996) prescribe the use of tense in academic discourse, other scholars such as Weissberg and Buker (1990) and Swales and Feak (1994) give advice based on the use of tense analyses of papers published in a range of scientific disciplines. They show that in real life, authors do not follow strictly the conventions. They attribute rhetorical power to tense deployment. For example,

The differences among ... tenses are subtle. In general a move from past to present perfect and then to present indicates that the research reported is increasingly *close* to the writer in some way: close to the writer's own opinion, close to the writer's own research, or close to the current state of knowledge (Swales and Feak 1994: 184).

What Swales and Feak mean can be illustrated in the following example.

(2) Mitchell and Krumboltz (1990) reviewed empirical studies related to social learning theory, that have supported what the author call "testable hypotheses" suggested by "the social learning theory of career decision making". This theory also accounts for ... (Soc. 4)

In Example (2), tense shift of reporting verbs from simple past (*reviewed*) to present perfect (*have supported*) and then to simple present (*accounts for*) shows that the research done by Mitchell and Krumboltz is increasingly close to the writer's own research.

Conversely, Comrie (1985) asserts that the basic temporal meaning of a tense remains constant regardless of its use in particular contexts. That means, the interpretations a tense may receive in a specific context are best accounted for linguistically, not solely in terms of its contextual uses, but rather in terms of the interaction between context-independent meaning and context-dependent use.

2.2 Tense realizations in LRs

Establishing a theory of tense usage in LRs is not an easy job, because a theory of tense usage should be able to account not only for the context in which tense is used, but also for the tactics that enable the writer to handle the temporal meanings and uses for their own rhetorical purposes. Besides, it is difficult to be sure about what underlies the way a competent writer/author handles tense in LRs. But here the current study argues that in LRs, tense can be correlated with rhetorical uses, and these correlations can be accounted for by the same temporal meanings and use attributed to tense categories.

Tense has been defined as the grammatical category that establishes a relationship between two temporal locations: the time of utterance and the time of the situation referred to (Comrie 1985; Lyons 1968: 304-306, 1977: 678). Tables 1a, 1b and 1c show that the simple present tense, the simple past and the present perfect tense are the three most commonly used tenses in LRs. The

basic meaning of the simple present tense is that it refers to a situation that includes or coincides with the moment of utterance. It may refer to situations that occupy a period of time much longer than the present moment. Nonetheless, the situations include the present moment within them (Comrie 1985). In contrast, the basic meaning of the simple past tense is that it refers to a situation that occurs prior to the moment of utterance. The intermediary tense, the present perfect tense, deals with the relevance of a previous situation to the present moment. The perfect expresses a relation between two temporal points: the time of the state resulting from a prior situation and the time of that prior situation. With the present perfect tense, the time of the resulting state includes or coincides with the moment of utterance (Comrie 1976).

An examination of distributions of tense of reporting verbs in LRs reveals that there are some rules governing the tense usage: a) the simple present tense of reporting verbs can be used in all the four elements of LRs, b) the simple past tense of reporting verbs can be used to refer to specific research when the writer reviews the previous studies of a subject and indicates research gaps in Elements 2 and 3, c) the present perfect tense of reporting verbs can be used to refer to areas of research, and to make generalizations of a subject in Element 1, and d) the present future tense of reporting verbs is used to announce the writer's own research in Element 4. For example,

(3) These works are indeed important in that they show the need for professionally trained interpreters in multilingual health care settings but do little or nothing to help elucidate the linguistic complexities of interpreted encounters.

(Ling. 6)

(4) For example, Garland and Bennett (1990) compared the 'among family' variance with the 'between family' variance of physiological traits of garter snake progeny among natural population (16). (Bio. 8)

(5) Instead, researchers have investigated exchange rate variables to proxy for tourism prices. (Mkt. 3)

These examples seem to follow the rules mentioned above. In Example (3), the simple present tense is used for a generalization of *these works*. Example (4) reports Garland and Bennett's research by using the simple past tense of the Research verb *compared*; while Example (5) refers to the research of many researchers by using the present perfect tense. In these examples, the 'researcher agent' seems to be a signal to predict the tense usage. In Example (3), the use of the present tense is indicated by the reporting verb *show* without a specific researcher agent, in Example (4), the use of the simple past tense is indicated by a specific researcher agent, while in Example (5), the present perfect tense is indicated by more than one researcher agent (or more than one study).

There are still other cases in our data where clauses with a researcher agent and a reporting verb (i.e. reporting of a specific study) could be found in the simple present tense, the simple past tense, or the present perfect tense, and references to ongoing research activity could be found in either the simple present or the present perfect tense. The author could choose either the simple past or the simple present tense when referring to a particular research in the past, as can be seen in the following examples:

(6) Kass (1987) introduced the use of active contour models ('snakes') in computer vision applications (54). (Comp. 5)

(7) Lau has proposed a dihydrogen complex as the most logical intermediate in exchange between RuH and an intramolecular ammonium proton. (Chem. 3)

(8) Berentsen (2000) assumes there exists a monopolist that has the ability to print fiat money and make announcements about redemption practices which are known to all the agents. (Eco. 4)

These three examples are cases of reviewing the previous studies in Element 2 of LRs, but with different tenses of reporting verbs. Tense variation of reporting verbs here may result from different purposes of the writers or different attitudes of the writers towards the authors' studies. The simple past tense in Example (6) refers to a single event/action that occurred in the past, or an event that occurred over a period of time prior to the moment of utterance. The use of the simple past tense of the reporting verb 'introduce' may imply that the author's research *Kass (1987)* may be quite different from the writer's. In Example (7), the present perfect tense is used to refer to a past experience with current relevance. The use of the present perfect tense of the reporting verb *propose* may imply that the writer does not quite agree with the author's research. The simple present tense in Example (8) is used as a reference to an action that holds true for a period of time. The use of the simple present tense of reporting verbs here may imply that the author's research *Berentsen (2000)* is already seen as established knowledge in the academic community. But a more reasonable explanation for the tense choice here is that reporting verbs perform interactive functions. By employing these reporting verbs, the writer expresses the interchange between researchers as they present, discuss, reformulate, evaluate, argue against, and comment on each other's or their own research. Reference is made to the *act* of presenting information to the research community through a dissertation.

Reporting verbs in LRs behave very differently from other verbs, in terms of the present tense referring to the past, like the tense used in Examples (9) and (10).

(9) Within this basic framework, Bull (2001a) identifies the relative merits of an inquisitorial system vs. an adversarial system (where there are costs of producing and suppressing evidence). (Eco. 10)

(10) Fine (1993) observes that the strategic benefits of flexibility can be addressed by studying impact of investment in flexible manufacturing systems on competitors. (Eng. 8)

Here, the implication of the present tense is that although reporting took place in the past, its result – the information communicated – is still operative. Thus, Example (9) suggests that although the book/paper was written by Bull in 2001, it still 'identifies the relative merits' at the present time, and Example (10) suggests that although the experiment/research was reported by Fine in 1993, it still 'observes the phenomenon' at the present time. The use of the simple present tense of reporting verbs in such cases are what Quirk et al. (1985: 181) call the use of the HP (historical present), which refers to the use of the present tense to refer to past events. Such use of the present tense of reporting verbs in LRs is unique, which is perhaps an important reason for the frequent use of present tense in this genre.

2.3 Summary

Given that tense use conventions of reporting verbs in LRs are not followed strictly by the

writer/author, it is difficult to be sure about what underlies the way a competent writer/author handles reporting verb tense in LRs. However, it can be seen from the above discussions that although temporal meaning is basic, the interaction between context-independent meaning and context-dependent use of reporting verbs is of crucial importance, which allows more than one temporal meaning. Presenting tense use of reporting verbs in LRs as inviolable rules (Day 1995) oversimplifies actual practice and ignores the reader's abilities to infer meaning from context (Burrough-Boenisch 2003). In the analysis of tense usage in reporting verbs of LRs, one does not have to adhere rigidly to the conventions – to match grammatical choices with the time of events in the physical world. An important feature that needs to be presented here is that the temporal location of many references to the previous studies is one that exists only in the mind of the dissertation writer himself. To some extent, the choice of tense is a rhetorical one, and the write/author can choose the time location that best suits his purposes.

3. Conclusion

The perspective in the linguistic phenomenon of reporting depends on the writer's subjective bias and egocentrism (Sakita 2002). LRs may be developed according to the writer's mental imagery which is constructed upon his interpretations of a topic, and his purposes in writing the dissertation. Therefore, the tense realization of reporting verbs in each LR is, in a sense, individualistic and particular to each situation. In spite of this, LRs follow certain patterns shared by the peers and the audiences of the writer, since one of the writer's primary goals in writing a dissertation LR is to convey his mental imagery to his peers and his audiences. The writer, therefore, can choose, in a number of situations, a tense for his own purposes.

In this article I have intended to show that tense choice is an important element not only in dissertations but also in their literature reviews in all the disciplines. Thus, it is also important to make students and novice writers of research articles, theses and dissertations aware of such usage and able to construe their writing on the bases of previous research.

To end discussion of usage of tense in reporting, the current study quotes Shaw (1992: 317) as saying 'we probably should not suggest to learners that particular tense have any special status as signals of the writer's attitude or of the discourse function of the statement, even though skilled workers may be able to use them in this way. Rather we should emphasize the typical structure of a paragraph, the ways in which new topics and subtopics are indicated by choice of appropriate sentence-themes, and perhaps particularly the rather specialized convention by which continuation of the same topic can be signaled'.

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Appendix 1 Reporting verb sources

Reporting verbs in the current study refer to all the verbs in the 100 PhD Literature Reviews that represent verbal and mental processes, all the verbs mentioned in Thompson (2000), and the list of groups of speech act verbs mentioned in Wierzbicka (1987), Halliday's (1994) as well as Hyland's (2002) reporting verbs classification.

Appendix 2 The 100 dissertations

Linguistics1-5 from University of Michigan, Linguistics6-10 from University of Texas

Sociology1-5 from University of Kentucky, Sociology6-10 from University College London

Economics1-5 from London School of Economics, Economics6-10 from University of Pennsylvania

Marketing1-5 from Yale University, Marketing6-10 from Columbia University

Philosophy1-5 from Stanford University, Philosophy6-10 from Cambridge University

Physics1-5 from Princeton University, Physics6-10 from Oxford University

Chemistry1-5 from University College London, Chemistry6-10 from University of Liverpool

Computer 1-5 from Birmingham University, Computer6-10 from New York University

Biology1-5 from Harvard University, Biology6-10 from California Institute of Technology

Engineering1-5 from Duke University, Engineering6-10 from Massachusetts Inst. of Technology