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TENSE OCCURRENCE IN ECONOMIC AND BUSSINES JOURNALISTIC ARTICLES COMPARED TO GENERAL-TOPIC ONES

Autors
Ana Martínez
Filologia 3r cicle

ABSTRACT

The choice of tenses in discourse on the part of its producer responds , among other factors, to the rhetorical function that lies beyond the writer's or the speaker's words. However, it would be wrong to think that a piece of written discourse, an article in this case, can be identified with a specific rhetorical function. On the contrary, many different rhetorical functions can occur coherently in a single article. We can only consider a rhetorical function as dominant, if it really is, when we analyse the different parts of the article. In fact it is by means of these rhetorical functions that we can attempt a coherent division of an article into parts. In this sense, this paper aims at a study of the occurrence of tenses in six articles of approximately the same extension. Three of the articles correspond to business and economic contents, whereas the other three talk about topics of general interest. Tense occurrence has been analysed in two different ways : in the first place, all the articles have been divided into different parts according to the rhetorical function which proved dominant in each case and tenses have been counted in each part. Secondly, tense occurrence has been compared in economic and general articles. It goes without saying that the number of different tenses in the article is going to be the same from both perspectives. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to compare economic and general articles in terms of tense occurrence in an attempt to throw some light upon the question of whether tense choice is more dependent on subject matter or on rhetorical function. Moreover, we will be referring to the pedagogical implications related to the conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Although we are only going to deal with aspect in this study, the following quotation from A. Schramm (1996: 1) will prove very useful to give an idea about the line of investigation that could be considered as background for this work: "In ESP there is a long history of investigation into tense and aspect form. The reason for this focus lies in the apparent differences in frequency and use of such forms in science, academia, government, etc. as opposed to other arenas". He refers to the first study of tense/aspect forms in English for Science and Technology (Barber 1962) as a mere frequency count of something that had been noticed intuitively. Going back to our own study and to the factors that inspired it, it was not, as in Barber's case, triggered by the intuitive observation of a different use of tenses in economic article compared to general ones. On the contrary, nothing of the sort was noticed at first sight. The main reason for this study was to throw some light about the possible relationship between tense choice, rhetorical function and article structure in economic articles in English and general topic ones.. What our study aims at, is to determine whether this tense choice is more dependent on rhetorical aspects (structural division) or on subject matter (economic and general-topic articles).

The definition of rhetorical function needs to be contextualized in order to understand the aim of this particular study. L. Malcom (1987: 32) defines her use of the term as "the predominating illocutionary force expressed by each clause." Although our use of the term is essentially the same, there is a slight difference worth mentioning. Instead of clauses, we will be referring to functions expressed in each part of the articles, for this is the unit we are concerned with in this work. Another point which needs to be clarified is the fact that, although it might seem that were are dealing with linguistic functions in this work, for we talk mainly of description, narration and argumentation , instead of with rhetorical ones, it is not the case. An argument supporting this idea is the fact that these apparently linguistic functions we have mentioned always reflect some intentionality on the part of the writer and consequently some kind

of reaction on the reader. As a matter of fact, the borderline between the terms linguistic and rhetorical becomes blur. In this sense we think we might be talking the same things, but of different ways of attempting them.

Unfortunately, the rhetorical sections in our corpus are not so clearly shaped as in the ones in research articles. Hanania and Akhtar (1985: 50) refer to them as "broad rhetorical functions": introduction, review, methods, results and discussion. This circumstance has forced us to use an original typology in the division of the articles into parts.

METHODOLOGY

The reason for dividing the articles into parts according to the dominant function in each of the parts is twofold. On the one hand, the count became much easier this way, for every time results were checked , the count could be done in several stages thanks to this division, and the total result was the addition of the number of tenses in each part. On the other hand, this was the only way to relate the use of a particular tense to a rhetorical function. As we mentioned before, it is extremely difficult and rather risky to establish an exclusive dominant function in an article. This division into parts might seem quite subjective and lacking . In fact, we would dare say that different divisions could have been proposed. Concerning this last point, we would like to leave clear that this methodological division can be considered as a mere "tool" in order to carry out such a study. The main argument to support this last statement is the fact that the total count of tenses in each article is not altered at all whether or not division into parts is done. If any model for structuring these articles has been followed, that would be the three-part structure, which was first proposed by Aristotle as beginning, middle and end, and it forms part of our cultural tradition almost as matter of commonsense. The irregular length of the three parts of the articles is not a factor affecting tense count, for what we are considering here is the number of tense within each part, and not between the different parts.

As we have already mentioned, division of the article into parts should not be regarded as a part of a scientific method whatsoever. We could have done without this division and just count the number of tenses in the six articles. In this way some overall conclusions about the different use of tenses in economic articles and general ones might have been proposed. However, we have found it much easier for the count and also for establishing relationships between function and tense choice. In any case we insist on the fact that the final product, that is, the count, will be the same.

It would have saved us a lot of time and effort to do a computerised counting of tenses. Nonetheless, this would have proved quite a hard task due to the following reasons: first of all, we would have needed a scanner to introduce the corpus of study in the computer. Secondly, the counting programme would have to be extremely sophisticated to discriminate or include some verb forms which for different reasons we thought it was better to ignore or to consider. These verb forms are:

- Passive voice, which we have found necessary to include, for what we are focusing on is tense and not voice.
- Only personal forms of verbs have been considered. Non personal forms usually occur as dependent on personal forms. e.g. ¨...corrupt police force cannot control the gansters¨ (Freedom stained by violence). Most authors working on tense/aspect in relation to rhetorical function consider only finite forms in their analysis: Hanania an Akhar, 1985; Malcolm, 1987; Schramm, 1996, just to quote a few of them. It seem clear that finite forms are the ones reflecting the strenght of rhetorical functions.

• Lexical, modals and primary auxiliaries have all been treated the same way, for as we have said before, the focus of study is on tense in relation to function.

We would like to make some comments about the corpus of study. This corpus consists of six articles from two well known international publications, ¨Time" magazine and "The Economist". Two economic texts have been taken from "The Economist", whereas the remaining five belong to the "Time". Concerning the economic articles, we will say that the ones in The Economist appear under the section of Finance and Economics, whereas the one in the Time was found in the Business section. The reason for mentioning the sources of the articles is important in order to understand the fact that the two articles in "The Economist" could be classified as less sensational than the one in the "Time". By sensational we refer to things which are not present in the other two article, for example the tittle in the Time's article ("How Much Bull is Left in the Market") seems to have been conceived in order to call attention, whereas the other two ("Why the Dole plan will Work" and "Jobs and Wages Revisited") are just an introduction to the content of the articles. However, although this slight degree of sensationalism may explain the difference between the two sections, Finance and Economic, and Business, the three articles present a clear economic content. Another question about the corpus of study, this time more related to format than to content, is the fact that the three articles have more or less the same extension, that is a magazine page. Moreover, and concerning the format, we also have to mention that such thing as titles, heading, tables, diagrams and footpage note have not been considered in the count.

TENSE OCCURRENCE AND RHETORICAL FUNCTION

We will first consider the structure of the three economic articles and the relationship between tense choice and function. The tenses analysed are the following:

p.p	- present perfect.
pas.p.	- past perfect
s.p.	- simple present
s.pas.	- simple past
con.	- simple conditional
fut.	- simple future
p.c	- present continuous
pas.c.	- past continuous.

1. "JOBS AND WAGES REVISITED"
1.1 STRUCTURE

Subheading... *"Despite recent newspaper reports that argue the contrary, wider wage differentials do help to create jobs"*.

1st part...Introduction. Brief DESCRIPTION OF A SITUATION, the content in the subheading is developed in more detail.
 "This implies that there is likely to be some trade-off between inequality and unemployment."

2nd part...Core. DESCRIPTION OF A PROCESS (mechanism) that have led to the present situation.
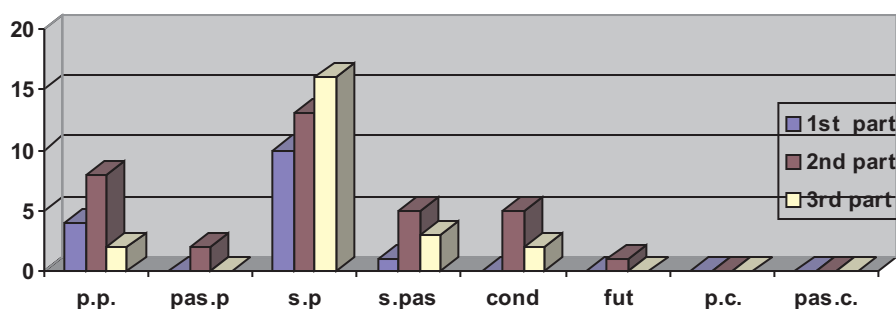Presentation of current data.
"...it is worth considering the mechanism by which more flexible wages should create more jobs."
"In France, in contrast, the minimum wage is ..."

3rd part... Comparing theory and reality. The author's viewpoint becomes more clear in this third part.
ARGUMENTATION.

1.2 TENSE OCCURRENCE

Since the article starts with a description of the situation, the **first part** is clearly dominated by the simple present. However, occurrence of present perfect is also significant, for this situation is the result of an action starting in the past and having an effect on the present. The **second part** is in fact quite similar to the first one, the only difference is that the proportion of present perfect examples has risen in relation to the simple present. The reason for this becomes simple if we take into account that in this second part the process leading to the situation is more important than the situation itself. The use of conditional tense here remind us that the topic of the article is in fact a theory, which practice does not necessarily confirm. **The third part** is mainly a revision of this theory with some personal predictions on the part of the writer (simple conditional.)

2. "WHY THE DOLE PLAN WILL WORK"
2.1 STRUCTURE

1st part....NARRATION of a personal experience.
"I was surprised when I received a phone call..."

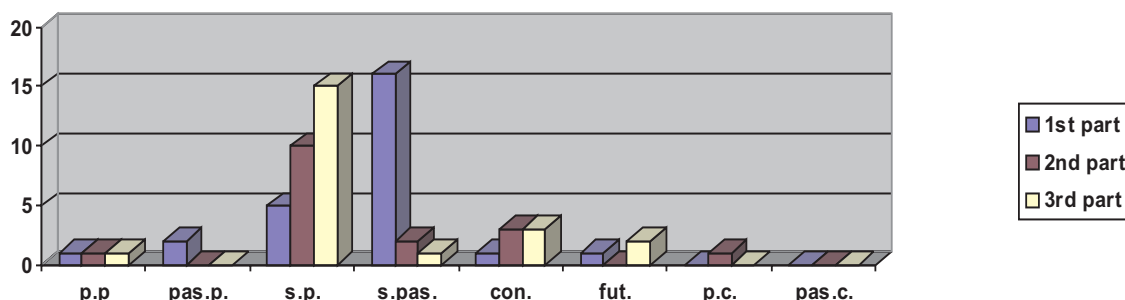2nd part...DESCRIPTION of an economic program.
"his program advocates..."

3rd part...personal evaluation of the program and of how it would work. DESCRIPTION/PREDICTION.
"I believe..."/"The tax cuts...would reduce".

2.2 TENSE OCCURRENCE

Contrary to what we have just seen in the first article, the **first part** here consists of a narration where the simple past reaches its highest peak in the whole article. The **second part** is mostly a description of an economic plan, this explains the role simple present plays here together with simple conditional, which reminds us that Dole's economic program is not a fact yet.

3. "HOW MUCH BULL IS LEFT IN THE MARKET?"
3.1 STRUCTURE

Subheading..."*What went up used to come down. But that was before the boomers*"

1st part... Introduction. DESCRIPTION of the problem.
"*what goes up must come down. But that ancient bit of sentatiousness is out of favour in Wall Street today.*"

2nd part...DESCRIPTION/NARRATION of the process that has caused this situation.
"*America's baby boomers are rewriting all the old rules...*" "*Dow average jumped 33%...*"
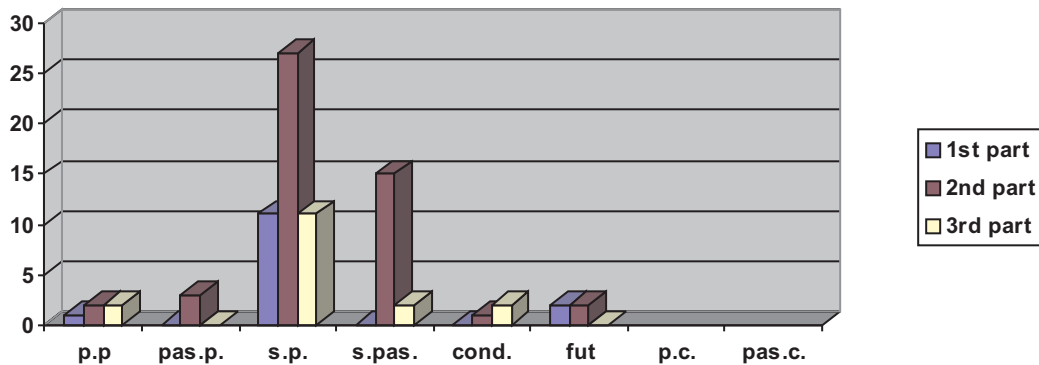
3rd part...DESCRIPTION/PREDICTION of how the situation may develop.
"*What might finally shut off the money spigot would be...*".

3.2 TENSE OCCURRENCE
As we have just seen in the first article "Jobs and Wages...", in this case, the **first part** also starts with a description of the situation, in both cases the subheadings are developed in more detail. These two first parts play the role of an introduction to the topic from a descriptive perspective. In this sense, the bars representing the simple present are higher. If we analyse the **second part**, we realise that the structure of this economic article still resembles that of the first one. Both second parts consist of the description/ narration of the process causing the situation the articles describes. There is however, a slight difference in how this process is conceived by the writer and this could prove the reason for that little difference in tense choice. In "Jobs and   Wages..."the writer regards the process as a somehow recent phenomena: "In recent years, technological change and....have reduced the demand...", that justifies his greater use of the present perfect and the simple present over the other tenses. In "How much Bull...", the preference for the present perfect is substituted by that of the simple past. Contrary to what it may seem, the writer does not use the simple past to emphasise the span of time between the time of the event and his present : "This January alone, mutual founds took in ...". Therefore, the fact that the writer of "Jobs and Wages..." uses the present perfect to report what has happened "in recent years", whereas the one in "How much Bull..." prefers the simple past to talk about "this June" , takes us beyond the scope of linguistic functions to the unlimited field of rhetorical functions and discourse. What we mean by this, is that it was in the end the writer's mind what determined tense choice, he himself chose to conceive the action as a process with short-time consequences in the present (present perfect), or as punctual actions which are better described by simple past. The fact that "viewpoint appears to influence lexical choices.." (Schramm) has in our view some important pedagogical implications we will later discuss. It is by reaching the **third part** of the article that our hope of finding a parallel structure between "Jobs and Wages..." and "How Much

Bull..." is vanished. As a matter of fact this third part, a description/prediction about the situation, resembles more to the second article "Why the Dole Plan...".

Let's now consider the structure of the three general articles to determine in what way they differ, if they do, from the three economic article we have seen above.

4. FREEDOM STAINED BY VIOLENCE
4.1 STRUCTURE

1st part...Introduction, DESCRIPTION/NARRATION of the process that has caused this situation:
"A sampling from the police ...provides a grim picture..."
"During the long years when blacks struggled..."

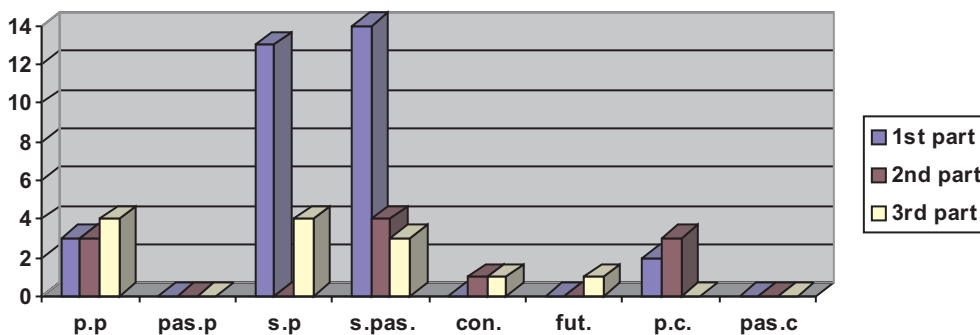2nd part...DESCRIPTION of the consequences and results.
"White South Africans and European residents are leaving the country."

3rd part ... NARRATION/DESCRIPTION of what the government has done so far. Some predictions about what may happen.
"...the official response...has been disappointing."
"...Minister Omar's return to his home... would be one important symbolic gesture..."

4.2 TENSE OCCURRENCE

The first part of this article combines narrative (simple past) and description (simple present) and is similar to the first part of the economic article "Why will the Dole...", being the later more narrative. **the second part** directs our attention to a tense to which we have not devoted any comment so far, that is the present continuous. This part describes the current results of the events described in the first part. The use of the present continuos might be motivated by the writer's wish to leave clear that these consequences are still taking place. Again, **the third part** is as review of the actions taken together with some predictions about how the situation may develop.

5. *"AN EPIDEMIC OF MURDER"*
5.1. STRUCTURE
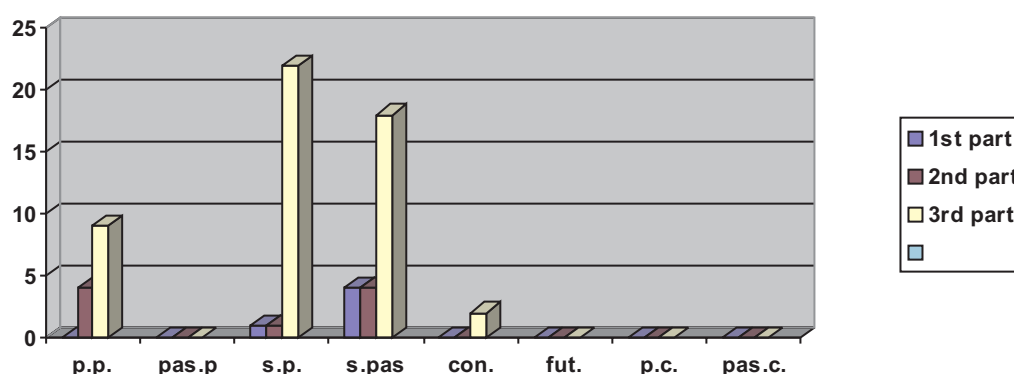
1st part...NARRATION of an event

2nd part...DESCRIPTION of actions taken after the event.
"No one has been arrested..."

3rd part...DESCRIPTION/EXPLANATION of the possible reasons for that event to take place.
"Romero Mgaña's death has thus been woven into a web of conspiracy theories..."

5.2 TENSE OCCURRENCE

Once more, the article starts by a narration where the simple past plays an important role. **the second part** is again a report of the actions taken after the event, where the present perfect and simple past combine. **the third part** , which is the longest of the three, does not include so many examples of conditional tense as we have seen in the third part of the other article. This could be explained saying that the writer does not involve himself very much into making guesses about the possible causes for the action to happen, but "stays away" by reporting other people's theories.

6. "WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE"
6.1. STRUCTURE

1st part...NARRATION of an event.
"Last October separatist ...Bouchard stunned the world..."

2nd part...DESCRIPTION of the results of that action, description of the current situation.
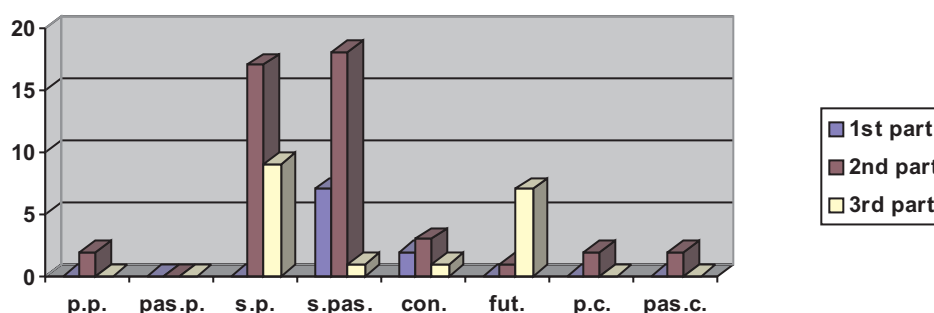"Politics, has intervened..."
"...legislative hearings begin this week..."

3rd part...DESCRIPTION/PREDICTION about how the situation may develop.

6.2 TENSE OCCURRENCE

As the bars indicate, **the first part** is what we could call "a pure narrative", very similar to what we found in "Why the Dole Plan...". Once again we find present perfect and simple present to describe the results in **the second part.** This second part has a similar function to the third part of the previous article "An Epidemic...". **The third part** is also devoted to predictions about the development of the situation. However, there is a high frequency of a tense which has been much used so far, that is the simple future. Most examples, if not all, of the use of this tense are reported speech, the author is not really presented his own predictions, but those of other people.

TENSE OCCURRENCE IN ECONOMIC AND GENERAL-TOPIC ARTICLES

Although at this point, it is not difficult to foretell the fact that tense occurrence in both types of articles is not going to yield significant difference, we have decided to represent these data by means of a table:

	p.p.	pas.p.	s.p.	s.pas.	con.	fut.	p.c.	pas.c.
"Jobs.."	14	2	39	9	7	1	0	0
"Why.."	3	2	30	19	7	3	1	0
"How.."	5	3	49	17	3	4	5	0
total:	**22**	**7**	**118**	**45**	**17**	**8**	**6**	**0**
"Freed."	10	0	17	21	2	1	5	0
"An..."	13	0	24	26	2	0	0	0
"Watch.	2	0	26	26	6	8	2	1
total:	**25**	**0**	**67**	**73**	**10**	**9**	**7**	**1**

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Before rushing into any conclusion, we are to admit that the corpus used proves too limited to lead to significant conclusions about the similarity of structure in economic articles compared to general ones. Therefore, it seems a good idea to enlarge the corpus while maintaining the method, for further work. Concerning the structure of the articles in general, a couple of points are worth mentioning:

First, we have observed that four out of six articles (one economic and three general topic) start by a narration where main event are reported. Consequently, it is in the first part of these four articles where the bar for the simple past reaches its highest peak.

Another conclusion worth mentioning is the fact that in all articles, the third part always involves some predictions about how the situation described in the article may develop. The source of these predictions is either the author himself or some other people quoted by him. This points easily explains the reason why the bar for the simple conditional and simple future is practically flat except when it comes to the third part.

To sum up, we can conclude saying that within such a corpus as ours, the question on whether tense choice is more dependent on topic or on rhetorical function is answered just by observing that the graphics representing economic articles do not form a separate unit, that is to say, the structure of economic articles does not constitute a genre.

Last but not least, let's now talk about the pedagogical implications of this study, without which, all we have been saying would fall in a bottomless well, so to speak. The task of dividing the articles into parts according to rhetorical functions aids comprehension a great deal, and this is our own experience here. It was by attempting division that we realised we had not quite understood the content of the articles. In other words, by having to think about what the author wanted to say (rhetorical function) we understood better what the article was about. In this sense, this task of identifying functions resembles that of paraphrasing. In order to apply the strategy of paraphrasing, that is reproducing the same content with different words, one needs to

grasp the meaning of the original , message succesfully. in the same way this identification of functions can be compared to summarising, a strategy far more complicated than it is commomnly thought, where the main information has to be isolated from the rest. These pedagogical implications would apply not only to ESP students, but also to ESL students, for comprehension is one of the main goals in language teaching.

The second pedagogical implication deals with the way grammar explanations are usually carried out in the language classroom in general, and it can be summarised in the following quotation from Lackstrom et al (1970:104) where they state that tense choice in EST may not be dependent on "time lines as most textbooks presuppose, but on rhetorical and subject matter considerations...". In this way, it is important to make our students aware of the fact that correlation between tense and function should not be established on a one-to-one basis, this correlation is not direct. Thus discourse offers the student more possibilities of understanding the function of verb tenses than sentence level. For example, it is not enough to provide a student with the typical example "l have studied English for ten years" to explain the uses of the present perfect. if this is the only use they associate with this particular tense, they will be a bit surprised if they are asked to explain why in the next extracts one of the writers uses the simple past with a time phrase like "this January alone", while the other prefers the present perfect to talk about "recent years":

> *"This January alone, mutual funds took in $33.3 billion...."*
> ("How Much Bull is Left in the Market?" from "Time")

> *"In recent years technological change and increased competition...have   reduced the demands..."*
> ("Jobs and Wages Revisited", from "The Economist")

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1. "Historically, language analysis for specific purposes began in quantitative studies of the linguistic properties of functional varieties or registers of a language... A prototypical study of this kind would involve investigating the occurrence of verb form..."
(J.M. Swales. *Genre Analysis.* 1990: 2)

2. "We will use the term rhetorical function to refer to the predominating illocutionary force expressed by each clause..."
(L. Malcolm. What Rules Govern Tense Usage in Scientific Articles? *English for Specific Purposes,* 1987: 32)

3. Tense choice in EST might not be dependent on "time lines as most textbooks presentations presuppose, but on rhetorical and subject matter considerations..."
(Lackstrom et al. Grammar and Technical English. *ESL current issues.* 1970: 104)

4. "This January alone, mutual funds took in $33.3 billion..."
("How Much Bull is Left in the Market?" from "Time")
"In recent years technological change and increased competition...have reduced the demands...."
("Jobs and Wages Revisited", from "the Economist")