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3. Teaching the Conference Abstract

JOHN SWALES, UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to reflect upon some experiences in teaching the writing of conference abstracts to international graduate students at an American university. These registered students (plus occasional non-native speaker (NNS) staff, post-doctoral fellows and visiting faculty) come from many different countries of the world, although with a preponderance from Asian countries such as Taiwan, Mainland China, Korea and Japan. They also come from across the many colleges and departments at the university. If the majority are enrolled in scientific and technical programs, there are always some from other areas. For example, in my current class (Winter semester, 1995), these are the outliers (and their country of origin): Cultural Anthropology (Puerto Rico); Archeology (Thailand); Botany (Peru); Chinese Studies (Japan); Nursing (Taiwan); Psychology (Mainland China); Social Work (Mainland China); Theater Studies (Japan); and Urban Planning (Indonesia, Korea and Taiwan). In fact, in the current class of 18, 13 different graduate programs are represented – as usual, heterogeneity is high.

The two advanced writing classes that I teach (*Research Paper Writing* and *Thesis, Prospectus and Dissertation Writing*) consist of students who have signed up voluntarily (even though they may have been 'leaned on' by their advisors). The only 'prerequisite' for the courses is that students should be sufficiently advanced in their studies that they are undertaking individual and/or independent research projects, such as attempting a paper for publication, completing a Master's thesis, or writing a chapter of a dissertation. I mention these details for a particular reason; in socio-linguistic and sociocultural terms, my class participants strike me as being fairly representative of NNS junior scholars and researchers in other situations, both within the United States and elsewhere. They know that English is likely to play an important role in their future academic or professional careers; they know that their academic English proficiency is

Väiverronen, Esa. 1993. Science and the media: Changing relations. *Science Studies* 6: 2, 23-34.
Väiverronen, Esa. 1994. The controversial role of scientists in environmental discourse. Paper presented at the EASST Conference, Budapest, August 28-31.
Wynne, B. 1992. Misunderstood misunderstanding: Social identities and the public uptake of science. *Public Understanding of Science* 1, 281-304.
Wynne, B. 1994. Public Understanding of Science. In Jasanoff, S., Markle, G.E., Peterson, J.C. & Pinch, T. (eds.) *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*. Thousand Oaks and London: Sage. 361-388.

My papers on popularization on which this review is based:

Myers, G. 1990. *Writing Biology: Texts in the Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge*. Chapter 5. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
Myers, G. 1988. Every picture tells a story: Illustrations in E. O. Wilson's *Sociobiology*. *Human Studies* 11, 235-269. Reprinted in Lynch, M. & Woolgar, S. (eds.) 1990. *Representation in Scientific Practice*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Myers, G. 1989. Science for women and children: The dialogue of popular science in the Nineteenth Century. In Christie, J. & Shuttleworth, S. (eds.) *Nature Transfigured: Science and Literature 1700-1900*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 171-200.
Myers, G. 1989. The pragmatics of politeness in scientific texts. *Applied Linguistics* 10, 1-35.
Myers, G. 1990. Making a discovery: Narratives of split genes. In Nash, C. (ed.) *Narrative in Culture*. London: Routledge. 102-129.
Myers, G. 1990. The double helix as an icon. *Science as Culture* 9.
Myers, G. 1991. Lexical cohesion and specialized knowledge in science and popular science texts. *Discourse Processes* 14, 1-26.
Myers, G. 1992. Fictions for exposition. *History of Science* 30, 221-247.
Myers, G. 1994. The narrative of science and the narrative of nature in molecular genetics. In Coulthard, M. (ed.) *Advances in Written Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge. 179-190.
Myers, G. 1995. 'The Power is Yours': Agency and plot in *Captain Planet*. In Bazalgette, C. & Buckingham, D. (eds.) *In Front of the Children: Screen Entertainment and Young Audiences*. London: BFI. 62-74.

usefully serviceable in some respects, but not up to the highest communicative demands likely to be placed on it; and they know that they are in a competitive and complex sociocognitive situation as they begin to make their first moves towards establishing their academic credibility with an audience wider than their individual class instructors.

A classic early locus for testing these wider waters is attempting a conference presentation, which in turn typically requires the preparation of a conference abstract. Unlike the journal abstract, the conference abstract is neither highly visible nor that easily obtainable; it is one of those 'occluded' academic genres, exemplars of which rarely appear in print (Swales, in press). For this reason alone, my class participants have a tendency to minimize the differences between the two. Additionally, the journal abstract has been a much studied text-type (e.g. Graetz 1985; Johns 1992; Jordan 1991; Melander et al. (in press); Salager-Meyer 1992; Ventola 1994), while the conference abstract has been neglected, thus tempting the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructor also to extrapolate from the former to the latter. However, in my view, any such coalescence should be strongly resisted. Conference abstracts are stand-alone texts that enter into a competition for the available slots⁴ on the conference program (Swales 1993). In terms of their immediate intertextual relations, they coexist – to the eyes of the review panel – with the abstracts of others, not with the proposed presentation itself (which may in any case not have been constructed yet), nor – at least under a blind review system – with the writer's previous work. In contrast to 'homotopic' journal abstracts, conference abstracts are *independent* 'make-or-break' texts, and in consequence need a good deal of careful thought and rhetorical work.

We can see this difference more clearly when we turn to the major source of current information on the *discoursal* features of conference abstracts – the "Gatekeeping at an Academic Convention" chapter in Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995). This is a study, extending over several years, of the fate of abstracts submitted to the annual Composition and Communication Convention in the United States. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995: 102) conclude:

1. The high-rated abstracts all addressed topics of current interest to active, experienced members of the rhetoric and composition community; the low-rated abstracts often did not.
2. Almost all of the high-rated abstracts clearly defined a problem; the low-rated abstracts often did not.
3. The high-rated abstracts all discussed this problem in a way that

4. The high-rated abstracts usually projected more of an insider ethos through the use of terminology, special topoi, and/or explicit or implicit references to the scholarly literature of the field than did the low-rated abstracts.

Berkenkotter & Huckin willingly concede that the national convention they analyzed (and its gatekeeping activities) may have its own particular disciplinary distinctiveness. They note, in particular, that the concept of *novelty* tends not to be seen, as it may be in science and elsewhere, as the cumulative addition of a new piece of evidence, another piece of the puzzle, or as a useful result confirming or disconfirming findings. Rather, *novelty* is expressed through *framing* the discourse in an interesting and interestingly problematic way. Even so, they argue that their gatekeeping study strongly supports two of their main general hypotheses: "Genre knowledge embraces both form and content, including a sense of what content is appropriate to a particular purpose in a particular situation at a particular point in time" (1995: 13); and "genre conventions signal a discourse community's norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology" (1995: 21).

Their stress on the importance of *novelty* and 'interestingness' is of course itself a problem for me in my writing classes. (And note here that the situation is very different with my own graduate students in Linguistics where I can offer some insider knowledge of *leitros* or timeliness, of what topics seem hot, tepid or cold.) As an assistant coach of the conference abstract genre in my university-wide classes, on the other hand, I have to try and find a role for myself in an arena where I can, at best, merely speculate on what might be the current rules of play. Sure, I can 'fix' matters so that the syntax is acceptable, or the choice of vocabulary is appropriate. But are there ways I can go beyond the roles of copy editor, literate native speaker and English as a Second Language (ESL) grammarian?

As it happens, in *Genre Analysis* I already gave up much of this ground when I discussed the case study of 'Ali' (Swales 1990: 210–12). There I was at pains to show that the combined efforts of one of my students and myself to co-construct a conference abstract had their limitations. It was only when the senior professor re-wrote the introductory section that "the static frozen-in-time character of the earlier drafts" became "converted into a dynamic contemporary history in which the authors, as protagonists,

have a significant role to play" (Swales 1990: 212). Neither the graduate student 'lab rat' nor the EAP instructor 'language rat' could construct this vibrant sense of a moving research front. But if this was a story of defeat and discomfiture, it was also one with a valuable lesson to teach: in most situations, in a conference abstract an effort at 'interestingness' must be made.

2. Tiina Koivisto's Conference Abstract

So here is another story of a conference abstract which took place about five years later than the 'Ali' case (in 1993) and moves us from one arcane area (electronic sensors) to another equally arcane (post-tonal music theory). I have chosen as my 'comeback' case, the story of Tiina, particularly since Tiina is Finnish, indeed the only Finnish representative in any of my advanced writing classes to date. Tiina has recently completed a Ph.D. in music theory at the University of Michigan, where she has been a part-time doctoral candidate for the last few years, moving back and forth between Helsinki and Ann Arbor once or twice a year. Back in 1993, Tiina was attempting, for the first time, to speak at a major music theory conference in the United States, and coincidentally attending my Dissertation Writing Class. In the one-on-one consultancy meetings we worked most on her conference abstract. The fourth draft of the abstract was submitted and accepted, and the eventual paper was received with considerable interest. But this time we did not need the advisor's intervention. Her abstract is given in (1) below (sentence numbers have been added):

(1) Rhythm, Meter, and the Notated Meter in Webern's Variations for Piano, Op. 27

1) One of the problematic issues in post-tonal music is the notion of rhythm and meter. 2) In the numerous analyses of Webern's Variations for Piano, Op. 27, analysts have failed to agree about the role of the notated meter in the rhythmic and metrical structure of the piece. 3) Some claim the notated meter to be purely conventional and not to be observed in performance, while others give an alternative changing meter to the one notated. 4) This paper seeks to illustrate that the notion of rhythm and meter in Webern's Op. 27 is a delicate and, more significantly, an intentional interplay between the notated meter, and the rhythm and meter arising from the phrase structure of the piece.

5) In order to demonstrate this, the paper presents an analysis examining the phrase structure of the piece, seeing it as an interaction between the pitch and the rhythmic domain. 6) The analysis employs the concept of Generalized Musical Intervals (GMI) developed by Lewin, as well as applications of the traditional notion of phrase rhythm. 7) These features are then presented in interaction with the row structure of the piece. 8) The paper closes by suggesting that an essential feature in understanding rhythm and meter in Webern's Op. 27 is the interaction between the various layers of the music: that is, the underlying row structure, the surface interpretation of the row structure, the phrase rhythm, the meter, and the notated meter.

In terms of content, this remains for me an obscure abstract; indeed, I never more than vaguely understood what the 'row structure' was, and Tiina used to become mildly exasperated by my confusion about the differences between the sub-fields of Musicology and Music Theory. In rhetorical terms, however, there are several pertinent observations that can be made. First, like most successful conference abstracts, it uses several of its limited number of sentences to *preface* the actual work with a scene-setting episode designed to create 'interestingness'. Tiina's abstract, in fact, devotes the first three of its eight sentences to establishing the significance of Webern's Op. 27, its interest for scholars, and the unresolved issue of how best to analyze and conceptualize one of its prominent features.

Secondly, the language of this opening episode is strikingly evaluative:

1. ... problematic issues ...
2. ... numerous analyses ... have failed to agree ...
3. ... Some claim ... while others give ...

As is well known (and much discussed in Belcher & Braine 1995), the issue of assisting apprentice scholars, both native speaker and non-native speaker, to be *appropriately* critical, to be as one of my students once wrote both "complicitous and contestatory", can often be a major hurdle. Here, however, we see Tiina succeeding brilliantly as she *implies* that she is fully familiar with the scholarly history of her chosen piece, *overviews* the current state of the art, and *hints* that the story of that history is by no means at an end.

Thirdly, it is worth reflecting on the nature of the thematic subjects and pre-subjects in Tiina's abstract after the opening episode:

4. This paper ...
5. In order to demonstrate this, the paper ...

6. The analysis ...
7. These features ...
8. The paper ...

The heavy employment of textual reference, including the use of three demonstratives (two with lexical support), is in striking contrast to the findings in Mauranen (1993). These strongly suggest that one of the most striking surface manifestations of the differences between Finns (whether writing in Finnish or English) and Anglo-Americans is the latter's much greater propensity to use textual reference. She goes on to observe:

One rhetorical effect that *this* produces is an impression of closeness and solidarity between reader and writer. It has the effect of bringing the reader round to the writer's orientation, or point of view, by implying that the writer as well as the reader are both 'here', on the same side, looking at things from the same perspective. (Mauranen 1993: 95-96)

If Mauranen is right, then such reader-writer alignments may be a particularly important rhetorical device under the circumstances under which conference abstract reviewers typically operate – sitting confronted with a pile of anonymous single-sheet abstracts and having to quickly sort them into three or four categories.

So, Tiina's abstract has found its way into a recent textbook. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (Swales & Peak 1994), as a model abstract and is there exploited for rhetorical analysis in class. When I asked Tiina what she thought about her abstract a year later, she observed that Webern's Op. 27 is a key but difficult work in twentieth century classical music. The abstract still seems to her to be well argued, and also clearly indicates that she has something new to say. Alas, neither Tiina nor I can trace the earlier drafts, and I can no longer reconstruct in memory the processes that lead to its final form, nor recollect where my assistance may have been more (or less) valuable.

3. Reformulations in the Conference Abstract Context

Before I look at another case that does allow examination of the drafting process, I would like to comment on methodology and on the choice of this genre. The particular methodology I shall illustrate is that of 'reformulation' as originally conceived by Cohen (1983) and modified by Allwright et al.

(1988), Dudley-Evans (1995) and others. In most versions, a student draft is selected and passed to a 'reformulator' who rewrites it in such a way that s/he both tries to be faithful to the writer's assumed intentions, but yet attempts to make uncertainties and ambiguities more explicit. The two versions are then discussed in class, focussing on the changes made, their effects, and whether they are appropriate. All, I think, would agree that the value of the technique resides more in the discussion that arises than in any 'improvements' to the particular student draft *per se*. Alternatives do exist, however, as to the choice of the most appropriate reformulator. Allwright et al. advocate using a native speaker outsider to the class, while Dudley-Evans, in his 'Writing Club', uses international students as peer reformulators. As for myself, I have become over the years my own reformulator. I feel I can no longer try the patience of colleagues and friends with reformulating impositions, and I also feel it is very important that the reformulator be present at the discussion so s/he can take the class 'behind the scenes' of why modifications were made. There is, of course, one clear and present danger to my proceeding this way – the instructor's reformulation may become over-privileged in the eyes of the class since the instructor's text may inexorably take on an authoritative status. To counteract such tendencies, I write my reformulations pretty quickly and tend to 'read' the student draft hurriedly and in a slightly idiosyncratic way, thus achieving a version which, by default if not exactly by design, will have infelicitous and misunderstood elements.

As it has turned out, the very last task in *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* is the one which calls for students to write a conference abstract. Here is the rubric:

Your advisor contacts you about an upcoming small regional conference and suggests that you submit a conference abstract based on your current work. The deadline is ten days away. The abstracts should be anonymous and between 150 and 250 words. Make sure you have a draft ready for your next writing class. (Swales & Peak 1994: 217)

However, for my advanced writing classes, the conference abstract is where the course begins rather than ends. For the following reasons:

- a) These short texts give me quick and easy insight into the nature of the students' current research projects;
- b) Students in the class seem ready to scrutinize these short texts written by their colleagues, though not term papers and other longer texts;

- c) As I have tried to show, the conference abstract is a highly rhetorical text, and so immediately confronts the class with the 'negotiating the knowledge claim' aspect of academic prose (Myers 1990);
- d) As a group, with these texts, we can immediately perceive striking differences across disciplines in topic, methodology, epistemology etc., which convinces us that the primary shared ground is in discourse and communication;
- e) Revised versions can form the texts for a simulation involving a conference review panel accepting and rejecting conference abstracts.

4. Samiri Hernandez-Hiraldó's Conference Abstract

Below in (2) is Samiri's draft conference abstract as originally written, except that I have divided it into separate sentences for ease of later comparison. Samiri is a third-year student in the University's doctoral program in Anthropology, one of the largest and most highly regarded of such programs in the world. She comes from Puerto Rico and speaks with quite a noticeable Hispanic accent and, on occasion, omits subject pronouns and the like. Her writing, however, is largely free of grammatical errors – although she says that her U.S. husband occasionally helps with the proofreading – and she commands, as we shall see, an extensive academic vocabulary.

(2) Samiri Hernandez-Hiraldó

ELI 600

January 18, 1995

Abstract

Religious Coexistence in Puerto Rico

- 1) The recent dramatic changes in the religions and the new religious movements all over the world counter modernization theory and historical materialism. 2) Religious studies demonstrate that the continuing role of religion is due to its capacity for restructuring and assuming various forms (Wuthnow 1988 & Kepel 1994).
- 3) Anthropologists and Latin Americanists interested in conversion emphasize the role of world/traditional religion in the articulation of

local and global specificities, so necessary for coexistence (Stoll 1990, the Comaroffs 1993 & Helmer 1993). 4) Prevailing paradigms, however, limit their analysis by concentrating exclusively in the ideological and scriptural analysis, by considering the official point of view, and by elevating the more palpable or heroic manifestations of coexistence that are, religious conferences, assemblies, ecumenical agencies, academic seminars, special purpose groups, etc. 5) This paper elaborates the processes of religious coexistence in a small municipality of Puerto Rico. 6) From archival research, life histories, interviews and participant observation, results show that types of conversion relate to patterns of coexistence. 7) They also demonstrate that coexistence is determined by the interplay of processes from above and from below, by the immediate social contact of the daily life and by discursive and non-discursive aspects of doing ritual or the whole religious experience.

I chose Samiri's text for reformulation for reasons that are not hard to imagine. The subject matter is likely to be interesting and broadly accessible to my highly heterogeneous class (although many will be reaching for their dictionaries). The syntactic errors are sufficiently insignificant not to distract our attention from the more 'macroquestions'. The abstract also looks like a pretty successful draft; certainly, Samiri seems to have learnt the lesson of Tiina's abstract well (if, in fact, she needed to).

So here is my reformulation (warts and all) in bold, with my 'reasoning' in parentheses, and with the response to my reformulations in italics.

RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE IN PUERTO RICO

(I didn't like the original title much; it seemed to threaten a dull and rather flat treatise; it also seemed very narrow and specific for an anthropological conference, especially as Samiri appeared to be arguing for a different *approach* to the phenomenon. So, one of those bifurcated titles split by a colon: general – specific.) *The class, including Samiri, concurred.*

ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHT: THE CASE OF RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE IN PUERTO RICO

- 1) The recent dramatic changes in the religions and the new religious movements all over the world counter modernization theory and historical materialism.

(O.K., this looks like a great start, but *all over the world* looks risky though; somebody will surely object 'what about in...?'. And does she mean changes in terms of religions' declining as well as religions' gaining? Probably not, so let's put that *especially* phrase in. Is it true that the rise of religion actually counters modernization theory (whatever that is)? Better make that a bit more cerebral. Finally, very interesting question of whether to start with the definite article (*The recent ...*) or with the indefinite (*Recent ...*). In fact, the deletion of the now looks like a switch from old information to new information. I could go either way; let's make the change because it will make a good discussion point in class). *Class decided by a clear majority that the 'breaking-story' strategy was more effective than the 'as-you-know' strategy. The first word would not be 'The'.*

1) Recent dramatic changes in religions, especially the resurgence of old and the rise of new religious movements in many areas of the world, run counter to the assumptions of modernization theory and historical materialism.

2) Religious studies demonstrate that the continuing role of religion is due to its capacity for restructuring and assuming various forms (Wuthnow 1988 & Kepel 1994).

(Up-to-date references, good; Berkenkotter and Huckin (point 4) would surely approve. Wow, I think this must be the first time I have ever seen the ampersand used to join different publications; this will make a small but technically useful point in class.) *As it did.* (S's *religious studies* strikes me as potentially ambiguous – academic studies or study of sacred texts by true believers? As probably the former, let's change to *research*; also add a sentence connector. That *demonstrate* looks far too bold: shooting her research in the foot? We need a non-factive here.) *Points all taken by the class.*

2) In fact, research suggests that the continuing role of religion is due to its capacity for restructuring and assuming various alternative forms (Wuthnow 1988; Kepel 1994).

3) Anthropologists and Latin Americanists interested in conversion emphasize the role of world/traditional religion in the articulation of local and global specificities, so necessary for coexistence (Stoll 1990, the Comaroffs 1993 & Hefner 1993).

(Whew, this a tough sentence, highly dense and abstract – evidence of

Hispanic academic argumentation? I had better try and break it out a bit. How do *Anthropologists and Latin Americanists* line up? Let's experiment. Why the slash between *world and traditional*? *Coexistence* with what? Other religious groups? Or with the non-religious as well? I love the *Comaroffs* as an affiliative and friendly reference, but I fear it will not go with the formal tone of the text. *MAJOR debate. First I had misread Samir's intentions with the opening subject; second, S made it very clear that "world" and "traditional", i.e. local, were completely different; and third, where did I get this idea of religious-secular coexistence from? Especially given the title. On the last point at least, I clearly need my head examined.* (See Samir's revised version below for a third sentence rather different from both her original and my reformulation.)

3) More specifically, Latin American anthropologists and other specialists interested in religious conversion have stressed the way in which traditional world religions can intersect with local or global specifics, thus preserving religious belief with a secular culture (Stoll 1990; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Hefner 1993).

4) Prevailing paradigms, however, limit their analysis by concentrating exclusively in the ideological and scriptural analysis, by considering the official point of view, and by elevating the more palpable or heroic manifestations of coexistence that are, religious conferences, assemblies, ecumenical agencies, academic seminars, special purpose groups, etc.

(This is an impressive sentence, in length, language and content. Don't want to do much here. An extra article before *ideological* can go. I don't understand *palpable*; change? Put *heroic* in single quotes to maintain judicious academic distance? I don't understand *special purpose groups*. Pro-life or something like that?) *Several members of the class jumped on the unnecessary repetitions of "analyses" and "manifest". The instructor acknowledged that he would try to do better in future. Lengthy class discussion with Samir about what she meant by "special purpose groups". This turned out to be groups of hospital visitors and the like. Clearly not "pro-life" types of group. She finally agreed that it was hard to explain and not necessary anyhow.*

4) The prevailing paradigms, however, limit their analyses by concentrating on ideological or scriptural analyses, by privileging

the official point of view, and by elevating the more visible or 'heroic' manifestations of coexistence as manifested through religious conferences or assemblies, or through ecumenical agencies, religious pressure groups or academic seminars.

5) This paper elaborates the processes of religious coexistence in a small municipality of Puerto Rico.

(O.K. here at last is the switch to the present study. Add a strong adversative. *elaborates* looks like a Spanishism to me.) *Changes were approved, especially after the instructor himself deleted the "secular". Learning from his mistakes.*

5) In contrast to this orientation, this paper investigates the processes of religious-secular coexistence in a small municipality in Puerto Rico.

6) From archival research, life histories, interviews and participant observation, results show that types of conversion relate to patterns of coexistence.

I observed that, although the repetition of "patterns" evinced an attractive parallelism, it was not in fact accurate: it was "processes" that she was concerned with. Very interesting discussion, especially from the scientists, about the merits and demerits of saying "the results show" (there they are, for all to see) as opposed to "the study shows" (results are hard to get at, but after my analysis...). (Again see the changes in the revised version below.)

6) Using a combination of archival research, life histories, interviews and participant observation, the study shows that patterns of conversion can be related to patterns of coexistence.

7) They also demonstrate that coexistence is determined by the interplay of processes from above and from below, by the immediate social contact of the daily life and by discursive and non discursive aspects of doing ritual or the whole religious experience.

(Add a connecting phrase; keep with the *study* orientation; how many levels? In any case, put them in order from macro to micro.) *Typo in "contract"; otherwise basically o.k.* (But see the changes made in Samiri's revised version below).

7) More specifically, the study demonstrates that coexistence is determined by the interplay of processes at various levels – from the

whole religious experience, from the discursive and non-discursive aspects of ritual engagement, and from the immediate social contract of daily life.

In (3) we have the revised, post-reformulation version:

(3) Samiri Hernandez-Hiraldó

ELI 600

February 8, 1995

Abstract

ANTHROPOLOGICAL INSIGHT: THE CASE OF RELIGIOUS COEXISTENCE IN PUERTO RICO

Recent dramatic changes in religions, especially the resurgence of old and the rise of new religious movements in many areas of the world, run counter to the assumptions of both modernization theory and historical materialism. In fact, research suggests that the continuing role of religion is due to its capacity for restructuring and assuming various alternative forms (Wuthnow 1988; Kepel 1994). More specifically, Latin Americanists, anthropologists and other specialists interested in religious conversion have stressed the way in which both traditional and world religions have contributed to the articulation of local and global specifics, thus preserving religious belief within changeable and/or pluralist societies (Stoll 1990; Comaroff & Comaroff 1993; Hefner 1993). Prevailing paradigms, however, limit their analyses by concentrating on ideological or scriptural interpretations, by privileging the official point of view, and by elevating the more visible or 'heroic' demonstrations of coexistence as manifested through religious conferences or assemblies, or through ecumenical agencies or academic seminars. In contrast to this orientation, this paper investigates the processes of religious coexistence in a small municipality in Puerto Rico at a more basic level. Using a combination of archival research, life histories, interviews and participant observation, this study will allow an evaluation of the relationship between conversion and coexistence processes. More specifically, the study will demonstrate the extent to which religious coexistence is determined by the interplay of processes at various levels – from the official and popular point of view, and from the discursive/non-discursive aspects of ritual engagement and the immediate social contact of daily life.

5. Final Comments

I have presented here several arguments for giving *early attention* to the genre of the conference abstract in EAP writing classes for senior graduate students. I have illustrated some of my practices through discussion of the conference abstracts of Tina and Samiri, and related these to what little we know about what makes a successful or high-rated example of the genre. In Tina's case, as in that of 'Ali' (reported in Swales 1990), we have the reality-check of knowing that they succeeded within their own disciplinary communities. As far as I am aware, Samiri's abstract has as yet no actual conference target, but rather stands, as it were, primed and ready to go. Indeed, she says she may use it if she speaks at a conference in Puerto Rico, to which she plans to return to continue her field-work.

Like Lemke (1994), I believe that knowledge of any genre is best viewed as "a strategic resource", and one wherein specific tactical textways will need to reflect "what content is appropriate to a particular purpose in a particular situation at a particular point in time" (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995: 13). These contextual tactics lie beyond my informed assistance, but I can discuss strategy. And here the conference abstract genre, seen as a set of short, fast-moving texts framed by complex audience designs, stands out as an excellent vehicle for raising consciousness about how writing strategies and discursive decisions can either add to or subtract from that elusive quality of academic 'interestingness'.

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