

The Undergraduate Linguistics Association of Britain

Abstract Guide

This document contains useful information regarding the writing of abstracts for prospective submissions to JoULAB or the annual ULAB Conference. It includes a distinction between conference abstracts, journal abstracts, and Plain English Abstracts; a breakdown of the structure of an abstract; some tips from the National Committee of ULAB; and some examples from work in linguistics. We hope potential authors for the Journal or presenters at the Conference find that this Abstract Guide helps refine their skills to maximise the chance of acceptance.

Thank you for your cooperation,

T. R. Williamson

Archivist, Undergraduate Linguistics Association of Britain

Editor, Journal of the Undergraduate Linguistics Association of Britain

University of Cambridge



ULAB would like to thank Dr Jennifer Culbertson (University of Edinburgh) for the guidance their Abstract Writing Workshop's 'Anatomy of an Abstract' document provided during the construction of this Abstract Guide.

1 Abstracts

1.1 Types of Abstract

In the academic world, there are many types of abstract. For submissions to the ULAB Conference and JoULAB, the following three types are relevant:

- (1) **Conference Abstracts** (for the ULAB Conference: **maximum 500 words**)
 - Can be the first thing written about a project
 - Main aim: audition the project to prospective presentation-attendees
 - Typically includes background, goals, (longer) summary of argumentation/data/findings
 - May introduce concepts slightly wider to the research at hand
 - Will **include a list of references** for work cited in its body
- (2) **Article Abstracts** (for JoULAB: **maximum 250 words**)
 - Often the last thing written (after the article is close to final form)
 - Main aim: a concise summary communicating novelty and impact
 - Also note:
 - As most people will read only the abstract, ensure that you represent your work as wholly and honestly as you can
 - The abstract is a chance to distil the work its catchiest form, from which others can draw the clearest picture of what you did when going in to read it further
- (3) **Plain English Abstracts** (for JoULAB: **maximum 250 words**)
 - Policy of JoULAB, with the aim of widening access to academic work for those external to the field/academia
 - Similar in structure to an article abstract
 - All concepts/methods/findings requiring prerequisite knowledge contextualised and explained
 - Ask yourself: what does someone *need to know* to get the gist of your work

1.2 Anatomy of an Abstract

An abstract can be broken down into four distinct parts:

(1) Frame and motivate the research

- What is your research about?
 - In what field/subdiscipline?
 - Tackling what big issues?
- What (clearly and concisely) is the research question/hypothesis?
- Why do/should others care about it?
- What is missing from current understanding of that question that you are going to fill in?
 - Note: give credit to previous scholarship throughout the abstract, but here especially as this helps to position your work within others' contributions.

(2) Briefly explain what you did (method, experimental manipulation)

- What was your method, in general terms? (e.g., use of a questionnaire, corpora, fieldwork, electroencephalogram, etc.)
- What did you actually do to get your results?

- (Was there a special population/language investigated?)
- (Is your method or type of analysis novel?)

(3) Set of basic findings or argument

- What (briefly) did you find?
 - If your methods returned null results, this is not (in our eyes) ‘finding nothing’, so these also count as findings
 - (Were there any significant factors that hampered data collection attempts?)

(4) Concisely describe major conclusions/implications

- What conclusions can/would you like to draw?
 - How does the data support these conclusions?
- What are the larger implications?
 - Remember to state the scope of impact modestly

1.3 How to Start

As with writing anything, starting can be the hardest part. Here are five basic strategies for how to start an abstract:

- (1) Starting with a **real-world phenomenon or with a standard practice**
 - e.g., ‘Many languages use a mix of semantic and phonological properties to determine noun class.’
 - This strategy helps to frame discussion
- (2) Starting with a **purpose or objective**
 - e.g., ‘The aim of this study is to examine how noun classes are learned.’
 - This strategy is quite impersonal, but also to-the-point
- (3) Starting with the **present action of researchers**
 - e.g., ‘In this study, we compare how semantic and phonological cues are used in noun class learning.’
 - This strategy is more personal than (2), and to-the-point
 - Could also be used as a way to introduce discussion of methodology
- (4) Starting with a **problem or uncertainty**
 - e.g., ‘Previous work on noun class acquisition suggests that phonological information – even if less reliable – is privileged over semantics.’
 - This strategy helps to highlight the contribution of the paper (a useful tactic to employ *anywhere* in the abstract)
- (5) Starting with a **broad scope of the field, then focusing in**
 - e.g., ‘In the study of language acquisition, a discussion exists regarding the relative significance of semantic versus phonological cues for the learning of noun classes.’
 - This strategy might be most useful for a Plain English Abstract

1.4 Tips from the ULAB Committee

Abstract reviewers for the Journal and the Conference alike expect high-quality submissions, but also understand and sympathise with the fact that what they read will mainly come from undergraduates without experience of the professional academic world. Here are some tips to from us to help:

- (1) Where possible, try to write the abstract for your presentation or article after having completed it. That way, you will be able to write the abstract to be as focused to the content of your submission as possible.
- (2) Alternatively, instead of (1), make sure you check over your abstract after having completed your submission to ensure that it still accurately represents your work.
- (3) Ensure that all four of the anatomical parts identified in Section 1.2 have been satisfied in your abstract as far as possible. Using these parts as a guide for writing any abstract will be very helpful!
- (4) Introduce the subject area of your work at the start of your abstract, as the capacity to frame your submission will enable reviewers to judge it more easily
- (5) Include the most pertinent citations to your work throughout the abstract, as this gives reviewers the chance to see your expertise
- (6) Keep the titles of your submissions to a reasonable length so as not to cloud the precise focus of your work
- (7) For conference abstracts only, ensure that you attach a list of references for all the works you cite in the body of the abstract
- (8) For the Plain English Abstract of JoULAB, try to picture yourself explaining the key points of your work to a friend unacquainted with the concepts at hand. A Plain English Abstract should be accessible to anyone who tries to read it, regardless of their academic background.

1.5 Example Abstracts

Should it be useful, please take a look at the following example abstracts of type identified in Section 1.1. Note that they are colour-coded: each colour corresponds to in order with one of the four anatomical parts of an abstract as identified in Section 1.2. Readers of this document should pay little heed to the length of these anatomical parts for each abstract; we understand that every submission will be different!

1.5.1 Example Conference Abstract

Papineau, B. & Hall-Lew, L. (2019). 'Hooked on Celebri[r]y': Intervocalic /t/ in the Speech and Song of Nina Nesbitt (poster). *New Ways of Analyzing Variation 48 (NWAV48)*, 10-12 October, The University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA.

484 words

Word-medial, intervocalic /t/ rarely varies with [r] in spoken British Englishes, but appears in the music of British singers, perhaps to appeal to a wider, international audience (Bell 1984, Trudgill 1997, Beal 2009), or to denote alignment with the mainstream music industry (Beal 2009). However, studies of /t/ variation among singers have focused primarily on the [t] and [r] variants, and on singers whose speech does not make regular use of the glottal variant intervocalically. Previous research into t-glottaling in Scotland has found it to be associated with the working class (Stuart-Smith et al. 2007), and that it is increasingly common in younger generations (Smith and Holmes-Elliott 2017). Although losing stigma, it is still non-standard, appearing less frequently in careful speech and reading tasks (Schleef 2013, Stuart-Smith et al. 2007). Given its rich indexical field (e.g., Romaine 1975, Stuart-Smith 1999, Stuart-Smith et al. 2007, Schleef 2013, Kirkham and Moore 2016), the glottal stop variant is expected to be, on the one hand, the variant which indexes opposition to the mainstream music industry, but on the other hand, the variant which may limit a British artist's international appeal. This paper examines intervocalic /t/

variation in the singing and speech of Scottish singer-songwriter Nina Nesbitt to investigate how singers may employ and negotiate these social meanings.

The entirety of Nesbitt's discography (38 songs) and three publicly-available interviews were coded auditorily, resulting in 157 tokens. The results show that, when speaking, Nesbitt almost always employs the glottal stop intervocalically (90%), and her rates of use do not differ significantly between the interviews. These findings are consistent with those observed by Smith and Holmes-Elliott (2017) and Stuart-Smith et al. (2007), whose results indicate an ongoing shift towards t-glottaling in the Scottish Central Belt, and those of Schlee (2013), who found high rates of t-glottaling in Edinburgh (where Nesbitt is from). In music, however, Nesbitt's /t/ realisation is variable, and drastically different to what we find in her speech (Fig. 1). The results show that the [t] and [ɾ] variants are the most common in her singing, with only six tokens of the glottal stop appearing (<8%). Conditional inference testing of both extralinguistic and linguistic factors indicates that these variants are significantly predicted only by the genre of song in which they appear; [t] is associated with her acoustic music, whilst [ɾ] appears in her pop and pop-folk-style songs (Fig. 2). No other variable accounts for this variation.

Drawing on the notion of the indexical field (Eckert 2008), we argue that Nesbitt employs different /t/ variants in singing to maintain a coherent musical style, and that these variants are indexically linked to her musical genres. These uses also suggest that part of adopting a pop persona is the necessary alignment with the mainstream music industry, and therefore an international audience, in line with the claims of Beal (2009); these claims also explain why Nesbitt's singing contains so little t-glottaling.

References:

- Beal, J. (2009). "You're Not from New York City, You're from Rotherham": Dialect and Identity in British Indie Music. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 37(3), 223–240.
- Bell, A. (1984). Language style as audience design. *Language in Society*, 13(2), 145–204.
- Eckert, P. (2008). Variation and the indexical field. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 453–476.
- Kirkham, S., & Moore, E. (2016). Constructing social meaning in political discourse: Phonetic variation and verb processes in Ed Miliband's speeches. *Language in Society*, 45(1), 87–111.
- Romaine, S. (1975). "Linguistic variability in the speech of some Edinburgh schoolchildren". Master's Dissertation, University of Edinburgh.
- Schlee, E. (2013). Glottal replacement of /t/ in two British capitals: Effects of word frequency and morphological compositionality. *Language Variation and Change*, 25(2), 201–233.
- Smith, J., & Holmes-Elliott, S. (2017). The unstoppable glottal: tracking rapid change in an iconic British variable. *English Language and Linguistics*, 22(3), 323–355.
- Stuart-Smith, J., Timmins, C., & Tweedie, F. (2007). 'Talkin' Jockney'? Variation and Change in Glaswegian accent. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 11(2), 221–260.
- Trudgill, P. (1997). Acts of Conflicting Identity: The Sociolinguistics of British Pop-song Pronunciation. In N. Coupland & A. Jaworski (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 251–269). London: Macmillan.

Many thanks to Brandon Papineau (National Chair, ULAB, 2019-2020) for permission to use this abstract.

1.5.2 Example Article Abstract

Bailey, J. (2019). There's a Verb Gone Missing: Past Participle Reduced Relatives in Colloquial English Narrative Structures. *Proceedings of ULAB IX, 2019*, 291–323.

175 words

Reduced subject relative clauses headed by active past participles, like the example in (1), are found in colloquial varieties of dialectal European (and probably other varieties of) English.

(1) There's a man gone past the window.

Having received very little attention in the literature, I term this the Narrative Relative (NR). It performs a similar discourse role to the subject contact relative and is subject to variation in grammaticality across the UK and Ireland. After presenting a descriptive account of the structure and its use within a wider paradigm of colloquial narrative structures, I evaluate three potential syntactic analyses for the NR, including an existential construction, a phasal reduced relative clause based on a proposed phase boundary between projections for the temporal perfect and the resultative perfect and a non-phasal reduced relative clause, settling on the latter analysis to account for the structure. I propose a typology of different kinds of reduced relative clause in English, which allows me to account for the variation observed in the acceptance of this and other constructions as grammatical.

Many thanks to James Bailey (Archivist, ULAB, 2019-2020) for permission to use this abstract.

1.5.3 Example Plain English Abstract

(adapted from) Williamson, T. R. (2019). Is Arbitrariness a Design-Feature of the Sign? *Proceedings of ULAB IX, 2019*, 228-259.

246 words

Throughout the history of linguistics, many have believed there is nothing that causes the meaning of linguistic signs (e.g., words) to relate to those signs' forms (i.e., what they're made of); or, that the relationship between linguistic signs and their meanings is *arbitrary*. This view was specifically popularised by de Saussure (1916), although it has been sustained in the philosophy of semiotics (signs) since Aristotle, and was supposedly cemented by Hockett (1960) in calling 'arbitrariness' the eighth of thirteen 'design-features', by which he meant 'necessary properties', of language.

Recent trends in the empirical study of semiotics have proposed that we ought to take seriously the opposite view, that there are certain *nonarbitrary*, or *iconic*, elements of language. The aim of the present paper is to contribute to this scholarly effort by taking a theoretical approach to the notion of nonarbitrariness.

Starting from the abstract thoughts found in Plato's *Cratylus*, a philosophical language (called *Nonarbitrer*) is constructed with the intent of making it with the 'design-feature' of nonarbitrariness to examine to what extent such a language might function like any other natural language. This was done measuring the accuracy and time taken of 33 participants in a test to see how well they remembered words of three different 'Levels' of

Nonarbitrer, scaled by how arbitrary they were. This data was then compared with analogous data from tests for Mandarin and Basque, and it is found that *Nonarbitrer* functioned similarly enough to reconsider the position of Hockett (1960).

For reference with this Plain English Abstract, here is the original for this paper:

Throughout the history of linguistics, there has been a tendency to believe that there is no relationship between the form of linguistic signs and their meanings; in other words, that their relationship is arbitrary. This view was specifically popularised by de Saussure (1916), although it has been sustained in the philosophy of semiotics since Aristotle, and was supposedly cemented by Hockett (1960) in his *Origins of Speech*, calling 'arbitrariness' the eighth of thirteen 'design-features' of language. While recent trends in the study of nonarbitrariness have set out to overthrow the Saussurean precedent, this paper aims suggest that, in fact, arbitrariness is not a design-feature of the sign. Starting from the beliefs of Cratylus in Plato's *Cratylus*, a philosophical, nonarbitrary language (called *Nonarbitrer*) is constructed to test whether there could be a language that had the 'design-feature' of nonarbitrariness, or iconicity, such that the language might function just as any other natural one. By measuring the accuracy and time taken for 33 participants in a memory recall task for lexical items in three 'Levels' of *Nonarbitrer*, alternating in Level by degree of iconicity (compared with analogous data from Mandarin and Basque, selected for their genetic and orthographic resemblances with, or not with, English) it is found that *Nonarbitrer* could be considered functional, and that, therefore, Hockett (1960)'s position should be reconsidered.

Many thanks to T. R. Williamson (Archivist, ULAB, 2020-2021) for permission to adapt and use their abstract.