

Cross-Disciplinary Analysis of the Syntactic and Lexical Features of Chinese Master Thesis Titles

Zhijie Wang

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia;
Foreign Language School, Huanghuai University, Zhumadian, Henan, China

Mohd Azidan Abdul Jabar

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

Farhana Muslim Mohd Jalis

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract—This study offered a detailed cross-disciplinary analysis of master thesis titles (MTTs) in the fields of Linguistics and Literature, focusing on the variations in title length, syntactic structure, and lexical features. Utilizing a corpus-based approach, the research analyzed 1,000 MTTs from 25 top universities in China, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore how titles reflect disciplinary conventions. The quantitative analysis revealed that Linguistics titles were typically longer and utilized complex nominal structures with a higher lexical density of substantive words, emphasizing precision and detailed content communication. In contrast, Literature titles demonstrated greater syntactic diversity and lexical variety, reflecting a broader thematic scope and adaptability in narrative and thematic expressions. Qualitatively, the study highlighted how these features aligned with the distinct cultural and academic settings of each field. The findings suggested that while Linguistics titles focused on analytical depth, Literature titles incorporated more creative and interpretative elements. This research provided valuable insights into the construction of thesis titles and suggested practical applications for enhancing academic communication across disciplines.

Index Terms—master thesis titles, genre, academic community, cross-disciplinary, corpus

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Swales's foundational work, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* (1990), interest in academic genres has expanded considerably across diverse disciplines, languages, cultures, and linguistic competencies, involving both native and non-native English speakers. This scholarly attention has primarily focused on specific sections of academic texts, such as research articles (RAs) and theses/dissertations. The scope of these investigations covers a range of analytical topics including rhetorical structures such as moves and steps (Amnuai, 2019; Arboleda, 2022; Bonsu & Afful, 2022), linguistic features like tenses (Tseng, 2011; Jasrial et al., 2021), metadiscourse (Herriman, 2022; Nur et al., 2021; Pooresfahani et al., 2012), and lexical bundles (Hyland, 2012; Nguyen, 2023). Additionally, there is a marked interest in the study of titles of academic works, often referred to as "Titleology" (Biacchi, 2003). This interest is driven by the critical role that titles play in disseminating new knowledge within academic communities, as they are the primary point of contact between the reader and the content of an article, often determining whether the reader will engage with the full text. Effective titles succinctly communicate the main topic of the research, identify the critical variables or theoretical issues under investigation, and clarify the relationships among them (American Psychological Association, 2020). Titles should be appealing, informative, and concise (Pearson, 2021; Ball, 2009; Hartley, 2005; Jiang & Jiang, 2023; Kerans et al., 2020; Wang & Bai, 2007). They must adhere to the conventions of their respective disciplinary communities, despite the existence of variations in title construction across disciplines (Hyland & Zou, 2022; Xie, 2020; Diao, 2021; Nagano, 2015; Ball, 2009; Hartley, 2007; Haggan, 2004). Consequently, significant time, discussion, and effort are devoted to ensuring that titles are both appropriate and engaging (Swales, 1990). Anthony (2001) emphasized the need for extensive research on academic titles (ATs) to establish discourse conventions within and across fields before offering practical advice on title composition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly examination of ATs across diverse disciplines, languages, and genres has been a prominent area of research focus. Many studies have predominantly explored titles within different academic genres, including RAs (Heßler & Ziegler, 2023; Jiang & Jiang, 2023; Diao, 2023; Jiang & Hyland, 2022; Hyland & Zou, 2022; Xiang & Li, 2020; Kerans et al., 2020), review papers (Soler, 2007), conference papers (Afful & Ankomah, 2020; Yakhontova, 2002), case reports (Salager-Meyer et al., 2017), and even posters and short communications (Cianflone, 2013). Theses and dissertations, which reflect differences between US and UK academic norms (Kawase, 2018), are considered

typical examples of advanced academic literacy (Thompson, 2005; El-Dakhs, 2018; Kawase, 2015) and are positioned between student-produced coursework and peer-reviewed articles, embodying specific genre-defining characteristics (Xiao & Sun, 2020; El-Dakhs, 2018; Kawase, 2015; Swales, 2004). Despite their significance, the titles of theses and dissertations have attracted minimal research attention, with only a few studies examining their form and content features (Hao, 2024; Morales et al., 2020; Slougui, 2018; Afful & Akoto, 2010; Jalilifar, 2010; Gesuato, 2008; Dudley-Evans, 1984). Cross-genre studies reveal that these titles are marked by distinct syntactic structures, rhetorical functions, and levels of informativeness (Hao, 2024; Gesuato, 2008; Jalilifar et al., 2010). Notably, Gesuato (2008) noted that thesis titles often exhibited high syntactic complexity due to the condensation of sophisticated information and the use of specialized technical terminology. Furthermore, Hao (2024) analyzed key characteristics of titles in research articles and doctoral dissertations across various disciplines, observing significant variations in length, punctuation, structure, and content, which underscored the influence of disciplinary and genre-specific conventions.

Crafting an effective English thesis title poses significant challenges for novice writers, particularly those for whom English is a foreign language (EFL). These novice researchers often face difficulties due to limited proficiency in English, which hinders their grasp of the subtle complexities required for creating successful academic titles (Ichiyama, 2021). Additionally, they frequently encounter barriers due to a lack of access to resources and opportunities to familiarize themselves with the norms and conventions of English academic writing. Simui et al. (2018) found that creating a compelling thesis title typically involved multiple revisions and posed numerous dilemmas, emphasizing the importance of ongoing title refinement throughout the research process to promote innovation and improve critical thinking skills. Slougui's (2018) research further highlights the significant impact of gaps in language proficiency and the shortage of educational resources. Addressing these issues necessitates tailored support and educational interventions specifically designed to aid EFL researchers in mastering the complexities of academic writing (Jalilifar, 2010). Such support is essential for enabling them to craft titles that meet academic standards and effectively gain the acceptance of the academic community.

III. AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although existing research has explored specific characteristics of thesis titles using discipline-specific, cross-disciplinary, or cross-generic approaches, there has been a lack of comparative studies focusing on MTTs in Linguistics and Literature. This paper aims to address this gap by undertaking an exploratory analysis of MTTs in these fields, examining elements such as title length, syntactic structure, and lexical features. The study is intended to provide a valuable resource for postgraduates, supervisors, examiners, and researchers in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), thus contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the area of Titleology. Consequently, this research seeks to address the following questions:

- (1) What are the word lengths of Linguistic and Literature thesis titles?
- (2) Are there disciplinary similarities or differences in the syntactic structure and lexical features of these titles?
- (3) Why are there disciplinary variations in the length, syntactic structure and lexical features of these titles?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This research employed a mixed-method corpus-based approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine MTTs. Quantitatively, the study explored statistical elements such as title length, syntactic structure, lexical density, diversity, and word frequency, incorporating numerical data into tables to outline trends and facilitate comparisons between Linguistics and Literature titles. This method enhanced the clarity and presentation of results and discussions. Qualitatively, the study employed content analysis to observe and describe phenomena related to title lengths, format styles, syntactic structures, and lexical attributes without influencing them, providing insights into various aspects of MTTs. The corpus methodology, often used to identify linguistic variations and similarities, allows for an in-depth examination of syntactic complexity and lexical richness (Taylor, 2018; Egbert & Schnur, 2018). Although corpus linguistics is primarily empirical, focusing on quantitative data, it also accommodates qualitative interpretations of these data (Szudarski, 2017). The sections that followed will detail the corpus used and the specific analysis techniques that were applied.

B. Corpus

The corpus of English major's MTTs was created to analyze the titles in the fields of Linguistics and Literature, comprising 1,000 titles from 25 leading universities in mainland China, renowned for their English Language and Literature programs. These titles, covering the years from 2013 to 2022, were carefully selected from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) to reflect the current and evolving academic standards in thesis title crafting. A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure a representative and unbiased sample, enabling diverse linguistic expressions and thematic diversity across the disciplines, with each university contributing equally to the corpus.

C. Theoretical Frameworks and Data Analysis

All titles were stored in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, Microsoft Word document, or plain text file for coding and subsequent analysis. In this study, the length of each title was measured using both manual and automated methods via WordSmith 7.0 to enhance accuracy and reliability. WordSmith 7.0, specifically designed for text analysis, optimizes tasks such as measuring text lengths, Type-Token Ratio (TTR), and word frequency, ensuring efficient and effective analysis. A word was defined as a string of characters bordered by spaces or punctuation, in accordance with typographical norms. Specific counting rules included treating each word, including hyphenated terms and possessive forms, as a single word. For instance, the title “‘Man-Woman’: Roxana’s Gender Construction” (Literature, 2018) was counted as four words. Additionally, figures, abbreviations, and acronyms without any corresponding referents in the title were each counted as one word (Gesuato, 2008; Li & Xu, 2019; Milojevic, 2017), regardless of their length or complexity. For example, the title “On the Chinese Reversible Construction Based on the CDF Model” (Linguistics, 2013) was counted as ten words.

In this study, the syntactic features of MTTs were analyzed using a refined adaptation of the models developed by Gesuato (2008) and Wang and Bai (2007). This research advanced beyond previous studies by also examining the structural components of multi-unit or compound titles, thereby providing a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of MTTs’ syntactic organization. The analysis proceeded in three stages. Initially, MTTs were classified as either single-unit titles, containing only one structural element, or multi-unit titles, consisting of two or more elements. This classification depended on the presence of punctuation marks such as colons, commas, question marks, or dashes, which indicate significant pauses within the titles (Anthony, 2001). The identified units were then analyzed for their specific structural forms: nominal phrases (NPs), prepositional phrases (PPs), verb phrases (VPs), and full sentences (FSs). These forms could either stand alone or be linked through coordination or expanded via modifications before or after the main phrase elements. Notably, as nominal phrases were most prevalent, echoing findings from previous studies (Jiang & Jiang, 2023; Diao, 2021; Pearson, 2020; Morales et al., 2020; Wang & Bai, 2007; Soler, 2007; Hartley, 2005; Haggan, 2004). This prevalence is attributed to the nominal structure’s ability to efficiently convey detailed information through extensive pre- and post-modifiers, thus clearly articulating the research focus. In the final stage of analysis, the focus shifted to the core elements of these nominal phrases—specifically, the head words, which were categorized into uni-head, bi-head, and multi-head types according to Wang and Bai (2007). Each head word and its modifiers were manually coded to further analyze the structural depth of the titles.

For instance, the title “An Analysis of Adultery in Flaubert’s Parrot, Arthur & George, and The Sense of an Ending” (Literature, 2019) is characterized as a single-unit noun phrase. This title forms a uni-head structure with “Analysis” as the central noun, post-modified by the prepositional phrase “of Adultery in Flaubert’s Parrot, Arthur & George, and The Sense of an Ending” and pre-modified by the determiner “An”. Conversely, the title “On Utterance-final Particles in MinNan Local Mandarin—A Pragmatic Perspective” (Literature, 2017) displays a multi-unit format. It consists of a PP “On Utterance-final Particles in MinNan Local Mandarin” and a NP “A Pragmatic Perspective”. The latter is also a uni-head NP structure, with “Perspective” as the head, modified by the pre-modifier “A Pragmatic”. These examples highlight single-unit nominal titles with extensive modifying phrases and multi-unit titles combining various syntactic structures, thereby illustrating the diverse syntactic configurations utilized in the construction of academic titles.

The analysis of lexical features in MTTs concentrated on lexical density, diversity, and word frequency. Lexical density, sometimes termed the “substantive word rate” (Nagano, 2015), assesses the proportion of substantive words such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and specialized terms, which carry specific meanings, as opposed to function words like pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions (Méndez & Alcaraz, 2015). A title with a higher lexical density is more informative due to a greater proportion of substantive words. For instance, the title “A Contrastive Study of Conceptual Metaphors in English and Chinese Football News Reports” (Linguistics, 2019) includes 9 substantive words out of 13, resulting in a lexical density of 69.2%. The lexical density of MTTs in this study was evaluated using TagAnt 2.0.5, a tool that facilitates the analysis of texts by examining contextual cues, word structures, and syntactic patterns. This software also provides part-of-speech (POS) tags for individual words, aiding in a comprehensive analysis of lexical features.

Lexical diversity, referring to the variety of vocabulary within a title, is an indicator of linguistic proficiency and the quality of vocabulary used. In this study, lexical diversity was measured by the Type-Token Ratio, where “types” are distinct words and “tokens” are the total words used within a title. A higher TTR indicates richer vocabulary usage and is calculated as the ratio of distinct word types to the total word count (Malvern et al., 2004). WordSmith 7.0 was employed to assess the TTR of the titles in the corpus. For example, the title “Trauma of War: An Interpretation of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*” (Literature, 2017) exhibits a high lexical diversity, with a TTR of 91%, containing 10 unique types out of 11 tokens.

$$\text{TTR} = \frac{\text{Type Count}}{\text{Token Count}}$$

Furthermore, the analysis of word frequency in this study entailed examining the frequency distributions that categorize and quantify the occurrences of each word type within the corpus. This study provided insights into the most frequently used substantive and function words. WordSmith 7.0 was also employed to perform the word frequency analysis of MTTs. These methodologies collectively offer a detailed overview of the lexical characteristics of thesis titles in the fields of Linguistics and Literature.

D. Inter-Rater Reliability Analysis

The validity and reliability of the analysis were rigorously established through a structured process. An independent co-rater with a PhD in Applied Linguistics and experience in the relevant field assisted in assessing the reliability and validity of the analysis. Reliability was quantified using Cohen's kappa, a statistical index of inter-rater agreement. According to the scoring criteria recommended by Kanoksilapathan (2005), scores are interpreted as follows: below 0.40 indicates poor agreement, 0.40 to 0.59 suggests fair agreement, 0.60 to 0.74 is considered good, and 0.75 or higher reflects excellent agreement. In this study, a Cohen's Kappa value of 0.88 was achieved, indicating an excellent level of agreement between the raters and thus confirming the analysis's reliability. When discrepancies in analysis results emerged, the raters engaged in discussions to resolve these differences, aiming for consensus to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the analysis.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Title Length

Thesis title length should conform to university guidelines to uphold academic standards and ensure uniformity. Adherence to these guidelines guarantees that titles are both concise and comprehensive, adequately reflecting the content of the thesis and facilitating its cataloging and retrieval in academic databases. The appropriate length of a title is crucial as it helps clearly communicate the core of the research to various academic stakeholders, including advisors, supervisors, and examiners. This supports the efficient dissemination and evaluation of scholarly work within the academic community.

TABLE 1
LENGTH OF MTTs

| Disciplines | No. of Titles | No. of Words | Max | Min | Average Title Length |
|-------------|---------------|--------------|-----|-----|----------------------|
| Linguistics | 500 | 6924 | 32 | 5 | 13.85 |
| Literature | 500 | 6166 | 25 | 4 | 12.33 |
| Total | 1000 | 13090 | 32 | 4 | 13.09 |

Note: Max=Maximum Length; Min=Minimum Length

Table 1 displays the lengths of titles within the corpus, showing that titles in Linguistics were longer than those in Literature (13.85 vs. 12.33 words). Linguistics MTTs varied from 5 to 32 words, while Literature titles ranged from 4 to 25 words, as illustrated by the examples provided below. This difference suggests that Linguistics MTTs often incorporated more complex or specific terminologies, leading to longer titles, whereas Literature titles tended to be more concise or focused on broader themes. The average lengths observed in this study were comparable to those of Dentistry thesis titles at 13.4 words (Morales et al., 2020), Linguistics dissertation titles at 12.9 words (Gesuato, 2008), Applied Linguistics thesis titles at 13.65 words (Jiang, 2013), and Literature dissertation titles at 12.8 words (Afful & Akoto, 2010). However, these lengths were considerably shorter than the 18.87-word titles found in Slougui's (2018) study of Applied Linguistics dissertations and longer than Chemistry titles at 10.2 words (Afful & Akoto, 2010). When compared with RA titles, the thesis title length in this study was close to that found in Applied Linguistics by Hyland and Zou (2022) at 13.4 words but was longer than the average lengths reported by Xiang and Li (2020) for Linguistics and Literature (both 11.2 words) and by Haggan (2004) for Linguistics (8.8 words) and Literature (9.4 words). It was also shorter than the title lengths observed in Biology (15.33 words) and Medicine (15.48 words) by Soler (2007), highlighting significant variations in title length across different disciplines and genres. The findings indicated that the average length of academic titles varies considerably across different fields of study, as previously noted in the literature (Hyland & Zou, 2022; Milojevic, 2017; Nagano, 2015; Soler, 2007).

(1) An Appraisal Analysis of Advertorials (5 words, Linguistics, 2018)

(2) A Study of the Discursive Construction of China's National Image in the Cases of President Xi Jinping's Political Discourse on "A Community of Shared Future for Mankind" from the Perspective of Transitivity (32 words, Linguistics, 2019)

(3) History Writing in *Paradise* (4 words, Literature, 2020)

(4) An Exploration of Jamie Tyrone's Spiritual Journey in *Long Day's Journey into Night* and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* from the Perspective of Posttraumatic Growth (25 words, Literature, 2019)

While most research has reported overall word counts and average title lengths across entire corpora, an examination of preferred title length ranges offers deeper insights. According to data from Table 2, a smaller percentage of titles in Linguistics (23.2%) fell into the shortest word range (1-10 words) compared to Literature (33.4%). The majority of titles for both disciplines were within the (11-20 words) range, with Linguistics displaying a higher percentage (71.0%) than Literature (64.0%), aligning with findings from prior studies (Morales et al., 2020; Slougui, 2018; Jalilifar, 2010; Gesuato, 2008). Furthermore, Linguistics titles (5.8%) were more likely than Literature (2.6%) to extend beyond 20 words, suggesting a tendency in Linguistics for longer titles both in the prevalent mid-range and the longer range. This trend proves that MTTs in Literature tend to be shorter in length compared to those in Linguistics.

TABLE 2
RANGE LENGTH OF MTTs

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|---------|-------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| 1-10 W | 116 | 23.2 | 167 | 33.4 |
| 11-20 W | 355 | 71.0 | 320 | 64.0 |
| 21+ W | 29 | 5.8 | 13 | 2.6 |
| Total | 500 | 100.0 | 500 | 100.0 |

Hyland and Zou (2022) suggested that differences in title lengths across disciplines might be associated with the nature of the research conducted. For example, thesis titles in Linguistics were typically longer than those in Literature, a pattern linked to the frequent inclusion of academic terms such as “study” and “analysis”, as well as language-specific terms like “Chinese” and “English”, and methodology-related terms such as “perspective”, “comparative”, and “corpus-based” by novice researchers in Linguistics. As a result, Linguistics MTTs often provided more detailed information about the dataset, research methods, designs, or results compared to those in Literature. This trend is exemplified by the following examples:

(5) A Comparative Study of Elite English Speech Discourses Between Chinese and American Universities from the Perspective of Positive Discourse Analysis (20 words, Linguistics, 2014)

(6) The Effects of Relevance and Tolerance for Ambiguity on Understanding Conflicting Information in L2: An Eye-Tracking Study (17 words, Linguistics, 2022)

B. Syntactic Structure

(a). Format Styles of Titles

The current study assessed the composition of thesis titles based on their structural units. Titles can consist of either a single unit or multiple units. A title is categorized as a single-unit if it presents as a unified entity, while it is classified as a multi-unit title if it is divided into various parts separated by appropriate punctuation marks.

TABLE 3
DISTRIBUTION OF MTTs' STYLES

| | Single-unit | % | Multi-unit | % | Total | % |
|-------------|-------------|------|------------|------|-------|-------|
| Linguistics | 349 | 69.8 | 151 | 30.2 | 500 | 100.0 |
| Literature | 246 | 49.2 | 254 | 50.8 | 500 | 100.0 |

Table 3 shows that Linguistics significantly preferred single-unit titles (69.8%) over multi-unit titles (30.2%), which contrasted with the findings from Hyland and Zou's (2022) study. Their research indicated a dominance of compound formats (63.7%) over single formats (36.3%) in Applied Linguistics RAs titles. In contrast, Literature displayed a more balanced distribution, with single-unit titles comprising 49.2% and multi-unit titles slightly more common at 50.8%. These results were consistent with earlier research, such as that by Jalilifar (2010), who found that thesis titles generally favored single-unit structures (primarily nominal phrases), while RAs in Applied Linguistics often featured compound-unit titles. Additionally, Gesuato (2008) observed that although both single and two-unit titles were prevalent across various genres, dissertations were more likely to feature single-unit titles, accounting for 51.2%, compared to 48.0% for two-unit titles.

Single-unit titles provide a clear and straightforward preview of an article's content, marked by their transparency and minimalist style. Their simplicity enhances their appeal, facilitating comprehension and searchability. Haggan (2004) and Hartley (2007) noted that such titles were often preferred by scientists addressing specific communities. Kuhn (1996) highlighted that in “normal science”—a context where knowledge expands steadily and linearly within a defined framework—scientists preferred single-unit titles because they believed their work would be easily understood within their community. Conversely, multi-unit titles allow authors to include additional keywords, thereby enhancing their discoverability (Moore, 2010). Van Wesel et al. (2014) suggested that including a colon in the title could capture readers' attention, balancing informativeness with intrigue. Additionally, Hyland and Zou (2022) observed that compound titles enabled scientists to make their titles more engaging and appealing. Examples demonstrating the trend in both styles of MTTs are illustrated below:

(7) An Interactive Pragmatic Study of English and Chinese First-Person Reference (single-unit, Linguistics, 2015)

(8) A Heideggerian Interpretation of the Death Motif in Albee's Works (single-unit, Literature, 2013)

(9) An Application Study of English Euphemism—Taking Film *Emma* for Instance (multi-unit, Linguistics, 2013)

(10) Worry and Meditation of Nature and Redemption of Humanity: An Eco-critical Interpretation of *Solar* (multi-unit, Literature, 2013)

(b). *Distribution of Syntactic Structure*

Table 4 provides a detailed analysis of the syntactic structures found in single-unit titles within the disciplines of Linguistics and Literature. The data indicated a strong preference for NPs in both fields. Specifically, Linguistics showed a greater dependence on NPs, which comprised 95.13% of its single-unit titles. In contrast, Literature also primarily used NPs (85.37%) but displayed a wider range of syntactic structures, including PPs at 12.2% and VPs at 2.43%, more often than observed in Linguistics. Notably, FS was absent in the single-unit titles of both disciplines. Examples illustrating the different syntactic structures of single-unit titles are provided below:

- (11) A Generative Approach to “XP de-ge YP” Construction in Lanzhou Dialect (NP, Linguistics, 2021)
- (12) Performativity in *The Loves of Cass McGuire* (NP, Literature, 2022)
- (13) Interpreting *The Overstory* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism (VP, Literature, 2021)
- (14) On the Transcategorization of Perception Verb *look* (PP, Linguistics, 2016)

TABLE 4
SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE OF SINGLE-UNIT TITLES

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|-------|-------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| NP | 332 | 95.13 | 210 | 85.37 |
| VP | 5 | 1.43 | 6 | 2.43 |
| PP | 12 | 3.44 | 30 | 12.2 |
| FS | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Total | 349 | 100.0 | 246 | 100.0 |

Note: NP=Nominal Phrase; VP=Verbal Phrase; PP=Prepositional Phrase; FS=Full Sentence

Table 5 illustrates the syntactic constructions present in multi-unit MTTs in the corpus, identifying 11 distinct types in total. In Linguistics, the most common configuration was NP-NP (68.87%), with other structures like NP-VP (13.25%), NP-PP (6.62%), PP-NP (3.97%), VP-NP (3.97%), NP-NP-NP (1.33%), FS-NP (1.33%), and PP-S (0.66%) occurring less frequently. In contrast, Literature also favored the NP-NP arrangement (62.60%) but showed a wider range of syntactic variations, including NP-PP (9.06%), PP-NP (7.87%), VP-NP (7.48%), FS-NP (7.09%), NP-VP (2.76%), PP-PP (1.57%), VP-PP (0.79%), FS-PP (0.39%), and NP-NP-NP (0.39%). The inclusion of sentence structures, such as FS-NP, in Literature indicated a move toward more complex and potentially narrative-driven titles, differing from the more straightforward nominal constructions typically seen in Linguistics. But this demonstrated a strong preference for MTTs constructed from multiple nominal phrases. The prevalent use of NP-NP structures in thesis titles was consistent with previous research findings (Morales et al., 2020; Jalilifar et al., 2010; Gesuato, 2008), highlighting consistent syntactic preferences in academic title formulation. Examples illustrating the syntactic constructions of multi-unit titles are provided below:

(15) Ideational Metaphor in Popular Science and Academic Research: A Case Study of Environmental Problems (NP-NP, Linguistics, 2019)

(16) Docility and Resistance—On the Character’s Seeking of Cultural Identity in *Half a Life* and *Magic Seeds* (NP-PP, Literature, 2013)

(17) Ethical Consciousness and Ethical Identity: An Ethical Literary Analysis of *Song of Solomon* (NP-NP, Literature, 2021)

(18) On the Vagrancy in *Homecoming*: Form, Connotation and Significance (PP-NP, Literature, 2015)

(19) Nothing is Black and White in South Africa—A Reading of Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* (FS-NP, Literature, 2013)

(20) Manipulating the Body and Soul: Power Mechanisms in *The Tempest* and *Hag-Seed* (VP-NP, Literature, 2022)

The findings of this study were consistent with prior research (e.g., Moslehi & Kafipour, 2022; Diao, 2021; Moattarian & Alibabae, 2015; Nagano, 2015; Cheng et al., 2012; Jalilifar et al., 2010; Soler, 2007; Wang & Bai, 2007), which consistently demonstrated a predominance of nominal titles in academic works. The prevalent use of nominal structures is attributed to their capacity to succinctly present core topics, thereby producing titles that are both informative and concise. From the Systemic-Functional perspective introduced by Halliday (1994), nominalization allows for the inclusion of extensive information within a compact nominal group structure, enhancing the coherence and clarity of academic writing. This characteristic promotes the widespread adoption of nominal titles in scholarly communication. What’s more, Literature multi-unit titles exhibited more complex and diverse syntactic constructions than Linguistics because Literature often explored a broader range of themes, narrative styles, and interpretative angles. This diversity necessitates varied syntactic forms to encapsulate complex ideas and creative expressions effectively. In contrast, Linguistics focused more on precise and structured language analysis, favoring simpler, more straightforward syntactic constructions to clearly communicate specific research methodologies and linguistic phenomena. This disciplinary focus influences their respective title complexities.

TABLE 5
SYNTACTIC STRUCTURE OF MULTI-UNIT TITLES

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|----------|-------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| NP NP | 104 | 68.87 | 159 | 62.60 |
| NP PP | 10 | 6.62 | 23 | 9.06 |
| NP VP | 20 | 13.25 | 7 | 2.76 |
| NP NP NP | 2 | 1.33 | 1 | 0.39 |
| PP NP | 6 | 3.97 | 20 | 7.87 |
| PP PP | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 1.57 |
| PP FS | 1 | 0.66 | 0 | 0.0 |
| VP NP | 6 | 3.97 | 19 | 7.48 |
| VP PP | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 0.79 |
| FS NP | 2 | 1.33 | 18 | 7.09 |
| FS PP | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 0.39 |
| Total | 151 | 100.0 | 254 | 100.0 |

(c). *Heads of NPs*

The distribution of head types in NPs of MTTs in Linguistics and Literature is displayed in Table 6. The data showed that both disciplines predominantly used uni-head nominal phrases in MTTs, with Linguistics demonstrating a stronger preference (95.76%) than Literature (80.74%). In contrast, Literature displayed a greater variety in head types, employing bi-head (15.21%) and multi-head (4.05%) NPs more frequently than Linguistics, where these occurred at rates of 3.9% and 0.34%, respectively. This variance was significant when compared to the distribution of head types in Dentistry thesis titles, as reported by Morales et al. (2020), where one-head titles constituted 70.5%, two-head titles made up 14.3%, and other types comprised 15.2%, highlighting distinctive patterns across disciplines.

TABLE 6
NPs' HEAD TYPES IN MTTs

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|------------|-------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| uni-head | 565 | 95.76 | 499 | 80.74 |
| bi-head | 23 | 3.9 | 94 | 15.21 |
| multi-head | 2 | 0.34 | 25 | 4.05 |
| Total | 590 | 100.0 | 618 | 100.0 |

Literature MTTs exhibited greater diversity in head types of NPs and more syntactic complexity, reflecting the varied and creative nature of the field. This diversity is indicative of the broad scope of themes, styles, and approaches that characterize literary studies. In contrast, Linguistics, with its more structured and formulaic approach to language study, typically used simpler, more straightforward titles. Linguistics MTTs often consisted of uni-head NPs, aligning with the analytical and objective nature of linguistic research.

(d). *Modifications in NPs*

The distribution of modifier types in NPs of MTTs within the corpus, seen in Table 7, highlighted differences between Linguistics and Literature. Linguistics MTTs predominantly used pre-and-post modifiers in 81.69% of its NPs, showing a stronger preference for this type compared to Literature, which exhibited this style in only 56.02% of its NPs. In contrast, Literature displayed a wider range of modifier types, using non-modifiers (18.72%), pre-modifiers (14.01%), and post-modifiers (11.25%) at higher rates than Linguistics, where these occurred at rates of 2.59%, 7.29%, and 8.43% respectively. This data indicated that although the NPs of MTTs in both disciplines frequently utilized modifiers, particularly combining pre-and-post types, Literature demonstrated greater diversity in its approach to modifying NPs in thesis titles compared to the more focused method found in Linguistics.

For instance, example (11) is a single-unit NP title with only one head noun, "Approach", which is modified by a pre-and-post modifier, "A Generative" and "to 'XP de-ge YP' Construction in Lanzhou Dialect". Example (12) also shows a uni-head NP, with the head noun "Performativity" being post-modified by the PP "in *The Loves of Cass McGuire*." Example (17) represents a multi-unit title consisting of two NPs. The first NP is a bi-head type with the head words "Consciousness" and "Identity", both pre-modified by "Ethical". In its second NP, the head noun "Analysis" is surrounded by the pre-and-post modifier "An Ethical Literary" and "of *Song of Solomon*". The multi-unit title (18) features a PP, "On the Vagrancy in *Homecoming*", and an NP, "Form, Connotation, and Significance", which is a multi-head type with all three head words unmodified.

TABLE 7
NPS' MODIFIER TYPES IN MTTs

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------|------------|-------|
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| Non-modifier | 16 | 2.59 | 143 | 18.72 |
| Pre-modifier | 45 | 7.29 | 107 | 14.01 |
| Post-modifier | 52 | 8.43 | 86 | 11.25 |
| Pre-and-post modifier | 504 | 81.69 | 428 | 56.02 |
| Total | 617 | 100.0 | 764 | 100.0 |

C. Lexical Features

(a). Lexical Density

The informativity of MTTs in Linguistics and Literature is revealed in Table 8. Linguistics MTTs displayed a lexical density of 65.48%, with 4,534 substantive words out of a total of 6,924 words, resulting in an average of 9.07 substantive words per title. This outcome was similar to Gesuato's (2008) findings on Linguistics dissertation titles, which reported a lexical density of 68.3% and an average of 8.8 substantive words per title. In comparison, Literature titles demonstrated a lower lexical density of 60.36%, with 3,722 substantive words from a total of 6,166 words, averaging 7.44 substantive words per title, suggesting that Linguistics titles generally contain a higher proportion of content-carrying words than Literature. Overall, the lexical density of MTTs in this study was comparable to that found in Li and Xu's (2019) study of RA titles in Pragmatics but was lower than the results reported in thesis or dissertation titles from previous research (Morales et al., 2020; Gesuato, 2008; Afful et al., 2010). Moreover, it was below the lexical density observed in recent studies of RA titles across different fields, including Jiang and Jiang's (2023) research in TESOL, Diao's (2021) study in Library Science and Scientometrics, and Xiang and Li's (2020) investigation in Linguistics and Literature.

Linguistics titles tended to contain more substantial words than Literature, a difference primarily attributable to the disciplinary focus. Linguistics, as a field, frequently utilized specific, technical vocabulary to articulate complex language concepts, such as "cognitive", "discourse", and "construction". These terms, dense with information, were essential for precise linguistic analysis. In contrast, Literature, while also analytical, generally emphasized broader themes such as cultural context, character development, and thematic exploration, areas that typically did not demand as much densely packed technical terminology as Linguistics. This variance in thematic concentration resulted in a greater density of substantial words in Linguistics MTTs.

TABLE 8
INFORMATIVITY OF MTTs

| | Linguistics | Literature |
|--------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Substantial words/ total words | 4534/6924 | 3722/6166 |
| Lexical density | 65.48% | 60.36% |
| Substantial words per title | 9.07 | 7.44 |

(b). Lexical Diversity

Table 9 shows that the TTR for Linguistics MTTs was 23.32%, calculated from 1,615 unique words out of a total of 6,924 words. In contrast, Literature MTTs exhibited a higher TTR of 31.11%, with 1,918 unique words from 6,166 total words, suggesting that Literature thesis titles utilized a more varied vocabulary than those in Linguistics, as indicated by the higher TTR. However, the TTRs for both disciplines in this study were significantly lower than those reported by Xiang and Li (2020) for RA titles in Linguistics (44.6%) and Literature (48.2%), reflecting a lower degree of lexical diversity in thesis titles compared to research articles titles. Thesis titles tend to exhibit less vocabulary variety than research article titles because they are designed to be concise and specific, closely focusing on the thesis topic and content. Conversely, research articles might employ a broader vocabulary to attract a wider audience and improve discoverability through diverse keywords.

Literature investigated a wide range of themes, from psychological analysis to cultural critique, necessitating a diverse vocabulary. For example, a title in Literature might use words such as "identity", "feminism", or "ethical", each reflecting different thematic focuses. Conversely, Linguistics was more concentrated on specific language structures, methodologies or theories, frequently employing specialized terminology such as "discourse", "comparative", or "corpus". This focused scope tended to result in the repeated use of certain technical terms, which consequently lead to a lower TTR.

TABLE 9
LEXICAL DIVERSITY OF MTTs

| | Linguistics | Literature |
|--------|-------------|------------|
| Types | 1615 | 1918 |
| Tokens | 6924 | 6166 |
| TTR | 23.32% | 31.11% |

(c). *Word Frequency*

Table 10 outlines the top 10 substantial words used in MTTs of the corpus, illustrating differences between Linguistics and Literature. In Linguistics, commonly encountered terms included academic markers such as “study” (314 occurrences) and “analysis” (84); discipline-specific terms like “Chinese” (202), “English” (155), “discourse” (59), “construction” (43), and “cognitive” (43); along with methodology-related terms including “perspective” (82), “comparative” (69), and “contrastive” (51). In contrast, Literature frequently used terms were academic markers “study” (143), “interpretation” (38), and “analysis” (36); discipline-specific markers “identity” (47), “novels” (30), “reading” (29), “narrative” (27), “ethical” (27); and methodology-related markers “perspective” (63) and “theory” (22). These terms indicated Literature’s emphasis on themes such as identity, narrative structure, and ethical considerations. Overall, both disciplines often employed the generic academic terms like “study” and “analysis”. However, Linguistics MTTs typically focused more on language-specific and methodology-related terms, while Literature titles highlighted a variety of thematic explorations and literary interpretations.

TABLE 10
SUBSTANTIAL WORDS IN MTTs

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|----|-------------------|-----|-------------------|-----|
| | Substantial Words | F | Substantial Words | F |
| 1 | STUDY | 314 | STUDY | 143 |
| 2 | CHINESE | 202 | PERSPECTIVE | 63 |
| 3 | ENGLISH | 155 | IDENTITY | 47 |
| 4 | ANALYSIS | 84 | INTERPRETATION | 38 |
| 5 | PERSPECTIVE | 82 | ANALYSIS | 36 |
| 6 | COMPARATIVE | 69 | NOVELS | 30 |
| 7 | DISCOURSE | 59 | READING | 29 |
| 8 | CONTRASTIVE | 51 | NARRATIVE | 27 |
| 9 | COGNITIVE | 43 | THEORY | 22 |
| 10 | CONSTRUCTION | 43 | ETHICAL | 19 |
| | | | NEW | 19 |

In Linguistics MTTs, as shown in Table 11, the most frequently used function words included “of” (630 occurrences), “a” (385), “the” (324), “in” (312), “and” (258), “on” (192), “from” (97), “an” (53), “to” (33), and “by” (30). Conversely, in Literature, the most common function words were “of” (539 occurrences), “the” (499), “in” (367), “a” (265), “and” (277), “on” (113), “from” (79), “an” (76), “to” (42), and “as” (19). This usage reflected a high frequency of prepositions such as “of”, “in”, “on”, and “from,” aligning with findings from prior research by Afful and Akoto (2010). Both disciplines extensively utilized function words, particularly prepositions and articles. Linguistics MTTs more frequently used function words like “of”, “a”, “and”, “on”, and “from” to denote specific relationships and structures within language study. Literature MTTs, focusing on thematic and spatial elements, more commonly used “the”, “in”, “an”, and “to”, reflecting their narrative and descriptive emphasis. This variation in word usage reflected differing emphases on relational and structural components across academic fields when crafting titles, illustrating how disciplinary focuses shape title construction.

TABLE 11
FUNCTION WORDS IN MTTs

| | Linguistics | | Literature | |
|----|----------------|-----|----------------|-----|
| | Function Words | F | Function Words | F |
| 1 | OF | 630 | OF | 539 |
| 2 | A | 385 | THE | 499 |
| 3 | THE | 324 | IN | 367 |
| 4 | IN | 312 | A | 265 |
| 5 | AND | 258 | AND | 227 |
| 6 | ON | 192 | ON | 113 |
| 7 | FROM | 97 | FROM | 79 |
| 8 | AN | 53 | AN | 76 |
| 9 | TO | 33 | TO | 42 |
| 10 | BY | 30 | AS | 19 |

VI. CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This exploratory analysis of MTTs in the fields of Linguistics and Literature offered profound insights into how thesis titles were constructed within these disciplines. The study underscored the subtle yet significant differences in title construction between Linguistics and Literature, reflecting the distinct academic writing traditions and scholarly practices that shape these fields. Firstly, the analysis revealed that Linguistics MTTs were generally longer than those in Literature. This is attributed to Linguistics' reliance on specific, technical vocabulary necessary for describing complex structures, which emphasized the need for precision and detailed explanation to facilitate a deeper understanding of language phenomena. Secondly, Linguistics titles predominantly employed complex nominal structures with multiple modifiers, aligning with the field's focus on analytical depth and specificity. These structures enhanced the precision of the conveyed linguistic analyses. Conversely, Literature titles displayed greater syntactic diversity and complexity, which accommodated the field's broad thematic scope. This diversity reflected Literature's inherent creativity and interpretative flexibility, allowing for a rich exploration of narrative techniques and thematic content. Thirdly, there was a noted difference in the lexical density and diversity of MTTs across the two fields. Linguistics titles showed a higher density of substantial words, consistent with the field's emphasis on specific content communication. This lexical choice supports the precise and detailed nature of linguistic analysis. On the other hand, Literature titles demonstrated greater lexical diversity, facilitating the exploration of a broad range of cultural, thematic, and philosophical issues, which enhanced their appeal and accessibility to the readers. These findings highlighted the tailored approach both fields took in thesis title crafting, influenced by their distinct academic and cultural contexts. This not only aids in shaping a reader's first impression but also plays a crucial role in the academic dissemination of knowledge.

This comprehensive study on MTTs in Linguistics and Literature has several implications. Theoretically, it enriches our understanding of academic discourse in genre analysis by highlighting how disciplinary conventions influence title construction, emphasizing their significance in academic writing. Practically, the findings assist advisors, supervisors and reviewers by providing a nuanced understanding of title elements that effectively convey complex research within specific disciplines, thereby improving the evaluation and guidance of thesis work. Pedagogically, the study serves as a valuable resource for students and educators in EAP, offering concrete examples of how titles can be structured to meet disciplinary norms while maintaining engagement and informativeness. By demonstrating the distinct approaches to title construction in Linguistics and Literature, the study helps instructors in better preparing students to meet academic standards and conventions, enhancing their communication skills within the academic community.

While this study provides valuable insights into the construction of MTTs in Linguistics and Literature, it is not without limitations. First, the analysis is confined to titles from only two academic disciplines, which may not fully represent the diversity and nuances of title construction practices across a broader range of fields. Second, the study's focus on English-language theses from Chinese universities may limit the generalizability of the findings to other linguistic and cultural contexts. Further research could extend the analysis of MTTs to a broader range of disciplines and cultural contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Incorporating a comparative study involving more languages and examining non-English thesis titles could provide deeper insights into linguistic and cultural variations in academic title construction.

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Zhijie Wang is the corresponding author of this article. He is a PhD candidate majoring in Applied Comparative Linguistics at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Selangor, Malaysia. He is also a lecturer at Foreign Language School, Huanghuai University, Henan, China. His research interests include English for Specific Purposes, Discourse Studies, and English Language Teaching (ELT). E-mail: gs60638@student.upm.edu.my



Mohd Azidan Abdul Jabar is a Professor in Discourse Studies, Arabic Language, and Applied Linguistics at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). He has carried out numerous research projects and has published papers in a diverse array of books and journals, while also having presented a significant number of papers at national, regional, and international conferences.



Farhana Muslim Mohd Jalis is a senior lecturer in Literary and Culture Studies, Applied Comparative Linguistics and German as a Foreign Language at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). She currently actively participates in international conferences to promote German as a foreign language, raises awareness of cultural differences, and fosters mutual understanding through language and culture.