CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Academic writing is associated with the discourse types used as tools of communication among practitioners in the field as well as those who require this form of writing for academic purposes. The notion that academic writing is formal, objective and impersonal, and that it adheres to the Aristotelian rhetorical devices makes it seem formidable.

Of particular interest to the present study is the Master’s thesis. The Master’s thesis is regarded as a rite de passage (Swales, 1990) for those entering or leaving the academic world. However, accomplishing the task of writing and completing a thesis is proven to be an arduous task. It is a laborious endeavour that checks one’s determination to persevere. The high standard to which it is held does not make the task of completing it any easier. Its daunting size, according to Swales (1990), even deters discourse analysts from conducting an in-depth study on it. There is, therefore, a dire need to
study its features in order to make thesis writing less formidable and more rewarding.

Probably one of the reasons why thesis writing is problematic, is that it is a very different exercise compared to what novice thesis writers were trained to do during their undergraduate years, that is, to write compositions, laboratory reports, and term papers. Compared to thesis writing, these writing tasks are short and require minimal research work at the most. Thesis writing, on the other hand, is time-consuming and requires one to maintain a regimented discipline to accomplish it. This is something that those who have gone through the system can attest to in total agreement.

Apart from these problems, novice thesis writers face the problem of not knowing how to approach the task. Questions abound as to how they should present their research findings, the kinds of strategies they could use, and, in fact, the whole process of trying to convince the examiners to accept their findings. To obtain these answers, novice thesis writers often refer to the old library copies in the library in search for the answers.

Needless to say, thesis writing is said to be an inadequately explained genre in the academic world. Thesis writing, in fact, is a process of
discovery: learning as one goes along under the guidance of a supervisor. Therefore, it would be appropriate at this time to undertake a study to find out and make available the different kinds of strategies that thesis writers can use to their present their findings. They need to know what kinds of strategies they can use to help convince the examiners to accept their findings. It is the hope of the present study that the writer-reader relationship in thesis writing, presented in the theoretical framework, is able to "demystify" the process of thesis writing. Probably the findings of the present study would be able to give thesis writing a different and more challenging perspective.

The significance of the present study lies in its aim to clarify the socio-rhetorical status of thesis writers in the academic discourse community, and, thus, explain the nature of persuasion in thesis writing. The discourse analysis conducted in the present study hopes to answer, at least partly, the question posed by Bhatia (1997:34): *Why do members of specific discourse communities use the language the way they do?* In the present study, specific discourse community refers to the academic discourse community. This study is an attempt to answer the following question adapted from the one posed by Bhatia (1997):

*Why do thesis writers use language the way they do?*
As for the teaching of academic writing, the present study hopes that the findings are able to offer some useful insights. In line with what Candlin (1997) proposed, that is, teaching writing is supposed to be critical and beyond an academic exercise, this study would like to look at the thesis writer-examiner relationship and the issue of power that plays a role in determining how thesis writers present their findings. It is hoped that the present study is able to shed some light on these issues, and a clearer picture of the social processes involved in thesis writing is gained.

At present, much has yet to be done in analysing the Master's thesis as a genre in academic writing. As Dudley-Evans (1997:158) notes, research into thesis writing may help establish its particular features and "enhance the range of genre analysis and the teaching of academic writing to graduate students." The present study hopes that it is able to answer at least part of this call as it intends to look at the kind of persuasion found in the writing of Master's theses and the different persuasive strategies employed by thesis writers.

1.2 Objectives of the Present Study

The present study undertakes the task of looking at the use of persuasion and persuasive strategies in Master's theses from the
perspective of the Social Constructionist Approach. This approach proposes a set of notions that comprised the features of a discourse community, the function of discourse among community members, the consensual agreement between established members in the creation of knowledge and the manner in which aspiring non-members can gain membership into a particular discourse community.

The theoretical framework of the present study would like to look at the thesis writer, the examiners, the academic discourse community and the act of thesis writing using the above notions. This study will look at the kind of persuasion thesis writers may use when presenting their findings to established members of the discourse community as part of the knowledge-making process.

The objectives of the present study are:


2. To look at how power is linked to the use of persuasion in thesis writing.
3. To identify and compare the types of persuasive strategies found in Master's theses written by thesis writers from two different fields: the Arts and the Sciences.

The first two objectives will be dealt with in the chapter on the theoretical framework of the present study (Chapter Four). A figurative representation of the framework will also be presented in the same chapter. The third objective refers to the presentation of the findings of the data analysis that will be presented in three separate chapters (Chapters Five to Seven). All of these three objectives will be summarised in the concluding Chapter Eight.

1.3 Corpus

The corpus of the present study is made up of fourteen (14) theses written in both the Arts and Science fields. An equal number of theses written in both fields were taken to ensure that the selection of corpus was balanced. A total of seven (7) theses on history, teaching of English, translation and economics were randomly selected to represent the Arts field. Seven (7) other theses on fishery, biotechnology, environmental studies and food technology were
randomly selected to represent the Sciences. A list of the theses used as corpus is given in Appendix A.

For the analysis of non-linear texts found in theses, a total of six (6) theses, which included a thesis from the University of Manchester, were selected. This part of the present study was conducted much earlier in the study. In the main study, it was decided that it was best to restrict the corpus to the local universities so that there would be some form of uniformity, and hence, the removal of this particular thesis from the main study to ensure that only theses from local universities were used as corpus.

The theses were all chosen at random in order to obtain an unbiased corpus of data. The criteria used for selecting theses as corpus for the main study were:

(a) the theses were submitted to either the University of Malaya or the University of Putra Malaysia, and

(b) they were written in the English language.

The corpus for the main study were obtained from the various libraries of the University of Malaya and the main library of the University of
Putra Malaysia (formerly Universiti Pertanian Malaysia). It was decided that theses obtained from these two universities would be used to ensure that the corpus would not be made up of theses from a single source. Furthermore, this would contribute towards obtaining a comprehensive collection of strategies found in theses written in both the Arts and Science fields. At the same time, the findings of the present study would not be confined to the writing strategies of thesis writers from any particular institution.

It is worth mentioning that obtaining copies of theses was not an easy task as theses are kept in the libraries, and inspection is restricted to within the confines of the libraries. As a result, when the analysis on the use of non-linear texts was conducted, the researcher even had to borrow personal copies of theses to be used as corpus. One of them included a 1984 Master's thesis.

As the study progressed, more copies of theses were added to the collection of theses used as corpus. This has resulted in a collection of theses written between 1984 and 1999. One advantage of this is that the collection of strategies from this set of corpus would encompass a sampling of strategies used by thesis writers within a span of fifteen (15) years from both fields.
The choice of language is based on the fact that the present study would like to tie up the findings with the previous works, particularly that of Myers (1989). Another reason is that English is the second language in Malaysia, and its utility as an international communicative tool among academics, scientists and professionals would suffice as a justification to look at theses written in the English language at the local universities.

1.4 Methodology

The Social Constructionist Approach is adopted as the basic framework for the whole study. The notion of the academic discourse community is based on this social perspective approach and the discussion of the thesis writer-examiner relationship is based on the notions of this approach.

Taking the Social Constructionist Approach as the underlying structure, an eclectic combination of discourse analysis, genre analysis and CDA is used to analyse the data. It is hoped that the best interpretations would be obtained from the combination of three types of analyses. Basically, the three methods are used to conduct the analysis of the data so that:
1. **Descriptive discourse analysis** may reveal the relationship among the following participants: the thesis writer, the supervisor and the examiners in the communicative act of thesis writing. The focus would be on 'Who says What to Whom' (Harvey, 1997: 119). This analysis would enable the researcher to look at the persuasive process involved in the social interaction between these participants through a text identified as the Master's thesis.

2. **Critical Discourse Analysis** (CDA) (Fairclough:1995) would be useful in the discussing the issue of power in thesis writing. The communication of the Master's theses is a form of discursive practice and CDA would be particularly useful in the setting up of the framework on persuasion in this study. With CDA, the present study would be able to analyse the Master's theses as a form of the sociocultural practice within the academic discourse community. This leads to the analysis of the different types of strategies used by thesis writers in presenting their findings.

3. **Genre analysis** is to reveal the prototypical features of thesis writing as outcomes of the linguistic behaviour and expectations of the academic discourse community. As thesis writing is
placed in institutionalised academic settings, "the tactical use of language" (Bhatia, 1997) by thesis writers can be identified. The present study would like to identify the persuasive strategies and tactical devices found in Master's theses. This may help to "demystify" the epistemological conventions (Dudley-Evans, 1994) in thesis writing in terms of how knowledge is negotiated between the thesis writer and the examiners, and how findings are negotiated and presented as new knowledge claims.

A qualitative analysis of the data will be carried out to identify the different types of strategies found. Sentences obtained from the corpus are categorised according to the different strategies they represent. The different strategies will be presented in the manner adopted from the study by Kaur (1998). Where applicable, the strategies are described in terms of loosely structured frames called "framing stages". This facilitates the discussion of the sequence of persuasive tactics used in a persuasive act. The different strategies are presented in Chapters Five to Seven.

The location of the sentences in their respective theses is displayed beneath each sentence. This notation is explained in a more detailed manner in Chapter Five (p. 148-149).
The information as to where the sentences are located in the respective theses would be useful in analysing the distribution of the different types of strategies found. This second part of the analysis is to display the frequency distribution in terms of:

(a) the location of the sentences in the theses
(b) the distribution of the strategies found in the theses from the two different fields: the Arts and Sciences.

The third part of analysis is on the amount and types of non-linear text found. Two theses were taken from each of the following areas: English, Economics and Biological Sciences. English was chosen to represent the Arts while Biological Science theses were selected to represent the Sciences. Economics was chosen because of the fact that it typically uses statistics in its analysis. Therefore, it would be interesting to compare the amount of non-linear texts found in these type of theses compared to the other two types of theses.

All calculations for the amount of non-linear text found in the theses were done manually. The total amount of written text in each theses was calculated using the following equation:

\[(\text{Number of pages}) \times (\text{Average length of a fully-typed page})\]
The amount of non-linear texts used in each thesis was measured and the total amount was calculated. The pages that were measured were those which formed the main text of each thesis. All calculated figures were converted into percentages for the tabulation and presentation of results.

1.5 Research Questions

Data collected will be analysed to examine the relevance of proposed theoretical framework by the present study. In sum, it intends to look at the data and determine the kind of persuasive strategies used by thesis writers.

The present study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of persuasion is employed in thesis writing and is considered to be appropriate by the academic discourse community?

2. How is power linked to persuasion in thesis writing and how does it influence the way thesis writers use persuasive strategies?
3. What sort of persuasive strategies are found in the Master's theses of both the Arts and Science fields?

4. Do thesis writers from different fields use persuasive strategies in a similar manner?

The present study also hopes to clarify the status of thesis writers in relation to the examiners who are the immediate audience of their theses. The present study proposes that it would be beneficial for thesis writers to know where they stand in the academic discourse community as this awareness can assist them in planning the persuasive strategies used to present their findings as new knowledge claims.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

The present study does not attempt to do any of the following:

(a) look at the differences in the style of writing or choice of persuasive strategies based on any particular gender, age or ethnic background
(b) describe of the persuasive strategies used by any particular discipline. Instead, the theses from different disciplines are grouped into two general categories: the Arts and Sciences

(c) undertake the task of conducting a linguistic analysis of the sentences found in the data. Instead, it attempts to highlight certain salient features that are found in the examples considered as persuasive strategies.

(d) conduct a comparative study of the different strategies used by thesis writers over a period of time.

The present study is confined to a study of persuasive strategies found in the corpus of Master's theses that were obtained from two local universities.