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Contact address:
Carmen López Ferrero
Translation and Language Sciences Department
Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Campus de la Comunicació-Poblenou, despatx 53.602
C/ Roc Boronat, 138
08018 Barcelona
SPAIN

carmen.lopez@upf.edu
carme.bach@upf.edu

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Abstract
As a discourse genre, statements of purpose are characterized by their occluded status in the academy and by their hybrid nature. Statements of purpose are required in applications for a place in a postgraduate course (master’s degree or doctorate) and they are requested to obtain information about the academic and professional background and skills of each applicant. A study of the genre’s linguistic and textual features is needed in Spanish to discover and understand writers’ and readers’ perception of this genre.

A corpus of 50 motivation letters in Spanish is analyzed here. We study the distinguishing macro and microtextual features of this particular genre and cooccurrences between both kinds of features. At the macrotextual level, statements of purpose display prototypical rhetorical moves, which can be classified as writer’s moves and reader’s moves. On the microtextual level, modalization resources and discourse markers are discussed. This multiple perspectives analysis of the corpus shows evidence of significant cooccurrences between modalization, discourse markers and rhetorical moves. Writers’ ideal representations of this discourse genre, which spans the academic and professional fields, can also be deduced.

Keywords: discourse analysis, statement of purpose, occluded genre, Spanish language, academic discourse, professional genres, moves genre analysis
Short bionote

Carmen López Ferrero is a professor of Spanish Language and Discourse Analysis at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF, Barcelona, Spain) and a researcher of the consolidated research group Gr@el-UPF. She graduated in Spanish Philology (Language) and she received her doctorate in Philosophy and Sciences of Education from the University of Barcelona. She has published several books and articles on Discourse Analysis and Spanish Language Learning as L1 and L2. Her research focuses on academic and professional discourse, written communication and applied linguistics. Personal website: https://www.upf.edu/pdi/carmen_lopez_ferrero/

Carme Bach is a professor of Catalan Linguistics at University Pompeu Fabra (UPF, Barcelona, Spain) and a researcher of the consolidated research group Gr@el-UPF. Her research focuses on General Discourse Analysis, Language Learning and Teaching and Applied Linguistics. Her publications deal with connectives, reformulation and its importance in the process of specialized discourse construction and in extraction of semantic information of specialized discourse. Her PhD thesis about reformulation markers includes a lexicographical implementation prototype for these units. Personal website: https://www.upf.edu/pdi/dtf/carme.bach/index.htm
1. Introduction

The object of study of this paper is the motivation letter ("carta de motivación" in Spanish, known as “statement of purpose” or “personal statement” in US). Letters as a discourse genre have been analyzed in different settings and for different purposes: for product and self-promotion in business settings (Bhatia, 1993), as job applications (Gillaerts, 2003), as personal argumentative texts in newspapers (Garrido, 2005; Burguera, 2006; Ciapuscio, 2010), and as presentation or submission letters (Swales, 1996; Montolío and López, 2010). However, motivation letters in Spanish have not been studied sufficiently. Their special status as an occluded genre in the academy makes them difficult to categorize and describe.

There are plenty of recommendations ("how to" literature, Newman, 2004) to be found online (in both English and Spanish) aimed at helping people to write a good motivation letter, along with samples. The advice given on these web sites is not pragmatic or discursive but primarily structural (parts of the letter, format) and informative (content) in nature; it is focused on the product and not on the process. Apart from these brief general guidelines, there is no systematic or detailed linguistic or textual description of a standard Spanish motivation letter, nor of its rhetorical process. In the survey of print and electronic resources for writing the statements for graduate programs made by Samraj and Monk (2008), they conclude the information given doesn’t differentiate between Ph.D. and master’s programs, and across disciplines. This study also reveals the focus on a list of “Do’s” and “Do not’s” for writing a statement of purpose. Swales and Feak (2011) give examples of statements of purpose for English graduate school applications and offer a variety of tasks to show students how their texts may be perceived in order to feel more “genre ready”. In this line of preparing for the genre in Spanish, the questions we aim to answer in our study are the following:

1) What are the most characteristic macrotextual features in the discourse genre of motivation letters in Spanish?
2. Theoretical framework: motivation letters as an occluded genre

Motivation letters, also called personal statement (Ding, 2007; Barton et al., 2004; Bekins et al., 2004), or statement of purpose (Brown, 2004; Samraj and Monk, 2008) in US discourse tradition, are written as a requirement imposed by an academic institution to which the writer is trying to gain admission. Their aim—as the noun motivation suggests—is to show the writer’s aspirations to become a good professional in a specific field or to improve his/her job prospects. The ultimate goal of a motivation letter is to persuade its reader of the writer’s suitability as a candidate for a place in the course, given the qualifications the candidate expounds in his/her text.

This type of letters can be defined as occluded or semi-occluded (Samraj and Monk, 2008) written genres in the academy. Swales (1996: 46) defines occluded genres in the academy as follows:

On the one hand, they are typically formal documents which remain on file; on the other, they are rarely part of the public record. They are written for specific individual or small-group audiences, and yet may also be seriously invested with demonstrated scholarship and seriously concerned with representing their authors in a favourable professional light. More importantly, however, exemplars of these genres are typically hidden, ‘out of sight’ or ‘occluded’ from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality.
One consequence of these characteristics is that newcomers to a field, such as graduate students or junior staff, may have particular difficulties in matching the expectations of their targeted audiences.

Occluded discourse genres are written by people serving as references, by academic committees or by students (as is our case); some examples of occluded genres listed in Swales (1996) are request letters (for information, copies of papers, advice, etc.), application letters (for jobs, grants, etc.), submission letters (accompanying articles, etc.), research proposals (for outside funding, etc.), article reviews (as part of a review process) or external evaluations (for academic institutions). We add motivation letters (for postgraduate studies) to this list of items drawn from Swales.

There are, of course, previous discourse studies on other types of letters. For Spanish letters, Ciapuscio (2010) has carried out an analysis of politeness and illocutionary structure in letters by science readers, highlighting the hybrid nature of this genre, which combines traits of journalistic texts (*letters to the editor* is one of the opinion pieces of a periodical) and literary texts (*the epistolary* is a genre with a long tradition).

Research on motivation letters developed in the US points out the genre’s instability in different discourse communities. Bekins et al. (2004) analyse personal statement (PS) in medical school applications highlighting their unusual status: it is a genre not practice by central members of a discipline but rather by disciplinary apprentices. The “marketisation” character of this kind of genre is pointed out as it involves the promotion of oneself through discourse: The PS in medical school applications is a common and important genre that plays a significant role in determining which students are selected for admittance into medical schools. The primary purpose of the PS is to highlight the personal qualities and achievements that grades, recommendation letters, and MCAT scores do not reveal. (Beckins et al. 2004: 57).

In the few previous research, different features have been found in motivation letters written for different programs: medical schools (Bekins et al., 2004), medical residency programs (Barton et al., 2004), clinical psychology program (Brown, 2004), linguistics, electrical engineering and business
administration master’s programs (Samraj and Monk, 2008). The results in Samraj and Monk (2008) study of 35 statement of purpose (12 of linguistics, 9 of electrical engineering and 14 of business administration programs) indicate the need of deeper research in this field:

although there are broad similarities in the organization of this genre across these disciplines, there are intriguing differences, adding to our current knowledge of disciplinary variation in academic writing. Our findings also indicate that this genre can still be deemed occluded to a certain degree, for although some information exits on the general structure of graduate school statements of purpose, there is little specific information that is relevant for the writing of statements for specific master’s programs. (Samraj and Monk, 2008: 195)

Multidimensional linguistic analysis (Van Dijk, 2000) has emphasized text structure and the rhetorical moves which characterize each discourse genre. A move is a particular textual segment meant to achieve a purpose, following Swales’ work on academic articles (Swales, 1990). In the case of product and self promotion letters, a genre which shares the “persuasiveness” aim with motivation letters, Bhatia (1993) has distinguished the following seven moves:

a) Establishing credentials
b) Introducing candidatures
c) Offering incentives
d) Enclosing documents
e) Soliciting response
f) Using pressure tactics
g) Ending politely

Specific studies on personal statement or statement of purpose in the US detailed different rhetorical moves. Bekins et al. (2004: 61) construct a tentative set of five rhetorical moves to held a two-day workshop to help students to prepare a personal statement for medical, dental, pharmacy or veterinary school:

1. **Hook**: Narrative account designed to grab the reader’s attention by stating a unique characteristic or experience of an applicant.
2. **Program**: Reason applicant states for choosing a profession/specialization.
3. **Background**: Critical evaluation of skills and/or milestones in learning.
4. *Self-promotion:* Discussion of an individual’s distinctive qualities as a rationale for candidacy.

5. *Projection:* Evidence of critical judgment and/or understanding of the career choice.

As for Samraj and Monk (2008: 200-201), they identify in the 35 statements of purpose of their corpus the following five moves, with only moves 2 and 3, *background* and *reasons for applying*, appearing in all the texts, the other being optional:

(1) *Introduction*, with three steps
   - Generalization
   - Background
   - Goals or decision to apply

(2) *Background*, with five steps
   - General (Family/Travel, etc.)
   - Work
   - Education
   - Research
   - Personal attributes

(3) *Reasons for Applying*, with four steps
   - Gap in background
   - Positive gains (incl. interests)
   - Program/university attributes
   - Disciplinary and research reasons

(4) *Extra-Curricular Activities and*

(5) *Conclusion*, with two steps
   - Goals and/or prediction of future
   - Self evaluation

These studies focus on the process and also in the contrast between the *personal* (individual introspection and reflection) features and the *academic* or the *professional specialization* of the statements of purpose. Different from them, we are interested in the discourse and linguistic features that connect the *academic* and the *professional* nature of the genre. For this reason, the macrotextual point of departure for our analysis is Bhatia’s seven-move model for application letters, which we have adapted to fit the features of the genre under study. We also consider the rhetorical structure and the use of metadiscursive elements for persuasiveness that Gillaerts (2003) has studied in
job applications. Motivation letters are part of an application for master's-level education leading to a diploma, so persuasion is a defining pragmatic goal of this hybrid discourse genre. The microtextual features we analyze in our study, then, are due to the persuasive argumentative component of motivation letters, in the framework of the rhetorical genre studies and systemic functional approaches to discourse genres (Halliday, 1994; Hasan et al., 2005; Martin and Rose, 2003, 2008), as well as research in academic discourse genres (Bhatia, 2004; Hyland, 2007).

3. Corpus

The corpus of our analysis consists of 50 motivation letters written by students selected –from a total of 140 candidates– to enter a single master's program (MA) in Teacher Training for Spanish as a Foreign Language over a period of two academic years: 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 at two Catalan universities in Barcelona. The total word count in the corpus is 20,618: the average word count for each letter is 412.

The criterion we followed to select the letters was that their authors were eventually selected for the MA program, which means that the writers are probably communicatively competent in Spanish. Although the selected candidates come from all over the world, they have the Spanish language as a first language (L1); they must demonstrate a Mastery or an Effective Operational Proficiency competence in any case. So, it should be fair to assume that most of the features of the analyzed motivation letters display genre-characteristic trends, because their authors (the candidates to the MA) have demonstrated their competence as writers in Spanish. Apart from this language skill, the fact that the applicants of the corpus letters were selected for the MA program means that the reasons they argue in their text were credible and convincing statements for the admissions committee; the successful nature of the texts of the corpus has been also a requirement in previous research (cfr. Samraj and Monk, 2008). To sum up, two criteria were applied to choose the corpus: a more substantive one, that is, the effective and persuasive statements of the letters, and a linguistic one, the Spanish competence of the writers.
The specific audience of these motivation letters is the two coordinators of the MA: one Associate Professor from each of the two Catalan universities involved. The only indication given in the MA's pre-enrolment procedure instructions is that candidates must submit a “personal motivation letter”, with no further information regarding the letter’s addressee. Applicants didn’t receive any instructions about writing the motivation letter.

4. Methodology: categories of analysis and tool

Following Bathia (1993, 2004), we can establish ten moves the general academic discourse community would accept as prototypical. This does not mean that they are all necessarily present in every letter, but that they are all the possible different moves in motivation letters:

a) Establishing credentials (personal parameters: writer’s name)
b) Entitling the letter
c) Referring situational parameters (place and time)
d) Greeting the reader
e) Persuading the reader
f) Introducing the applicant and the letter’s objectives
g) Reasons for applying
h) Expressing future expectations
i) Ending politely
j) Letter closing and signature

Decisions about the classification of the moves are made on the basis of linguistic evidence (lexical cues) and comprehension of the text, given that “moves are semantic and functional units of texts, which can be identified because of their communicative purposes and linguistic boundaries” (Ding 2007: 370).

In our analysis of motivation letters we have not considered the first three moves: a) establishing credentials, b) entitling the letter, c) referring situational parameters, because they are paratextual, not actually part of the discursive material, but rather situational parameters that identify the text as belonging to the epistolary type. These three moves are inherent to all types of letters (e.g., all the letters in Figure 1), and they, therefore, are not specific to the genre we are characterizing.
In Figure 2 we describe and exemplify the moves we are going to study in the corpus (seven in total), which are the macrotextual dimension categories in our analysis, focusing on the communication participant prominent in each of them, the writer (W) or the reader (R).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move</th>
<th>Description of the move</th>
<th>Example (Letter 29)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Establishing credentials</td>
<td>A Master’s candidate introduces his or her personal references: name and surname. Although this information is deleted to respect privacy, we wish to state its presence since it constitutes a structural element of the letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entitling the letter</td>
<td>In the corpus, some letters have a title, although this feature is not actually part of the structure of all motivation letters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Referring situational parameters</td>
<td>Just as the name of the candidate for the Master’s is shown, this part of the letter is to show when (date) and where it was written.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R</td>
<td>Greeting the reader</td>
<td>A candidate first writes a salutation addressed to the Master’s Director, usually very briefly, as a standard item.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persuading the reader</td>
<td>The writer flatters the Director as a persuasive strategy to win him/her over.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Example (Letter 29)**

Me interesan los contenidos pero también las formas, y la lengua como vehículo de expresión básico en el ser humano. El dominio de una lengua ayuda a entender la realidad y carecer de ello te limita como persona en todos los aspectos de la vida. Por ello creo que es imprescindible para un adulto poseer un correcto uso de la lengua que permita alcanzar la plenitud de mente y espíritu.

I am interested in both the content and forms of language, as well as its fundamental role in human expression. Mastery of a language furthers one’s understanding of reality; lack of such mastery is limiting in personal and all other areas of life. Thus, I believe it is essential for an adult to be able to use language correctly, which allows full development of the mind and inner life.

(...)

La correcta transmisión del conocimiento es sin duda uno de los pilares de nuestra sociedad. Además en este mundo globalizado donde las personas disfrutan de una movilidad casi ilimitada, los intercambios lingüísticos se hacen más necesarios que nunca por lo que conocer a fondo un idioma se hace imprescindible.

Accurate transmission of knowledge is without a doubt one of the pillars of our society. Furthermore, in today’s global world, where people enjoy nearly limitless mobility, interaction through language is more necessary than ever; thus thorough knowledge of a foreign language is indispensable.

Sin más, les adjunto la documentación requerida y les emplazo a que valoren
| Introducing the applicant and letter objectives | Me dirijo a ustedes con el propósito de que tengan en consideración mi candidatura para poder acceder al Máster Oficial de Formación de Profesores de Español como Lengua Extranjera que se inicia el próximo mes de Octubre. La motivación que me conduce a querer realizar dicho curso no es otra que la de conducir definitivamente mi carrera profesional por el camino de la docencia. I am writing to request that you consider my candidacy for admission to the Official Master's in Teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language program, starting next October. The reason behind my desire to do this master's is none other than to steer my career definitively towards teaching. |

| Reasons for applying | Tras mi licenciatura en 1993 en Ciencias de la Información por la UAB he desarrollado diferentes trabajos en diversos ámbitos que me han aportado experiencia y madurez laboral. Al mismo tiempo, durante estos años he continuado con mi formación sobre todo en lengua inglesa, obteniendo el título de nivel avanzado de la Escuela Oficial de Idiomas en junio del 2010. After completing undergraduate studies in Information Science at the UAB in 1993, I have done a variety of work in various sectors. This has given me experience and professional maturity. During this time, I have also continued my training in languages, especially English, having obtained the advanced-level diploma from the Official School of Languages in June 2010. Siempre he sentido especial interés por las lenguas y la comunicación, lo cual pude desarrollar durante mi paso por la facultad, estudiando asignaturas como redacción periodística, en la cual logré una matrícula de honor, o creatividad publicitaria, que te exigen un nivel notable de análisis y síntesis. I have always been keenly interested in languages and communication, |
a passion I was able to develop during my degree studies through coursework in journalistic writing, where I achieved top marks, as well as in creative marketing, which demands considerable analytical and expressive skills.

### Expressing future expectations

The applicant uses this part to express his/her hopes to enrol in the course and prosper academically or professionally thanks to what he/she will learn and do in the course.

**Creo que puedo desarrollar una buena labor como maestro. De hecho, durante mis años de universidad, compaginaba los estudios con trabajos esporádicos como profesor particular para niños con problemas de aprendizaje, y disfrutaba con ello. La correcta transmisión del conocimiento es sin duda uno de los pilares de nuestra sociedad. Además en este mundo globalizado donde las personas disfrutan de una movilidad casi ilimitada, los intercambios lingüísticos se hacen más necesarios que nunca por lo que conocer a fondo un idioma se hace imprescindible.**

I believe I will be able to do excellent work as a teacher. Indeed, during my undergraduate studies, I periodically tutored children with learning difficulties, work that I very much enjoyed. Accurate transmission of knowledge is without a doubt one of the pillars of our society. Furthermore, in today’s global world, where people enjoy nearly limitless mobility, interaction through language is more necessary than ever; thus thorough knowledge of a foreign language is indispensable.

| R | Ending politely | The writer ends politely to bring the letter to a close. | Atentamente.  
Yours faithfully, |
<table>
<thead>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>Letter closing and signature</td>
<td>The writer bids farewell and signs the letter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2. Motivation letter moves and their description, letter 29**
By grouping the moves at the macrolevel analysis as W moves and R moves, we connect them with the microlinguistic resources: we emphasize two types of lexicogrammatical items given the persuasive-argumentative component of the genre: modalization resources and discourse markers.

For modalization features, we follow Hyland’s (2005) stance and engagement model of academic interaction. Stance and engagement are interactional macrofunctions related to the W and to the R, respectively. Stance includes attitudinal features which refer to “the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments” (Hyland, 2005: 176). Engagement, in terms of Hyland (2005: 176):

- is an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants and guiding them to interpretations.

These two interactional functions, two sides of the same coin (the interpersonal dimension of discourse), are realized by the following linguistic resources (Hyland, 2005: 177):

- **Hedges**
- **Boosters**
- **Attitude markers**
- **Self-mention**
- **Reader pronouns**
- **Directives**
- **Questions**
- **Shared knowledge**
- **Personal asides**

![Figure 3. Linguistic resources of interactional macrofunctions](image)

From this model we select six modalization cues which have clear lexical and grammatical cues in our corpus: *hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention, reader pronouns* and *questions*. We have classified them according to the nature of their linguistic signals: predominantly *evaluative and epistemic cues* in *hedges, boosters* and *attitude markers* and predominantly grammatical (*personal deixis*) in *self-mention* and *reader pronouns*; as for *questions*, they are rhetorical features to engage the reader. Nevertheless, we only reflect in the
paper those linguistic features which have been more significant, as Atlas-ti cooccurrence tool shows (see figure 6 below): attitude markers, personal deixis (self-mention and reader mention elements) and discourse markers of structure.

4.1. Modalization cues

Modalization is related to the presence of the author in his/her text, through stance and voice in discourse (Hyland, 2005). Sancho Guinda and Hyland (2012: 1) define these concepts in applied linguistics as follows:

the terms essentially refer to the expression of point of view in speech and writing and to the ways we engage with others. They are central to ways of looking at written texts as social interactions, where readers and writers negotiate meanings, and to how students can be taught to convey their personal attitudes and assessments and appropriately connect with their readers.

Evaluative and epistemic modality cues

1. *Attitude markers* to express feelings such as surprise or disappointment, and judgements of importance, relevance, etc., that go with writer’s arguments: these include nouns (*interés “interest”), adjectives (*imprescindible “essential”, *interesante “interesting”, *prestigiosa “prestigious”, *especial “special”), verbs (*deseo “wish”, *siento feel, *quiero “want”) and prepositional clauses (*con eficacia “with efficacy”) conveying evaluative meaning or the writer’s wishes (desiderative sentence modality).

Personal deixis

2. *Self-mention elements* which signal how the writer makes self-references in the discourse, including subject and object first-person pronouns; possessive determiners and verb endings: *mi máxima motivación “my greatest motivation”; carezco de herramientas “I lack the tools”, etc.

3. *Reader mention elements* used by the applicants to reach out to their reader (the coordinators of the master’s), including personal pronouns and verb endings showing distance or proximity between the communication participants: *me dirijo a ustedes “I address you”; Le escribo “I write to you”; no sólo porque el español sea parte vital de nuestra cultura “not only because Spanish is a vital part of our culture”; que ofrece su Universidad “which your university offers”.

16
4.2. Discourse markers (DMs)

DMs are linguistic units specialized in linking discourse segments and in guiding interpretation of the text. We use the term DMs of discourse structure first used by Schiffrin (1987) and then by Redeker (1990). We distinguish two types of DMs in the corpus: distributional and argumentative ones, but the more relevant appeared to be the distributional ones (see figure 6 below).

DMs in a distributional function

Discourse structure DMs organize the various parts of a letter. They are very important cohesive tools because they guide a reader going through a motivation letter, by marking its different parts. At the same time, they are important in their argumentative strength to clearly present reasons in this type of letter (En primer lugar “In the first place”; Primero de todo “First of all”; por una parte “on the one hand”; por otro lado “on the other hand”; etc.).

4.3. Qualitative analysis tool

We used a qualitative analysis tool: Atlas.ti, version 6.2, a licensed software application (Friese, 2014). The letters were fed into the software after creating a hermeneutic unit, which is the file containing all the information related to the qualitative analysis of texts recorded: documents, codes used, analysis and the relationship between the text segment quotations marked. Having created this analysis unit, the texts were input one by one in rich text format (.rtf). Once the letters had been digitized, the analytical categories were introduced in the software as codes. Since we have established two different types of codes, one corresponding to the macrotextual level of the letters and the other to the microlinguistic level, each one was given a different tag for easy recognition and to make marking and subsequent analysis operational.

- Macrostructure tagging with letters (from a to j) was used for codes corresponding to the ten moves identified in the letters.
- Microstructure tags starting with a number were created for each formal lexicogrammatical category: 1 to 6 for evaluative and epistemic modality cues; 7 to 9 for DMs.

Figure 4 shows the tags used in the Atlas.ti software for each of the analytical categories established:
As we have detailed in Figure 2 above, up to four of the considered moves can be connected to rhetorical actions concerning the letter writer (W moves), and three with the addressee (R moves); we list in Figure 5 both groups below according to the letter assigned to it for analysis in Atlas.ti.

**Figure 5. Atlas.ti move letters coding**

For identification purposes, each letter was assigned a code in the hermeneutical unit analysis: ct (*carta*) identified it as a motivation letter, and a reference number (1, 2, 3, etc.) for each entry of a letter in the corpus. Thus, ct21 identifies letter 21 within the corpus. Texts were tagged manually, with one or more tags assigned to each text segment. The software enabled us to assign
and overlap tags on the same segments: in other words, we could reflect the multifunctionality of the discourse elements. For example, here is a segment from ct3:\(^6\)

(1) *Expongo a continuación los motivos por los que me gustaría matricularme al master [...]*.  
I expound below the reasons why I would like to enrol in the master’s [...] 

It was tagged as follows.  
1) Macrotextually, the whole segment belongs to the *Introducing the applicant and letter objectives* move.  
2) Microlinguistically, we find the following tags for the same segment, corresponding to two different lexicogrammatical features.  
   a. self-mention elements: *me gustaría* “I would like”, *matricularme* “to enrol [me]”.  
   b. hedge: *me gustaría matricularme* “I would like to enroll”.  

To apply these tags we have marked units that have a minimum complete textual sense, i.e., the microlinguistic units are not tagged alone (only the pronoun *me* in the example above), but they are analyzed as part of the discourse segment in which they are used (*me gustaría matricularme*) in order to easily retrieve what the writer meant to communicate in the letter.  

In order to observe the pragmatic function of the lexicogrammatical elements, it was necessary to take into account the context they appear in. The *Atlas.ti* tool was used to extract every discursive sequence marked with the analytical categories as well as to extract frequencies of use for each one.  

Finally, we have crossed the macro and microlinguistic to establish relationships between these two levels. Figure 6 shows the table of cooccurrences found through *Atlas-ti*: the lighter shades show the most outstanding data in relation to lexicogrammatical forms used more frequently in each of the moves as they were defined. In the following section we explain the results of the crossing the two levels of analysis.
5. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the macrotextual features, then, is both qualitative and quantitative (§5.1). In the study of microlinguistic features (§5.2), it is worth mentioning the coocurrences found between lexicogrammatical elements and the macrotextual categories analyzed previously.

5.1. Macrotextual features

The macrotextual features of our corpus were analyzed according to whether they were oriented towards the writer’s (W) or the reader’s (R) letter. As for the W moves, only in three of the 50 letters (ct34, ct37 and ct45) is the author’s signature missing; of these, two include the farewell (ct34: aprovecho la ocasión para brindarles mis más cordiales saludos “I take this opportunity to greet you most cordially”; ct37: saludos cordiales “kind regards”). Letter ct45 has no signature and no closing salutation, which is characteristic of this type of letter. Here is how letter ct45 (unique in the corpus) opens and closes:

    CARTA DE MOTIVACIÓN
    En mis primeros años de escuela, mis profesores solían elogiar mis facultades a la hora de escribir. A menudo, elaboraba redacciones fantásticas y creativas.
    […]
    Por todas estas razones solicito ser admitida en el MÁSTER (ct45)

MOTIVATION LETTER
    In my first years at school, my teachers used to praise my writing skills. I would often compose fanciful, creative essays.
    […]
    For all of these reasons I request to be admitted to the master’s”.

The absence of any mention of who the writer is or who the letter’s audience is shows that it is conceived more as an academic essay than an epistolary. However, it must comply with the requirement of signalling the writer’s identity with a signature at the bottom, following a standard practice of the letter writing genre, as well as some formulae for letter closing, like Atentamente “Yours sincerely” (ct2); Saludos cordiales, “Kind regards” (ct1) or Reciban mis más cordiales saludos “Please receive my kind regards” (ct46). They are routine linguistic formulae, fixed for this rhetorical function: they appear in 84% of the letters analyzed.
All of the moves that make up the body of the text are present, f) introducing the applicant and letter objectives, g) reasons for applying and h) expressing future expectations; the first, introducing the applicant and letter objectives, is the only one which is missing from 18% of the letters. This data can be explained by the hybrid nature of the genre, which overlaps academic and professional letter writing. Some applicants opt for a more academic approach when they do not include in the first paragraph the subject they are writing about (the so called “subject line” in business and professional environments). Here are some examples of this move:

(3) Me dirijo a ustedes para exponer los motivos que me llevan a solicitar la matriculación a este Máster. (ct1)  
I am writing to you to tell you [the reasons] why I am applying to enrol in this master’s.

(4) Me llamo *** y soy licenciada en *** por la Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Me pongo en contacto con usted porque deseo cursar el Máster Oficial […] que ofrece su Universidad (ct4)  
My name is *** and I hold a degree in *** from the Autonomous University of Madrid. I am contacting you because I wish to enrol in the Master’s […] that your university offers.

This first paragraph of the body of the letter is followed by an explanation of the reasons for applying. The reasons for applying move is the key one that distinguishes the motivation letter from other letters. The aim of this part is to show that the author is an adequate candidate to benefit from one the places offered in the MA. Noteworthy in this move is the fact that the candidate’s adequacy sometimes depends on academic qualifications and sometimes is based on professional reasons. (5) and (6) are examples of the academic reasons that are given:

(5) Siempre he sentido un especial interés por el estudio de la lengua y la literatura española, que ha ido en aumento a lo largo de los últimos años de educación académica. (ct3)  
I have always felt a special interest for studying Spanish language and literature, which has grown over the last years of formal education.

(6) Acabados mis estudios de Filología e Historia en la universidad Komotini (Grecia), me encuentro ahora buscando un mejor puesto de empleo. La lengua española está presente en mi vida desde hace 4 años y sigo utilizándola continuamente, día tras día. (ct14)
Having finished my studies in Philology and History at the University of Komotini (Greece) I am now looking for a better job. Spanish has been a part of my life for the last 4 years, and I still use it all the time, on a daily basis.

(7) is an example of professional reasons:

(7) Otro motivo es que la lengua española ha supuesto para mí una herramienta profesional a la que he tenido la suerte de estar vinculado de manera permanente durante trece años. En todo este tiempo, desarrollando mi labor como redactor publicitario, tuve la necesidad, así como el placer, de profundizar en su conocimiento, el cual me gustaría seguir ampliando cursando este máster. (ct1)

Another reason is that Spanish, for me, has been a professional tool and I have had the luck to be in constant contact with it over the past thirteen years. In all this time, in carrying out my work as an advertising writer, I found the need, as well as the pleasure, to gain a deeper knowledge of the language, which I would like to continue to develop by doing this master’s.

Other cases that stand out are the ones that state a desire for a professional career change as the main reason for wishing to enrol in the MA program. This can be seen in (8):

(8) Soy ingeniero industrial de profesión, la he ejercido por dos años y medio más casi un año de pasantías en una empresa de alimentos muy conocida en Venezuela. (ct20)

I am an industrial engineer by profession. I have practised for two and a half years plus almost a year’s internship in a well known food company in Venezuela.

This kind of motivation can be supported by academic and professional reasons:

(9) Desde que me he licenciado mi actividad formativa y profesional ha estado enfocada fundamentalmente en dos vertientes […]. Por un lado, en el ámbito de la investigación universitaria, centrada en la oralidad y la entonación; y por otro lado, en el ámbito de la enseñanza del gallego, en el que últimamente estoy más interesada. (ct30)

Since finishing my degree, my training and work have been basically focused on two areas […]. One is in the field of university research, in spoken language and intonation; the other, in the area of teaching Galician, which I have lately found more interesting.

This move, then, the defining element of a motivation letter, is where the hybrid nature of the genre can be seen most clearly: it is halfway between an academic text and a professional one, as we postulated in the theoretical framework. (10) illustrates the same hybridization in the expressing future expectations W move:
In short, I consider that it is very important for me to do this master’s, both for my CV and my career, because it would open doors for me as a teacher of Spanish as a foreign language, as demand for professionals has grown in this sector due to a growing interest in knowing our language, and this would help me to find employment in line with my professional vocation both in Spain and abroad.

Given the mixed nature of the genre analyzed in the corpus, very often these two W moves, reasons for applying and expressing future expectations, are blended and appear in the same paragraph, as in (11), the expression of expectations underlined:

(11) Como demuestra que mi primera elección de estudio universitario fuese el magisterio de educación primaria, la educación siempre ha sido una vocación que ha despertado mucho interés en mí. Siempre he tenido en mente, también, la posibilidad de trabajar en el extranjero y de desarrollar mi vida laboral fuera de mi país (de ahí la elección de la antropología como estudio de segundo ciclo). […] Esto se acompaña con que, además, estoy dedicando este año - y el que viene - a perfeccionar mi inglés para la obtención de un certificado oficial que me permita, junto con la obtención de éste [sic] máster, orientar mi futuro a la enseñanza del español en el extranjero. Por ello, estoy dispuesto a trabajar duro para conseguir la mención europea vinculada a este máster. (ct13)

As demonstrated by the fact that my first choice for university studies was primary education training, education has always been a calling that has roused a keen interest in me. I have always borne in mind the possibility of working abroad and developing my professional career in a different country (hence my choice of anthropology as a second-cycle undergraduate degree). […] Furthermore, I am devoting this year, and the coming year, to improving my English in order to obtain an official certificate that will enable me, together with this master’s degree, to steer my future to teaching Spanish abroad. That is why I am willing to work hard to gain the European Mention which is associated with this master’s.

Students show in these W moves that they are competent in using attitude markers and self-mention cues to express their stance in the different moves of the letter. This is a very outstanding resource, as motivations letter
are “a rich source of interactional features that allow us to see how individuals work to position themselves as potential members of a discourse community” (Bekins et al., 2004: 57).

Just as the most systematic W move is the letter closing and signature, in the case of R moves the opening (greeting the reader) also happens to be the most recurrent element in the corpus: 42 letters include an opening salutation (84%). However, the writers do not seem so sure about who the addressee should be, ranging from a single individual to a whole group, as illustrated in (12):


To whom it may concern / Dear University / Dear addressee / Sirs, / Dear Madam or Sir, / Dear Mr *** and Mrs ***: / Dear Professors of the Selection Committee: / Dear management team for the master's / etc.

In contrast with stance, the engagement resources (Hyland, 2005) are not well controlled by the authors of the letters: there are doubts in relation with reader pronouns and shared knowledge. The variety in greeting the audience can be explained by the “occluded genre” nature of motivation letters.

As for the persuading the reader move, it appears in most (76%) of the letters, but it does not always appear in the same place. In some of the letters it appears after greeting the reader, in others it is written immediately after introducing the letter’s aims, or even after the reasons for applying move; this is due to the cycled nature of the moves. (13) shows the wording used (underlined) to persuade the MA coordinators of the suitability of a given candidate:

(13) Puedo enumerar varias razones más que me motivan a ingresar y cursar la maestría ofrecida por vosotros, por ejemplo el prestigio con que cuenta la Universidad […] y el hecho innegable de que el curso, la universidad y también la ciudad misma son un reconocido espacio intercultural, lo que a mi modo de ver ya es valioso (ct36)

I can list several more reasons that motivate me to enrol and take the master’s course you offer, such as the prestige of the University […] and the undeniable fact that the course, the university, and also the city itself constitute a recognized intercultural space, which to my mind is an asset in its own right.
The *ending politely* segment is found in most of the letters, as a mark of politeness aimed at “gaining the benevolence” of the addressee before closing. It is used in 68% of the letters, with a variety of wordings which express gratitude for the reader's attention and appeal to the addressee’s openness towards a final acceptance of their application. Prototypical forms are in (14):

(14) esperando que mi solicitud sea bien acogida. (ct5) / Gracias por la atención prestada (ct6) / Gracias por su tiempo y resto a la espera de recibir noticias suyas. (ct11) / Muchas gracias por tomarse la molestia de leer esta carta, esperando los resultados (ct21) / Espero que consideren mi petición de forma favorable y le agradezco su tiempo (ct25)

Hoping my application will be welcome. / Thank you for paying attention. / Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you. / Many thanks for taking the trouble to read this letter, I await the results. / I hope you consider my application favourably and I thank you for your time.

5.2. Microlinguistic features

This section presents our analysis in the corpus of the *modalization cues* and *discourse markers*, as described in §4. Modalization cues are frequent in the parts that define the text as a motivation letter: W moves *reasons for applying* (g), and *expressing future expectations* (h), and in the R move *persuading the reader* (e). Noteworthy are the writer’s self-references (*self-mention elements*) when expounding personal motivations, also in the section for persuading the addressee; (15), (16) and (17) are representative examples of this:

**Reasons for applying:**

(15) El primero de ellos [motivos] se remonta a mis estudios de bachillerato. En aquella época, la lengua española suscitó mi interés por su estructura, sus mecanismos, su léxico, […]

Otro motivo es que la lengua española ha supuesto para mí una herramienta profesional a la que he tenido la suerte de estar vinculado de manera permanente durante trece años. […]

Por último, me gustaría destacar otra razón que considero imprescindible. Es la ilusión. Porque si pudiera realizar estos estudios y acceder a la docencia del español, lograría orientarme de manera más eficaz a una profesión a la que deseo mucho acceder, también desde la responsabilidad. […] (ct1)

The first one [of the motives] dates back to my high school studies. In those days, Spanish caught my interest because of its structure, its devices, its vocabulary, […]

Another reason is that Spanish, for me, has been a professional tool and I have had the luck to be in constant contact with it over the past thirteen years […]

26
Lastly, I would like to point out another reason I consider essential. That is hope. Because if I could take this course and get into teaching Spanish, I would manage to focus my career more effectively in a profession that I honestly hope to join, also from responsibility.

**Persuading the reader:**

(16) El año pasado perdí el periodo de preinscripción por 15 días y por eso, a pesar de mi máxima motivación, no pudieron tener en cuenta mi candidatura. Lo entendí perfectamente y acepté esperarme hasta el año siguiente para intentarlo de nuevo. Desde entonces han pasado varios meses pero mi motivación no ha dejado de crecer.

(ct9)

Last year I missed the pre-enrolment period by two weeks and that is why despite my highest motivation my application could not be considered. I understood completely and I accepted that I had to wait until the following year to try again. Since then several months have gone by but my motivation has kept growing.

**Expressing future expectations:**

(17) Mi proyecto a partir de esta formación es poder viajar al extranjero para impartir clases. […] sé que una formación de calidad sumada a la experiencia me podrían abrir muchas puertas en otros países. Me entusiasma poder participar en el incremento de la calidad en la docencia de E/L*E en todo el mundo.

(ct7)

My plan if I get this training is to be able to travel abroad to teach. […] I know that quality training added to my experience could open a lot of doors for me abroad. I am enthusiastic to be able to participate in the rise in quality in teaching Spanish as a foreign language all over the world.

The three moves shown in (15)-(17), and Figure 5, stand out, secondly, because of the frequency of use of attitude markers, as noted in (18):

(18) […] el español sea parte vital de nuestra cultura, sino porque además representa un hecho social que incentiva el intercambio cultural, el entendimiento entre las personas y su integración en diversos contextos, aspectos todos ellos tan necesarios en nuestros días.

(ct1)

Spanish is an essential part of our culture, and also because it represents a social reality that promotes cultural exchange, understanding among people and their integration in a variety of contexts, all of these such necessary aspects today.

Mentions of the audience, of course, stand out in the R moves: greeting the reader, persuading the reader and ending politely, but also in reasons for applying, as can be seen in (19):

(19) Como podrán darse cuenta por mis estudios universitarios, mi interés por la diversidad lingüística y el intercambio idiomático siempre ha sido de gran importancia en mi vida.

(ct5)
As you can see from my university studies, my interest in language diversity and exchange has always been of great importance in my life.

(19) is a form of engagement (Hyland, 2005): the reader is mentioned to focus their attention and to include them as discourse participants, which allows writers to lead readers through the argument actively.

Turning to DMs, the data showing cooccurrences, figure 5, are the following: the one that predominates is DMs of discourse structure in the reason for applying move (20) and in the persuading the reader move (21):

(20) Aparte de los motivos ya descritos anteriormente, los principales motivos que me movieron a solicitar la preinscripción en este master […] son:

1. En primer lugar, considero que la estructura y el plan de estudios del master responden a la perfección a mis necesidades formativas, […]

2. En segundo lugar, el prestigio que atesora la Universidad […]

3. Una última razón de peso para mi deseo de realizar este master en esta universidad es el hecho de poder realizarlo en una ciudad tan cosmopolita e interesante como Barcelona. (ct16)

Besides as the reasons already described above, the main reasons that moved me to apply for enrolment in this master's degree […] are:

1. In the first place, I consider the structure and curriculum of the master’s to fit in perfectly with my educational needs. […]

2. Secondly, the prestige that is held by the university […],

3. The final reason of importance why I wish to undertake this master's in this university is to be able to do it in such a cosmopolitan and interesting city as Barcelona.

(21) Primero que todo, gracias por la oportunidad de poder postular a este Máster en tan prestigiosa casa de estudios (ct5)

First of all, thank you for the opportunity for me to apply for this master's in such a prestigious place of study.

6. Conclusions and future lines of research

From our initial research questions, the following four conclusions can be established. First, the most prominent macrotextual features in motivation letters in the Spanish corpus analyzed are the following five moves, all of which are present in at least 70% of the 50 motivation letters studied: persuading the reader, introducing the applicant and letter objectives, reasons for applying, expressing future expectations and final greeting and signing.
Second, among the prototypical microlinguistic characteristics, the ones that stand out among the modalizing elements are attitude markers and self mention elements; their frequency of use is accounted for by the promotional nature of any motivation letter, whereby its writer needs to include some self-promotion. As for DMs, the most frequent ones are the DMs of discourse structure, given the organized exposition of motives as a requirement for this argumentative text.

Third, there are significant correlations between the macro and the micro features identified. In the W moves, there is an understandable abundance of forms for referring to the first person of the writer; in the R moves the same is the case in forms for referring to the reader. The DMs of discourse structure are predominant in the reason for applying move.

Lastly, we conclude that the letters we have analyzed here are a hybrid genre (Bhatia, 2004), as they share academic and professional features at different levels: pragmatic (academic goals in conjunction with professional ones), informational (content) and linguistic (style). A motivation letter fits the criteria both of the academic type that has to be approved as matching the profile of the eligible student for a particular master’s program and of the professional texts (the cover letter that is attached to a CV in a job application). In this sense, Bhatia (2004) argues that discourse genres have to be understood and described in terms of “genre families” or “genre colonies”: motivation letters are hybrid forms because they share pragmatic, textual and linguistic traits from different genre families. They have content intersections with other academic “promotional” genres such as reference letters or curriculum vitae (Swales and Feak, 2011); at the same time, they share structural features with media genres such as letters to the editor and with literary genres as epistolary novels; finally, motivation letters also have many elements in common with job application letters.

All of these features show the image that graduate writers have of what constitutes an ideal type of motivation letter, as well as their mastery of written discourse. The fact that motivation letters are a hybrid genre, a combination between academic and professional texts, explains that among the writers of our corpus there is a certain amount of hesitation, especially when it comes to
using some of the procedures for interacting with the audience, those that have to do with opening salutation (*greeting the reader*) and with finishing off the letter (*ending politely*) just before closing and signature. Hesitations in interaction reflect that the writer only has a vague idea of the person who is to read the motivation letter and the proper type of relationship that one is expected to establish. The “occluded genre” nature of the text would explain this perplexity.

The inconsistencies pointed out are related with the interpersonal dimension of discourse, and especially with engagement (Hyland, 2005). Regarding the analysis of the genre under study, we could claim that graduate students are competent in stance resources when writing motivation letters but need to improve their engagement skills. The analysis of the audience is central in a genre family theory (Bhatia 2004, Ciapuscio, 2007) to distinguish the different nature of the addressee in each genre member of the family. The W moves are clearer than R moves in the genre competence of motivation letters. The results of our study point to the need to uncover and contrast the communicative and linguistic features in each of the members of a genre family and their status in academic and professional settings (authors 2011).

Thus, future lines of research emerge, related to the data and to the method of analysis. In terms of data, additional texts could be investigated: motivation letters relevant to other MA programs and/or written in other languages and/or relevant to other cultures/countries; and neighbouring genres could be analyzed: letters of applications, submission letters and reference letters. Additional methods giving further insights into the genre of motivation letters could come from a corpus-driven identification of recurrent phraseologies or interviews with faculty selecting applicants, for example. All this research would shed light on the most effective procedures to achieve a positive assessment in Spanish motivation letters, and it would, therefore, contribute to the genre analysis pedagogy.
Notes

1 This paper is related to the project IES 2.0: Digital literacy practices. Materials, classroom activity and online language resources, (EDU2011-28381; 2012-15), from the Spanish government Plan Nacional de Investigación Científica, Desarrollo e Innovación Tecnológica 2011. The authors of this article also belong to the Gr@el research group (Grup de recerca sobre aprenentatge i ensenyament de llengües, Research group in language learning and teaching), a consolidated research group financed by AGAUR 2014-2016 (ref. 2014 SGR 1042-F).

2 See, for example, the following sites, among others: http://www.gotostudyabroad.com/study-abroad/documentation/letter-of-motivation/sample-of-letter-of-motivation.htm (English); http://www.contenidoweb.info/otros/carta_de_motivacion.htm (Spanish).

3 A master’s candidate introduces his or her personal references: name and surname.

4 The title is not actually part of the structure of all motivation letters.

5 Just as the name of the candidate for the master’s is shown, this part of the letter is to show when (date) and where it was written.

6 All of the examples drawn from the corpus are verbatim [sic] transcriptions.

7 The authors of the letters have given their consent for the study, with their anonymity guaranteed. This is why all proper names have been omitted.

References


