PHD DEFENCES AND VIVAS

Špela Mežek and John M. Swales

Introduction

The PhD defence or viva voce is the doctoral student’s final rite of passage prior to the award of the doctoral degree. It usually takes the form of a mandatory final oral examination. As such, it has been the object of research in educational assessment and quality assurance (e.g. Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; Morley, Leonard & David, 2002), with also some attention to how students can best be prepared (e.g. Murray, 2009; Watts, 2012). Less research has focussed on the defence/viva as a genre; as a result, most descriptions of this genre have only been available in university policy documents and in some shorter descriptions and participant accounts. However, there are additionally a small number of transcripts extant, some accompanied by video or sound files (details below).

From a geographical perspective, most research on PhD defences in English is situated within Anglophone contexts such as the US, the UK, and Canada. However, such PhD defences are also held in other geographical contexts where English is used as a lingua franca. In these cases, PhD defences do not necessarily follow the American or British format, but instead follow local procedures. Defences of this type, however, remain largely unexplored.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce the genre of the PhD defence in different geographical contexts. The chapter surveys PhD defences in the US, the UK, Asia, and continental Europe. The description of PhD defences in these different contexts is provided through a review of previous research and complemented by informant accounts of defences they have participated in, incidental observation of Swedish defences in various disciplines, and any available institutional documents regulating how defences should be conducted. The only recordings and transcripts available to us are three PhD defences in the US from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) (49,000 words; Simpson et al., 2002), each of them in a different discipline (Swales, 2004), and an earlier one in sociology (Grimshaw, 1989), and the transcripts of four PhD defences (66,000 words) in English linguistics from Sweden. The Swedish defences must, thus, stand as representative of non-American defences, in order to explore parameters along which the genre can vary.

The PhD defence in the United States

In the United States, the document under scrutiny is called a “dissertation” rather than a thesis, and the oral examination is called a “defense” rather than a viva. There is no requirement that an academic from another institution be invited, although this sometimes
happens if some special expertise is thought helpful. The examining committee consists of a Chair or sometimes two Co-chairs (candidate’s advisor(s)/supervisor(s)), plus three or four faculty members, one of whom is “cognate”; that is, he or she comes from another department. Committee members are chosen by the candidate, often in consultation with the Chair. Before the defence, they have all approved the proposal and may have even seen and commented on various drafts of the thesis. The proceedings are nominally open to the public, but there is an increasing trend in the sciences for a “half and half” scenario; in other words, the candidate’s opening presentation is attended by others (typically graduate students from the candidate’s home department, interested faculty members, close friends, family members, etc.), followed by general questions from the audience, but then the committee and candidate withdraw to a closed room. The usual—if dubious—justification for this is that it provides a better opportunity for the committee to ask “hard questions”. The size of the audience for defences can vary from nobody to perhaps 40–50 people. Dissertation defences usually last around two hours.

The nature of this genre is rather hard to pin down. Are dissertation defences, on the one hand, simply “meaningless rituals”, essentially epideictic celebrations, with the various actors “just going through the motions”? Or are they, on the other, tough and true oral examinations of the submitted work, consisting of carefully prepared but unpredictable interrogations of the texts under review and thoughtful and intelligent responses by the candidates? Or are they sometimes both, or at least sometimes more and sometimes less one or the other? One thing, however, is pretty clear; the outcome will be “pass” with, in nearly all cases, various requirements for revisions to be undertaken.

Unfortunately, our primary knowledge of the discoursal properties of this genre is limited to a single sociology defence recorded at Indiana University in 1975 (Grimshaw, 1989; Grimshaw & Burke, 1994) plus the three dissertation defences recorded around the end of the last century as part of the MICASE project. In his 1989 volume, Grimshaw discusses what he believes to be certain stylistic oddities and inconsistencies in the defence he had examined. He observes:

It does seem possible, however, that there are speech events which are defined as somehow simultaneously formal and informal—formal because of institutional constraints and the importance of the business at hand, informal because of the nature of interpersonal relationships among cointeractants.

(Grimshaw, 1989, p. 522)

However, this “mixed variety” style, with its juxtapositions of formal phraseology (“I would now like to address the question of…”), everyday lexical bundles (“Could you say a little bit about…”), and technical jargon intercalated with the contractions and hesitations of on-line everyday speech, turns out to be broadly characteristic of American academic speech as a whole. Since this type of discourse is just as likely to occur in lectures, panels, and question periods following presentations by outside speakers, we know that it cannot really be ascribed to “the nature of interpersonal relationships among cointeractants”. Nor, indeed, given its prevalence, can it best be described as a “mixed” style since it appears to be the norm rather than an exception. From an insider, emic, perspective on academic discourse, the centrality of this style needs to be characterised in its own terms, and not in terms of some odd collection of heterogeneities.

In fact, what we see here in the defence is the performing of academic personae, be they candidates, committee members, speakers or questioners, who do not want to “talk like
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books”, and yet who, when speaking, are “on show” as careful and thoughtful human beings; who are repositories of expertise and yet are capable of humour; and who are able to wear their scholarship sufficiently lightly so as not to alienate the other participants, whose reactions to their own utterances they (usually) closely monitor. Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1994) explore the ritualistic nature of this genre and note, in contradistinction to “high” or formal rituals, that “the ritual character rests in the performance of the event itself, not in its content or terminology” (p. 394). Of course, this is in considerable contrast to many defences in continental Europe, where the ritualistic apparatus is foregrounded.

One small sign of this blending of relaxed tone and high purpose in the defence can be seen in the form, distribution, and putative role of vocatives. According to Biber et al. (1999), vocatives are much commoner in multi-party exchanges, presumably often to avoid confusion. In the 1975 defence, there were 41 vocatives used in about two hours of speech. All were in first-name format and often abbreviated (e.g. Pat, Sherm). Sixteen addressed the candidate by name, 21 occurred in exchanges among the committee members, ten of these being uttered by the Chair, while just four were used by the candidate to address a committee member. The committee members often used vocatives to pre-announce to the candidate that questions were coming up, as in:

.mm hm I was particularly concerned Lee with the th- possible implications of this for your acceptance…

In the three MICASE defences, the cumulative total amounted to only 18 vocatives, seven of which invoked the candidate. There is no obvious explanation for the discrepancy in vocative use between the 1975 defence and those recorded around 25 years later. However, a senior doctoral student at Michigan (Collette Moore, p. c.) noted that, if a candidate is on first-name terms with three members of her committee but not the fourth, she will be likely to “no-name” all their examiners in order to avoid the overt disparities that would otherwise arise. Similar inhibitions might also affect committee members.

So far, we have attempted to characterise and capture an initial something of the verbal and cognitive flavour of this genre in the US in order for it to be contrasted later with comparable events in Europe and elsewhere. We now turn to the structure of this genre. When we put the Indiana and the Michigan defences together, we see sufficient variation to suggest that a simple outline structure makes a lot of sense at this stage in our knowledge. In contrast to Indiana, the Michigan tradition of having an early in-camera session forms a natural boundary between the Preliminaries and the Defence Proper, during which the committee reads each other’s reports and decides on the order of questioners. One consequence of this is that candidates’ narrative accounts (or, rather, their attempts at such sustained monologues) become the first element of the Defence Proper. Second, we can build into the generic structure the option of “rounds”, and, third, since the Defence Proper (as Grimshaw’s choice of terminology already implies) remains the longest and most important part of the genre, this needs to be highlighted. The resultant picture is in Figure 28.1 (elements in parentheses are optional).

A fairly clear sense of the similarities and differences among various defences can be gained from calculating the number of actual turns—for example, excluding back-channels and failed attempts to get the floor—taken by the various participants (Table 28.1). The percentage of turns by the candidate provides some insight into how much the defence maintains a question-and-answer format between the candidate and another participant, and how much the defence involves “sidetrack” discussions among the non-candidate speakers. As
the table shows, the Q&A frame was largely maintained in the computer science defence, but was considerably eroded in social psychology, with the musicology defence falling somewhere in the middle. The percentages also tell us something about the role of the Chair. In the computer science defence, the Chair asked very few questions and largely functioned administratively. Apart from one short Q&A exchange, he largely left “his” candidate to fend for herself. In considerable contrast, the Chair in social psychology, a distinguished university professor and very well known in his field, played a considerable further role in supporting “his” candidate.

The Chair in the musicology defence also handled the management of the defence, but additionally asked her share of “sharp” questions to “her” candidate, especially toward the end of the speech event. Further, this defence was the only one in which there was a clear sense of “rounds” of questions by individual committee members, with the Chair going last, and the Chair managing these “rounds”. In social psychology, any hopes for such a structure broke down early, as shown in this extract. The candidate is about six lines into a summary of his dissertation when this occurs:

Memb 1: c c- c- could I ask a procedure question? um, should we interrupt throughout this, or how do you how do you wanna proceed?
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Table 28.1 Percentages of turns per participant type in three MICASE defences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Computer science</th>
<th>Social psychology</th>
<th>Musicology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of recording</td>
<td>113 min</td>
<td>76 min</td>
<td>91 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 4</td>
<td>5 (n.r.)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chair: uh, well normally it’s just a quick, run-through, but I don’t if people wanna do it on a on a you know just…, in this, fashion common on the fourth floor <LAUGH SS> that’s fine too. I don’t know, what do people wanna do? I mean there’s nothing (xx)

Unknown 1: (whatever)

Memb 1: I mean cuz there’re various points of which, I think I might wanna want clarification and or comment on certain things

Chair: okay well [Cand: okay, yeah] why don’t you why] don’t you do that?

The final topic we explore is the role of humour in this genre, especially as we might not expect to find much humour in the dissertations themselves. Both episodes of general laughter (GL) and individual laughter (IL) occur quite frequently in all three defences, as shown in Table 28.2. In effect, then, in the whole dataset, a burst of general laughter occurs on average about once every eight minutes.

For reasons of space, we focus on the general laughter episodes in the social psychology defence, although it is important to point out that there are at least three GL episodes close to the beginnings of all the other defences. It seems as though Grimshaw’s (1989) opening “settling in” segment encourages participants to maximise opportunities for humour as a way of relaxing tension, creating a non-adversarial interactional framework, and/or “deformalising” the ceremonial aspects of the genre.

The social psychology defence actually has a laughter episode right at its beginning:

Table 28.2 Laughter episodes in three MICASE defences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Length of recording</th>
<th># of GL episodes</th>
<th># of IL episodes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer science</td>
<td>113 min</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social psychology</td>
<td>76 min</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicology</td>
<td>91 min</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>280 min</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Chair: okey-doke, uh well Kim Sook was gonna do another, very brief summary of what he’s up to. uh to bring it all up on our screens…

Cand: alright, um…first of all I’d like to thank all of you, for agreeing to be on the committee, reading the draft, and coming to the defense, being with me at, my last moment of, graduate school.

Memb 1: <LAUGH> such optimism <LAUGH SS>

We can see here that our distinguished university professor begins very informally (“okey-doke…what he’s up to”). In response, the candidate opens gracefully with a more formal expression of appreciation to his committee, the last part of which leads to the committee member’s (Memb 1) witty sally at the candidate’s expense. The sally is successful because of the faint chance that the candidate might in the end fail his oral examination and have to do it all over again.

It might be thought that this kind of joking banter is only permissible for those in authority, but toward the end of the defense this particular candidate can turn the tables, as it were. The necessary context is that earlier the Chair, who is in late middle age, had failed to remember the second part of a question he wanted to ask:

Chair: … how can you put, those, drive all three of those things from the same, core notion?

Cand: i mean, I was surprised that um, you, do not see the connection. <LAUGH SS> that was [funny

Chair: yes], we’ve been talking about the aging problem <LAUGH SS>

Cand: (actually) to me, [to me

Memb 1: it’s obvious] <LAUGH SS>

The three instances of general laughter here have very different origins, but work together to create a delightful exchange. The first occurs in response to the candidate’s (tongue-in-cheek?) expression of surprise at his advisor’s apparent obtuseness; his advisor then rises to the occasion, turning the joke on himself by referring to his incipient senility; and when the candidate begins to respond, a quick-witted committee member completes the candidate’s utterance with a very forthright “it’s obvious”, thus extending the jocularity at the Chair’s expense. Humour, along with informality and other features, is here used to reduce tensions and to moderate the pious insistencies of institutional regulations.

The PhD defence in Sweden

In Sweden, the oral examination of a PhD thesis is called disputation. The PhD defence is a public event which is about two hours long. A number of people participate in the examination: the respondent (“the candidate”), the opponent (“the examiner”), the Chair, and the grading committee (three to five members). The student’s supervisors (advisors) are present as well. Since the defence is a public event, other members of the department, the respondent’s family and friends, PhD students, and others also attend the defence. The audience of the defence can, thus, be from a few people to over a hundred. As participants often do not speak Swedish, defences are typically in English, particularly in the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and social sciences. This use of English is fully naturalised in Swedish universities.
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The participants at the defence come from different departments and institutions. The Chair of the defence is a senior member of the department (sometimes the student’s principal supervisor), whereas the opponent is from a different institution (national or foreign) than the respondent. Different institutions have different regulations about who comprises the grading committee; however, at least one member has to be from a different institution, only one can be from the respondent’s department, and none should have worked with the respondent before. A deputy/replacement member also needs to be present.

It is the grading committee that determines the grade (pass/fail) after the defence is finished. As in the US, very few theses receive the fail grade. However, unlike US practice, the thesis is published by the university several weeks before the defence, and the changes to the thesis are only made if the PhD student decides to publish their thesis as a monograph after the completion of their degree. The thesis is, thus, considered a finished work before the defence, and, as such, a failing grade would be quite shocking.

The structure of the Swedish defence is in parts notably different from the American defence (Figure 28.2). In the first part, the Preliminaries, the Chair first opens the defence, introduces the participants, and explains the procedures. Because the thesis has already been printed, the Preliminaries are usually concluded by comments from the respondent, who presents the audience with a list of errata or other comments about the thesis. The Defence Proper follows a different structure, as well. Here, the respondent and the opponent are the most important participants, as the majority of interactions are between them. The opponent’s role, however, varies depending on the discipline. In the natural sciences, it is the respondent who provides the main summary of the thesis, whereas in the humanities and social sciences, this is the opponent’s job. This summary is usually quite long; in our corpus, the summaries lasted between 7 and 33 minutes. In the humanities and social sciences, the summary is usually followed by a response given by the respondent, and, in the natural sciences, by the opponent putting the thesis into a broader context. In the natural sciences, the order of these two parts can also be reversed. After the summary part is complete, the opponent and the respondent have a discussion about the thesis. Following is a dialogue between the grading committee and the respondent, and, finally, the audience and the respondent. The defence is then concluded by the Chair. The grade is decided by the grading committee in a secluded room immediately after the defence and the results of their discussion are usually reported back to the student and others within an hour after the defence.

Another difference between American and Swedish defences is in the distribution of turns the various participants took during the defence (Table 28.3). As in the American defences, the candidate (“respondent”) took the most turns. However, what is different in the Swedish defences is that the turns taken are distributed relatively evenly between the respondent (ca. 45 per cent) and the rest of the participants combined (ca. 55 per cent). The opponent is the person with the second highest percentage of turns taken. Other participants, three to four members of the grading committee, and in our corpus, three to nine audience members, each took fewer turns than those in the American defences. The Chair mainly functioned administratively. One defence where the pattern is different is Defence 2, where the opponent took fewer turns. In addition, the opponent questions part of the defence usually had a higher average word count for the respondents’ turns than the opponents’, but this was not so in Defence 2. The opponent in this defence took fewer, but on average longer, turns. Instead, the audience took more turns. A possible explanation for this is that the respondent was slightly more reserved and gave shorter answers, and so the audience had more time and more topics they wanted to bring up for discussion.
Part A. Preliminaries
Greetings (Chair)
↓
Introductions (Chair)
↓
Explanation of procedures (Chair)
↓
(Comments by the candidate ('respondent'))

Part B. The Defence Proper
Thesis summary (Hum & SS: opponent; NS: respondent)
↓
(Hum & SS: Response ((respondent))
NS: Situating the thesis (opponent)
↓
Dialogue between opponent and respondent
↓
Dialogue between the grading committee and respondent
↓
Questions by the audience

Part C. Closing Segment
Announcement of end (Chair)
↓
Explanation of procedures following the defence (Chair)

Part D. In Camera Session

Part E. Announcement of Results

Figure 28.2 Structure of the Swedish PhD defence conducted in English

Table 28.3 Percentages of turns per participant type in four Swedish PhD defences in English linguistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>Defence 1</th>
<th>Defence 2</th>
<th>Defence 3</th>
<th>Defence 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Length of recording</td>
<td>102 min</td>
<td>87 min</td>
<td>127 min</td>
<td>116 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member 3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy member</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience (combined)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the time the exchanges go back and forth between the speakers; somebody asks the respondent a question and the respondent gives a long answer, after which they have a discussion on the points brought up in the answer. It is also common that the subsequent questioners refer to previous discussions or pose follow-up questions. In this way, the Q&A sections can be seen as discussions between various speakers, even though usually only two speakers converse at a time. However, occasionally several people have a conversation together as well. This occurs particularly in the later part of the Defence Proper, and in instances where the topic of the discussion interests several people or where the student has problems responding. The exchange below is an example of the latter where several participants get involved in the discussion between an audience member and the respondent.

Aud 4: [... ] have you looked into that w- w- what kinds of words that you say are not advanced maybe uh [(xx)

Resp: uh] yeah that's a very good question yeah and I think that, that has to do with th- the list being outdated th- th- I think there are a few, words that are common now uh I can’t really remember any but but

Chair: computer is often given [[Resp: yeah] as an] example

Resp: yeah computer yeah or something [(Opp: text) like that] yeah [internet <Many people speaking at the same time>]

Opp: text] which was rare [Resp: mhm] it’s now very common [[Resp: yeah] to] text

Resp: w- words like that uh uh th- they uh they are very common among the learners but the the they um, um are marked as advanced uh words uh by the measure

Aud 4: right

Aud 1: we’d have the reversed version of ones falling out sahib was among the four thousand most common words in cobuild in ninety eighty-seven <LAUGH- General>

As in the American defences, the speech in the Swedish defences is a mixture of very formal and everyday phrases. The Chair in particular tends to use set and formal phrases in the Preliminaries (“I declare the proceedings open”), the Closing Segment (“I declare the session closed”), and when marking the start of the different questions sections of the defence (“we now turn to the members of the grading committee who are invited to ask questions”). The opponent summary tends to be more formal as well, particularly the beginning.

The vocatives, similar to the American defences, are in the first-name format. The majority of the vocatives are used by the Chair referring to the members of the committee and the audience when calling on people to ask questions. Out of 47 vocatives used in the four defences, 38 were used by the Chair. The rest were used by the opponent, members of the grading committee, and the audience, to refer to the respondent. Interestingly, none were used by the respondent, possibly because the Chair had already specified who the speakers were. From this, the administrative function of the Chair is clear; they make sure the defence follows the procedures and that it runs smoothly. Unlike in the American defences, Swedish Chairs do not ask questions.

Another aspect we looked at in the corpus of Swedish defences is laughter. Here episodes of GL and IL are also very common. In fact, in the Swedish defences, laughter appears to be much more common than in the American defences (Table 28.4). Previously it has been
reported that humour is perhaps not that common in Swedish defences (Fillmore, 1994). Our results show otherwise, however. It is unclear whether this is due to differences in transcription methods, educational cultures and disciplines, or individual differences.

General laughter episodes often came very close together; there were periods when people were making jokes and then longer periods of serious discussion without any humour. In the example below, we can see one such period where we counted five general bursts of laughter. Before this excerpt, the opponent asked the respondent which questions they were expecting to get that they did not. After providing one such question and then answering it, the respondent asks whether they should provide more questions, which is where the excerpt below starts.

Resp: yeah, sh- shall I, go on
Opp: uh one more. <LAUGH-General> can you manage one more
Resp: yes. um you did not ask me about domain loss so much
Opp: no I thought that probably… <LAUGH-General>
Resp: oh you [thought somebody else would do it
Opp: (xx) there there] would be uh [[Resp: sure] thought] I would leave [that to to him
Resp: yeah, yeah.] yes. <LAUGH-General> but I shouldn’t maybe answer that then (should I). … <LAUGH-General> uh should I yes
Opp: I think you can get it one way or another
Resp: yeah, or
Memb 1: yeah please do <LAUGH-General>
[Respondent gives a 98-word answer]

This section of the transcript would be difficult to understand without the video. The second laughter episode, for example, starts after the opponent gestures towards one of the members of the grading committee who is interested in domain loss. The third and the fourth episodes happen while the respondent is alternating looking at the opponent and the committee member in question, as if waiting for permission from both of them to answer the question. The final laughter episode in this segment occurs after the permission is given by the committee member. What generates laughter in this segment is, thus, the break in protocol: the respondent seeking non-verbal permission to answer a question from a speaker who is at that moment not a part of the conversation.

As in the American defences, laughter episodes have various origins. They also occur during all of the speakers’ turns, so the respondents generate laughter as well. It is also quite common that laughter episodes occur at the beginning of sections. The following example illustrates three general laughter episodes occurring in the response section, where
the student is asked whether the opponent’s summary of their thesis was correct. The laughter generated here might be due to the student’s awkwardness at having to evaluate the opponent’s summary of their work. At the end of this segment, the tone of the defence shifts from the playful intermission to a more serious tone.

Opp:  [...] that was my summary, but uh uh is that is that a reasonable summary generally <LAUGH-General> are there things that were quite different
Resp: that was a very good and very thorough summary it was very well done yes yes <LAUGH-Resp> <LAUGH-General> no you you got everything it was, really well done. <LAUGH-General> I don’t have anything to add. um except some of the questions that you had during the uh the presentation you said you’d like to discuss them
Opp: should [[Resp: yeah] should] we should we discuss those first
Resp: yes

Laughter is, thus, quite typical in these types of transition episodes, marking the endings and beginnings of different parts of the defence, and having a function here to relax the atmosphere.

**PhD defences in some other countries**

**Australia**

PhD defences are rare in Australia, although the candidate is required to give a presentation before the final submission of their thesis (Green & Powell, 2007). Instead, the grade is determined on the basis of written reports by the examiners. Only if there are ambiguities or uncertainty can an examiner request an oral defence (Mullins & Kiley, 2002).

**Belgium**

In Belgium, the PhD defence (verdediging/soutenance) is a public event, which can be attended by people outside of the department. The defences usually last about 1.5 hours. The defence is scheduled after the printed thesis has been sent to an examination jury who decide whether the candidate is ready for the defence. According to our informant, some institutions have a longer review process before the thesis is sent to the jury. At the defence, the main participants are the Chair, the candidate, and the five members of the examination jury, one or two of whom are the candidate’s supervisors, and one an international scholar. The defence itself is formal: the examiners wear the official university gowns and the Chair uses ceremonial phrases. The structure of the defence is as follows:

i  The Chair opens the session and welcomes the participants and the audience;
ii  The candidate presents their thesis;
iii  The examiners ask questions;
iv  The examiners discuss the grade in a separate room;
v  The examiners and the Chair come back into the room. The Chair announces the result (pass/fail);
vi  The supervisor gives a laudatio;
vn  The candidate thanks everybody and invites them to a reception.
Step vi, the laudatio, is not only typical of PhD defences in Belgium, but also the Netherlands (Green & Powell, 2007). In laudatio, the supervisor praises the candidate and his/her achievements, and in this way adds to the ceremonial feel of the Belgian PhD defence. In some Belgian defences the laudatio is, after a defence in English, in another language (e.g. Dutch, German, French) for the benefit of the family members present.

**Canada**

In Canada, the PhD defence is also a public occasion, which can be attended by an audience other than the examining committee, Chair, and supervisors. Its structure follows the American format. There is variation in Canadian defences, though. Chen (2011) points out that in some universities, PhD students have two defences, although the final is not public, rather like the US “half and half” system in the sciences. Some candidates are also allowed to read the examiners’ reports before the actual defence. What is unclear, though, is whether there are also differences between disciplines.

**Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, PhD vivas are preceded by examiners’ reports. The vivas are closed events, although in some institutions other research and academic staff and invited guests are allowed to attend as well (PolyU Handbook, 2014). The viva begins with the candidate’s presentation of the thesis, followed by the questions and answers session. Who is allowed to ask questions differs depending on the institution. At some institutions, only members of the examination committee are allowed to ask questions (HKU Procedures, 2014), while at others the audience may ask questions as well (PolyU Handbook, 2014). At some institutions, it is also possible for the candidate and the examiners to have further discussion after the audience questions, although this session may be closed to others in attendance (PolyU Handbook, 2014).

**Iran**

Work on defences in Iran has been done by Don and Izadi (e.g. 2011), who use conversation analysis to investigate how participants achieve face in their corpus of 12 PhD defences. They report that Iranian defences follow the American format: i) introduction; ii) candidate’s presentation; iii) questioning; iv) evaluation; v) result.

**Norway**

In Norway, like in Sweden, the thesis is published by the university before the defence (*disputas*). It is evaluated by three committee members who decide whether it is ready for the defence; they also examine the public defence. The structure of the defence proper follows the American format, with the difference that the preferred form of address is the third person (Burling, 1997). As in other countries, there are variations in defences between different disciplines, faculties, and universities.

In Norway, the candidate also has to give a lecture on a given topic other than the one in their thesis (Kyvik, 2014). *Disputas*, thus, do not focus only on the thesis work done by the candidate, but also on the candidate’s general knowledge of the subject and their ability to lecture on various topics.
Spain

According to one of our informants, in Spain the PhD defence (*defensa*) is a public event, 1–3 hours long. Reviewers write reports before the defence, and based on these reports it is decided whether the candidate is ready for the defence. The defence is chaired by one of the five examination committee members. The structure of the defence is the following:

i. The Chair opens the session, introduces the participants, and explains the procedures;
ii. The candidate presents their study;
iii. The committee members ask questions. The candidate has a choice whether to answer all of the questions at once or individually;
iv. The audience may comment or ask questions, but in this particular case, only people with PhDs were allowed to ask questions;
v. The examiners have an in-camera discussion;
vi. The Chair announces the results.

No revisions are required of the candidate if they receive a passing grade.

UK

Research in educational assessment and quality assurance has shown that there is much variation between vivas in different institutions around the UK, not only in their structure, but also in whether the examiners are required to submit reports both before and after the viva, or only after the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), and whether a candidate can receive a failing grade on the basis of their viva (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001), such as being offered a lesser degree (e.g. MPhil).

Generally, though, the PhD viva in the UK is a private examination in practice, although not necessarily always in policy (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). It is conducted behind closed doors, and only the candidate, the Chair, two examiners, and in some cases the supervisor, are allowed to attend. In the viva proper, the examiners ask the candidate questions about their thesis and research process. After the viva, the examiners can either decide to pass the candidate (sometimes with required corrections to the thesis), fail the candidate, or suggest a resubmission.

One account of the British viva (Trafford & Leshem, 2002) gives a more detailed description of the viva structure:

i. Pre-meeting between the two examiners;
ii. Greetings and introductions by the Chair;
iii. Opening remarks by the candidate;
iv. Questioning by the examiners;
v. Closing remarks by the candidate;
vi. In-camera session without the candidate and supervisor;
vii. Results.

According to this account, the candidate was invited to say something about him/herself and the reasons for choosing the particular topic of research before the questioning session. This reportedly relaxed the candidate.
However, there are differences between vivas in different disciplines. Jackson and Tinkler (2001) have reported that in the natural sciences the vivas are longer and fewer candidates are told about the examiners' decision beforehand. They also found differences in candidates' perceptions of vivas after the fact, which might indicate that vivas serve a different purpose in different disciplines. These differences between disciplines are something which requires further research.

**Concluding remarks**

Dissertation defences/vivas are often dismissed as “meaningless rituals”, but they are clearly different in rhetoric, length and character from ritualistic and ceremonial genres of the academy that deal with the awarding of prizes, honours, and degrees. Even if in the great majority of cases the outcome will be “pass” (in some countries after some revisions to the text), the dissertation defence provides an opportunity for an important academic conversation that operates to certify the candidate’s membership in his or her chosen specialisation. In effect, in public defences everybody wants to do well: the Chair to demonstrate control of events; the examiners/committee members to demonstrate their expert knowledge and yet show their humanity; and the candidate to proudly defend the document that the examiners have (one hopes) all read and yet be ready to accept that his or her document, while meeting the institutional requirement of “making an original contribution to knowledge”, is still not quite as good as it might be.

Any repurposing of this genre (Askehave & Swales, 2001) suggests that there is a sufficiently complex agenda at work to disallow any single (or simple) function to predominate. Certainly, there remains an examination aspect, but equally (or close to it) there is a sense in some contexts, such as the US, that we have been witnessing a high-level editorial committee meeting. There is, additionally, a palpable air of what might be called “celebratory relief” whereby all participants share a sense that a long intellectual journey is in the process of coming to an end. Finally, the genre offers a showcase opportunity for the major players so that they can present themselves as demotic scholars within the evolved traditions of university life, within which expertise, humanity, wit, and insight can—ideally—be communicated without excessive pedantry or undue egotism.

**Implications**

Currently, little is available dealing specifically with language training for doctoral candidates, although some universities do offer English courses on speaking in research contexts. Courses should also be offered where candidates could practise summarising and presenting their theses and answering what they consider “difficult” questions. Ideally, mock defences/vivas, following the same procedures as the “real” defences/vivas, should also be organised.

A further promising international development is the emergence of “Three Minute Thesis” (3MT) competitions, where doctoral students are helped to summarise their research projects in just three minutes for a general academic audience. Examples of these can be found on the web.

**Further reading**

Swales (2004)
PhD defences and vivas

Related chapters

12 Dialogic interaction
27 PhD adviser and student interactions as a spoken academic genre

References


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