

BOOK REVIEW
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STUDIES ON ACADEMIC WRITING:
THE ROLE OF DIFFERENT RHETORICAL CONVENTIONS
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The increasing dominance of English as a medium of international communication and academic publishing poses newer and newer challenges to language users, teachers and researchers as to the nature of what is commonly called “intercultural competencies”. Contrastive Rhetoric has offered important insights in this area regarding, among others, culture based beliefs influencing novice and expert writers’ discourse organisation strategies, representing self and others as well as attempts to create interest, authority and reliability in different languages and discourse communities. In the following, I shall review a new contribution to this field: the IJES monograph on “Academic Writing: The role of Different Rhetorical Conventions” (edited by Monroy-Casas). The merit of this monograph lies in the fact that it presents new research having been initiated by the editorial board for the purposes of this publication, at the same time giving an overview of new perspectives in Contrastive Rhetoric. I shall first outline the development of main research interests and recent concerns, which will be followed by a review of these concerns as represented in the work of the authors in the volume.

Development of research interests in Contrastive Rhetoric

After the 1970s, when the idea of culture-based rhetorical differences was raised by Robert Kaplan, ESL students came to be considered disadvantaged not only on account of their linguistic shortcomings but also their L1-based rhetorical conventions (see, for instance, Silva’s (1993) presentation of the features of ESL writing). Thus, inspired by the idea of linguistic determinism, research started to focus on differences (often presented in a rather critical, ethnocentric voice), and the main aim of writing instruction was to eliminate L1 schemata and inculcate new L2-based rhetorical forms. However, further studies of native English speaking students’ and ESL students’ writing revealed that both groups go through similar developmental stages in rhetorical development (e.g. Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1989; Stalker and Stalker, 1989; Andrews, 1995) and ESL writers produce lower quality writing because of language barriers as well as not having received writing instruction in their mother tongue at all. Such considerations somewhat lowered the critical bias towards ESL writing and focused attention on instruction. Studies of ESL students’ initiation into ESL academic rhetoric (e.g. Connor and Mayberry, 1996) revealed a lot of interesting information about how ESL students rely on their L1 background to acquire L2 standards. It has been increasingly acknowledged that an awareness of L1 intellectual traditions is part of intercultural competence and a basis for studying L2 based conventions. The knowledge and strategic use of different rhetorical schemata is a key skill and great advantage of multilingual writers. The

focus of instruction and research has gradually shifted from the critical exploration of cultural differences towards a striving to describe such differences from insider and outsider perspectives, as well as a need to respect and acknowledge them both in instruction and intercultural communication. Such an approach includes the exploration of the roots of cultural differences and developing pedagogical practices for harmonising differing L1-L2 requirements (cf. Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) on individual voice or Petric (2004) and Bloch (2008) on different attitudes issues of plagiarism). The idea of harmonising cultural differences has recently been taken even further by, for instance, Li, (2008), who argues for a search for a collective identity in global communication involving the study of similarities in cultural traditions and the process of writing development regardless of cultural background. Finally, the shift towards a more democratic approach also generated new methodological concerns, such as the focus on similarities (e.g., Wolfe, 2008), “insider” research, (which may mean teacher research or international team research) and a heightened attention to a non-judgemental tone (e.g., Kubota, 1999; Magnuczné Godó, 2003) in presenting findings.

New concerns in Contrastive Rhetoric: The IJES monograph

The monograph clearly demonstrates that intercultural rhetoric, increasingly evident and influential in global communication practices, has a great impetus on language use, teaching and research. As Monroy-Casas points out in his introduction, the studies of the volume are characterised by two major tendencies. Firstly, there is a clear concern for revisiting and criticising the theoretical basis of CR and looking for new frameworks; secondly, there is a focus on writing as a socially constructed practice, in which the perceived interaction between writer and reader greatly influences the decisions of writers. Beyond these, authors also address several concerns mentioned in the previous section, e.g. the developmental features and good practices of rhetoric, initiation into academic rhetoric, roots of rhetorical differences, harmonising cultural differences as well as insider research.

The reconsideration of the traditional theoretical underpinnings of CR appears as a major theme in Zhu Yunxia’s discussion of relevant approaches for the study of language and intercultural communication and in Monroy-Casas’s article on linearity in language. Revisiting Kaplan’s (1966) model of culture-based discourse organisation, Zhu Yunxia argues for a more holistic approach incorporating cross-cultural pragmatics and genre studies to avoid broad generalisations. She points out that in every culture there is a set of rhetorical options language users can choose from, which is why it is a mistake to make generalisations from a single speech act to the whole of the discourse structure. Choice depends on communicative purposes, genre expectations as well as related issues of politeness, required levels of indirectness and face saving. As a result of severe criticism, Kaplan himself modified his initial claim in 1987, and accepted the idea of rhetorical options in every culture. However, this position statement seems to have had a much less significant impact on research than his initial strong claim, and, as Zhu Yunxia demonstrates, researchers tend to focus on confirming Kaplan’s idea of circularity in Chinese discourse organisation rather than looking for variety. Reflecting on Kirkpatrick’s works (1991, 1993 in Zhu Yunxia), she offers evidence to prove that the subordinate-main structure resulting in what Kaplan termed as “circular discourse organisation” is not the only option in Chinese. Firstly, she points out that the internationalisation of Chinese literacy has brought strong Western influences and introduced the main-subordinate structure as an alternative. This is especially evident in business letters, where the persuasive communicative purpose necessitates a main-subordinate structure. Secondly, variety is also present in the different realisations of the subordinate-main structure as claims are mitigated to a different extent in the three main styles of writing in

Chinese. What may be interpreted as a “subordinate” or unrelated introductory part by an outsider may prove to be a required politeness formula, after which the real purpose of the communication is elaborated on according to the main-subordinate logic. Zhu Yunxia’s approach definitely justifies the insights that insider research may provide. As the author rightly claims, accounting for such variety is the next major challenge for the study of culture-based rhetoric.

Monroy-Casas also returns to Kaplan’s cultural thought patterns and points out that although intuitively appealing, these patterns lack theoretical description on the basis of which texts could be submitted to more principled analysis. Starting out from the most prestigious concept of linearity, he offers a definition of linearity and tests this concept on the writing of English and Spanish writers’ expository essays. The authors specify linearity along 7 criteria including a single functional thesis, thematic progression, monothematic paragraph structure, personal tone, inter-paragraph cohesion, concreteness, sentence simplicity. The investigation shows no significant difference in any criterion: both groups demonstrated an equally strong tendency for linear discourse organisation. Monroy-Casas’s contribution, while calling attention to the similarities of Spanish and English academic writing, also calls attention to an important need in CR research: defining variables more carefully.

Hyland and Martín-Martín conceptualise academic writing as a socially constructed activity and demonstrate how this influences authors’ attempts to formulate acceptable and justifiable claims according to the perceived requirements of the targeted discourse community. Hyland positions academic writing as embedded in social practices and disciplinary interactions. However academics may try to create the nimbus of truth around their practices and findings, they have to face the fact that their messages are filtered through the subjective assumptions of the reader and the theory that provides the framework for describing publicly observable phenomena. In this sense, authors can only convey credibility if they display familiarity with disciplinary persuasive practices of their target discourse communities, that is, if they can relate “independent beliefs to shared experience” (p. 4). As both Hyland and Martín-Martín in the volume claim, a crucial aspect of this framing act is the way authors position themselves and their claims in relation to others. Hyland studies stance (self-presentation) and engagement (audience awareness) in a corpus of 240 research articles from different disciplines in hard and soft sciences. Through the analysis of observable textual phenomena and interviews with academics, Hyland also exemplifies the benefits a multifaceted analysis may provide.

Martín-Martín contributes a comparative study of mitigating claims in research papers to the same line of investigation, at the same time emphasising the need to involve more and more languages in the study of cross-cultural pragmatics. Drawing on the idea of discourse community expectations, he highlights politeness and vagueness as two key issues in academic discourse. Politeness is important as making claims either in connection with our own or others’ work is a face threatening act (Myers (1989) in Martín-Martín), which has to be mitigated by hedging primarily for self-defence. Vagueness, another way of avoiding making strong claims, has a different implication, too: science in general is doubtful and uncertain, so the author might not have the final word in the question presented. Vagueness, in this sense increases credibility (Salager-Meyer (1994) in Martín-Martín). Building on the assumption that the pragmatics of hedging is strongly culture-dependent, Martín-Martín proposes a comparative study of English and Spanish research articles along three hedging features: subjectivisation, indetermination and depersonalisation. Contrary to initial expectations, the two corpora do not show significant differences in an measure. While English authors use slightly more hedges (especially indetermination) and Spanish writers tend to prefer depersonalisation for self-protection, essentially the two groups demonstrate the

same tendency of hedging across the different sections of the articles.

Yichun Liu and Xiaoye You's study of initiation into ESL academic practices as well as Baroudy's study of writing behaviours focus attention on the issues of instruction. In a remarkably insightful example of teacher research, Yichun Liu and Xiaoye You explore Taiwanese and North American college students' negotiation into academic discourses. Having learned and worked in the United States for years, the authors emphasise the importance of having both an outsider and insider view of the cultural and institutional aspects of initiation into a new discipline, and underline the significance of such multi-angle research into the strategies and processes of literacy development. The key variables include the critical awareness of the students' agency in learning to write, putting on new roles, learning new actions, and coming to view a multilingual background as an enriching resource. While Yichun Liu and Xiaoye You attempt to generate a rich picture of literacy practices focusing on both cultural differences and similarities, Baroudy focuses on non-culture-specific writing behaviour. The author claims that the most effective way to success, regardless of cultural background, is the process approach, and proposes a questionnaire to identify successful and unsuccessful writers' practices. Although, perhaps, Baroudy expects rather a lot of the students both when they are asked to fill in a 150-item questionnaire and when they are required to "reflect upon their creeping experience and pass informative judgements about their own strategies" (p. 43), such an in-depth exploration may provide valuable insights into writer behaviour. As a result, writing teachers may develop a clearer understanding of their students' beliefs and practices relating to writing, and help their students acquire more effective practices. While there is a lot of research interest in various factors that may facilitate L2 writing (for instance, developing an awareness of cultural transfer and L1 schemata, developing knowledge-transformation skills through cross-curricular approaches, co-operative writing and peer-review practices, etc.), Baroudy makes an important point when he emphasises the importance of the process approach as an important contributor to writing success both in first and second language.

Ling Yang and Cahill's study and M. Godó's article report on comparisons of different rhetorical practices also aiming to explore their roots. Ling Yang and Cahill explore the rhetorical organisation of Chinese and American students' expository essays in a nice example of insider team research, in which a native speaker of each observed language participates. The authors start off from the criticism of Kaplan (1966) pointing out that his theory does not account for genre, context or developmental interference and only leads to stereotyping. The resulting research paradigm focuses on differences, which the authors definitely refuse and employ a remarkably insightful research design to investigate potential variation in level, cultural background and language use. The participants of the study included 50 English L1 students, 50 Chinese L1 students, 50 beginner Chinese ESL students and 50 advanced Chinese ESL students. The results showed that while all four groups demonstrated a clear preference for direct discourse organisation in terms of initial thesis and topic sentence use, the American students applied such strategies significantly more dominantly. Another important difference in direct organisation has been demonstrated in the beginner and advanced ESL essays for the favour of the latter, supporting the authors' initial hypothesis that alternative rhetorical strategies can successfully be taught by focused instruction.

Magnuczné Godó's study contributes to the same line of comparative research, focusing on American English and Hungarian college students' L1 argumentation. The study makes systematic qualitative and quantitative comparisons between the two groups and aims to explore the roots of differences in various intellectual traditions underlying literacy practices in each group. The author has found clear rhetorical imprints of "classical humanism" in the

Hungarian corpus, and the “progressivist” tradition in the American group. The Hungarian writers demonstrated rhetorical vagueness in their writing evident in a delayed or missing aim and/or thesis replaced by a set of questions or list of topics without a viewpoint; implied opinion and conclusion trusted to the reader. The aim of their writing was clearly knowledge demonstration rather than opinion formation. However, there was much less evident attention to form to help the reader (cf. missing introduction or conclusion, incomplete paragraph structure). The American students, in contrast, paid attention to the presentation of a clear and direct evaluative viewpoint and a reader-friendly style including initial evaluative theses, positive and direct viewpoints as well as attention to formal organisation. Their argumentation contained fewer alternative views and supporting details and focused instead on the elaboration of a couple of important arguments. The main merit of this study is its multifaceted approach, the association of rhetorical differences with particular intellectual traditions as well as its emphasis on the teachability of rhetorical strategies.

All in all, the monograph represents a valuable attempt to bring together new concerns and demonstrate recent lines of development in contrastive rhetoric. There is a tendency to return to and reconsider the influential theoretical models of the past as well as to use these models as springboards to develop new frameworks of analysis. Beyond the varied themes, concerns and approaches, however, there is definitely a common thread: the task of CR in the 21st century is not to divide people and cultures, but to connect them .

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