Cross-cultural perspectives on writing: contrastive rhetoric
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Contrastive rhetoric
The cross-cultural analysis of the ways in which written texts are organized

Scope
- Intercultural Communication
- Rhetoric and Composition
- Contrastive Rhetoric
- Applied Linguistics
- Second Language Writing

Origin
- 1960s: rise of international students in US universities
- Pedagogical need to integrate students into academic discourse
- Kaplan (1966): 1.1 cultural thought patterns influence L2 writing

Outline
- Overview of contrastive rhetoric research
- Conceptual assumptions
- Historical background
- Multiple perspectives provided by criticism
- Impact on language shifts
- Implications for second language educators

Assumptions and Findings of Contrastive Rhetoric Research
Major Assumptions

Each language has unique rhetorical conventions due to a culturally specific thought pattern.
The rhetorical conventions of students' first language (L1) negatively transfer to their ESL writing.

Kaplan (1966) Graphic Representations of Cultural Thought Patterns

Language Categories

INDUCTIVE
"delayed introduction" of thesis

DEDUCTIVE
thesis statement at outset (e.g., English)

Other Suggested Cultural Rhetorical Differences (Connor, 1996)

Arabic
- Parallel construction with coordinate clauses
- Trace back to the OT Testament and Qur’an

Chinese/Korean/Japanese
- Inductive
- Inclusive
- Branch and organization
- Q (very, huge in Chinese)
- Formally-styled (Korean)
- E. cited on title (German)

Chinese
- Right to left only
- Required for Qing Emperors (1444-1722) and current emperors

Language Categories

WRITER RESPONSIBLE
Writer makes explicit logical connections between arguments (e.g., English)

READER RESPONSIBLE
Reader must find implicit connections between arguments (e.g., Japanese)

Other Languages (Connor, 1996)

German
- Progressive
- Sequential
- Linear
- Long sentences
- Long coordination
- Content before form

Finnish
- Inductive
- Stylized

Spanish
- Elaborated and flowery
- Long sentences
- Long coordination

Czech
- Right to left
- Elaborated/contrasted
- Purpose

Recall
- Right to left
- Elaborated/contrasted
- Purpose

Recall
Categorization of English

- Linear
- Deductive
- Writer-Responsible
- Logical

Binary Between English and Non-English Languages

- English: Superior
- Other: Interior

Pedagogical Implications

- Rearranging scrambled paragraphs
- Writing according to an outline
- Explicit teaching of conventional rhetorical structures
- Imitating models
- Identifying topic structures

Goal: integrate students into mainstream academic discourse community

Methods and Challenges

- Analyze published texts in other languages
  - Problem: confuses academic and journalistic writing and denies writing as a social action that may conform to or bend expectations to express meaning
Compare published texts within the same genre in two languages

Taylor and Chen (1991) compared English and Chinese academic papers and found some similarities and some differences.

**English**
- Intro
- Summarize literature more
- More frequent citations

**Chinese**
- Intro
- Summarize literature less
- Less frequent citations

Compare ESL essays of different L1 students

Underlying assumptions: similarities in essays written by students of the same L1 are based on use of L1 rhetoric.

- L1-L2 transfer is implied but not proven
- Other factors that may account for differences
  - L2 proficiency
  - L1 writing expertise
  - Instructional focus
  - Individual writer agency

Compare L1 and L2 essays written by the same students

Study of Taiwanese college students shows transfer of prototypical L1 features in L2 essays (Wu and Rubin, 2000).

- Placement of thesis statement transferred (same in both L1 and L2 essays)
- Use of first person pronoun did not transfer (frequency was higher in L2 essay)

Historical Background

**Influx of international students in US universities**
- 450% increase 1940-1950
- 530% increase 1951-1967

**Behaviourism**
- Language learning = habit formation
- Stimulus and response

Behaviourist Assumptions relevant to contrastive rhetoric

- Language = a habit; language learning = new set of habits
- Major source of error in L2 is L1
- Differences between L1 and L2 account for errors
- The greater the difference between L1 and L2, the more errors will occur
- To learn a second language, learn the differences between L1 and L2

Strong vs Weak Contrastive Analysis

**Strong form**
- Predicts learner output through L1 influence
- Lack empirical analysis of L2 output

**Weak form**
- Explains learner output through L1 influence
- Lack of error analysis:
  - Collect, identifies, classifies, quantifies linguistic errors
  - Analyze sources of errors including L1 features
**Whorfian linguistic relativity (1930s)**

- Different language systems shape different thought patterns or worldviews.
- Originally developed to critique Western ethnocentrism and celebrate plurality of languages and multilingual communities.
- Undermined by Chomskyan generative linguistics underscoring linguistic universals and innateness.

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**Suggested directions**

- Plurality, complexity, hybridity of rhetorical patterns within one language.
- Similarities among languages/cultures.
- Focus on agency of students as individuals with diverse educational experiences, subjectivities, and competencies.

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**Future expansion of contrastive rhetoric**

**Within-subject design**

- Examining transfer at an individual level by seeking individual perceptions and orientations of the writer.

**Intercultural rhetoric**

- Examining genres other than academic writing.
- Examining the effects of instruction.

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**Exoticizing the Other while ignoring historic shift**

- English
- Other
- Idealized
- Essentialized
- Contemporary
- Classical

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**Historical Shifts**

- Essentialized classical forms are unlikely to influence contemporary ESL writing.
- *Baguwen* (eight-legged essay) exerts little influence on contemporary Chinese writing (post-Cultural-revolution) (Kirkpatrick, 1997).
- *Qi-cheng-zhuan-he* or *ki-shô-ten-ketsu* has no single definition of forms.
**Historical Shifts**

**Prescriptive vs. Descriptive Gap**

- The prototypical English style (e.g., the 5-paragraph essay) is the prescribed style.
- Not necessarily the style preferred or used in the majority of English texts.

**Critical contrastive rhetoric**

- Focus on human agency
- Question normative, essentialist, and colonial assumptions
- Illuminates sociopolitical construction of knowledge and unequal power relationships
- Details possibilities for appropriating a linguistic form to express alternative meanings
- Student writers as agents with multiple subjectivities

**Recent developments**

Ulla Connor’s proposals (2008):

1. Situate texts in sociopolitical contexts (Fairclough, 1992)
2. Investigate practices in local institutions: small vs. large cultures (Holliday, 1999)
3. Shift to intercultural investigation
   - Variety of texts and interviews with writers

**Unchanged assumptions**

- Still assumes an incompatibility between L1 and L2 even as Anglo-based communication styles are globalized.
- Cultural and linguistic binaries
- Based on a deficit model: focuses on linguistic resources lacking in a learner rather than the *funds of knowledge* that students bring.

**Impact of contrastive rhetoric on rhetorical shift**

Knowledge constructed by research

- Range of positive and negative values assigned to different languages and cultures
- Popular judgment of desirability of language/culture

Cultural/linguistic shift
Example of Japanese rhetorical shift

- Kaplan categorizes Japanese as introverts and non-labor (1966)
- English (linear, logical, deductive) is valued as positive
- Implication that the Japanese need to adopt English-type discourse
- 1.3 Japanese texts become more English-type discourse (Kubota and 200)

Placement within global hierarchy of power

English = lingua franca

Academic knowledge from Western world (e.g., contrastive rhetoric) = hegemonic

Questioning “culture”

- English can be appropriated to express religious and cultural identities for the political purpose of nation building
- Non-English-type rhetoric purposely used in English to promote religious/cultural identity in contemporary Pakistani English language textbooks
- Does the language/culture itself define rhetorical norms or the educational institution influenced by the politics of the nation-state?

Implications for teachers

- Recognize students’ background
- Understand ISW students’ background
- Educational practices
- Local politics
- National discourses
- ISW identity
- ISW proficiency
- ISW writing experiences in a particular genre
- Writer’s intentions
- Writer’s own beliefs about cultural difference

Conclusions: Reflections

- Reflect on perceived cultural difference by situating individuals in complex power structures within political contexts
- Reflect on the political and ideological discussions of the underlying beliefs about cultural difference and the purpose of learning the rhetoric of power (i.e., whether to assimilate into the dominant community, both ideologically and functionally or to appropriate the rhetorical power to resist and critique the unequal hierarchies

Suggested Further Reading

This book synthesizes the findings of contrastive rhetoric research up to the mid-1990s and explores its relationship with other disciplines such as composition, text linguistics, translation studies, and genre studies. It offers implications for further research and pedagogy.


- As the most updated edited volume, this book provides a range of foci, perspectives, and approaches to contrastive (intercultural) rhetoric studies. It contains data-based studies in specific genres, pedagogical issues, and future directions of intercultural rhetoric.


This is a fictional narrative about a university-level writing teacher who experiences various conceptualizations of cultural difference in her private and professional life. It provides readers with some concrete examples how these conceptualizations might be put into practice.


This article synthesizes criticisms of contrastive rhetoric research from theoretical and pedagogical points of view and offers postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial approaches to contrastive rhetoric. Critical engaged practice in relation to cultural difference is proposed.