

## CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC: DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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### 1. Introduction

Contrastive rhetoric is an area of research in second-language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second-language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them (Connor 1996: 5). Contrastive rhetoric and contrastive analysis are both fields of study in applied linguistics, which have contributed to the knowledge about the role of transfer from the native language to the target language.

In the past thirty years, contrastive analysis and contrastive rhetoric both have advanced the understanding about second language learning and teaching but have also come under criticism. Sajavaara (1996: 18) maintains that the criticism directed at contrastive analysis "as such was often totally misguided in nature" but acknowledges some failings of early contrastive analysis. He mentions the following: (1) not all the results were directly translatable for language teaching methodologies, as was often the expectation; (2) there was too strong a reliance on the structuralist view of language among contrastive analysts, and (3) English tended to be the only point of comparison, thus casting doubt on the independence of the descriptions of the languages contested. Similar criticisms have been raised concerning the results of earlier contrastive rhetorical research.

Although contrastive analysis and contrastive rhetoric are closely related in theory research foci, their relatedness has gone unnoticed until recently (e.g., Odlin 1989). James (1998) argues for a strong connection between the two and writes:

Does anyone remember Contrastive Analysis (CA)? And the title of Robert Lado's seminal 1957 work *Linguistics across Cultures*? And even Gerry Abbott's (1983) conciliatory call: "Come back Robert, nearly all is forgiven"? Well, it seems it has – and he has – come back (Do you get this sort of ellipsis in Japanese?) In the form of Contrastive Rhetoric (CR), an updated and focused neo-Contrastive analysis that is much the wiser with the benefit of 40 years of hindsight. (James 1998: 52)

The review of the research in contrastive rhetoric in the U.S. applied linguistics settings in the past thirty years and the challenges facing the field are the focus of this chapter. After a brief overview of the basic elements of the early contrastive rhetoric, I will describe new directions in contrastive rhetoric research in four domains. A discussion of challenges for contrastive rhetoric will follow in terms of teaching ideologies, standards, norms, and choices of English. Finally, a playful attempt will be made at a new set of contrastive diagrams or "wiggles".

## 2. Definition of contrastive rhetoric; Kaplan's original theory

Contrastive rhetoric is a branch of applied linguistics with very close ties to specific teaching situations. Initiated thirty years ago in applied linguistics by Robert Kaplan, contrastive rhetoric maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena. As a consequence, each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it. Furthermore, according to Kaplan, the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in English as a second language.

Kaplan's study (1966) was the first serious attempt by applied linguists in the United States to explain the second language writing of ESL students. Kaplan's pioneering study (1996) analyzed the organization of paragraphs in ESL student essays and identified five types of paragraph development, as depicted in his frequently reproduced diagram, to show how L1 rhetorical structures were evident in the L2 writing of the sample students (Figure 1).

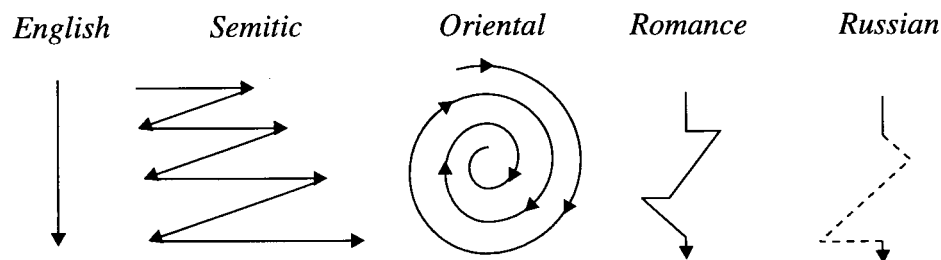


Figure 1. Diagram on crosscultural differences in paragraph organization in Kaplan's (1966) study.

Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric has been criticized for several reasons: being too ethnocentric and privileging the writing of native English speakers; dismissing linguistic and cultural differences in writing among different languages, e.g., Chinese, Thai, and Korean speakers in one "Oriental" group; and considering transfer from a first language a negative influence on second language writing. Kaplan has modified his earlier position in a number of publications (1987, 1988), leaning away from what could be described as a Whorfian interpretation, namely that rhetorical patterns are related to the native language and reflect patterns of thinking. Instead, cross-cultural difference in writing, according to Kaplan, can be explained by different conventions of writing, which are learned.

Kaplan has been modest about his 1966 work, calling it an idea or a notion, rather than a model or a theory. Yet, his original study provided a useful model of writing in a second language. Granted, it is more useful in some applications than in others. For example, the model is not particularly relevant for the theory of translation, since it refers to second-language texts only by speculating about first-language influence. A model for translation needs to compare texts in both the source and the target language. While Kaplan's model is useful in evaluating ESL/EFL written products, a different model is needed to describe essays written by undergraduate students for school purposes. Furthermore, a different contrastive model is needed for a description of cross-cultural writing for academic or professional purposes such as the writing of a research paper article or a grant proposal.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. New directions in contrastive rhetoric research

In the past three decades, significant changes have taken place in contrastive rhetoric research. The traditional contrastive rhetoric framework was no longer able to account for all the data, and an expanded framework was needed. A broader definition of contrastive rhetoric considers cognitive as well as sociocultural variables of writing in addition to purely linguistic variables of the earlier work. Contrastive rhetoric research has moved from examining only products to studying processes as well as products of writers writing in schools, colleges, and professional workplaces. These situations involve other reader/audiences in addition to teachers such as journal editors, reviewers of grant proposals, and prospective employers.

In Connor (1996), I survey the field and suggest that contrastive rhetoric in the context of applied linguistics has taken new directions in the following four domains: (1) contrastive text linguistics (comparison of discourse features of

<sup>1</sup> Contrastive rhetoric research has produced an extensive body of research for ESL/EFL teaching. The use of contrastive rhetoric framework has not been used for the research and teaching of other foreign languages.

texts across languages); (2) study of writing as a cultural activity (comparing the processes of learning to write in different cultures); (3) classroom-based studies (examining cross-cultural patterns in collaborative revisions and teacher-student conferences); and (4) contrastive genre-specific studies including a variety of genres for a variety of purposes such as journal articles, business reports, and letters of application. Figure 2 lists major publications in each domain.<sup>2</sup> (For language-specific reviews of contrastive rhetoric, see also Connor 1996, and Leki 1991.)

1. Contrastive text linguistic studies examine, compare, and contrast how texts are formed and interpreted in different languages and cultures using methods of written discourse analysis. See Clyne (1987), Connor – Kaplan (1987); Eggington (1987), Hinds (1983, 1987, 1990).
2. Studies of writing as cultural and educational activity investigate literacy development in L1 language and culture and examine effects on the development of L2 literacy. See Carson (1992), Purves (1988).
3. Classroom-based contrastive studies examine cross-cultural patterns in process writing, collaborative revisions, and student-teacher conferences. See Al-laei – Connor (1990), Goldstein – Conrad (1990), Hull – Rose – Fraser – Castellano (1991), Nelson – Murphy (1992).
4. Genre-specific investigations are applied to academic and professional writing. See Bhatia (1993), Connor – Davis – DeRycker (1995), Jenkins – Hinds (1987), Mauranen (1993), Swales (1990), Tirkkonen-Condit (1996), Ventola – Mauranen (1991).

Figure 2. New directions in Contrastive Rhetoric; published studies

I want to emphasize that contrastive rhetoric as defined for the purposes of this paper is very much an applied linguistics endeavor. It began as an effort to help teachers and researchers become more aware of the linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural backgrounds of student ESL/EFL writers. This knowledge about writing activities, products, and processes is helpful in understanding L2 writing difficulties and planning instruction to overcome them. Research in contrastive rhetoric is interdisciplinary; it draws on theories from many interrelated fields including linguistics, composition and rhetoric, translation studies, and anthropology. Yet, the main focus of contrastive rhetoric is not on the development of new theoretical constructs in its interdisciplinary fields such as new definitions of “culture” in anthropology, for example. Instead, the driving force behind contrastive rhetoric research is pedagogical, namely to inform the ESL/EFL

<sup>2</sup> All the studies cited in Figure 2 were not conducted by researchers who would call themselves “contrastive rhetoricians”. For example, Hull et al. (1991), is a work in the U.S. L1 field, in which contrastive rhetoric is fairly unknown. I have merely compiled studies that support the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis in its new, expanded form.

teacher about cultural preferences in writing styles and activities. With this knowledge, teachers are better able to prepare ESL/EFL students to write for L2 audiences, which often have different expectations about organization, style, and appropriateness of content.

The contributions of the four new domains of contrastive rhetoric research complement the applied linguistics goal of the original model, which is to provide usable knowledge. Studies of text linguistics have developed concrete tools for the study of writing. These new text analyses deal with features beyond the traditional sentence-level. These text analyses are not limited to examining expository texts but also apply to argumentative/persuasive as well as narrative texts. Concrete tools include analyses of cohesion, coherence, super-structures of argument, rhetorical moves, metatext, etc., across cultures. Published studies show step-by-step applications in student and other texts, and the research describes specific applications of text analysis for the teacher and evaluator of student writing. Studies of writing as a cultural and educational activity are significant in that they describe the teaching of writing and reading in L1 and L2 in a variety of cultures, thus helping teachers understand deep-seated preferences in students’ written styles. Research shows differences in what teachers from different cultures value in student writing. Furthermore, studies of writing activity suggest that certain student genres which teachers in the U.S. take for granted, such as the persuasive essay, may not exist in all other cultures. Cross-cultural studies of writing classrooms have shed light on different expectations about group work and behavior, thus offering suggestions for teachers about how to form and adjust peer response writing groups in process-based classes. Finally, studies of genre-specific texts are important in describing prototypes of writing for specific purposes (i.e., academic and promotional) and for specific contexts (i.e., type of academic discipline, journal, or job) in different languages and cultures. Genre-specific studies also describe differences in how a letter of application, for example, is written and used across cultures. These studies are shaping a new contrastive rhetoric in a significant manner by showing the complex interrelationships among genre, culture, and writing. Often, genres, which appear to be textual equivalents, such as editorials in newspapers, turn out to have completely different purposes. Editorials in Finnish newspapers, for example, are typically written to build consensus, unlike those in the U.S., which argue for a particular point of view (Tirkkonen-Condit 1996). Furthermore, genre-specific case studies help us understand how genres are learned and how writers need to learn to adjust genres depending on culture and situation. Case studies show, for example, that ESL Ph.D. candidates studying in the U.S. learn to write up research in the “Anglo-American” manner, both in the presentation of the research paper as well as in the “marketing” of the paper for publication, but may find, after returning

to their L1 cultures, that a different form and a different marketing style are expected in L1 scientific journals (Casanave 1996).

#### 4. Contrastive rhetoric and teaching ideologies; standards, norms, and choices

The goal of contrastive rhetoric throughout its thirty-year history has been to help teachers and students become aware of cross-cultural differences in writing styles as well as their effects on the native English-speaking reader/audience. In the past decade, however, contrastive rhetoric has seen a shift of emphases in the Englishes that are considered norms. The "Anglo-American" norm (i.e., English in U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, "the inner circle" in Kachru's 1984 terms) is being supplemented by world Englishes spoken by speakers of other varieties of English (i.e., English in "the outer circle" in countries such as India, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, and others) as well as English spoken and written by nonnative ESL/EFL learners. Indeed, contrastive rhetoricians around the world can learn a great deal from the research on international or world Englishes (Kachru 1984). For example, in Europe, because of the European Union, there is an increasing talk about "Eurospeak" or "Euro-English" or "Eurorhetoric", but its definitions and characterizations are still forthcoming.

I am aware of postmodern critiques of the objective of contrastive rhetoric to teach to the expectations of native speakers or others in power positions. Yet, my position is that we are obligated to teach our students the expectations of the audience, whether the audience is teachers, editors of journals, or grant proposal reviewers.

The following examples from personal experience in two cross-cultural projects in the past couple of years illustrate the changing needs of literacy and the multiple literacies ESL/EFL writers face. First, the changing nature of audiences for nonnative English speakers (from native English speakers to other nonnative speakers of English) was brought home convincingly in a research project at Åbo University in Finland in 1995 (Connor et al. 1995). In the project – playfully titled "Milking Brussels" – we analyzed research grant proposals written by Finnish scientists for European Union research funds and wrote a guidebook about grant proposal writing in English. In the project, we discovered many difficulties that native-speaking Finnish writers have when they write academic texts in English. For example, Finns do not state their thesis at the beginning of the writing, but prefer to delay the introduction of the purpose. Also, in a manner similar to the Japanese writers documented by Hinds (1983, 1987 and 1990), Finnish writers do not use transitions between paragraphs. In other words, Finnish writers are not very reader-friendly; rather, they let the facts speak for themselves. (See Ventola – Mauranen 1991, and Mauranen 1993, for discussion of the characteristics of Finnish academic writing.)

Based on the findings of the analyses, our project team wrote a guidebook and gave workshops for Finnish scientists about how to write proposals in English. At these workshops, we taught an Anglo-American style of grant proposal writing using a newly-developed rhetorical "moves" analysis, reminiscent of Swales's genre-analytic "moves" analysis for the writing of research paper introductions (Connor – Mauranen in press). We instructed the Finnish scientists that if they wished to get EU research grants, they should follow the EU norms and expectations, which at the present are based on Anglo-American scientific and promotional prose. When, on the other hand, Finnish scientists write grant applications in Finnish, they should follow the expectations of the Finnish agencies.

In the project, we became aware of the complexity of the language situation related to grant proposals in the EU. It seems likely that changes may take place in the norms and standards of English in these grant proposals, because the raters of grant proposals for the EU in Brussels are not only native English-speaking scientists but come from a variety of EU countries with many different first languages and many different rhetorical orientations. In fact, something called "Eurorhetoric" may emerge. A fruitful area of inquiry for contrastive rhetoricians awaits in the comparison of proposals and ratings by scientist from all around the EU!

My second example about the changing norms of English writing and the multiple demands of literacy for ESL/EFL learners comes from an international teaching collaboration involving business writing classes in Finland, U.S., and Belgium. During the past two years, a class in each of the three countries has taken part in a simulation which involves applying for jobs across the continent as well as working in teams to propose various services and products. Instruction in the course includes readings and discussions about each other's cultures. Before the establishment of the international courses, we had collected letters of job application written by students in the U.S. and Belgium and found distinct differences in the length and content of the letters in the two countries (Connor – Davis – DeRycker 1995). The U.S. students in the sample wrote much lengthier discussions of their qualifications (i.e., "self-appraisal" in Bhatia's 1993 terms) than the Belgian students, whose letters were short, direct accompaniments to the resumes. Interestingly, after the course, in which the students were taught about differing reader expectations concerning letters of application, there seemed to be a convergence of styles. Although still a tentative hypothesis, we saw an emergence of an international style of writing, a more homogenized style. Students from each country changed their styles, from what we would have expected from previous contrastive rhetoric research, to adapt to the expectations of their audiences. Of course, we instructed the students that they should continue using their national styles when appropriate. Thus, Finns applying for Finnish jobs should continue to write like Finns: to be modest and

humble about their achievements, let the facts of the resume speak for themselves, and in general, let the reader do the guessing.

These two examples suggest some of the complexities of the literacy needs of EFL learners. In no way do these examples give us a panacea, but they point to the increasing demand for us in the EFL teaching profession to give our students choices among writing styles in English from which to select when they write for many different audiences and purposes in today's complex world.

### 5. From Kaplan's diagrams to new ones

In light of all the new information gained from the impressive amount of contrastive rhetoric research during the past 30 years, I attempted to develop a new set of diagrams in order to replace Kaplan's (1966) diagrams. I was not able to come up with firm, objective diagrams. Instead, I am still finding how useful the old diagrams are for helping us learn about complexities of writing in a second language. Yet, Figure 3 is an attempt to show what those wiggles, after 30 years of research, might or might not look like.

#### 1. Article introductions in English

Establish territory  
Summarize previous research  
Indicate a gap  
Introduce present research

#### 2. "Moves" in letters of application in three cultures

U.S.	Belgium	India
Apply for position	Apply for position	Apply for position
Include resume	Include resume	Include resume
Explain qualifications		Ask for pity
Explain desire for interview		Express apology
Explain how to be reached		
Express pleasantries		

#### 3. Paragraph organization in English written by Finns

Sample text written by a Finnish scientist (as appeared in Mauranen 1994: 32).

Finland is one of the Nordic countries and it is located between the 60 N and the 70 N latitudes. It is known as a region where the summer may occasionally be warm, but during the winter the temperatures stays almost constantly below zero and frequently falls below -20 Celsius also in the southwestern parts. Therefore its climate conditions are rather severe regarding the use of automobiles. However, motor vehicles are widely used and consequently the major part of the total distance driven comes from the op-

eration below normal ambient temperature. Hence the effect of the low ambient temperature on the use of automobiles is an important subject of research.

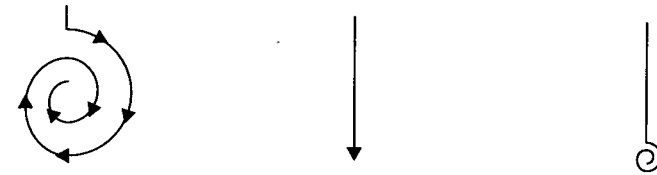


Figure 3. New Diagrams or "Wiggles" in 1996

The diagrams in the figure are meant to show that writing in any language takes many different forms depending on the purpose or communicative function and audience. Thus many different purposes are included. The diagram on the top depicts an "Anglo-American" style of research article introductions, following Swales's moves. Introductions follow a four-part pattern: establish territory, summarize previous research, indicate a gap, and introduce present research. The development is not linear, as we might expect of English writing based on the 1966 diagrams. Instead, a digression appears when the summary of previous research is introduced. The next three diagrams depict "moves" in letters of application based on previous research (Connor – Davis – DeRycker 1995; Bhatia 1993). The U.S. application letters seem to go around and around, forming a gyre; the Belgian letter is direct; while the South Asian letter includes both linear and circular presentation of material. Finally, a diagram depicting the development of a paragraph written in English by a Finnish writer is definitely a gyre; the writer gets to his main point at the end of the paragraph with the poor English-speaking reader wondering what the writer is trying to say throughout the preceding sentences!

The diagrams in Figure 3 were drawn playfully. Yet, they are a testimony to the significance of the early work in contrastive rhetoric that still keeps us talking and writing. These new wiggles also remind us of the most important lesson we have learned about contrastive rhetoric research: one's ethnocentric view about one's own culture is bound to affect one's way of looking at writing in other cultures. Therefore, in order to avoid stereotyping languages and cultures in contrastive rhetoric studies, it is advisable to collaborate with a native speaker of a language other than your own when doing contrastive studies. Related to this, as a native speaker of Finnish, I am allowed to poke fun at Finnish writing. It would be less acceptable for a nonnative Finnish speaker to describe the English writing of Finnish speakers as indirect, implicit, beating around the bush, etc., which I have done in examples throughout this paper.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has discussed changes in contrastive rhetoric research in the past 30 years. An impressive array of studies informs the ESL/EFL teaching profession about patterns of writing in languages around the world. Contrastive rhetoric research has expanded, informing us today about the writing of second language speakers in many contexts: academic and professional worlds. Contrastive rhetoric also informs us about the changing norms of acceptable written English in the new global environment, where we and our students need to adjust our writing styles to suit the expectations of diverse audiences in a multitude of situations.

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