Directions in Contrastive Rhetoric Research

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This paper aims to identify some potentially useful directions for future contrastive rhetoric research by synthesising developments observed during the past few decades. It begins with the recognition of three main limitations in Kaplan's (1966) seminal work on contrastive textual analysis and correspondingly classifies new trends in this area around three themes, namely the research focus, methodology and explanatory factors. Finally, the paper suggests that contrastive rhetoric should consider: expanding the research focus by incorporating interpersonal aspects of writing; improving the research methods by examining writers' L1 and L2 output at the same time; and adopting a context-sensitive process/product combined approach when explaining research findings.

1. Introduction

In his seminal work on discourse organisation in the English compositions of approximately 600 foreign students, Kaplan (1966) claims that English writing is characterised by directness and deductive reasoning, while other languages (e.g. Oriental languages and Arabic) favour indirectness and inductive reasoning. At the same time, he attempts to link the differences in discourse organisation between English and other languages to their respective cultures and thought patterns. This pioneering research was valuable in directing ESL teachers and students to look beyond grammar and sentence-level difficulties. More importantly, it initiated a new research area (namely contrastive rhetoric), which has expanded enormously over the past few decades.

However, Kaplan's work is by no means without limitations and has been under constant criticism. This paper describes some of its inadequacies, concentrating on three themes, i.e. the research focus, methodology and explanatory factors. The purpose of presenting such constraints or inadequacies is to identify some areas for further research in the field, building on the seminal work of its founder.

2. Limitations of Kaplan's work

The first limitation is its relatively narrow definition of rhetoric, which focuses solely on discourse organisation in L1/L2 writing. By attributing the origin of English rhetoric to Anglo-European culture and Platonic-Aristotelian thinking, Kaplan (1966) maintains that English expository writing is linear in discourse organisation whereas other languages are indirect or digressive. However, this approach neglects many other rhetorical components, such as the four canons of Aristotelian rhetoric (invention, style, memory and delivery), and thus has been accused of being reductionist, insofar as it is limited to textual organisation (Liebman 1992; Connor 1996; Scollon 1997). Instead of centring on paragraph-level examination and comparison alone, a wider view of rhetoric can provide a more comprehensive understanding of L1/ L2 writing.

The second limitation of Kaplan's work concerns its reductionist approach to L1 rhetoric. Kaplan makes assumptions about L1 rhetorical patterns based entirely on his examination of

ESL/EFL students' writing and professional writing (e.g. translations from French philosophy and Russian political analysis). This approach has two drawbacks. Firstly, its attempt to infer L1 rhetorical patterns from evidence in L2 writing seems to be entirely speculative and prescriptive. Secondly, this approach might neglect the possible influence of different (sub)genres. It has long been known that rhetorical structures may be influenced by a genre's particular communicative purpose (Taylor & Chen 1991), and sometimes subgenres within a genre are also distinguishable and pose constraints on rhetorical structures (Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993).

The third aspect interpreted as a deterministic and essentialist approach to the L1/L2 relationship in writing is the negative L1 interference in L2 students' English. One hypothesis underlying Kaplan's (1966) explanation of what contributes to ESL students' difficulties is that they use L1 rhetorical conventions in their L2 writing, which results in 'doodle texts' (Kaplan 1987). Attributing ESL students' L2 writing problems and difficulties to L1 rhetoric may lead to serious stereotyping and overgeneralising (Leki 1991) and also risks being ethnocentric, privileging English over other languages and rhetorics (Kubota & Lehner 2004). Besides linguistic transfer, other factors such as developmental effects, educational background and students' personal experience and writing strategies are known to contribute to L2 writers' difficulties (e.g. Mohan & Lo 1985; Liebman 1992; Holyoak & Piper 1997). As there is no evidence that any of these factors is the most salient (Matsuda 1997), a multi-faceted explanation would be more beneficial and enlightening (Matsuda 1997; Connor 2004; Kubota & Lehner 2004).

It is important to add that these inadequacies are not limited to Kaplan's (1966) work but are quite common in the literature. Hence, further efforts are needed to make contrastive rhetoric a more fruitful research area. The next section reviews recent developments in this direction.

3. Developments in contrastive rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric has become an independent field of research (Matsuda 2003) and one of the most widely studied areas within second language writing. In a highly influential monograph on the subject, Connor (1996) lists four areas in which recent contrastive rhetoric has expanded. First of all, contrastive text linguistics, which compares discourse features across different languages and cultures by using various methods of written discourse analysis. Secondly, the study of writing as a cultural and educational activity that mainly investigates the process of literacy learning, the effects of literacy development on one's native language and culture, and the impact of L1 literacy development on L2 literacy. Thirdly, classroom-based contrastive studies, which examine cross-cultural patterns in teacher-student classroom interaction. Finally, contrastive genre analysis, which investigates academic and professional writing through genre theory.

In this paper, developments in contrastive rhetoric will be synthesised instead around three themes linked to the above-mentioned limitations of Kaplan's work:

- the *research focus* refers mainly to what discourse features are investigated and contrasted across different languages and cultures;
- *research methods* primarily involve the analytical frameworks or tools employed (e.g. cohesion and coherence, genre analysis, etc.) and how the contrast is made;
- *explanatory factors* are the perspectives used to interpret research, for example "L1, national culture, L1 educational background, disciplinary culture, genre characteristics, and mismatched expectations between readers and writers" (Connor 2002: 504).

Of course, the aspects dealt with under each parameter are not mutually exclusive and an empirical study will normally involve both a research content (focus), methodology and discussion (i.e. explanation).

3.1. Research focus

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate and compare discourse patterns in English and other languages (e.g. Kobayashi 1984; Clyne 1987; Connor & Kaplan 1987; Cai 1993; Moreno 1997, 2004; Kubota 1998; Hirose 2003; Chen 2008; Godo 2008; Monroy-Casas 2008; Ansary & Babaii 2009). However, this approach has been constantly criticised for employing a narrow view of rhetoric focusing excessively on the organisation of writing. From the 1980s onwards, an emerging trend in contrastive rhetoric research has compared *non-structural* discourse components in various languages and cultures – particularly the interpersonal aspect of written communication (e.g. Connor & Lauer 1985, 1988; Kamimura & Oi 1996; Wu & Rubin 2000; Lee 2006; Wang 2006; Liu & Thompson 2009; Kim & Thompson 2010). As a language can simultaneously perform interpersonal, textual and experiential functions (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004), this approach has been highly productive.

Connor and Lauer (1988) conducted an intercultural contrastive study of persuasive writing by high-school students from America, England and New Zealand. Their study differs from previous contrastive studies in that it examines persuasive patterns in students' writing from a linguistic, rhetorical and communication perspective. More specifically, this study dealt with the argumentative superstructure and informal reasoning, touching also on the interpersonal aspect of writing. Kamimura and Oi (1996) looked at students' compositions from the perspective of rhetorical appeals, diction and cultural aspects. They collected English essays from 22 American high-school seniors and 30 second-year Japanese college students during regular class time. While the American students preferred logical argumentation and showed more empathy by employing emphatic devices such as *should* and *I believe*, Japanese students relied on emotional persuasion, through words such as *sad* and *sorrow*, or hedging devices like *I think* and *maybe*. Another noticeable trend in the literature is the investigation of interpersonal components within the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) framework, particularly inspired by the recent advancement of its interpersonal analytical tool, Appraisal Theory (Martin 2000; Martin & White 2005).

By using SFL genre theory and Appraisal Theory, Wang (2006) studied Chinese and Australian newspaper commentaries on the 11/9 events. By analysing the attitudinal resources in both texts, he found that Australian texts used evaluative lexis twice as often as Chinese texts, thus indicating that "Australian writers tend to be more evaluative and expressive in revealing their attitudes towards the topic than their Chinese counterparts" (*ibid.*: 117). This study reveals that Chinese writers seldom expressed Endorsement of text sources and tended to distance themselves from outside resources. Working within SFL, Lee (2006) investigated how international students from East Asia (mostly Japan, Korea, and Taiwan) and Australian-born students managed interpersonal resources in their argumentative/persuasive writing. The latter students displayed a stronger voice and a higher sense of authority than the former.

More recently, Kim (2009) and Kim and Thompson (2010) have also pointed out that experiential and interpersonal meanings have been neglected by focusing only on textual organisation in cross-cultural textual analysis, and they have suggested that contrastive rhetoric in cross-cultural text studies shift its focus from text organisation to other aspects. In a corpus-based investigation of English and Korean newspaper science popularisations, Kim and Thompson (2010) found that there were more occurrences of modal expressions of obligation imposed upon readers in the English corpus than in the Korean. The English corpus also employed more third-person pronouns, while the Korean had more first-person pronouns associated with obligation-imposers. Finally, the English corpus was more likely to explicitly specify the obligation while the Korean tended to leave it implicit. The authors conclude that these differences might be related to the individualism and task-orientedness of English culture, as opposed to the collectivism and relation-orientedness of Korean culture.

As shown above, contrastive rhetoric has gradually broadened its scope from paragraph-level analysis to other rhetorical components, such as interpersonal elements in writing. However, this line of research is still weak and future studies employing a rigorous, comprehensive interpersonal framework will be welcome.

3.2 Research methods

Contrastive rhetoric has made considerable advances in methodology, with both text-based and non-textual methods now used in such studies (Liebman 1992; Connor 1996, 2004). Major developments include the use of ethnographic approaches, such as interviews and surveys (e.g. Liebman 1992; Holyoak & Piper 1997; Phung 2006), and corpus techniques for the analysis of specific linguistic features (e.g. Moreno 1998; Kim & Thompson 2010).

The main methodological improvement dealt with in this paper is the inclusion in contrastive rhetoric of texts drafted by L1 writers. Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 198) admit that one of the constraints in early contrastive rhetoric research "lay in the fact that deductions were made by examining deviation from the norms of English only, rather than examining the discourse of the L1". The assumption underlying previous contrastive rhetoric was that English L2 texts contained discourse features of their writers' L1 rhetoric, with a transfer from L1 to L2 texts. However, Connor (1996) and Wu and Rubin (2000) have opposed this assumption for at least two reasons. First of all, what is distinct from English is not necessarily due to a negative influence from L1 rhetoric but might be linked to other factors (such as writers' L1 writing instruction, their L2 proficiency, etc.). Secondly, this approach tends to treat L2 writers from certain language/culture backgrounds as a consistent group and blames their difficulties on L1 rhetoric interference instead of looking at L2 writers as individuals, given that "the manifestation of transfer can vary from one learner to the next" (Odlin 1989: 30). Within-subject studies, which investigate L1 and L2 writing by the same individuals, can overcome this 'design flaw' (Connor 1996: 162) and yield insights on the L1/L2 relation in writing.

Kubota (1998) also recognises the usefulness of the within-subject approach in contrastive rhetoric. She examined both English and Japanese texts written by the same group of Japanese university-level students and found that about half of the students employed dissimilar rhetorical structures in the two types of text. She suggests that the differences she found in the organisation of the texts in the two languages counter-argues with the premise held by traditional contrastive rhetoric research that L2 students organise their English and mother tongue in the same way and L1 rhetoric influences L2 writing. Kubota and Lehner (2004) argue that the between-subject design may not reveal individual transfer but only whether writers as a group use rhetoric in the same manner.

Indrasuta's (1988) study is one of the earliest in contrastive rhetoric to examine both L1 and L2 writing by the same group of writers. In this investigation, 30 secondary school students from America wrote in English and 30 from Thailand wrote in both Thai and English. The Thai students' English narratives were found to differ from their Thai writing and from the American students' English writing, but were more similar to the former in terms of narrative elements and their functions. This is interpreted as evidence that Thai students follow the local narrative conventions, mainly influenced by Buddhism, and transfer these to English.

More recently, the within-subject design has become increasingly common in contrastive rhetoric studies. Wu and Rubin (2000) conducted a very interesting study to evaluate to what extent the so-called collectivism which is thought to characterise the Chinese mentality, and the individualism believed to typify Americans, influence the argumentative writing by Taiwanese and American college students. The former wrote in English and Chinese and the latter wrote in English on one of two parallel topics (abortion and euthanasia). Their level of collectivism and/or individualism was tested through a well-established measure of collectivist ideation. The results suggest that American students write in a more direct and

personal way than Taiwanese students (both in English and Chinese) and that the use of such features as indirectness, personal disclosure and assertiveness is more related to nationality and language than to the measured level of collectivist self-concept. This study illustrates the necessity to collect samples of writing by both L1 and L2 native speakers, without which it would be misleading to infer L1 writing patterns from L2 data.

Hirose (2003) investigated organisational patterns in the output of 15 Japanese EFL students writing on the same topic in Japanese and English. The participants used similar organisational patterns in both languages writing, but were likely to employ more deductive patterns in English. The indication is that L1/L2 writing instruction, as well as developmental factors, are responsible for the students' performance in both languages. Also using a within-subject design, Uysal (2008) found a bidirectional transfer in Turkish ESL students writing in Turkish and English, in terms of organisational patterns and coherence.

In short, contrastive rhetoric has broadened its scope by adopting an enriched array of methods, including corpus analysis, interviews, questionnaires, classroom observation, and the within-subject approach. Future research based on a combination of these methods is likely to provide even more revealing findings.

3.3. Multiple explanatory factors

Accompanying its broader research focus and enriched range of methods, contrastive rhetoric has also made advances in its accounting for differences/similarities in research findings. In so doing, it has moved from an early focus on linguistic and cultural factors to a more context-sensitive approach (Connor 1996, 2004; Matsuda 1997). One common feature of research in contrastive rhetoric is the attempt to explain differences or difficulties in ESL writing from a linguistic-cultural perspective, with a tendency to attribute differences between ESL/EFL and Anglo-American writing to divergences between national cultures (e.g. Kaplan 1966; Indrasuta 1988; Koutsantoni 2005; Loi & Evans 2010). Though it is true that our thinking and behaviour are influenced by the cultural community we live in, making a strong link between contrastive textual analysis and global cultural differences is too simplistic an approach. As pointed out by Tirkkonen-Condit (1996: 259), we need to "avoid explaining all variation by crosscultural differences", for there are many other factors at work beneath textual differences.

Another common approach is the linguistic explanation, which holds that negative transfer from L1 rhetoric results in L2 writers' difficulties. Generally, this assumption is problematic in at least two aspects: first, because the difficulties encountered by ESL writers in their L2 writing are not necessarily caused by L1 rhetorical patterns; second, because language acquisition is a process of creative construction, and L2 writing draws on an evolving interlanguage which is different from L1 and is not necessarily influenced by the native language (Ellis 1985; Odlin 1989). At the same time, cross-linguistic transfer is not necessarily negative and unitary but can be positive and bidirectional. In the English and Japanese writing of a group of students, Kubota (1998) finds no negative transfer of culturally unique rhetorical patterns but a positive correlation between English and Japanese organisational scores. Similarly in her Turkish participants' writing in both Turkish and English, Uysal (2008) observes a bidirectional transfer of rhetorical patterns.

In order to move away from a prescriptive-determinist understanding of the L1/L2 relationship implicit in cross-cultural and linguistic explanations, recent contrastive rhetoric has increasingly paid more and more attention to the role of ESL writers' educational background (Mohan & Lo 1985; Carson 1992; Liebman 1992; Holyoak & Piper 1997; Phung 2006; Uysal 2008). In one of the most cited studies providing counter-arguments to the L1 negative transfer and interference account, Mohan and Lo (1985) argue that Chinese ESL students' writing difficulties are due to English language teaching emphasis on grammar and sentence-level accuracy rather than discourse organisation, and to developmental factors rather than cultural rhetorical patterns. They also suggest that it would be useful to compare

composition training in L1 and L2 within the same educational context. Similarly, Carson (1992) maintains that besides examining ESL students' final output, it is important to consider the process of literacy development, because L1 literacy education can indirectly influence foreign language education and ESL learning. A better knowledge of ESL students' L1 literacy background would help to build effective strategies for the ESL writing classroom, hence the need for empirical studies in this direction.

Liebman (1992) surveyed native composition training in Japanese and Arabic cultures through questionnaire data. Japanese and Arabic students indicated an emphasis on grammar and structure in their native language education, unlike their American counterparts. A focus on textual analysis alone might be 'misleading' because the text itself cannot provide information as to how it was produced or how the writer approached the task. Thus, a new contrastive rhetoric is needed, which "considers not only contrast in how people organise texts in different languages, but also other contrasts such as their approach to audience, their perception of the purposes of writing, the types of writing tasks with which they feel comfortable, the composing processes they have been encouraged to develop, and the role writing plays in their education" (Liebman 1992: 142).

This brief overview of the literature clearly shows that linguistic, cultural and educational factors greatly contribute to our understanding of the relationship between L1 and L2 writing. However, these "are by no means the only factors" (Matsuda 1997: 48) and there is not yet enough evidence to show which, if any, are the most salient (Matsuda, 1997:48). For Matsuda (1997: 49), if contrastive rhetoric researchers attempted to explain L2 writing only by examining linguistic, cultural and educational influences, many other factors such as writers' past writing experience "would be ignored". Holyoak and Piper (1997: 123) voice a similar sentiment, when they claim that contrastive rhetoric has overlooked the role of writers themselves "in the process of their interpretation of rhetoric and their writing problems and difficulties". By exploring student writers' L1 and L2 writing instruction and their perception of writing difficulties, we can address the question of why and how students write as they do. Writers themselves need to be taken into account as an important object of investigation in contrastive rhetoric.

4. Conclusion

Contrastive rhetoric calls for a context-sensitive approach to explain the textual choices of writers (Connor 2004), looking beyond the text as an object in order to understand how it is produced. A context-sensitive process/product approach in contrastive studies can yield more information on the formation of texts and better insights into the interaction between L1 and L2 (Zainuddin & Moor 2003). Of course, writers themselves also play a central role, and their experience of L1/L2 writing has an equally important role in text formation (Victori 1999; Liu 2010). Therefore, apart from seeking out linguistic and cultural factors, future contrastive rhetoric studies need to pay greater attention to context-sensitive elements such as L2 writers' literacy background and writing experience for a better understanding of writing behaviour.

This paper shows the huge progress made by contrastive rhetoric as it overcame the limitations of early approaches to textual analysis. By taking a broader view of rhetoric, current research confirms a shift in focus from discourse organisation to the study of interpersonal factors in L2 writing. It has also made important methodological advances by examining L2 writers' L1 and L2 output at the same time; the within-subject design avoids inferring L1 rhetoric from L2 writing alone and provides more information on the relation between L1 and L2 writing. Moreover, in order to provide a more ecological account of difficulties in L2 writing, increasing awareness is being given to the experience and educational background of L2 writers themselves.

In short, current contrastive rhetoric relies on a broader research focus and methodology, as well as improved explanatory techniques. Future contrastive studies that aim to achieve meaningful results will have to take all of these advancements into careful consideration.

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