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From contrastive rhetoric to intercultural rhetoric: Why intercultural rhetoric needs to reframe the concept of culture

1. Introduction

As the academic world continues to become more racially and ethnically diverse, both students and faculty members can ill afford cultural illiteracy. Therefore, approximating the ideal of a successful communication in an academic setting must involve a culturally-sensitive outlook on variations in academic style across cultures. Academic discourse patterns should be analyzed in both monocultural and multicultural contexts since when it comes to writing, students draw on various social, cultural and historical factors which develop differently in different societies. The outcome of these influences manifests itself in interferences at the linguistic and rhetorical levels. Cross-cultural differences have been mainly observed in such aspects of discourse organization as:

> global and local structures in texts, levels of explicitness and metatextual cuing; degrees of redundancy and distribution of salience; and linearity and complexity in form and content development. (Duszak 1997: 2)

In analyzing variations among writing styles, academic discourses have been found to address the issues of involvement and detachment, power and solidarity, face and politeness. Another important difference in organizational structure concerns languages that are writer-responsible versus those that are reader-responsible. Historically rooted intellectual styles also have a critical impact on the way

academic discourse is carried out by culturally diverse students and scholars. Consequently, all the differences in intellectual traditions and academic writing conventions must be considered and the awareness of these disparities should contribute to the decrease of the influences of Anglo-American monoculture and the creation of relative standards for what constitutes *good* academic writing[1]. Such changes will foster the process of socialization of international students into the writing/rhetorical/scholarly conventions of the academic world, give them the opportunity to learn about other socio-cultural systems, achieve awareness of the structure of their own system, and improve conditions for intellectual inquiry.

Undoubtedly, a call for attention to make those cross-cultural differences in writing explicit and to help students navigate rhetorically the cultural divide has never been greater. For successful academic communication and improved educational outcomes, it is critical to address the following questions:

- Is it possible at all to agree on the meaning of *culture*?
- How to describe cultures without stereotyping them?
- How to articulate a framework for rhetorical conventions of any culture without over-generalization?

The intensification of global migrations and cross-cultural exchange sparkled off the ongoing debate over contextualized text analysis as well as a better conceptualization of culture and laid the basis for a new theory of *intercultural rhetoric.* Connor (2011) refers to her paper "Mapping multidimensional aspects of research: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric" to discuss three pertinent components of the new theory:

> (1) texts in contexts, (2) culture as a complex interaction of small and large cultures, and (3) texts in intercultural interactions

and explains them in the following way:

> (1) the study of writing is not limited to texts but needs to consider the surrounding social contexts and practices; (2) national cultures interact with disciplinary and other cultures in complex ways; and (3) intercultural discourse encounters—spoken and written—entail interaction among interlocutors and require negotiation and accommodation. (Connor 2011)

The theory of *intercultural rhetoric* focuses on both *cross-cultural studies* (analysis of the same concept or theme in two respectively different cultures) and *studies of interactions* (interactive communication situations in which writers of different race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion negotiate meaning and style in the writing and speaking process).

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[1]   *Good academic writing*, according to Anglo-American standards, features a linear organizational pattern and holds the writer responsible for providing the structure and the meaning of the discourse. The key to good organization is to clearly state the thesis statement in the introduction, to outline the main points of the paper by subordinating supporting ideas to the main claims, and to restate the exposition in the concluding paragraph.

2. Limitations and advances of contrastive rhetoric research

Contrastive rhetoric, which has been investigating cross-cultural differences and similarities in writing in the past 30 years, has failed to address these questions successfully. It has been criticized for insensitivity to cultural differences (Scollon 1997, Spack 1997, Zamel 1997), supporting cultural dichotomy between East and West, and the alleged resulting promotion of the superiority of Western writing (Kubota 1999, 2001). Ryuko Kubota (1999, 2002) also made contrastive rhetoric responsible for essentializing writers—that is, suggesting that someone thinks, speaks or writes in a certain way because of his/her linguistic background. Thus, there has also been a call to study how writing across cultures is tied to the intellectual history of these cultures. According to Galtung (1985), intellectual history determines the writing style of a given culture. For example, varying levels of linearity in academic writing styles result from the differences between four major writing conventions: linear (Anglo-American, "Saxonic" style), digressive (German, "Teutonic" style extending to languages such as, Polish, Czech, and Russian), circular (Oriental, "Nipponic" style) and digressive-elegant (Romance languages, "Gallic" style). However, can the rhetorical conventions of any culture be described without an over-simplification leading to the homogenization and inferiority of other styles to the Anglo-American writing tradition? Description of academic writing in, for instance, Polish as "digressive" may seem judgmental. The same pertains to a term "circular" that, if applied to writing, usually produces negative connotation. It is evaluated as a blend of illogical, disorganized, awkward and confusing ideas. Duszak also points out that by comparing the digressive style to cooked spaghetti Clyne suggests "Teutonic" writing is of lesser quality.

These criticisms present contrastive rhetoric's view of culture as being static and decreasing the importance of an individual in the writing process. Therefore, researchers of text and style have become vitally engaged in the discussion on the interplay of culture and communication. Enkvist wrote:

> One of the hot subjects in today's linguistics is the field variously known as contrastive (or cross-cultural or intercultural) rhetoric (or, with varying emphases, text linguistics, discourse analysis, or pragmalinguistics)... simply defined as the study of patterns of text and discourse in different languages that vary in structural and cultural background. (Enkvist 1997: 188)

Although Enkvist used such terms as *contrastive rhetoric, cross-cultural rhetoric, and intercultural rhetoric* interchangeably, he pointed at the crux of the argument that is the changing concept of culture and discourse analysis. Connor accepts the term *intercultural rhetoric* as the best-suited name for this area of study today and observes that

> *Intercultural* provides a connotation of collaborative interaction between and among cultures and individuals, on one hand, and within cultures on the other. (Connor 2011: 1)

Therefore, the major focus of intercultural rhetoric is on commonalities instead of differences in the written discourse analysis among writers of various cultural backgrounds. Current understanding of the *discourse* as defined by Shiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton (2001) comprises an underlying paradigm for discourse that is broad enough to support a variety of approaches, methods, and even definitions regarding discourse. New approaches to contextualized text analysis and the changing understanding of culture viewed as a complex interaction of small and large cultures lay the foundations for a new theory of *intercultural rhetoric.*

> Intercultural rhetoric assumes that (1) the study of writing is not limited to texts but needs to consider the surrounding social contexts and practices; (2) national cultures interact with disciplinary and other cultures in complex ways; and (3) intercultural discourse encounters—spoken and written—entail interaction among interlocutors and require negotiation and accommodation. (Connor 2011: 2)

The new field of *intercultural rhetoric* allows for reducing the confusion and complexity that cultural differences bring to the classroom by carrying out cross-cultural studies of the same concepts or themes and studies of interactions in which individuals coming from multicultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds negotiate *meanings* through speaking and writing. Intercultural rhetoric makes room for various cultural orientations by drawing on the resources individual writers bring to the educational setting and hence, helps to achieve meaningful educational purposes. The main purpose of this paper, which is in line with the opinions of such researchers as Connor, Atkinson or Holliday, is to defend an interpersonal and interactive approach to academic writing that makes culture a fundamental part of intercultural rhetoric, and considers negotiation and accommodation among interlocutors. Therefore, after briefly presenting traditional theories of culture, I will focus on major views that shape the framework of culture for intercultural rhetoric.

3. Theories of culture

The study of culture and written communication has been a diffuse enterprise in the past 30 years and particularly today, when we witness the evolution of contemporary societies into intercultural melting pots, it becomes a pressing need. Success in cross-cultural communication includes not only linguistic competence but cultural knowledge as well. Students are required to learn linguistic skills and just as importantly they must acquire the cultural standards for effective communication. The complexity of the phenomenon of culture and the variety of

explanations, however, make complete coverage of the "facts" about culture not only a difficult undertaking, but one likely to be incoherent and blurry. Nevertheless, if the new field of intercultural rhetoric is to continue, it is necessary to patch together evidence from an often-bewildering array of cultures and techniques in order to illuminate any specific aspect of language-thought-reality relation (as, for example, the relation between L1 thinking patterns and writing in L2). This makes both the writers' job of exposition and the readers' job of interpretation a challenging experience.

3.1. Traditional views of culture

Culture is one of the most disputatious subjects in today's academic world. Larson and Smalley view *culture* as a phenomenon directly affecting the manner in which people within a given community act and speak. They define it in the following way:

> (…) guides the behavior of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behavior in groups, makes us sensitive to matters of status, and helps us know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group. Different cultures are the underlying structures which make Round community round and Square community square. (Larson and Smalley 1972: 39)

Similarly, Rosinski's explanation of the term *culture* relates it to a group reality which involves human and linguistic behaviors as well as social consciousness characteristic for this group. He presents the following working definition:

> A group's culture is the set of unique characteristics that distinguishes its members from another group. This definition encompasses both *visible* (behaviors, language, artifacts) and *invisible* manifestations (norms, values, and basic assumptions or beliefs). This definition goes to the essence of culture: it is a *group* phenomenon as opposed to an *individual* reality. (Rosinski 2010: 20)

The aforementioned authors present *culture* as mainly based on separate national entities which remain relatively homogeneous and static.

3.1.1. Theories of culture that matter in intercultural rhetoric

Current views of culture emerge from postmodern perspectives and have evolved from critiques of the traditional understanding of this notion which emphasized homogeneity over heterogeneity as a culture shaping force. These changing perspectives of culture have made contrastive rhetoric, and its approach to the role of culture in a writing process, the target of criticism. In the past contrastive rhetoric

defined culture as "a set of patterns and rules shared by a particular community" (Connor 1996: 101). Zamel criticizes the tendency of contrastive rhetoric to present cultures as "discrete, discontinuous, and predictable" (Zamel 1997: 343), Spack disapproves of the practice of labeling students by their L1 backgrounds (Spack 1997), and Scollon argues that contrastive rhetoric is too focused on texts and neglects oral influences on literacy, and thus is unable to interpret correctly all the aspects of second- language writing (Scollon 1997). These criticisms activated broader inquiry of the concept of culture among the scholars of text and style. For example, Atkinson in his article, "Culture in TESOL" (Atkinson 1999), discusses two competing approaches to culture which he divides into a received view and alternative, nonstandard views. The traditional approach perceives ESL students as members of separate, identifiable, cultural communities while an alternative perspective, influenced by a postmodern view of culture, introduces words such as: *identity, hybridity, essentialism,* and *power* to the discussion of the meaning of culture. Mathews (2000) calls the traditional view of culture "the way of life of the people" (Mathews 2000: 2) and argues that it makes it possible to group cultures according to their national backgrounds (e.g., American culture, Polish culture or Japanese culture). In light of current developments in cross-cultural research, such a monochronic approach to culture is open to criticism. Tannen observes that," some people object to any research documenting cross-cultural differences, which they see as buttressing stereotypes and hence exacerbating discrimination" (Tannen 1985: 212). But later on in her paper she argues that if cross-cultural differences are not addressed, it leads to miscommunication and "discrimination of another sort" (Tannen 1985: 212). Keesing also views culture as the product of Western thought which formed the concept to provide "a framework for our creation and evocation of radical diversity" (Keesing 1994: 301). He observes that such essentialist interpretation of culture has affected academic discourse and has reduced our view of cultures to their division into two major groups, Western and non-Western, thus forcing us to define our identities by the use of parameters that point at what we are not.

The British sociologist, John Tomlison, in his book *Globalization and Culture* (1999), proposes a definition of culture that is meaningful in a globalized world. He postulates an antireductionist approach to cross-cultural analysis that will make us sensitive to the points at which different cultural dimensions interconnect and interact. Tomlison poses the question that addresses the complexity of culture, "(…) since the concept of culture is so 'encompassing' that it can easily be taken as the ultimate level of analysis—isn't everything in the end 'cultural?" (Tomlison 1999: 17). He goes on to argue, however, that it gets us nowhere to think of culture in this way, as simply a description of a 'total way of life' as it leads us to "the throwing of anything and everything into the conceptual stew that is the 'complex whole ' of human existence" (Tomlison

1999: 17). Therefore, he calls for making the dimension of culture more specific and defines it in the following way:

> In the first place culture can be understood as the order of life in which human beings construct meaning through practices of symbolic representation. If this sounds a rather dry generalization, it nevertheless allows us to make some useful distinctions. Very broadly, if we are talking about the economic we are concerned with practices by which humans produce, exchange and consume material goods; if we are discussing the political we mean practices by which power is concentrated, distributed and deployed in societies; and if we are talking culture, we mean the ways in which people make their lives, individually and collectively, meaningful by communicating with each other. (Tomlison 1999: 18)

Postmodern culture theorists emphasize the *complexity* of culture. Hannerz in his book *Cultural complexity: Studies in the social organization of meaning* observes that the word *complex* is not intellectually attractive, but it has one major advantage—makes us think twice before "accepting any simple characterization of the cultures in question in the terms of some single existence" (Hannerz 1992: 6). He distinguishes three major cultural dimensions: metaphysical, aesthetic, and distributive that, although presented as separate categories, demonstrate significant correlations (Hannerz 1992). In light of current developments in cross-cultural research, such a monochronic approach to culture is open to criticism. Tannen observes that," some people object to any research documenting cross-cultural differences, which they see as buttressing stereotypes and hence exacerbating discrimination" (Tannen 1985: 212). Hannerz, however, observes that because people tend to attach meaning to whatever they do, the complexity in the forms of externalization of meaning becomes greater. This means that the development of new technologies will continue to increase cultural complexity and "those media technologies, ranging from writing to television, which make the cultural flow less dependent on face-to-face interactions, and which—having communication as their primary function—allow flexible, elaborate statements of meaning" (Hannerz 1992: 9). 'Distributive' includes the social distribution of the cultural accumulation of meanings among populations and social relations. The least complex example of distribution would be total uniformity, when each individual involved with a culture would have the same ideas and articulate them in the same way. However, the phenomenon is more complex because not all the people with the same cultural background have the same ideas and express them by the same means.

The voice of Neil Postman, one of the most militant cultural critics, who warns against the destructive force of new technologies in our lives cannot be ignored in the discussion of the role of culture in intercultural rhetoric. Postman talks about a technology's intrusion into a culture of contemporary societies and asserts that:

> (…) new technologies change what we mean by 'knowing' and 'truth'; they alter those deeply embedded habits of thought which give to a culture its sense of what the world is like—a sense of what is the natural order of things, of what is reasonable, of what is necessary, of what is inevitable, of what is real. (Postman 1993: 12)

His description of the ways new technologies shape societies by depriving cultures of their uniqueness, intellect, religion, history, and even privacy and truth is both disturbing and thought-provoking.

Appadurai (1996) describes a general pattern of the dissolution of links between cultural experience and territorial location in the current era of global modernity. A far-reaching analysis of the influence of electronic media and mass migration on evolving transnational cultural interactions lies at the heart of the book. Appadurai comes up with new frameworks to explain the complexity of new relationships, in which people have to make choices between the global and the local and frequently transform the global within their local practices.

Although there has been a lot of doubt about the ability to arrive at consensus about what the term *culture* means, for the sake of a successful development of intercultural rhetoric the concept of culture must be framed. Considering all the complexities of culture, Ulla Connor proposed the following explanation of this phenomenon, "This is how culture works in the framework of intercultural rhetoric: It recognizes large cultures but values small cultures; it acknowledges individual variation; and it focuses on the give-and-take in intercultural interactions" (Connor 2011: 34).

3.1.1.1. Cultures interacting in an academic setting

As universities continue to become more culturally diverse, a detailed insight into a variety of cultures interacting in an educational setting becomes imperative. University classrooms have their own academic culture consisting of many overlapping cultural components. Atkinson (2004) advocates an *alternative view* of culture, as opposed to a *received* (traditional) one, in an academic classroom in the face of the changing nature of global communication. A model depicting different cultures that operate in an educational setting has been proposed by Holliday (1994, 1999) and is in line with a new approach to culture. Holliday analyzed the influences of *small* and *large cultures* as major forces shaping academic culture. Large cultures feature ethnic, national, or international traits and tend to be normative and prescriptive. Conversely, small cultures are non-essentialist and rely on dynamic processes that relate to cohesive behaviors within social groupings. Small cultures do not accept any type of stereotyping, "In cultural research, small cultures are thus a heuristic means in the process of interpreting group behavior" (Holliday 1999: 240). Small cultures are engaged in a variety of activities, and academic discourse is one of the outcomes of a small culture enterprise (Holliday

1999: 251). Holliday asserts that, "In many ways, the discourse community is a small culture" (Holliday 1999: 252).

Holliday's model describes some cultures, like national culture, professional-academic culture, youth culture, student culture and classroom culture that can be found in any educational setting. These cultures interact and overlap with one another, but the primary importance has always been assigned to national culture that determines such aspects of academic life as code of conduct and discourse style. Therefore, today when academic classrooms tend to be more diverse in terms of ethnic, national, religious and socio-cultural backgrounds, it is critical to diminish the superiority of national norms and standards and draw on knowledge, and learning styles that individual students bring to the classroom. When it comes to academic discourse, both in speaking and writing, students draw on various cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences. The U.S accepts the challenge that culturally diverse academic classrooms create and pioneers in culturally responsive teaching. A culturally responsive classroom, also referred to as an inclusive classroom, is a space where all the voices are sought out and welcome, participants feel free to challenge or support other people's perspectives on course topics, and it is safe for participants to feel uncomfortable and take necessary risks for real dialogue to occur.

4. The influences on intercultural rhetoric

The theory of contrastive rhetoric predominantly rests on the assumption that patterns of language and writing are culture specific and accepts the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity as a primary influence. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is premised on the insight that language is not a neutral medium that does not influence the way people perceive and experience the world, and hence views language, in the initial, firmer version, as a determiner of thought, and in the later, softer version, as a shaper of thought. Therefore, to the degree that language and writing are cultural phenomena, different cultures have different rhetorical tendencies. Moreover, ESL learners transfer L1 writing conventions to L2 writing causing interference. Contrastive rhetoric examines the interference that reveals itself in the writer's choice of rhetorical strategies and content, not with differences at the level of syntax and phonology.

Since the 1980s, contrastive rhetoricians have been devoting more attention to different ways of exploring connections between students' culture and discourse style. Connor should be given the credit for her research on cross-cultural influences that have affected contrastive rhetoric theory. The final outcome of her work (Connor 2011) manifests itself in a comprehensive outline of six major factors that altered the approach to textual analyses and consequently contributed to the inception of a new field of *intercultural rhetoric:*

1. Relations between American composition and European text linguistics
   The co-related studies of American traditions of rhetoric/composition and European tradition of text analysis, reaching far beyond organizational patterns as a method of text analysis, are the primary focus of the field today.
2. Connections with Comparative Rhetoric
   Intercultural rhetoric draws on comparative rhetoric studies which analyze languages and cultures as separate entities and investigate in-depth histories of their rhetorical traditions.
3. Reframing the definition of *rhetoric*
   Contrastive rhetoric stems from the structural and content-based principles for writing laid down by Aristotle in *Poetics*, but reduces the term *rhetoric* to arrangement and organization, one of the three steps (the other two were invention and discovery) in Aristotle's treatise of rhetoric as an act of persuasion. Aristotle himself shifted emphasis on the rhetorical canons from style to invention and a new field of *intercultural rhetoric* draws from his original concept of rhetoric (invention, style, and arrangement) as well as the three types of rhetorical proof (*ethos, pathos* and *logos*). In Ancient times, in order to make an argument, one had to consider three elements: the means or sources of persuasion, the language, the arrangement of the different parts of the treatment. The means of persuasion are strategies for making three appeals: *ethos, pathos* and *logos.* "The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker, the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind, the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself". (Aristotle 1984:2155). This initial definition of rhetoric formulated by Aristotle is in line with the current developments in *intercultural rhetoric.* Kennedy emphasizes a new dimension of contemporary rhetoric in *Comparative Rhetoric: An Historical and Cross-Cultural Introduction* by defining it as "a form of mental and emotional energy" (Kennedy 1998:3) and later on continues," rhetoric is a natural phenomenon: the potential for it exists in all life forms that can give signals, it is practiced in limited forms by nonhuman animals" (Kennedy 1998:4).
4. New approach to research methods for studying writing
   Early contrastive rhetoric was primarily based on linguistic text analyses focusing on methods of analyzing cohesion, coherence, and the discourse superstructure of texts. However, the adequacy of exclusively text-based analyses was questioned and the process of extending the text analyses beyond the realm of textual features was initiated. Connor distinguishes the following periods in research methods for studying writing:

> Following the lead of L1 writing research and pedagogy, in which the 1970s were said to be the decade of the composing process and the 1980s the decade of social construction, empirical research on L2

writing in the 1990s became increasingly concerned with social and cultural processes in cross-cultural undergraduate writing groups and classes. (Connor 2002: 497)

5. Intercultural communication viewed as the text-speech interplay
Intercultural communication is not limited only to the written discourse. Therefore, one of the main objectives of *intercultural rhetoric* is to examine the text-speech interface by the means of new methods for rhetorical analysis.

6. Dynamic developments in studies of culture
Since local diversity and global connectedness confront us on a daily basis, more than ever there is a pressing need to analyze languages in cultural context. "Culture, in all the complexities of that word, is seen as dynamic and not confined to a hegemonic national discourse. The complexity of large and small cultures necessarily exists in the classroom just as it does in day-to-day life in a range of situations and social groupings" (Holliday 1999).

Along with these aforementioned developments in intercultural rhetoric comes a need to investigate in-depth the impact of the variety of cultural influences on human identity and self-awareness today.

4.1. Multicultural identities

We find ourselves living in a world of increasing cultural mobility. However, a mutual cultural exposure does not necessarily imply the acquisition of similar cultural identities, mutual benefits, acceptance, or harmony. Academic discussions about global versus local, or about the homogenization and fragmentation of cultures, are moving away from a black-and-white view and toward a more diverse perspective as Skalli observes, "cultural experience is both unified beyond localities and fragmented within them" (Skalli 2006:20). The construction of contemporary multicultural identities is not only affected by the presence of a global economy and mass cultural products, but also by local beliefs, values, and socio-cultural and linguistic norms. Therefore, at the same time as we recognize the far-reaching effects of technological, societal, and economic forces, we also need to recognize that all the messages we experience are interpreted through the meaning systems of culture (Lusting and Koester 2010).

4.1.1. Multiculturalism

The increase of cultural diversity across the globe has resulted in the promotion of *multiculturalism* which holds that a multitude of ethnic cultures can coexist in the mainstream or host culture and retain their original ethnic cultural heritage (Tadmor and Tetlock). Multiculturalism, on one hand, supports a multicultural

coexistence, but, on the other, may lead to group distinctions and threaten social cohesion. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) propose the *ideological asymmetry hypothesis* which suggests that hierarchy-attenuating ideologies such as, multiculturalism appeal more to low-status groups than to high-status groups, because the existing status hierarchy tends to be more beneficial for members of high- rather than low-status groups. Due to multiculturalism, low-status groups and minorities gain the opportunity to maintain their own culture as well as obtain a higher social status. Majority groups, however, may perceive a desire of ethnic minorities to maintain their own culture as a threat to mainstream cultural identity and their high social status. Thus, although all the people are ultimately multicultural beings those who draw strongest on cross-cultural influences in the construction of their identities are less powerful social groups.

4.1.1.1. Understanding our multicultural selves

As the products of interweaving multicultural and multilinguistic influences, our identities and cognitive capacities extend beyond the reach of any one culture. Our self awareness, affected by a variety of cultural influences, is continually altered and our identities are always *becoming.* From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, including intercultural rhetoric, *identity* of an individual is described as a blend of ethnic, national, international and linguistic components. The question that arises is: "How can somebody understand his/her own cultural identity, and those of other people, when it is obvious there can never be a clear description of a culture?" Hofstede (1980) coined the term *dimensions of culture* and Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) *cultural starting points* that are meant to offer one way of starting to decode cultural ways of making meaning. Pillay (2006) suggests six cultural starting points, which affect individual personality traits, to assist us in understanding the complexity of culture and affect individual personality traits.
  – High Context–Low Context
  – Individualism–Communitarianism
  – Universalism–Particularism
  – Specificity–Diffuseness
  – Sequential Time–Synchronous Time
  – Low Power Distance–High Power Distance (Pillay 2006: 32, 33)
    Starting points demonstrate a high level of inner correlations. For example, high-context communication (meaning is communicated through context) and polychronic time perspective (synchronous, recurrent, episodic time) often correspond with communitarian orientation which features cooperation and interdependence, and values group harmony and cohesion. Just like low-context communication (meaning is explicitly conveyed in words) is intertwined with

a monochronic time perspective (sequential, linear and rigid time) and appears in rather individualistic societies that encourage competition, individual achievement, and self-reliance. When we explore the continuum of specificity and diffuseness, we observe the discrepancy between the specific orientation (values efficiency, clear focus, outcome and solutions), typical for low-context cultures, and the diffuse orientation (pays attention to process, relationships, and takes holistic perspective) that high-context cultures operate on. Hofstede's (1984) idea of power distance
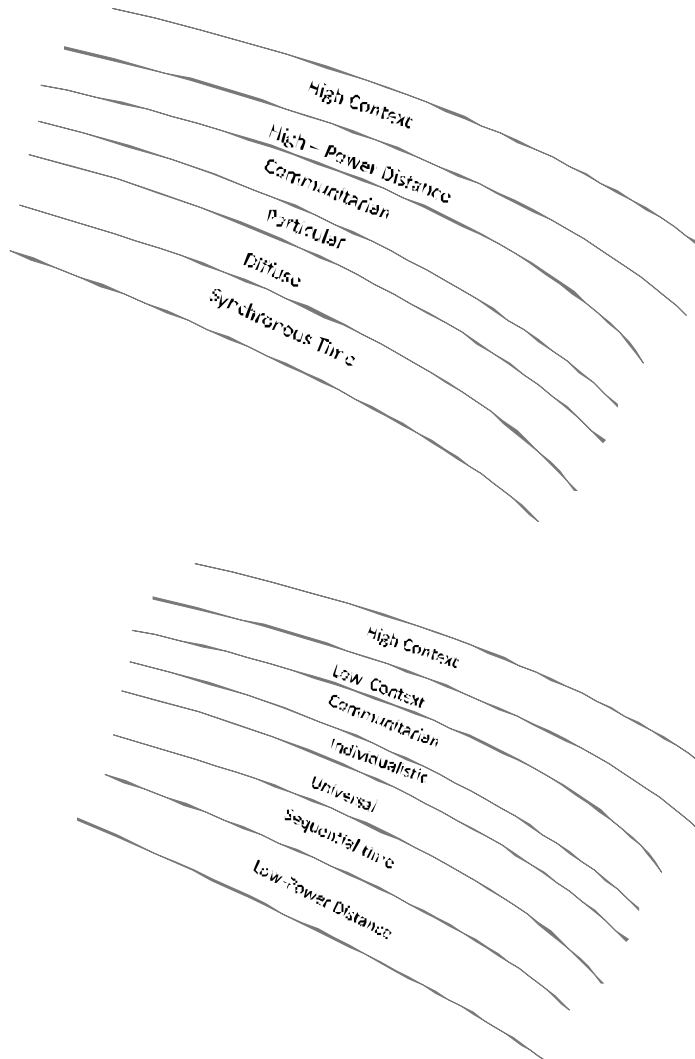
Figure 1. Sample Identity Patterns

refers to the differences in the distribution of power between communitarian, high-context cultures that rely on hierarchical civic structures where social status is ascribed, and individualistic, low-context cultures where status is earned by individual achievements and accomplishments.

Pillay asserts that the term *starting points* is the most accurate to describe different cultural perspectives as it allows to avoid a dichotomized, fixed-point interpretation of cultural traits. Particular cultural features may be applicable to all the members of one cultural group or only a certain combination may be relevant. Pillay's point is that "there are no fixed answers to understanding the dynamics of culture, but there are guiding lights to draw upon along the way" (Pillay 2006: 33). *Complexity* is a leading term in the discussions about culture, but *language,* including *academic discourse*, also plays a key role in intercultural communication because it addresses such issues as cross-cultural negotiation and accommodation. As Wierzbicka observes,

> Languages differ from one another not just as linguistic systems but also as cultural universes, as vehicles of ethnic identities. (Wierzbicka 1985: 187)

Each culture produces its own ethnic-specific roadmap that consists of particular norms (what you consider right/wrong, proper/improper), values (that are important to you, the way you manifest these values), basic assumptions and beliefs (what you regard as true/false). It draws on the political, social and economic history as well as its intellectual tradition to form meaningful background information which allows its members to interpret correctly allegories, figures of speech, symbols and behavioral patterns that are relevant for this culture. For example, if one knows the story of Robinson Crusoe, one will comprehend better the idea of' American Self-Made Man'. As for academic writing, Cooley and Lewkowicz (1997) in "Developing awareness of the rhetorical and linguistic conventions of writing a thesis in English: addressing the needs of EFL/ESL postgraduate students" argue that the most significant problems evolving from various cultural perspectives arise at the macro-level of discourse. In a parallel manner Duszak asserts that,

> There are the deficiencies that relate to the overall communicative success of a piece of writing, that involve the clarity of the text, its global organization, and the consistency and balance of argument, as well as the expression of thoughts in English. (Duszak 1997: 5)

It is not possible to define somebody's identity without viewing him/her through the lenses of culture. Although there are no prescriptive patterns for understanding cultures, there are starting points that may serve as initial clues in the ongoing process of intercultural understanding. If we imagine our identities as a blend of various cultural influences, we may ponder about how to create *cultural patterns of understanding* in cross-cultural encounters. Depending on the context and relational dynamics, identity patterns may vary in components and their number.

In the process of analyzing various identity patterns, we discover more insights into other cultures and most importantly, into our own culture. Therefore, competence in intercultural communication involves commitment to a process of growing self-awareness, curious observation, and respectful dialogue.

5. Conclusions

The complexity of diverse cultural behaviors can be observed in everyday human interactions including academic classroom situations. Therefore, culture must be seen as a dynamic phenomenon not limited to a hegemonic national discourse. Undoubtedly, culture needs to be included in any model of intercultural rhetoric. However, intercultural rhetoric must eliminate radical distinctions between polychronic, high-context thinking and monochronic, low-context thinking, linear and non-linear writing, and remember that as we embody multiple cultures, derive meaning from many cultural influences in a variety of contexts, we are ourselves the links between cultures. Today the undisputed example of the quality thinking is the Anglo-American academic discourse convention based on linear, coordinated and symmetrical principles for speaking and writing. Other cultural orientations demonstrating alternative standards for academic communication styles are disadvantaged. Since discrepancies in oral and written communication are vast across cultures, intercultural rhetoric must make the process of negotiation of meaning and the adjustment to each other's styles a number one priority. In order to emphasize my point, I would like to quote Duszak's assertion,

> further insight into academic communication styles is both pressing and worthwhile. Ignorance of, or misconceptions about, the communication styles of others can hinder understanding among academics and ultimately obstruct co-operation and advancement of scholarship. (Duszak 1997: 3)

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