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Culture, Curriculum, Cognition: Contrastive Rhetorics Today

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CULTURE, CURRICULUM, COGNITION:
CONTRASTIVE RHETORICS TODAY

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SAVANNAH, GEORGIA – APRIL 7, 2017

[Note: In this paper, the term "L" (in referring to L1, L2, or L1.x subject) does not necessarily stand for "language" as is commonly considered. The reader should consider "L" to mean a discourse community.]

In all disciplines, we value "good writing," but "good writing" often means something different from one discourse community to another. A discourse community, regardless of its own, unique rhetoric, coexists with multiple discourse communities to create an overarching communicative culture. The underlying matrix of discourses presents a complexity of rhetorics that often contrast when the members from different communities attempt to negotiate meaning. In pan-clusive discourse environments, in which diversity is so valued, academics, disciplinarians, and professionals still expect certain genres within the scope of "discourse x". These genres and subgenres differ both from one discourse to another and within discourse communities. The matrix becomes more complex.

Studies in contrastive rhetoric have focused mostly on specific linguistic groups, sometimes on specific disciplines and professions, and rarely on specific cognitively-challenged subjects, but no extensive experiments, true or quasi, have examined the matrix of language, discipline, and cognitive ability in analyzing discourse structure. A rhetoric must filter through several levels of discourse features before negotiated meaning occurs: first or second language, socio-cultural

context, and cognitive development. Therefore, all writers find themselves constantly exposed to and writing in *different* rhetorics and languages and striving to negotiate meaning between the L1 and a target rhetoric, somewhere on the continuum between L1 and L2. We should rethink our concept of writers as they traverse these rhetorical spaces and consider the paradigm of the L1.x writer. Rhetorical contrasts and clashes are more complex than we have thought.

Contrastive rhetoric(s), then, become(s) an important issue in writing in the disciplines, writing across cultures, and critical pedagogy. More and more, research points to writing as the key to critical thinking and learning. Couple this with an increasing demand for information literacy, cross-curricular competence, and cross-cultural meaning, we need to better understand contrastive rhetorics, why they clash, and how to manage, not necessary modify, those clashes.

Contrastive rhetoric yesterday

Kaplan's (1966) seminal work in contrastive rhetoric started as an examination of L2 writers in English-language scenarios. In what Kaplan now refers to as his "doodles" article, he posited through a series simple diagrams (Figure 1) that L2 writers transfer their native rhetorical patterns to English writing. Kaplan's study has been criticized as ethnocentric and privileging English (Matalene 1985), examining only L2 products (Mohan & Lo 1985), dismissive of differences among related languages labeled as "Oriental" (Hinds 1983), and implying a negative context of L1 transfer (Raimes 1991).
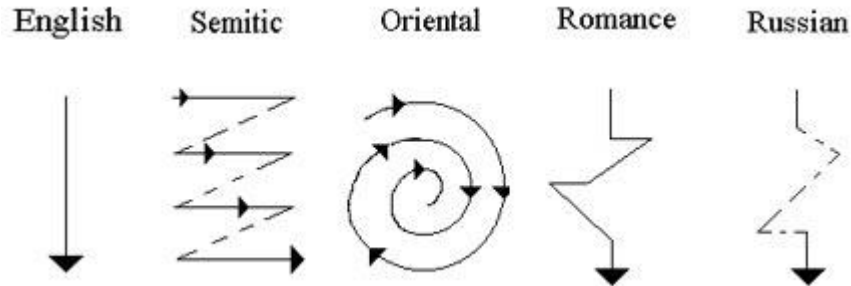
English   Semitic   Oriental   Romance   Russian

Figure 1: Kaplan (1966)

Modern contrastive rhetoric studies focus less on L2 student writing and more on discourse analysis maintaining that "language and writing are cultural phenomena" (Connor, 1996, p. 5). Péry-Woodley (1990) asserted that rhetorical practices are specific to particular groups. Connor (1996) noted the involvement of education, composition, and translation studies in recent contrastive rhetoric studies reflecting "multicultural pluralism" (p. 7) evolving to a paradigm shift that writing, regardless of who generates it, is "inherently interactive and social" within a certain context and situation (p. 18). Other contrastive rhetoric studies have focused on text linguistics, text analysis, genre analysis, social constructivism, and applied linguistics. These studies all indicate that in order to understand contrasts in writing, L1 writing has to be examined *as well as* L2 writing.

Rhetorical contrasts and clashes today

Writers today approach many rhetorical crossroads; they are at L1.x in a range of "languages"—e.g., new software, new hardware, new relationships, changing relationships, the media, courses in unstudied disciplines. Negotiating meaning within a rhetorical context outside one's *natural* discourse (whatever "natural" can really mean) becomes a continuous exercise. This clash is obvious when *lingua* itself is different and not so obvious when the *lingua* is not different. Studies in feminist, African-American, and queer rhetorics have indicated that like

L1 students who integrate into an L2 discourse community, L1s moving into a new discourse community or outside their L1 community into a new "variety" of L1 must negotiate language and linguistic *references* to become acculturated in the other discourse community. This also occurs when L1 writers are challenged by new learning situations, new academic programs, new disciplines, new professions—i.e., any new socio-cultural, ideological context where the view of the world differs from the L1's world view. This follows Bakhtin's (1981) concept that language is "specific points of view in the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words...[which have a] real life" (qtd. in Corbett, 2001, p. 34).

Because of these socio-cultural contexts that all writers consider in every writing task, all writers become "entangled in conflicting rhetorics and ideologies" (Corbett, 2001, p. 34). Ostler (2002) considered the acquisition of a new language of a discipline may compromise L1 fluency despite the writer/speaker not knowing or learning that the lack of facility in a new language "has consequences" (174). Gregg, Coleman, Stennett, and Davis (2002) implicitly concluded college writers with learning disabilities do not achieve the same quality, verbosity, and lexical complexity in the same period of time as college writers without learning disabilities. (This is an area of rhetorical studies that has been mostly overlooked and needs to be considered.)

In reconsidering contrastive rhetoric, then, we need to allow for the ideologies behind discourse. Berlin (1988) remarked that ideology influences our experiences, and thus is "inscribed" into our discourse practices. Corbett (2001) considered Bakhtin & Medvedev's (1978) position that social phenomena, objects, and symbols "in their totality" create the environment of social "man" (p. 35). We

see this, linguistically and culturally, in broad, historical contexts (from isolated, homogeneous, monolingual cultures to natives/colonists creating mixed social and linguistic structures) and local contexts (discrete discourse communities based on age, race, ethnicity, geography, discipline). These local contexts provide a rich area of exploration for expanded contrastive rhetoric studies. Instead of perceiving contrastive rhetoric studies as xenophobic and/or restrictive (as Kaplan admits his original work could be viewed as such), we can explore these studies not as discrete linguistic contrasts but as integrated areas (communities) of discourse. Taking Kaplan's notion that "rhetorical choices have purposeful roots" (in Panetta, 2001, xv) one step further, we must look at the cultural determinations of those rhetorical choices. In examining these determinations—culturally/linguistically and within a discipline—we begin to see *how* discourse communities decide Leki's (1991) questions of "what is relevant/irrelevant, what is logical/illogical, [and] what constitutes an argument" (p. 138).

Rhetorical Considerations Across Cultures

In 1995, over dinner with a Slovak manager at the Czech Management Centre where I was teaching, I was a bit shocked at his diatribe over American companies and organizations "shoving" American culture and attitudes into the post-Communist culture. Certainly, this questionable generalization has some merit, but the genesis of his argument was based on a simulation we enacted earlier in the day about what to consider when negotiating business in another culture. A business negotiation could succeed or fail based on one party's awareness or neglect of cultural differences in discourse.

Discourse in every culture is ritualistic. Ethnology has always focused on the rituals within a culture and often has a sub-focus on discourse rituals. Children within a culture observe and mimic these rituals until mastery occurs. While ethnology posits the outsider (L2) observing and mimicking rituals to become more of an insider (L1), ethnology always qualifies that the outsider will *never* be an insider, fully-enculturated, fully-fluent. We should approach discourse in a similar way; the outside writer can observe and mimic and enact discourse in the new "culture," but mastery and fluency in the discourse take effort, practice, failure, and negotiation. Lan (2002) claimed that "knowledge of a different culture/discursive practice cannot be thorough without knowledge of one's own culture" (p. 74). This lack of knowledge, *both from the learner and from the instructor*, can present a barrier to learning and teaching, as writers (and maybe some instructors) who may not be completely proficient in their own discourse communities negotiate discourse within a new community. An awareness of contrastive rhetoric implications beyond culture and language, then, provides the space for students between L1 and L2 to negotiating meaning to achieve mastery and fluency. However, negotiation does become an ongoing exercise for all in the community.

Discourse is complex in a single culture. In this Internet Age, cross-cultural discourse, with even more complexities, has become an important area of inquiry and research. One might say cross-cultural discourse has become *the* meta-discourse of our time. Even though the boundaries separating cultures are fuzzy or disappearing or absent, the boundaries of discourse are still present. Woolever (2001) acknowledged that the "culturally biased world of language" is moving more

slowly than our communication technology (p. 49). Locally, asynchronous and synchronous chat and e-mail have altered discourse somewhere on the continuum of concision to cuteness. The World Wide Web has altered discourse somewhere on the continuum of text to semiotics. Globally, discourse—political, technological, business—has shifted from delayed and text-based to instant and multi-media. Anyone from L1 entering any discourse community that has been altered (an L2) will automatically find herself negotiating new discourse and new rules.

Rhetorical Considerations Across the Disciplines

Baldwin (2014) writes: "Law is not a natural language, but learning to speak and write about the law is like learning a language" (399). Entering graduate school, I was an English literature major moving into linguistics. I knew the "vocabulary" of linguistics from an undergraduate course. However, I was as bewildered after the first night of class as I was during my first week in Sweden in an exchange program; everyone else was communicating in a language that was slightly familiar sounding but still unknown to me. If one moves from one field to another, he must learn yet another language, another way of knowing, another discourse.

As each discipline has its own theoretical framework(s) from which it grounds its field, each discipline's discourse has developed its own rhetorical framework. These forms are always dynamic whenever the paradigm shifts or the needs of the community changes and, arguably, at all times in the life of the community. However, mastery of the discourse comes from active participation— thinking, listening, speaking, and writing—in the discourse community. As we find ourselves exposed to new discourse communities and consider new rhetorical

situations, we must examine what Hyland (1998) stated are "communicative intentions."

In his study of text-level rhetoric, Hyland focuses on genre as the ideological construct of the discourse community, a concept also noted by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) and Connor (1996). These researchers concluded that in order to achieve writing/discourse fluency within a discipline, writers must compare texts written for similar purposes in similar contexts and master those genres, or those "linguistic realizations of some social activity" (Connor, 1996, p. 126). Bhatia (1993) further explored subgenres within genres as more precise rhetorical situations that require negotiation. This may be the point in disciplinary discourse where students experience the disconnects that cause L2→L1 contrasts. Students are taught to write specific genres in specific situations rather than how to discern "genres in situations with...contrasting rhetorical expectations" (Woolever, 2001, pp. 59-60).

Rhetorical Considerations in Genre

Anson (2016) wrote about "the universal challenge of transfer regardless of prior knowledge or meta-awareness of rhetorical strategies" in his *College Composition and Communication* article "The Pop Warner Chronicles: A Case Study in Contextual Adaptation and the Transfer of Writing Ability." This case study, based on his own experience of writing brief weekly game summaries for his son's Pop Warner football team for the local paper. A noted composition scholar, Anson volunteered his writing skill as part of his parental involvement, but when given the task of writing the summary, he realized "a failure to write," particularly when he asked his son to read the piece only to be met with laughter and a charge of

"total English professor speak" (528). As even an experienced writer faces issues with transfer when facing a new genre task, students facing an unfamiliar genre will freeze, wonder how to create the genre, and fumble before ever getting it right. Teledahl (2017) explores this with young students communicating their mathematical problem solving in writing. In her study, she found student writing was judged by its communicability, and in developing complex communication, students make "a variety of choices concerning interpretation, evaluation, design and production and meaning…through a wide change of modes" (562). How do we address this in the classroom?

Cremin and Baker (2014) consider instructors' own beliefs, practices and identities around writing. We bring our own processes to the classroom, and these are predicated on institutional constraints (as in the form of standardized instruction) and our own familiarity with discourse practices as well as our own "socially constructed process(es) mediated through sets of literary practices" (Salter-Dvorak, 2017, 92).

Contrastive Rhetorics and Critical Pedagogy

Instructors should consider a broader concept of teaching discourse and rhetoric: How do we use L1.x to strengthen our pedagogical practices and help students negotiate meaning in a variety of rhetorical situations to achieve competency? Mastery of *any* discourse is evolutionary. In approaching any new discourse community, one will always be at some disadvantage. However, if we consider Barton's (2002) claim that discourse is both shaped by and shapes the world, language, participants, prior and future discourse, mediums, and purposes, we should consider always what each writer brings to the new discourse. In all of

these instances, writers approach these discourse situation with their own ways of knowing, communicating, and composing, and the process from acculturation to enculturation (or fluency) into a particular discourse's way of knowing, communicating, and composing will require writers, with help from instructors and others in the discourse community, to negotiate the rhetorical spaces between L2 and L1—the ever-present L1.x. Ostler (2002) saw post-secondary education as the time to "prepare students to communicate in requisite discourse patterns" (p. 173). So what does this mean for our pedagogy?

Writing in real-life settings in which writing is integrated in communicative activities as a whole, intermingled in its various stages with spoken discourse, engenders an L1.x environment, where there is no specifically "right" discourse, but a continuous, mediated negotiation towards an acceptable discourse. As writing instructors, if we consider the notion that *every* writer negotiates—whether that negotiation is linguistic, rhetorical, cognitive, or any combination—at the front of our minds, our pedagogy will be strengthened. We must recognize and appreciate how self-contained our academic niche is and how difficult it is for students to learn our language. Because of this, we must see all our students as somewhere on a continuum between L2 and L1—the L1.x writer.

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