Direct research promotion in RA discussion sections through English and Spanish: Teaching implications for Spanish social scientists

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, researchers have increasingly published their research in English-medium scientific journals, mainly because of their greater prospects for international recognition and career promotion. Of all possible academic genres, the research article continues to be the pre-eminent genre of the academy, and the empirical research article is the most relevant for Spanish scholars. Discussion and/or other Closing (DC) sections in this subgenre in English-medium journals are especially difficult for social scientists to write when English is not their first language. This intercultural rhetoric research explores the possible negative transfer of their research promotional behaviour in Spanish when they write DC sections for publication in English. Drawing on recent strengthened move analysis methodology and employing quantitative and qualitative methods, I compared the extent to which authors writing in English and in Spanish as L1 promote their own research in DC sections. To do so, I systematically annotated ten pairs of comparable DC sections from the Exemplary Empirical Research Articles in English and Spanish Corpus for their communicative functions which, for the first time, were validated by the article authors themselves. Additionally, I used an online survey to understand their promotional behaviour better. This innovative methodology confirmed that the writers in the study were more promotional in English than in Spanish. In particular, authors in English highlighted more positive aspects of their studies and applications of their results while in Spanish they were more neutral and focused largely on statements of contribution and relevance to the zeitgeist. It was also found that the inclusion of specific rhetorical steps was affected by different levels of culture (unstated general communication norms, reviewing and socialisation processes, as well as research assessment policies). These findings demonstrate how social scientists' promotional approaches are complex and merit further attention. Implications for the teaching of academic writing in English for publication purposes are drawn.

Keywords: *promotion, discussion section, research article, genre analysis, intercultural rhetoric*

Introduction

Over the last few decades, researchers have increasingly published their research in English-medium scientific journals, mainly because of their greater prospects for international recognition and career promotion (e.g., Moreno et al. 2011). The research article continues to be the "pre-eminent genre of the academy" (Hyland, 2009: 67), and the empirical research article (RA) is no doubt the most relevant for Spanish researchers (Moreno et al., 2011). However, these researchers, for whom English is not usually their L1, find it very difficult to write their RAs for publication in English, particularly in the social sciences (SSC) (Moreno et al., 2012; Gea-Valor et al., 2014). Some of the rhetorical and stylistic changes that they need to make to get their RAs published in English can be identified and explained within the framework of intercultural rhetoric (Moreno, 2013a; also see Connor, 2004).

My study focuses on a rhetorical feature that has made it necessary for Spanish social scientists to revise their manuscripts, despite being lexico-grammatically accurate in English and/or [the absence of this feature] being conventional in Spanish (Moreno, 2013a). I am referring to the feature of **not having clearly articulated the contribution of their study**. This problem is real and was, for instance, identified in an introduction to an RA manuscript in finance, which received a 'major revision' assessment by the editor (Mur-Dueñas, 2014), even though it had been revised by a "native" speaker of English. Features like this have been referred to as writing obstacles in English (WOEs) (Moreno et al., 2012) to emphasize the powerlessness that authors feel in these circumstances.

Interestingly, the problem of the Spanish writers in finance mentioned above was not really a lack of *Statements of contribution*, but a lack of clear motivation and positioning (Mur-Dueñas, 2014). This suggested to me the need to look at not only *Statements of contribution*, understood in terms of novelty, addition, or improvement, but also at statements about the need, relevance, quality/rigor, and usefulness of the research. Furthermore, given that nowadays the most important section for readers is the discussion (Pérez-Llantada, 2013), where authors make their last attempts to persuade readers of the value and soundness of their research, I decided to switch the focus to the discussion section.

My hypothesis was that RA discussion (and/or other closing) (DC) sections in Spanish have not become as directly promotional of the authors' own research as those in English-medium journals for cultural reasons. So, this is the first systematic attempt to compare direct research promotion strategies (see section 2.2.) across English and Spanish to identify where the differences lie. More innovatively, I also aim to explain the differences identified by means of qualitative methods.

Methods

To carry out this comparison, I adopted the theoretical and methodological intercultural rhetoric framework revisited in Moreno (2021).

The corpus

I drew two comparable samples of ten SSC RA DC sections from perhaps the most comparable corpora of exemplary empirical research articles in English and Spanish available today, the EXEMPRAES Corpus (Moreno, 2013b, June). These corpora are made up of RA pairs which are highly similar in overall topic and study type (e.g., experimental, survey, qualitative), without being translations (see Moreno and Swales, 2018). Five of the ten pairs selected, published between 2004-2012, belong to business and economics (BE) and the other five to other social sciences (OSSC): pedagogy, psychology, and sociology. Table 1 compares the size of the RAs and of the DC sections across the two languages.

Table 1. Size of the corpus of social science (SSC) empirical research article (RA) discussion (and/or other closing) (DC) sections in English (Eng.) and Spanish (Sp.)

Size	Eng. RA N.	Sp. RA N.	Eng. DC n.	Sp. DC n.
Total number of words	71,914	69,982	10,919	12,409
M	7,191	6,998	1,092	1,241
SD	2,773	3,433	586	497

Interestingly, the relative length of the DC sections in number of words is higher in Spanish than in English, the difference being statistically significant, X^2 (1, N = 141,896) = 167.6572, $p < 0.001$).

Methods of text analysis

To identify direct research promotion strategies (adapted from Lindeberg, 2004), I annotated the DC sections in the two sub-corpora for their communicative functions systematically, following the stronger move analytical methods proposed in Moreno and Swales (2018) for the DC section. In Excel, I first segmented each section into relevant text segments. I then interpreted the segments for their specific communicative function, guided by the authors' coding scheme of 25 mutually exclusive specific communicative functions. These functions belong to three major types: announcing functions, nuclear functions (or moves/steps), and elaborating functions. Finally, I involved the authors of the texts themselves in confirming my interpretations, increasing validity and reliability.

The direct research promotion functions, which are the constants in this comparison, are grouped under two of the moves: Evaluating and/or situating the research and Drawing implications for future. Brief definitions and examples follow:

1) Stating the *Contribution of the current study* (CONTR) highlights the value of the research in terms of its novelty, addition, or improvement.

   (1E) **This study is a first** systematic **attempt to demonstrate** the existence of…

   (1S) …**es, la primera vez, que** la formación del individuo **es introducida** como… [Trans: …**it is the first time that** the individual's training **is introduced** as …]

2) Pointing out *Positive features of the current or proposed study* (POS) highlights the quality and soundness of the authors' research.

   (2E) But, on the other hand, our list also **takes into account**… **that enable to** accurately estimate…

   (3S) **La consideración** formativa **del** riesgo permite evaluar… [Trans: The training **value of** risk **allows to** evaluate...]

3) Noting *Gaps or deficiencies in others' research or practice* or *identifying a problem* (GAP) highlights the need or motivation for the current research.

   (3E) Especially in the case of investigating…, **traditional inquiry methods** are **no longer sufficient**…

   (3S) a nuestro juicio **dicha aproximación ha sido bien insuficiente** para... [Trans: In our view, **such an approach has been insufficient** for…]

4) Suggesting the *Applicability or usability of outcomes* (APP) highlights the usefulness of the research in future.

   (4E) **This instrument allows to support… with…**

   (4S) Y, además,**… podrán** hacerse una idea en cuanto a... [Trans: And, furthermore, … **they will be able to** have an idea of…]

5) Stating the *Relevance of the topic and/or evaluating the state of knowledge positively* (RELSTATE) situates the research in a positive light.

   (5E) …**it is of interest to** scrutinize the relationship between … and…

   (5S) **Una de las líneas más interesantes se refiere a**l papel que desempeñan... [Trans: **One of the most interesting lines refers to** the role played by...]

I then quantified the occurrence of these steps in each sub-corpus independently. Next, I compared their frequency and distribution across English and Spanish. I used

the chi-square test to determine whether the differences were statistically significant, allowing me to draw conclusions about the relation between these two variables and the two compared cultures, understood as complex and dynamic. To explain the differences identified, I surveyed (and interviewed) the authors of the texts online, aiming to tap into possible interactions among various levels of culture.

Results

The main hypothesis of this paper was that RA DC sections in the Spanish journals were less directly promotional of the authors' own research than those in the English-medium journals for cultural reasons. Table 2 compares the total number of step segments and the distribution of the direct research promotion ones.

Table 2. Direct research promotion step segments in social science discussion (and/or other closing) sections by language

Step	English			Spanish		
	N	%	*M*	n	%	*M*
CONTR	23	23	2.3	32	43	3.2
POS	32	32	3.2	12	16	1.2
GAP	16	16	1.6	10	14	1
APP	18	18	1.8	2	3	0.2
RELSTATE	11	11	1.1	18	24	1.8
Direct promotion segments	**100**	21.8	10	**74**	16	7.4
Other step segments	358	78.2	35.8	387	84	38.7
Total no of step segments	**458**	100	45.8	**461**	100	46.1

Note: APP = Applicability or usability of outcomes; CONTR = Contribution of the current study; GAP = Gap or deficiency in others' research or practice, or problem; POS = Positive feature of the current or proposed study; RELSTATE = Relevance of topic and/or positive evaluation of the state of knowledge.

As can be seen, the number of step segments was practically the same, supporting the comparability of the sub-corpora, despite the larger size of the Spanish sub-corpus in number of words. In support of my hypothesis, the chi-square test showed that the direct promotion step segments were more frequent in English (100) than in Spanish (74), $X2$ (1, N = 919) = 5.0042, p< .05. It also showed that their distribution was significantly different, $X2$ (4, N = 174) = 23.0679, p < .001. Unexpectedly, while two of them were more frequent in English (i.e., POS and APP), two were more frequent in Spanish (i.e., CONTR and RELSTATE).

Aiming to explain these results, the survey results suggested that authors in English highlighted more positive aspects of their studies due to their familiarity with the conventions of academic writing in English-medium journals. Other documentation

suggested that they highlighted more applications of their results probably because of science assessment policy interventions current around the time their articles were written. In contrast, Spanish authors were more neutral about the features of their research, apparently due to an extreme observation of the principle of modesty. They preferred to leave the appreciation of the good features of their research in the hands of the reader. Unexpectedly, Spanish scholars focussed more on highlighting their contribution, perhaps because of the feedback received previously in the review process. They also made more statements of the relevance of their research, apparently reflecting the advice received in the process of socialisation into academic writing.

Discussion

Overall, this study demonstrates that social scientists are less directly promotional of their own research in RA DC sections in Spanish journals than in English-medium journals, supporting my hypothesis. Furthermore, authors across the two publication contexts have different preferences for promoting their work. Explanations for the pattern of differences observed may be situated in the complex interactions at different levels of culture (unstated general communication norms, reviewing and socialisation processes, as well as research assessment policies). If the rhetorical transfer hypothesis proposed in this study proved to hold, the present comparative findings could help explain why, despite the Spanish SSC authors' greater efforts to make Statements of contribution in the DC sections of their English manuscripts, their text may not be sufficiently convincing of the soundness and value of their research.

Conclusions

The present results have clear implications not only for those Spanish social scientists who write RAs directly in English but also for those who require the services of translators and the translators themselves. From a purely pragmatic perspective, when authors address an international audience, they should slightly adapt the content of their DC sections to include more positive features of their studies and applications of their results. Otherwise, it is possible that their manuscripts will not be sufficiently persuasive. Obviously, if an original manuscript in Spanish does not contain the type of ideas expected by the English-medium journal anonymous reviewers, it will not be possible to translate them into English. On the other hand, their translators' awareness of the differing rhetorical conventions across the two writing contexts/languages could help them to ask the manuscript authors to provide them with the type of missing ideas so that they can be translated into English.

Spanish social scientists will benefit from explicit awareness of strategies for highlighting the superior quality of research without feeling uncomfortable, as well as the applicability of results. This training could consist of six stages: 1) Introduction to

Direct research promotion in RA discussion sections through English and Spanish: Teaching implications for Spanish social scientists

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and exemplification of these functions in English; 2) Identification of these functions in two model SSC DC sections, one in English and one in Spanish; 3) Comparison of participants' observations in these model texts with the present cross-cultural results to adopt a more evidence-based perspective; 4) Critical discussion of the reasons for the differences; 5) Presentation of 'The Discussion section in Essence' Poem (Moreno, 2015, October), whose verses represent the essential steps identified in these sections; 6) Repetition of stages 1-4 in relation to similar texts in their own fields.

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