

# AN ANALYSIS OF ARGUMENTATIVE TEXTS FOR CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC

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Publicado en Levey, David, María Araceli Losey y Miguel Ángel González, 2001, *English Language Teaching: Changing Perspectives in Context*, Cádiz, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cádiz, pp. 493-505, ISBN 84-7786-666-X.

## Abstract

Contrastive Rhetoric has been an outstanding line of research of Writing across Cultures in the United States for over thirty years. Despite the criticism it has received, it is enjoying a revival favoured by a new approach to writing, text analysis and culture itself.

In this paper a model of analysis for argumentative texts in Spanish and English is introduced in accordance with recent tendencies in Contrastive Rhetoric. Apart from a traditional quantitative text analysis, we propose an analysis of discourse markers and Rhetorical Structure Theory. These linguistic data are correlated with an evaluation of the texts to study the possible relationship between culture, writing style and evaluation.

As a consequence of the results obtained, possible research follow-ups will be exposed for argumentative and other text types.

## Introduction

Contrastive Rhetoric is a current of research of writing across cultures which appeared in the last 1960's. The founder and leading researcher was Robert B. Kaplan, an applied linguist with a long experience in TEFL. At that moment, he was puzzled by the differences between texts written by members of

different cultures and the possible drawbacks these differences could be when these writers were assessed in a foreign language context.

Since 1966, when his first article on this subject appeared, Contrastive Rhetoric has been under attack and its ups and downs have made it an appealing though suspicious field of research. This evolution has been outlined by several researchers concerned with Contrastive Rhetoric (Connor 1996; Leki 1991; Purves 1988; Trujillo Sáez 1997a, 1997b).

The key question for Contrastive Rhetoric is whether there are differences between texts written by speakers of different languages and members of different cultures<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, whether these differences results in poor marks in written assessment. The differences studied affected basically the organization and structure of texts.

The methodology used to carry out this type of research has been widely varied. As a consequence of those attacks and ups and downs Contrastive Rhetoric researchers have modified their research procedures a number of times; the relevant literature ranges from quantitative discourse analysis of interlanguage texts (see Clyne 1987; Connor 1990; Kaplan 1966; Lavin Crerand 1992; Montaña-Harmon 1991; Ostler 1987; Purves 1988; Raimés 1987; Scarcella 1984; Tarone et al. 1993), reflective inquiries about the nature and evolution of Contrastive Rhetoric, as Kaplan 1972 or 1987, Prediction and Classification studies as Reid 1992, Surveys as Liebman 1992 and Halimah 1991, Case Studies as Pennington & So 1993 and Matta 1992 or quasi-experiments as Hinds 1984, Eggington 1987 and Connor & McCagg 1983.

Despite the amount of work on Contrastive Rhetoric, doubt remains and revolves around its most basic tenets. Ethnocentrism in the case of English-

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<sup>1</sup> Contrastive Rhetoric hypothesis lies on the more general Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativism (Kaplan 1972: Foreword). As a consequence of this, there has been a certain theoretical and terminological confusion about the origin of differences, language or culture. Actually, all Contrastive Rhetoric researchers have studied texts written by members of different linguistic communities, assimilating so language and culture, with the obvious simplification that this implies.

speaking researchers, the use and sometimes abuse of interlanguage texts and the focus on expository texts are some of the faults it can be accused of.

The present study was designed to investigate the validity of the Contrastive Rhetoric hypotheses considering Spanish and English. The research hypothesis were:

1. English-speaking writers would obtain poorer marks than Spanish-speaking writers when they are assessed by Spanish raters.
2. There are no differences in the organization and structure of texts written by English-speaking writers and Spanish-speaking writers.

So, this research is hypothesis-testing in essence, though it also aims at suggesting new hypothesis in the field of study of writing<sup>2</sup>.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study are Spanish students from the first course of the Primary Education speciality of the Teacher Training College of Ceuta (University of Granada) and American students on a study visit to Spain<sup>3</sup>. At the time of the test, the Spanish students were eighteen and the American students seventeen. In both groups we asked for volunteers to write three compositions as part of a study of writing styles. In order to motivate them, they were told they would receive a detailed report of their personal writing style and suggestions of possible improvement. For this type of texts, argumentation, we had twelve Spanish and eight American volunteers.

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<sup>2</sup> The present report is part of a wider research on Contrastive Rhetoric in which, apart from argumentative texts, expository and narrative texts are also considered. Two reasons have been decisive for this selection of text types: first, they are, together to the description, the four text types defined by Werlich (1975), possibly the most respected text typology available; second, these four text types are the ones introduced in the Spanish educational law for the Compulsory levels (Real Decreto 1006/1991, Real Decreto 1344/1991, Real Decreto 1007/1991 y Real Decreto 1345/1991), supporting so the Werlich typology.

<sup>3</sup> The American corpus was collected thanks to Ms Carmen Varo, lecturer at the Department of Linguistics, University of Cádiz, who was in charge of them during their stay in Spain.

## Materials

The materials used in this study are the written texts in English and Spanish. For this type of text, the prompt in Connor (1988; 1990) was used. It reads as follows:

### Prompt for Spanish writers:

Todo el mundo encuentra cosas que les gusta o no les gusta en sus vidas o en el mundo a su alrededor. Puede ser el hecho de que la gente joven no encuentre trabajo, que la gente fume en lugares públicos, que no todo el mundo tenga las mismas oportunidades o que haya grupos concretos de personas que no se entiendan bien entre sí.

En este ejercicio de escritura tienes que escribir al alcalde de tu ciudad para convencerlo de que solucione un problema importante en tu comunidad o en la vida de la gente de tu edad. Puedes usar uno de los ejemplos descritos anteriormente o elegir algún otro problema.

Asegúrate de explicar cuál es el problema y cuál es el plan para mejorar la situación. Utiliza sólo la hoja que se ha entregado. Si quieres cambiar o corregir algo puedes hacerlo sobre el original; no tienes que pasar a limpio la redacción.

### Prompt for English Writers:

There are several things people can like or dislike in their life or the world around them. They might have noticed that young people cannot find work or that people smoke in public places, that not everybody has access to the same opportunities, or that particular groups should get to understand each other better.

In this writing task, you have to write to the mayor of your town to convince him/her to solve what you think is an important problem in your community or in the life of the people of your age. You can use one of the examples described above or choose a problem of your own.

Be sure to explain what the problem is and which is the plan for improving the situation. Use only the sheet of paper which you have been given. If you want to change or correct something you may do it on your original; you do not have to recopy the whole composition.

Ulla Connor has been one of the few researchers which have studied argumentative texts within Contrastive Rhetoric and using her prompt, repeatedly tested, enhances the reliability of our research.

### Design

The research was organised to resemble at any moment a classroom assessment procedure. The writers had sixty minutes to prepare, write and revise their writing, with no previous preparation. The two groups, Spanish writers (SW) and American writers (AW), wrote their texts separately, being assisted by the researcher and one of their own lecturers (in the Spanish case ) or teachers (in the American case). Unfortunately, it was impossible to establish any control group.

The independent variable is the language spoken by the writers and the dependent variables are the scores obtained by them in the assessment and the discourse features of their texts.

### Procedures

The research began with a pilot study in which the types of texts, the prompts, the analysis and the statistical procedures were tested. After the pilot study the participants were chosen as stated above. Each of them was given a single sheet of paper (A4) to write the text in no more than sixty minutes. The three types of texts were written on different days.

These texts were then typewritten and the English texts were translated. The texts were first translated by the researcher and afterwards the translation

was revised by two native bilingual EFL teachers to check the resemblance between both versions. On translating the texts, a special care was taken not to alter the organization of the text and the clause beyond the point of grammaticality in Spanish.

The decision of translating the text is justified by the necessity of avoiding interlanguage. Interlanguage is 'the type of language produced by second- or foreign-language learners who are in the process of learning a language' (Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985: 145). This period of the learning process is characterised by the creation of hypotheses about the nature and use of the target language and using texts written in the second or foreign language would obviously hinder the study of the genuine differences between Spanish and English texts. (For further discussion of the interlanguage problem for Contrastive Rhetoric, see Vähäpassi 1988).

The following step was preparing the raters. The raters were two Spanish Secondary teachers and two lecturers from the Teacher Training College of Ceuta. The four of them were well experienced as they have been teaching Spanish during their whole career. They were given some guidelines to rate the texts and they tested them on the four pilot study texts. The guidelines were, first, explained and, then, discussed. For the final assessment the raters had the Spanish and the English translated texts randomly ordered together with the guidelines and the rating scale.

The assessment was decided to be based on holistic rating. Two reasons were considered: First, this is the most usual way of assessing written texts in Spain, and it is our intention to simulate as far as possible a classroom assessment procedure; second, holistic rating is reliable enough, considering that, as Arthur Hughes (1989) explains, 'research has quite consistently shown acceptably high scorer reliability when writing is scored four times.'

The guidelines used for the assessment were adapted from the Test of Written English (TWE) of the TOEFL exam (Educational Testing Service,

1999). This test is based on a six point scale and includes guidelines for each point in the scale. The adapted guidelines are shown in Appendix 1.

## Results

The scores obtained by the Spanish and the American writers are shown in figure 1, together with the means and standard deviations of the two groups according to each rater and the total means of each participant. Considering the results of the alpha reliability coefficient, it is assumed that there is a high degree of inter-rater reliability ( $\alpha=0.8718$ ).

Name	First rater	Second rater	Third rater	Fourth rater	Mean socres	Words	Paragraphs	Discourse Markers	Conjunctive Adjunct	Modal Adjunct
Consuelo	3	3	4	4	3.5	216	3	3	1	2
Cristina	6	5	5	5	5.25	428	7	11	4	7
Cristina II	3	4	4	5	4	382	12	8	7	1
Hadiya	4	6	5	5	5	242	5	1	0	1
Jorge	2	3	3	2	2.5	147	5	3	3	0
Lorena Lara	4	4	3	4	3.75	301	6	6	5	1
Lourdes	4	4	4	3	3.75	244	4	5	4	1
Mª del Mar	3	5	4	5	4.25	522	4	8	6	2
Maribel	3	4	4	4	3.75	204	4	2	2	0
Miguel Ángel	3	4	3	3	3.25	130	5	0	0	0
Silvia	3	3	3	3	3	207	6	6	5	0
Silvia II	4	5	4	3	4	219	8	5	5	1
<b>Means</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>4.16667</b>	<b>3.83333</b>	<b>3.8333</b>	<b>3.83333</b>	<b>270.167</b>	<b>5.75</b>	<b>4.83333333</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>1.33333</b>
<b>S.D.</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.93744</b>	<b>0.71774</b>	<b>1.0299</b>	<b>0.77117</b>	<b>117.552</b>	<b>2.4168</b>	<b>3.21455025</b>	<b>2.31595258</b>	<b>1.92275</b>
<b>S.D.</b>	<b>1.28174</b>	<b>0.83452</b>	<b>1.06066</b>	<b>1.0351</b>	<b>0.93541</b>	<b>72.0768</b>	<b>0.75593</b>	<b>0.70710678</b>	<b>0.46291005</b>	<b>0.53452</b>
<b>Means</b>	<b>2.75</b>	<b>3.875</b>	<b>3.625</b>	<b>3.75</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>203.25</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>0.75</b>	<b>0.25</b>	<b>0.5</b>
Anne	3	3	4	4	3.5	246	2	1	0	1
Charlotte	2	4	4	4	3.5	160	1	1	0	1
Elana	5	5	5	6	5.25	338	1	0	1	0
Katy	1	3	3	3	2.5	159	1	1	1	1
Leslie	3	3	2	3	2.75	222	1	0	0	0
Mia	4	5	5	4	4.5	142	2	0	0	0
Sarah	2	4	3	3	3	119	3	1	0	0
Suzy	2	4	3	3	3	240	1	2	0	1

Figure 1. Scores, averages, number of words, paragraphs and discourse markers.

Different analysis of the texts have been performed in order to discover whether there are differences which justify different scores. A quantitative

analysis of the texts in terms of number of words and paragraphs is also shown in figure 1.

Discourse markers were also analysed. These linguistic units are defined by Portolés (1998: 25) as "unidades lingüísticas invariables, que no ejercen una función sintáctica en el marco de la predicación oracional y poseen un cometido coincidente en el discurso: el de guiar, de acuerdo con sus distintas propiedades morfosintácticas, semánticas y pragmáticas, las inferencias que se realizan en la comunicación." That is, discourse markers are postmarks through which the writer helps the reader make the correct inferences to create a relevant message out of the text.

We distinguish, according to Halliday (1994:81-85), two types of discourse markers: those which perform an interpersonal metafunction, named modal adjuncts, and those which perform a textual function, named conjunctive or discourse adjuncts. Our quantitative analysis of discourse markers is also shown in figure 1.

The scores have been analysed to discover whether a group has received better marks than the other. Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 shows the number of cases, the means, the standard deviation and the standard error of the mean for each rater.

	Language	Cases	Mean	SD	SE of Mean
First rater	Spanish	12	3.50	1	0.289
	English	8	2.75	1.282	0.453
Second rater	Spanish	12	4.1667	0.937	0.271
	English	8	3.8750	0.385	0.295
Third rater	Spanish	12	3.8333	0.718	0.207
	English	8	3.6250	1.061	0.375
Fourth rater	Spanish	12	3.8333	1.030	0.297
	English	8	3.7500	1.035	0.366



The t-tests for independent samples revealed that the data does not support our hypothesis. The first rater obtained a significance of 0.159; the second rater, of 0.486, the third rater, of 0.605, and the fourth rater, of 0.862,  $p < 0.05$ . This means that there are no significant differences between the scores obtained by the Spanish and American.

The t-test has also been used to study the possible differences between the texts. Discourse markers have obtained a two-tailed significance of 0.003; studying these results in more detail a significance of 0.251 is discovered for modal markers and of 0.001 for conjunctive markers. Words have received a two-tailed significance of 0.169 whereas paragraphs a significance of 0.000,  $p < 0.05$

This means that there is a significant difference in the number of conjunctive discourse markers and paragraphs between the Spanish and the American texts. However, no significant difference has been found for modal markers and words.

## Discussion

Considering the results obtained, we have found no differences between the scores obtained by the Spanish and the American writers, although there are differences between their texts, mainly in the number of paragraphs and conjunctive discourse markers. This means that our first hypothesis, that English-speaking writers would obtain poorer marks than Spanish-speaking writers when they are assessed by Spanish raters, is rejected considering these data. The second hypothesis, that there are no differences in the organization and structure of texts written by English-speaking writers and Spanish-speaking writers, is partially supported by the results obtained in this research.

These results, then, reject the basic hypothesis of Contrastive Rhetoric. Language and culture, in the case of Spanish and American writers coping with argumentative texts, are not decisive variables to obtain different scores in the

assessment, in spite of the possible differences between the texts. These differences, basically the number of paragraphs and the number of conjunctive discourse markers, can imply a different way of leading the reader in the process of interpretation. The paragraph is a meaningful unit to organize the ideas conveyed by the text and conjunctive discourse markers help the reader recognize the relevant relations between different parts of the text . However, the four Spanish raters have not been influenced by these factors when rating the texts.

However, another variable is thought to have provoked better scores for certain writers. Analysing the two writers with highest scores in the Spanish and the English groups we have discovered that they share a common rhetorical structure. This structure has the following moves: Justify-Problem-Elaboration-Solution-Volitional Result (JPESV)<sup>4</sup>. We can see a sample analysis of two texts in Appendix 2.

This work, though limited in number of participants, opens new lines of research. On the one hand, Contrastive Rhetoric needs more testing, particularly in the form of experimental designs, to become a solid explanation of the problems of writing across cultures or to become finally rejected. On the other hand, more participants and deeper text analysis is required to support the results, particularly concerning the influence of the rhetorical structure mentioned above to the assessment of cross-cultural argumentative texts.

Contrastive Rhetoric has been under analysis. Results have shown there are no significant differences between the scores received by Spanish and American texts when assessed by Spanish raters, even though there are significant differences in the texts themselves. However, it is thought that the

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<sup>4</sup> The terminology for the analysis has been adapted from the Rhetorical Structure Theory by Mann & Thompson (1988:243-281)

appearance of the cross-cultural rhetorical structure labelled JPESV in the highly scored texts could explain the rating more clearly than other textual differences.

## GUÍA DE EVALUACIÓN

**6. Demuestra una evidente competencia en la escritura tanto en el nivel retórico como en el sintáctico, aunque pueden encontrarse errores ocasionales.**

Un texto en esta categoría tiene las siguientes características:

- Cumple de manera eficiente los objetivos de la tarea de escritura.
- Está bien organizado y desarrollado.
- Demuestra variedad sintáctica y una apropiada elección del léxico.

**5. Demuestra competencia en la escritura tanto en el nivel retórico como en el sintáctico, aunque probablemente tendrá errores ocasionales.**

Un texto en esta categoría tiene las siguientes características:

- Es posible que cumpla algunos de los objetivos de la tarea de escritura más eficientemente que otros.
- Está en general bien organizado y desarrollado.
- Demuestra cierta variedad sintáctica y cierta gama de vocabulario.

**4. Demuestra una mínima competencia en la escritura tanto en el nivel retórico como en el sintáctico.**

Un texto en esta categoría tiene las siguientes características:

- Cumple los objetivos de la tarea de escritura básicamente pero es posible que descuide ciertos aspectos de la tarea.
- Está adecuadamente organizado y desarrollado.
- Demuestra una adecuada aunque posiblemente inconsistente facilidad respecto a la sintaxis y el uso del lenguaje.
- Es posible que contenga algunos errores que ocasionalmente oscurezcan el significado.

### **3. Demuestra una competencia escritora en desarrollo, pero aún quedan defectos o en el nivel retórico o en el sintáctico o en ambos.**

Un texto en esta categoría puede mostrar una o más de las siguientes debilidades:

- Inadecuada organización o desarrollo.
- Una elección evidentemente inapropiada de las palabras o la forma de las palabras.
- Una acumulación de errores en la estructura de la oración y/o el uso del lenguaje.

### **2. Sugiere incompetencia en la escritura**

Un texto en esta categoría tiene serios defectos debidos a una o más de las siguientes debilidades:

- Grave desorganización o subdesarrollo del texto.
- Graves y frecuentes errores en la estructura de la oración o el uso del lenguaje.
- Graves problemas con el tema principal.

### **1. Demuestra incompetencia en la escritura**

Un texto en esta categoría tiene graves errores causados por una o más de las siguientes debilidades:

- Es incoherente.
- No está desarrollado.
- Contiene graves y pertinentes errores de escritura.

## Appendix 2

*Spanish text: Cristina*

**Greeting** [[Estimado señor alcalde:]]

**Justify** [[Ultimamente estoy bastante preocupada por un asunto que, a menudo, la gente considera algo insignificante. Seguramente ya habrá recibido quejas con anterioridad, pero es que siempre sucede lo mismo;]] **Problem** [[fumadores empedernidos se dedican a destrozarse su propia salud al mismo tiempo que nos contaminan con sus "malos humos".]] **Elaboration** [[Casi siempre somos los no fumadores los que aparecemos como el culpable, o, si queremos rizar el rizo, representando el papel del malo de la película. Por este

motivo, creo oportuno plantearle este problema con la intención de que me proporcione una solución válida.

Soy consciente de que cada uno puede hacer con su vida lo que quiera y crea oportuno, pero ¿no es posible alcanzar una solución consensuada? Cuando mis amigos y yo nos reunimos, con frecuencia llegamos a discutir por dicho motivo. ¿No sería posible que existiesen lugares diferenciados para fumadores y no fumadores? Seguramente usted está pensando que esto ya se lleva a cabo... Sí, estoy de acuerdo, pero ¿qué hacer en lugares públicos?

Por ejemplo, cuando me reúno con mi pandilla en el bar de siempre, ¿por qué tengo que soportar los humos de aquellos que están a mi alrededor?]]

**Solution** [[Le propongo el siguiente plan de acción para solucionar esta discordia:

1. Proponer horas en las cuales no se pueda fumar dentro de los lugares públicos.]] **Volitional result** [[En este caso, si hablamos de bares, las tapas serían gratuitas y la bebida se reduciría a la mitad. Personalmente creo que daría resultado y muchos fumadores dejarían a un lado su vicio con tal de conseguir esta oferta tan suculenta.]]
2. **Solution** [[Una vez a la semana, convocar a la población en los salones del Ayuntamiento para hacerla más consciente de los riesgos del tabaquismo.]] **Volitional result** [[Supongo que muchos ya lo saben...pero, ¿por qué no intentarlo? A lo mejor a algunos se les enciende una bombillita en la mente y cambia de hábitos. Así, las pobres víctimas que, día a día, sufrimos la humareda de nicotina tan extensa que envuelve los lugares más insospechados, seríamos más felices al mismo tiempo que nuestros pulmones nos lo agradecen.]]
3. **Solution** [[¿Por qué no se imponen multas a los fumadores?]] **Volitional result** [[Sé que muchos lo pasarían mal...De todos modos, fumar es algo que no hace bien a nadie. ¿Para qué sirve? Mediante las multas podríamos acabar

con dos problemas a la vez: Los fumadores dejarían el tabaco y los demás dejaríamos de ser fumadores pasivos.]]

**Volitional result** [[Señor alcalde, espero que esta carta le haga reflexionar y nos pueda solucionar dicho problema, aunque soy consciente de la dificultad que ello conlleva.]]

**Close** [[Le saluda atentamente,  
Cristina]]

*American text: Elana*

**Greeting** [[Dear Mayor,]]

**Justify** [[Our town is a wonderful place to live. The people in our community are well-off and have every privilege and advantage available in life]] **Problem** [[As a result of this, children in our community grow up without a real understanding of people whose lives are not so easy.]] **Elaboration** [[Handicapped people are not visible in our community because most of them cannot afford to live here. The children raised here need to be made aware of the hardships that some people encounter in daily life, just getting out of bed and making breakfast. In order to have compassion for other people and to appreciate their own lives, children in our town should be acquainted with handicapped people through the schools.]]

**Solution** [[School is the perfect instrument to teach children about the disabled. At a young age, they should be taken to visit schools for disabled children of about their own age. The experience should not be traumatic. The children they visit and play with should not have problems that would frighten the abled children who are visiting. The purpose of such interaction is to impact compassion, not fear. As the children get older, they would be acquainted with people with more serious disabilities. During the visits, the abled children would play with the disabled children. For a child with a disability, a new friend who

can help them play games is a wonderful thing. (I know this because my sister is handicapped.)]]

**Volitional result** [[The experience of knowing and befriending handicapped children during one's childhood is very valuable. It helps children to understand that handicapped people are the same as them in many ways. The children develop a habit of looking out for and having compassion for those who are less fortunate than them. This invariably results in them being nicer to each other and gives them a true appreciation for what they have. A program to acquaint our community's children with the disabled would be a great asset to our community life.]] **Close** [[Thank you for considering my idea.

Sincerely, Elana.]]



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