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Contrastive Rhetoric

Logic (in the popular, rather than the logician's sense of the word) which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture; it is not universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture. It is affected by canons of taste within a given culture at a given time.

(Kaplan, 1966, p. 2)

Contrastive rhetoric, or the notion that culture influences rhetorical styles in writing, came to the attention to ESL educators in Robert B. Kaplan's 1966 article, "Cultural thought Patterns in Intercultural Education," a.k.a. "the doodles article." Kaplan examined native and non-native writers paragraph structures and developed models for US, Asian, Semitic, Romantic, and Slavic writers (see opposite page). He argued that these different models should be used explicitly to instruct ESL students.

Although originally challenged and then revisited, many now support his general ideas in terms of understanding cultural differences in writing. What is valued in one language may not work in another, so the writer needs to keep focusing on audience – and in this discussion the *cultural expectations* of the reader. For example, a study showed that statements that seemed quite neutral and reasonable to US readers seemed understated to Lebanese readers; statements that seemed neutral to the Lebanese readers seemed exaggerated and overblown to the US readers. This has obvious implications for the Lebanese writer when he or she writes for a US audience.

Understanding some contrastive rhetoric will not automatically allow readers to predict how international students will write. However, it will (1) help native-English-speaking academic readers understand a non-native English writer's text and one of the issues the writer may be struggling with and (2) assist these writers in addressing their texts more appropriately to a native-English-speaking academic audience.

Resources:

Kaplan, Robert B. (1966). "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." *Language Learning* 16.1: 1-20.

Panetta, Clayann Gilliam. (2001). *Contrastive Rhetoric Revisited and Redefined*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Contrastive Rhetoric – Kaplan's "Doodles"

US



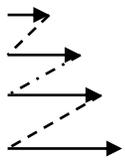
- Reader oriented: responsibility is on the writer to make explicit thesis and connections between ideas for the reader
- Explicitly stated thesis near the beginning and restated at the end
- Clarity and brevity of language/word choice is valued

East Asian



- Writer oriented
 - it is the reader's responsibility to make connections and discern the thesis
 - the writer respects the intelligence of the reader by *not* making everything explicit
- Hints and nuances are valued
- Examples not connected
 - no explicit connections between paragraphs/ideas
 - seems vague and/or unorganized to US readers
- Examines issues from various sides to lead reader to a harmonious conclusion *at the end*
 - thesis is not stated at the beginning, can be stated at the end but may be implied
 - related to "group-orientation" of culture (US is individual-oriented)

Arabic



- Digressions are valued
- Flamboyant, eloquent language
 - the more eloquently and more cleverly one can digress, the higher the prose
- Repetition of ideas
- Coordination (not subordination) of ideas
 - US readers tend to prefer subordination as a sign of rhetorical maturity
 - Examples:

Coordinate clauses: *My husband likes strawberry ice cream, but (and) I prefer mint.*

Subordinate clause: *While my husband likes strawberry ice cream, I prefer mint.*

- May focus more on form than on content
- Provides more background information (often in generalizations) than US academics consider necessary

Romance



- Digressions and asides are valued
 - valued as attempts to apply the point to other issues
 - considered "interesting" to Romantic language readers
- Embellishments and beauty of the language are valued
- Writer centered: digressions and embellishments can hide the structure of an argument