

A contrastive study of the rhetorical organisation of English and Spanish PhD thesis introductions

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Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the introductory sections of a corpus of 20 doctoral theses on computing written in Spanish and in English. Our aim was to ascertain whether the theses, produced within the same scientific-technological area but by authors from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, employed the same rhetorical strategies to introduce the work presented. The analysis follows the Swalesian approach and is based on a move/step/sub-step model proposed for PhD introductions in Spanish (Carbonell-Olivares, Gil-Salom, & Soler-Monreal, 2009). The Spanish academic conventions appear to be that move 1 (M1-*Establishing the Territory*) and move 3 (M3-*Occupying the Niche*) are obligatory moves in PhD thesis introductions in Spanish, while move 2 (M2-*Establishing the Niche*) is optional. The structure of English thesis introductions reveals that they conform more closely to the M1–M2–M3 arrangement. Moreover, combinations of moves and patterns, cyclicity and embedding make their organisation more complex. The step analysis suggests that introductions in both languages rely mainly on the presentation of background information and the work carried out. However, the English introductions tend to stress the writer's own work, its originality and its contribution to the field of study. They also present more embedding and overlapping of steps and sub-steps than the Spanish texts.

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1. Introduction

Contrastive rhetoric (CR) started as linguistic text analysis which aimed to identify problems in essays written by English as a Second Language (ESL) students in university classes due to the interference caused by cultural and linguistic conventions of the writer's first language (Connor, 1996; Kaplan, 1966). The approach was both theoretically-based and pedagogically-oriented. More recently, CR has been re-framed as intercultural rhetoric (Connor, 2004) and refocused on writing for specific purposes (Connor, 2008, p. 303). The analysis of specific purpose genres, such as research articles, research reports, grant proposals, texts for professional purposes and theses, is a growing area of research and pedagogical endeavour. In addition,

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the field has also begun to include the analysis of the social situation of writing (Connor, 2008, p. 3) and has benefited from a variety of approaches, particularly those from discourse-based, socio-cognitive and ethnographic fields.

New directions in CR focus on the processes that lead to the final written products and describe the complexities of the cultural, social, situational and contextual factors affecting writing (Connor, 2004, p. 292; Connor, 2008, p. 304). Although much research has been carried out to compare texts written in English by non-native and native writers, recent studies also compare different varieties of a language (e.g. Adel, 2008; Pak & Acevedo, 2008) and different languages (e.g. Árvay & Tankó, 2004; Burgess, 2002; Lee, 2000; Loukianenko Wolfe, 2008; Martín-Martín, 2003; Moreno, 1997; Taylor & Chen, 1991; Suárez & Moreno, 2008; Wang, 2008). In these cases, the corpora analysed are either translations or comparable corpora. The assumption is that there is some similarity between cross-linguistic aspects but that different sociocultural and socio-rhetorical parameters directly influence the way arguments and ideas are organised and expressed. Some studies focus on the dominant discursive and cultural features of the texts investigated, particularly those dealing with eastern and northern European languages (e.g. Ahmad, 1997; Duszak, 1997; Gnutzmann & Oldenburg, 1991; Melander, Swales, & Frederickson, 1997; Taylor & Chen, 1991). Others follow genre-oriented approaches that highlight the discursual and rhetorical patterns of the texts under comparison and consider the role of the writer in the discourse community and the expectations of that community (e.g. Burgess, 2002; Feng, 2008; Lee, 2000; Loukianenko Wolfe, 2008; Martín-Martín, 2003; Martín-Martín & Burgess, 2004; Moreno, 1997, 1998, 2004; Suárez & Moreno, 2008; Wang, 2008; Yakhontova, 2002).

In the context of genre analysis, special attention has been paid to the organisational patterns of introductory sections of English research articles (RAs) and to PhD theses. Swales's (1990) *Create a Research Space* (CARS) model for RA introductions has been validated by a number of descriptions of RA introductions written in English (e.g. Bhatia, 1997; Nwogu, 1990; Paltridge, 1994). However, other studies have pointed to the necessity of considering cyclicity (Crookes, 1986), embedding (Samraj, 2002) and new steps in the CARS model to effectively describe the rhetorical organisation of the texts analysed (Anthony, 1999). The Swalesian framework of analysis has also been used as a reference in studies of RAs from different language groups (Árvay & Tankó, 2004; Burgess, 2002; Lee, 2000; Yakhontova, 2002). As regards English and Spanish, Burgess (2002) and Martín-Martín (2003) have investigated RA introductions and abstracts, respectively.

A number of studies on PhD theses written in English have described their overall organisation (e.g. Paltridge, 2002; Thompson, 2001), as well as specific features, such as metatextual references (Bunton, 1999), stance (Charles, 2003), modal verbs and citation practices (Thompson, 2001, 2005). Other studies have followed the Swalesian approach to analyse particular sections or chapters (e.g. Bunton, 2002, 2005; Kwan, 2006; Ridley, 2000). As for PhD thesis introductions, Bunton (2002) posited a model that showed a greater number of steps than Swales's. According to Swales (2004), this is because of the different nature and extent of the PhD thesis and the RA. Cross-cultural studies on PhD theses (e.g. Cooley & Lewkowicz, 1997; LoCastro, 2008) have investigated the contexts of both the situations and cultures of doctoral research work, comparing writings subject to different traditions and notions of what constitutes an acceptable thesis in different countries.

However, we have not found any genre-based studies drawn from a comparable corpora of PhD theses written in English and in Spanish. To our knowledge our study is the first to compare PhD theses in these two languages. Like much other work in genre analysis, this paper focuses on the introduction section and follows the Swalesian approach. In it we examine the rhetorical structure of Spanish and English PhD thesis introductions in the field of computing from a comparative point of view.

Computing is a relatively recent field of knowledge which was initiated in the Anglo-American scientific community and then exported to the rest of the world. Computing curricula in Spanish universities are founded on this tradition. In addition, the internationalisation of scholarship and the dominance of English as the language of science, propitiate the use of standardised Anglo-American patterns. Although it seems natural that text production will share certain features that go beyond linguistic and ethnic frontiers, cultural differences in communication strategies are also to be expected. Our purpose, therefore, is to identify the similarities and differences in the strategies adopted in both languages. From a pedagogical standpoint studies of this kind may help students to decide what rhetorical patterns to choose to communicate effectively in their disciplinary field of study and the language in which they are writing.

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