Why We Need Contrastive Rhetoric

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What is Contrastive Rhetoric?

One of the hot subjects in today's linguistics is the field variously known as contrastive (or cross-cultural or inter–cultural) rhetoric (or, with varying emphases, text linguistics, discourse linguistics, discourse analysis, or pragmalinguistics). The Cartesian product of these two sets of terms could be developed into a very delicate typology of approaches and methods. Here I shall resist the temptation to indulge in such terminological niceties. My overall subject can be simply defined as the study of patterns of text and discourse in different languages that vary in structure and in cultural background.

It might be interesting to trace the history of contrastive rhetoric to the ancients. There was for instance the contrast between the Attic and Asianic styles. During the Middle Ages much of rhetoric was preoccupied with style. And the rise of the vernaculars prompted discussions of the merits of different languages, presumably tacitly including their traditional discourse patterns, as media for different types of communication. If we restrict ourselves to the past several decades, however, history turns more transparent. One powerful impetus for the study of contrastive rhetoric came from teachers of foreign languages and notably composition. They thought they could detect awkward organisational principles brought from alien cultures in the writing of their foreign students. Such observations showed that those comparing languages should not restrict themselves to phonology, synlexis, but also observe the traditional ways in which sentences join in discourse and in which the argument or story proceeds. The universality of textual and discoursal patterns had been too readily assumed, just as mechanisms of textual cohesion and coherence were thought to be universal enough to need no attention from language teachers.

The study of the cultural dimension of discourse came to seem increasingly natural in a period when both contrastive linguistics and the study of text and discourse were emerging on a broad front. Many more or less accurate observations on contrasts had been made by linguists working in wartime language-teaching programmes. This led to the setting-up of contrastive linguistics as a powerful sub-branch of applied linguistics. It was assumed that problems of language learners were caused by transfer, or interference, of patterns from their mother tongue. Quite logically this led to error analysis and to the theories of interlanguage. By studying the errors language-learners made, one could detect interference; indeed a contrastive analysis was expected to predict what kinds of errors speakers of language X would make when learning language Y. It was also understood that all language learners must make mistakes. Their errors are not consequences of original sin but of their living with an interlanguage somewhere between the mother tongue and the foreign language. As learning proceeds, the interlanguage develops, mainly in the direction away from the mother tongue and towards the foreign language.

These problems soon provoked intensive study in contrastive linguistics in various countries. Paradoxically such studies resulted in a widespread scepticism and even reaction against contrastive linguistics. Overoptimism led to disappointment. The simple and straightforward predictions of the contrastivists proved not to cover all the errors students actually made. There were linguists who threw out the baby with the bathwater and gave up contrastive work altogether. But there were others who began wondering why results of actual error analysis so rarely matched contrastive predictions. One reason was sought in oversimplified views of the mechanisms of human memory and learning, and an overreliance on the simple stimulus-response models of behaviourism. Nor were individual factors and influences from third languages sufficiently reckoned with. Another, even more interesting reason was the observation made by teachers of composition: learning a foreign language does not only involve learning sounds, words and syntax, but also its characteristic patterns of building up discourse, telling a story or presenting and attacking an argument. In contrastive linguistics too, we must venture beyond the sentence and the mechanisms of syntax, into text and discourse.

Such a venture seemed increasingly natural as it coincided with the rise of text and discourse linguistics in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. Text and discourse no longer seemed too complex for linguistic study and thus out of bounds for linguists. On the contrary, the mechanisms that link sentences and make a text cohesive and coherent were included among the most topical problems of linguistic study. And it soon appeared that the coherence of a piece of discourse was not simply a matter of tracing linguistic links between sentences. A shared knowledge of the world and a shared culture proved to hold many texts together through subtle mechanisms such as inference. In addition to syntax and semantics, pragmatics perforce entered into the study of discourse. And hordes of teachers of foreign languages and of composition were eager to receive what new help their more theory-minded colleagues could offer.

Yet another of the sources leading to contrastive rhetoric was contrastive pragmatics, whether we call it thus or prefer another, more or less closely related name such as ethnology of speech, conversation analysis or something else (cf. Blum-Kulka

& Kasper 1993). This area covered matters such as politeness in communication. Requirements and signals of politeness are known to differ greatly between cultures and also between social groups. They are reflected for instance in modes of address, linguistic taboos, turn-taking patterns, kinesics, dress and the like. Many of the linguistic politeness signals are particularly conspicuous in speech, which reflects face-to-face behaviour. But they may also carry over into writing and composition. The pragmatics sector of contrastive rhetoric might be defined as the study of the communicative use of rhetorical discourse patterns in different cultures and languages.

Kaplan's 'Doodles'

If you ask an American composition teacher where contrastive rhetoric begins, you are likely to get the answer 'in Kaplan's Doodles Paper of 1966'. In that year, Robert B. Kaplan published a provocative and seminal article based on his empirical observations of foreign-student composition in English (Kaplan 1966). Kaplan claimed that the rhetorical patterns in his materials fell into five different culture-specific groups. Anglo-American discourse was said to be clear and orderly and to proceed in a straight line. Oriental discourse was circular, looking at its topic from different points of view joined by association rather than by strict logic. In Romance cultures, discourse was characterised by digressions from the central topic and could be likened to a winding road. Semitic discourse was full of parallel constructions repeating what had been said and adding new information bit by bit, which makes it seem inefficient to an Anglo-American. Russian discourse is also loosely constructed with long digressions and abrupt changes which readily makes it seem incoherent. Kaplan bravely illustrated these patterns with a set of figures. Hence the title 'doodles paper'.

Kaplan was careful to point out that his discourse patterns were idealised stereotypes rarely found in pure form. Still the paper led to a lively discussion which goes on even today. Its critics pointed out that Kaplan's approach was highly ethnocentric: what would Anglo-American discourse look like to Semitic or Russian speakers and writers? Kaplan had obviously lumped together many traditions under dubious blanket labels such as 'Semitic' and 'Romance'. He had not allowed for differences between different discourse types and styles, different categories of speakers/writers, and so on. In the face of such criticisms, Kaplan has to some extent modified his views, admitting more diversity and emphasising culture rather than patterns of thought as formatives of rhetorical patterns. In today's perspective we may still have different opinions of Kaplan's paper as such. But whether we approve of its specific points or not, its general approach did have a beneficial impact. It compelled students and teachers of rhetoric to look at discoursal macro–patterns in the light of underlying cultural traditions and not only in terms of syntactic features on the linguistic surface.

Degrees of Empathy

The job of a composition teacher is to make students write texts which serve certain definite types of communication with maximal efficiency. And in most instances this means that a text should look native and idiomatic, and conform to established patterns. A student in a composition course is not likely to need skills in writing, say, modern poetic prose where departures from tradition are a virtue. He is more likely to attend a composition course to learn to write, say, reports, articles and business letters which seem clear and straightforward to their receptor. They are not supposed to distract or delight the reader by the use of strange or weird patterns. Therefore it is natural that composition teachers readily regard alien discourse structures as undesirable. They are foreign growths that should be excised in favour of the normal tissue of discourse.

In terms of discourse comprehension, we might also suggest that a text that follows established discoursal macropatterns will be easier on the receptor than a text full of surprising departures from tradition. Information is surprise. Therefore a text full of surprises will also be crowded with information. But in utilitarian texts we do not wish to add to the information content through unnecessary deviance from the structures our receptor is used to. For instance in a business letter or weather report or minutes from an annual general meeting, the reader's job is easier if she knows precisely where in the text she is likely to find the specific kinds of information she is looking for. Surprises and witty rhetorical figures will be more appropriate in another range of texts, such as poems and advertisements. But they are awkward in many types of utilitarian discourse. Even Bishop Sprat told us how the members of the Royal Society in its founding days in the 1660s were consciously opting for a new kind of straightforward, unadorned prose in their scientific reports.

I was suggesting that many composition teachers see their job as making their students abandon their native rhetoric for a target-language, for instance Anglo-American, type of discourse. There are, however, composition teachers who try to do this with empathy and respect. They are often scholars who have lived with foreign languages and cultures. They realise that their students cannot but transfer their own native patterns into, say, English. The learners' funny oddities do not necessarily owe to low intelligence or faulty logic or a special type of sin revealed in composition. Undesirable patterns on the contrary owe to the transfer of respectable, even venerable, cultural patterns into an alien context where they do not comfortably fit.

We can now see why the teaching of languages in general, and composition in particular, is a touchy process. Teaching rhetoric and argumentation compels the teacher to tamper with the student's way of expressing herself, and thus with the student's personality. Dirt has sometimes been defined as matter in the wrong place. Similarly the use of alien rhetoric can sully a nice clean argument. How, then, should a teacher maintain optimal motivation through tact? Presumably the students should be shown how different cultures have developed different patterns of expression. If the student wants to live happily and even prosperously in, say, an English-language environment, she will best avoid offence by learning its rhetorical habits, just like any other habits. Alien rhetoric may cause a negative response without bringing benefit to its user. Compare rhetoric with table manners if you like. Eating one's peas with a knife does not make them less nourishing. But it is likely to cause a negative response and even bar a person from a whole range of occupations.

A couple of quotations will illustrate the point. The first comes from Edward A. Fagan and Peggy Cheong (1987), both teachers of English as a Second Language in Singapore. They contrast English and Chinese compositional patterns as follows:

> ... English composition tends to be more direct and to the point. Conciseness, brevity, and simplicity are encouraged. Generally, although not all, Chinese compositions are characterized by long-windedness, digression, and indirectness .... English paragraphs are arranged in hierarchical order, with each paragraph stating a sub-topic that is subordinate to the main topic. All the paragraphs are therefore related to the main subject. Chinese paragraphs, on the other hand, may sometimes wander off the main topic .... English paragraphs are generally free of sentimental expressions, exaggerations, and reference to the past. Writers use forthright, straightforward, simple expressions. Chinese paragraphs are generally marked by poetry, flowery and florid styles, exaggeration, use of quotations, and reference to the past ... (Edward A. Fagan & Peggy Cheong 1987:25.)

Though Carolyn Matalene presumably faced much the same problems when teaching English composition to Chinese students, the tone of her reports is different. Having explained the role of rhetoric and memorising of traditional texts in Chinese education, she gave a number of examples of Chinese students' compositions in English, and summed up:

> Those who have done their years of memorizing and have mastered this (Chinese) tradition have done more than become literate. They have learned how to behave, what to say, and how to say it. They have gained entrance to the beauty, of the tragic beauty, of a centuries-old literary tradition and the right and the privilege to contribute to it. Our responsibility is surely to try to understand and appreciate, to admit the relativity of our own rhetoric, and to realize that logics different from our own are not necessarily illogical (Matalene 1985:807.)

Those faced with teaching composition across cultures might profit from a moment's thought around these two quotations.

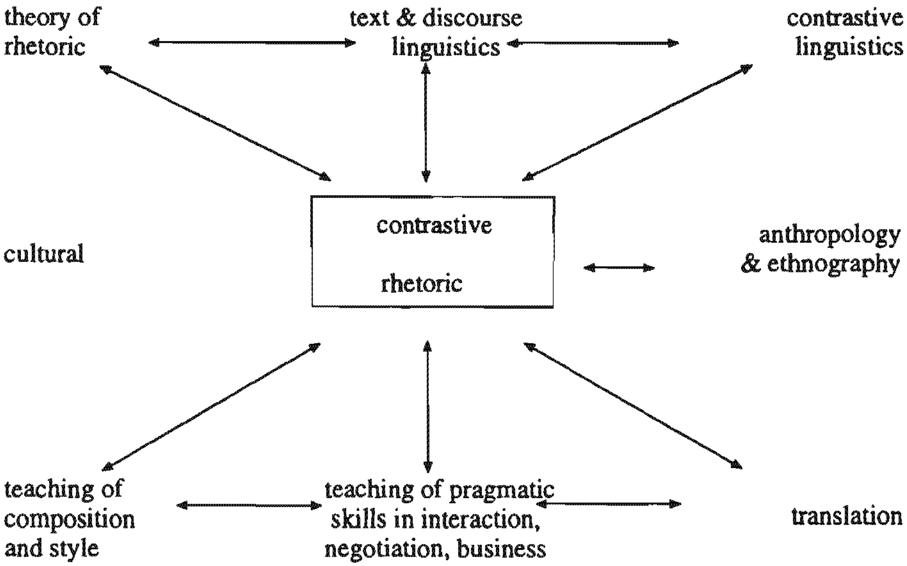
Institutional Aspects

Contrastive rhetoric is a branch of applied linguistics with very close ties to specific teaching situations. And teaching goals and strategies must needs vary from one society and country and language group to another. It would be interesting to review the history of applied linguistics to see to what extent educational strategies come first and lead to the development of theories and methods, or whether, the other way round, theories and methods come first and are later translated into educational strategies. But I shall leave this question and illustrate the institutionalisation of contrastive rhetoric with a skeleton example from one particular society, my own native Finland.

Finland's 5 million inhabitants belong to two major language groups, speakers of Finnish (some 94 per cent) and of Swedish (some 6 per cent). Some are bilingual in different ways, many are not. Neither language, Finnish or Swedish, is sufficient for inter-national communication. Of the major world languages, English supplanted German after World War II, though today, not least since Finland joined the European Union in 1995, there is a keenly felt need for more French and German.

Over the past few decades, there has grown a well-established institutional system to cater for the necessary training in foreign-language skills. At the tertiary level, foreign languages are taught in four types of organisation. First, universities have language departments which teach language, literature, linguistic and literary theory, and applied linguistics. One of their acknowledged aims is to train future language teachers. All the same, at many universities, until fairly recently the linguistic side of the syllabus used to be biased in favour of philology and historical linguistics rather than, say, applied linguistics and didactics. Secondly, for the past quarter century or so, universities have also had Language Centres serving the linguistic needs of their establishments, for instance by teaching languages for specific purposes to non-language students, and by providing their universities with various services such as translation and the vetting of translations. The third type of language-teaching establishment is the university School of International Communication. These schools began as separate colleges granting diplomas in translation and interpretation, but their staff was from the start encouraged to do research into relevant areas of applied linguistics. In the past few years these diploma colleges have been merged with universities and their syllabus was expanded so as to give the graduates ordinary university degrees. Finally, a fourth type of institution interested in contrastive rhetoric is the School of Economics. There are three independent schools of this kind, and a few more within the administrative structure of universities.

To the student of contrastive rhetoric, such a bird's-eye view shows how one small country has tried to build an infrastructure for the teaching of internationally viable languages. Very roughly one might illustrate the field of contrastive rhetoric in relation to its neighbouring disciplines as follows:


theory of rhetoric
text & discourse linguistics
contrastive linguistics
cultural
contrastive rhetoric
anthropology & ethnography
teaching of composition and style
teaching of pragmatic skills in interaction, negotiation, business
translation

As the figure shows, studies of contrastive rhetoric can be sought under various headings. One area containing relevant materials is composition and rhetoric. Another is the study of oral interaction, which is a central topic in pragmatics and in conversation analysis. There is a growing body of data on interaction in business negotiations (e.g. Graham et al. 1987 &1992). And yet another is translation and interpretation, with its enormous and rapidly growing bibliography.

This dispersal of relevant stuff across a range of different subjects might at first blush suggest that contrastive rhetoric is a cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary area. Generally, however, we ought to be wary of using such terms. For what we call a 'discipline' in the academic, bureaucratic sense, is often a result of historical or local accident. There is in fact no a priori reason why contrastive rhetoric could not be studied in departments and academic institutions with different labels, such as the four types found on the Finnish scene. To what extent it is meaningful to speak about interdisciplinarity must therefore be decided case by case and instance by instance. When speaking about intercultural rhetoric, one might well argue for regarding it as a discipline in its own right. It can all the same be pursued with varying aims and methods within different types of institutions. The traditional name of a department should not prevent progress.

I have touched upon these matters because experience shows that in academic bureaucracies, labels can sometimes prevent departments as well as individual researchers from doing what they feel they ought to do. Which can be a pity.

Cultural Contrasts

It is easy to understand why teaching across widely differing cultures has stimulated the study of cross-cultural rhetoric (cf. Hinds 1990). The quotations from scholars teaching composition in English to Chinese students may serve as a case in point. With the development of economic and cultural traffic between the West and Eastern Asia, studies of rhetorical traditions in English and other European languages in comparison with composition in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean for instance, have multiplied. There is already a very large bibliography of relevant studies, of which only a few could be included among the references of the present paper.

It is of course a truism that cultures with different discourse types and genres raise contrastive problems, as do cultures with widely differing politeness patterns and ways of expressing them through behaviour, including linguistic behaviour. But such a truism leads to some interesting questions, for instance about the links between communicative needs and the study of intercultural rhetoric. In what kinds of environment do questions of intercultural rhetoric become of interest in applied linguistics, and not only in folklore, social anthropology and other more purely academic pursuits?

Problems in the Study of Intercultural Rhetoric

For a linguist, especially a linguist trained in the traditions that concentrate on the structure of individual sentences, intercultural rhetoric brings with it a body of new problems beyond the reach of syntactic methodology. These problems are caused by the fact that rhetoric deals, not with individual sentences but with culture-bound discoursal macropatterns. Venturing into intercultural rhetoric will therefore involve the linguist's raising her eyes not only from sentence to discourse, but also from discourse to pragmatics, that is, to the use and function of specific modes of discourse in a specific society or social group.

This discovery process poses its own peculiar problems that must be solved, either ad hoc for each specific project, or more generally by building up a theory and a concomitant methodology. Here the main difficulty lies in the heterogeneity of the materials covered. We must obviously classify text types and genres to correlate such a classification with patterns of discourse. But in different societies—literate and illiterate, industrialised and agrarian, national and tribal, and so on—text types and their functions will vary greatly. Any classification with claims on generality will therefore become highly abstract (cf. Wierzbicka 1991), in fact so abstract that it may lose its usefulness for application to concrete details for instance in teaching composition. Assuming that there is some use in a very general discussion of such problems, a few of the relevant points will be listed in the following.

The main obstacles in the way of the contrastive rhetorician might be listed under three major headings. First there is the problem of observation. Contrastive rhetoric implies a contrastive study of cultures and of cultural backgrounds. Each investigator is, however, bound by his own culture and its categories. He is therefore not likely to notice at once the relevant meaningful features of an alien culture. One might say that there is a parallel here between cultural structure and phonological structure. When analysing a language the linguist does not know, he must first learn to perceive the phonetic distinctions that are capable of distinguishing meanings. Only after training his ear to catch such distinctions, many of which at first seem bewildering and subtle, can the linguist go on to work on syntax, lexis and discourse. Similarly the analyst of cultures must first learn to observe the meaningful distinctions and features of social behaviour in the alien culture. Only then can he go on to correlate discourse with cultural patterning. This we might call the problem of observation.

When we have learned to observe and define relevant cultural features we must next try to categorise them, to systematise them in a way relevant to our purpose. This is the second major problem, which might be labelled as the problem of categorisation. Should we be ambitious enough to try a categorisation which is not only tailored ad hoc for one specific problem, but which is supposed to have more general validity across many cultures and linguistic groups, we might call our problem a question of finding a tertium comparationis. In some situations it may suffice to say that John is taller than Peter. But if we want to relate John and Peter to a larger population, or compare one hundred people, we will find it convenient to operate with feet and inches. In this sense, a tertium comparationis is a concept, or set of concepts, that can be used as a basis for comparison. When we measure length or distance we do so in terms of kilometres, metres, centimetres and millimetres, or miles, yards, feet and inches. When we measure weight we use, among other measures, kilograms or pounds, and so forth. Each of these systems is a system of tertium comparationis: if we wish to compare things, we use a tertium comparationis such as a measure of distance or weight. And then we compare the measurement.

Similarly, if we wish to set up a general system for the comparison of cultures and of their concomitant discourse types, we shall need a tertium comparationis capable of bringing out the features relevant for our comparison. The ideal tertium comparationis would be universal in the sense of offering an apparatus for comparing any and all cultural features that can be found in human society. A priori one might assume that all cultures make use of some kind of politeness patterns: some types of behaviour, including linguistic behaviour, are more appropriate than others in a given type of situation. Who is supposed to be polite to whom and under what circumstances is likely to be a more culture-specific problem: age, rank, wealth, education, occupation, gender, family relationship, status, and situation-bound role are likely to affect choices of politeness levels. How such levels are exposed is usually a matter both of rhetorical macropatterns and of langue-specific syntactic and lexical structures. Similarly one might assume that certain economic transactions are culturally widespread and that functions such as buying/selling, lending/borrowing and the like have their own culture-and-language-specific exponents. One might then go on to compile a list of universal social functions—getting food, eating, drinking, sex, child-bearing, finding shelter and dwellings, and so on—and once again look for their expressions in discourse and in linguistic resources. When comparing more closely related cultures one can of course make lots of shortcuts in areas where patterns have been found to be more or less identical and their differences more or less irrelevant to contrastive rhetoric.

There is all the same a risk of overlooking differences that exist between such related cultures. It came as a surprise to many students of language that certain text types, such as scholarly articles, tend to have different macro structures in different European languages. Medical articles for instance may follow somewhat different patterns. And comprehensive studies of scholarly papers in English and in Finnish suggest conspicuous differences in rhetorical approach (Mauranen 1993). Newspaper editorials too differ between Finnish, English and German. Even schoolchildren's essays are differently constructed. Data of these kinds have given rise to widespread speculation of why such differences exist. Though Finnish, a non-Indo-European language, has a structure very different from that of most European languages, its semantic apparatus makes it perfectly capable of expressing what one might call standard European patterns of thought and culture. It is therefore more plausible to believe that these differences owe to tradition. Members of a given nation have learned to express themselves in certain ways and have been exposed to discourse that follows the preferred national pattern. Such patterns are then unwittingly transferred into a foreign language as well. Perhaps one of the features that mark a text as near-native rather than as native is a subtle disregard of idiomatic rhetorical patterning: a near-native text is, by definition, one that succeeds in avoiding major syntactic and lexical errors but which nevertheless strikes a native reader as somehow not quite right.

For the practical teacher and translator, such observations are, of course, highly valuable. One of the translator's problems is to decide when to produce discourse which follows the rhetorical macropatterns of the relevant target culture, bravely jettisoning those of the source text. In practice this may even mean giving up the paragraph and sentence structures and even the overall disposition of the source text. And such apparent disrespect for the source text may well lead to clashes of opinion between author and translator, or translator and the person editing text for publication. To avoid such altercation we need increasingly sophisticated information and education in the cultural and linguistic relativity of rhetoric.

The *Tertium Comparationis*

Many lists of linguistic and cultural features have been set up to cover the whole spectrum of factors affecting contrastive rhetoric. I shall present yet another such list, organising and grouping the factors by categories well known in modern linguistics.

First come *syntactic and lexical factors*. They comprise the mechanisms of cohesion and coherence within and between sentences and text units. To the text-and-discourse linguist, the sentence is not autonomous: the job of a sentence is to contribute to the flow of information through the text. Therefore the sentence must be linked to what went before, and provide links to what comes after. In English, the general trend is to begin sentences with so-called old information which is supposed to be familiar to the receptor. It can be familiar for various reasons: it can be known to everybody thanks to the human condition and life under the same stars (like *nose, foot, water, sun*); it can be known to a particular group such as a nation or family (*Bill Clinton, Hummelvik, Annette*); it can be known because it is present in the situational context (*this window needs washing*); and it can be known because it has been mentioned in the previous discourse (*Charlie came home. He was tired.*). Various mechanisms are available to place old information early in the sentence: choice of words (*Susie bought the car from Peter/Peter sold the car to Susie*) fronting by syntactic structure such as the passive (*Peter sold this car to Susie / This car was sold to Susie by Peter*), fronting without further syntactic change (*I have read this book / This book I have read*). If we place new information early in the sentence, we must warn our receptor, by cleft (*It was to Potchefstroom that Nils went*, said to somebody who already knows that Nils went somewhere but does not know where), or by stress-cum-intonation (*Nils went to POTchefstroom*, with stress and a high falling tone on POT (Enkvist 1979). These phenomena have become increasingly well known through studies making use of terms such as theme and rheme, topic and comment, focus and presupposition, functional sentence perspective, information structure, and end weight.

Instead of the old-information-first strategy, a speaker, and sometimes writer, can opt for a crucial-information-first strategy. While in South Africa, one of my hosts came to me with a tray and asked, 'What would you like to drink?', and I answered, 'A glass of white wine I would like very much'. The choice of wine was the crucial information, the rest in the nature of a polite afterthought. In dialogue, a crucial-information-only strategy is extremely common. If somebody asks me, 'Where are you going next?', the answer, 'To Potchefstroom', would be more natural than 'Next I am going to Potchefstroom'. We economise by omitting what can be readily inferred, and an admonition such as 'you must always answer with a complete sentence' reminds us of pedantic language teachers rather than of authentic dialogue.

The mechanisms of marking old and new information are, however, language-specific. One reason for this is the difference in the function of word order in different languages. English has relatively rigid word order patterns because word order signals, among other things, the difference between subject and object (*the lion bit the tiger* does not mean the same as *the tiger bit the lion*). Latin or Russian or Finnish, however, mark the difference between subject and object with a case ending (*Nero inter–fecit Agrippinam* is cognitively equivalent to *Agrippinam Nero interfecit* and *Agrippinam interfecit Nero*), and use word order to indicate meanings for which English needs other means (*Agrippinam interfecit Nero* would thus translate into 'It was Nero who killed Agrippina' or 'Agrippina was killed by Nero' because *Agrippina killed Nero* would play havoc with the meaning). Articles and demonstratives are another factor to reckon with in such studies.

Finnish has no articles in the English sense. So, *Auto on talon takana* translates as 'the car is behind the house', whereas *Talon takana on auto* should be rendered as 'there is a car behind the house', or 'behind the house there is a car'. Existential constructions, such as the English *there is*, have their function in starting a structure when there is no suitable old information or other starter available.

Such mechanisms, then, regulate the form of sentences to adapt them to serve the text strategy, that is, the overall governing principle which regulates the information flow through the text. To students and teachers of rhetoric a mastery of these mechanisms is crucially important. They are what makes a text flow smoothly, if that is desired, or in a broken and seemingly incoherent manner if such effects are indicated, in fiction for instance to reveal that a character is upset. The important point is to realize that the text is the father of the sentence, and that text strategies come before the syntactic formation of individual sentences. Giving a sentence its textual fit, its conformity with the text strategy, is not a cosmetic surface operation polishing the sentence after it is already there. Textual fit is a far more basic requirement, determining the choice of words as well as the syntactic structure of a sentence. To modern text and discourse linguists this is so obvious that it seems curious that grammarians and teachers of composition have, through the centuries, spent so much time and effort on syntactic phenomena within individual sentences, while overlooking the fundamental questions of text strategies and information flow. It is the text strategy and the information flow that actually determine which of the available syntactic and lexical structures a speaker or writer will choose in each particular instance.

Similar problems arise when we look at the ways in which text units are linked into text and discourse. In my terminology, a paragraph is a typographical unit, a chunk of writing whose beginning and end are marked, for instance by indentation. A text unit on the contrary is a chunk of text which coheres by some linguistic device such as a cohesive chain or, less obviously, by mechanisms of inference which link its elements such as sentences to each other. Such a distinction between text units and paragraphs makes it possible to discuss paragraphing strategies more precisely. One strategy is to make paragraph borders coincide with borders between major text units. Another is to chop up paragraphing to coincide with borders between minor text units. And yet another, usually awkward, paragraphing strategy is to paragraph a text without harmonising it with text units. To explain precisely what marks a text unit would at once explode the present paper. One type of device that enters into such explanations is the use of metatext, that is, of portions of text whose job is, not to give information about the subject proper but rather to clarify the structure of the text.

These were matters we have learned to handle, or are learning to handle, by the by now well developed methodologies of text and discourse linguistics. And they are, or can at least be suspected of being, language-specific. Even in otherwise syntactically similar languages, such as Swedish and English, there are differences: in Swedish we can say for instance *Sparven tog katten*, whereas in English, 'The sparrow caught the cat', would be weird, though the English, as well as the Swedes, know that sparrows do not catch cats but cats do catch sparrows. English requires the passive: 'The sparrow was caught by the cat'. Swedish newspaper headlines such as *Bovarna jagade polisen i tre timmar* will normally be understood as 'the police hunted the criminals for three hours', despite its syntactic ambiguity: Swedes find it more likely that police pursue criminals than vice versa, and interpret their headlines accordingly. In spoken Swedish, fronted objects will be marked as such by prosodic means.

Processual Considerations

One of the interesting developments in linguistics over the past few decades is the increasing interest in processual (or procedural, as some linguists prefer to say) rather than strictly structural approaches. It is, however, worth noting that processual considerations have been with us for a long time. Recall for instance Humboldt's *ergon* and *energeia*, the way in which American structuralists arrived at their phoneme and morpheme inventories through explicit discovery procedures, and the transformation processes of early generative-transformational grammars. One might therefore suggest that a structuralist linguist may use processes to arrive at structures, and, conversely, that a process linguist must use structures to explain processes (which in syntax can be defined as transformations of one element or structure into another).

So far we have no way of directly observing in detail how individual syntactic and rhetorical patterns are processed in the human brain. Nobody has as yet written a neurological grammar of a specific language. Therefore the best we can do is to speculate and to try to test our hypotheses by psycholinguistic experimentation. As realistic experiments tend to bring with them a welter of uncontrollable variables, such experimentation is, at best, difficult, and has often led to controversial and even contradictory results.

All the same, speculation is often interesting. We might for instance start from a stance of teleological optimism. We may assume that the constant wear and tear that languages are subjected to over long periods of time has led to an optimisation of linguistic structures and processes.

Can we, then, think of a reason why the early placing of old information and the late placing of new information would be advantageous for discourse comprehension? We might start out by noting that when we begin a sentence, our choice of structures is relatively unconstrained. But the further we proceed, the fewer are the ways in which we can continue if we are to observe the constraints of syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Therefore our conversation partner has the greatest difficulties in guessing what we are going to say before we have started our discourse, text unit, or sentence. The more she has heard, the easier it will be for her to anticipate what comes next. (This is of course an oversimplification: probabilities vary, at some points guessing is easy and at other points difficult or impossible; but we may assume that, by and large and on the whole, anticipation gets easier the more we have heard or read of the sentence.) Therefore it would make sense to try to ease the processing load at the beginning of the sentence or text unit or even discourse. And this could be done by placing old, and thus more readily anticipated, information early, and leave new information until later. The principle of end weight (placing long and heavy elements late in the sentence) is a corollary of the old-information-first principle. Weighty constituents are weighty precisely because they contain much new information. Hence they come late.

Such speculation should of course be viewed with due suspicion. Its hypotheses need further testing. One of the relevant questions is to what extent the old-information-first principle is universal, and to what extent it is restricted to a limited set of languages of a specific from-old-to-new-information type. Another question which we already know something about is how a language such as English may depart from the basic unmarked information pattern and place new information early in the sentence, duly warning the receptor of what has been done. Another principle that affects the ordering of elements in a sentence is salience. We tend to begin with human agents close to ourselves or with other animate agents, turning them into syntactic subjects. If no such animate agents are available, other structures must be used. Tourist guides for instance like to infuse life into inanimate objects through sentences such as *This room has witnessed the signing of many important treaties*. As some psycholinguists put it, 'figure' comes before 'ground'. It is easy to say *the rabbit ran past the bush*. But how do you express the same scenario from the point of view of the bush? **The bush was run past by the rabbit* would hardly pass muster with a linguistic jury.

Another discoursal device that makes processing easier is iconicity, that is, making the discourse isomorphic with, or 'a picture of', the world. One common illustration has to do with isomorphisms between temporal order in the world, and linear-temporal ordering in discourse. Should I say *John and Susie got married and had a baby* you will at once assume that John and Susie got married before they had their baby. And if I say *John and Susie had a baby and got married* you will assume that the baby came before the ceremony. Should you wish the text to state events in an order different of that in the scenario, you have to pay a price: in English, you must say something like *John and Susie had a baby only after they got married.* Iconicities exist at many levels of language, and an interesting question is to what extent they are universal, and to what extent the structures of some languages constrain their use and necessitate specific rhetorical devices to signal isomorphisms.

Intertextual-Cultural Considerations

So, there are features of discourse structure, both at the micro and the macro levels, which are language-dependent: they are affected by the syntactic constraints and linking mechanisms of individual languages. And there are aspects of discoursal structure about which we can speculate in terms of cognitive features such as an optimisation of processing load. At present, much of the study of linguistic universals has been syntax-centred, whether it has been based on generalisations from a few attested patterns, or on an empirical quest for shared features in large numbers of different languages. We could therefore well use cognitive, neurolinguistic and psycholinguistic studies of discourse processing to get at universals in discoursal patterns which reflect general principles of information processing. Those who insist that sentences must adapt their form to the discourse might hope that such discoursal studies will at the same time tell us more about sentences as well.

Another area for empirical study and theory development is the cultural. With two fashionable terms we could speak about discourse pragmatics, meaning the use of types and patterns of discourse in different communicative situations, and intertextual studies of discourse, meaning the comparison and contrast of types of text within and between cultures and social groups. Relevant work has been done in linguistic pragmatics, where observations for instance of politeness relations offer data for generalisations, on 'face' for instance. And intertextual studies of text types have long been a central concern for instance in the history of literature and of styles, though here a more general categorisation is difficult because of the variation of cultural backgrounds and functions of what we might call 'literature'. Thus the discipline traditionally known as 'comparative literature' has, in the West, mainly been glossed as 'the comparison of literatures in Europe and those parts of the world affected by European literary traditions'. There has, for instance, been an inclination to view the Anglophone and Francophone literatures of Africa within a Europe-inspired and Europe-oriented conceptual frame, though of course with new, fresh elements grafted upon a stock of familiar roots. Social anthropologists have perhaps been freest to view the texts they have collected in their original social context, for instance in relation to religion, magic and various rituals they have tried to define and describe. But in social anthropology the main trend has been towards a structuralism where texts are viewed as elements within their own specific cultural structure. The bold comparative universalism of scholars such as Frazer or Westermarck has fallen out of fashion, perhaps to reappear at some future date.

This brings up the question to what extent a culture-based comprehensive discourse typology, both extensive enough and specific enough to work as a tertium comparationis, is possible at all. There have been many attempts at such universal categorisations (for instance Scollon and Scollon 1995, Wierzbicka 1991) which seem useful enough as a first overview. But we must apply them to a variety of actual studies in contrastive rhetoric to see where they may need supplementing, which seems likely. Part of the question hinges on the delicacy level at which we expect to contrast cultural features in discourse. Culture itself is an elastic term covering a range of features from the most general to the most minutely detailed, and no finite list of cultural features can ever include all about a culture from macropatterns (such as patriarchy versus matriarchy, nomads versus farmers, and the like) to micropatterns (such as types of stitches in embroidery, patterns in knitting and weaving and the like). What the students of relevant problems in anthropology, ethnology, ethnography, rhetoric, stylistics, syntax and other disciplines must decide is what level of delicacy and detail best serves their particular purpose.

The choice between available types of discourse and text, between genres and styles should also be viewed, not only in a social and temporal context but also in an aesthetic one. Many such choices are affected and even determined by fashions which change with time. Such changes can be fast or slow, depending on the stability of social structures and on the ease and speed of their transfer over various media of communication. Cultural influences must also be reckoned with. Some cultures are apt to dominate others and bring with them their own patterns, including those of rhetoric, even to the extinction of earlier, 'native' ones. In today's Europe for instance, not least in the smaller countries, a daily lament concerns the domination of the English language and the American-based 'coca-cola-culture' symbolised by, for instance, brashly intrusive advertising on TV and other media. There is a global conflict between 'internationalisation' in the sense of increasing the scope of cultural homogeneity, and 'maintaining the national heritage' in the sense of keeping alive the distinctive cultural features of individual nations and groups. There is a paradoxical tension in the world between an increasing need for internationally viable languages, and an emphasis and even resuscitation of small and threatened ones (Scots Gaelic, Irish, Welsh, Breton and Basque for instance). In large, racially and socially heterogeneous countries such as the United States and Canada and the former Soviet Union, there has been considerable discussion of ideals and policies sometimes labelled as 'the melting-pot model' versus 'the salad-bowl model'. It has been moot to mention these very major cultural problems here because they are inevitably, and strongly, mirrored in rhetoric and discourse as well as in other aspects of culture.

Epilogue

Languages are many-faceted phenomena, and they can, and should, be studied from many different angles. At one extreme are the linguists—'restrictionists' I have called them—who try to isolate specific problems by excluding a maximum number of variables. They work, for instance, with uncontextualized sentences out of one single variant of the language. At the other extreme are those linguists—the 'expansionists'—who claim that linguistic structures must be studied in relation to their authentic cultural, social, psychological and discoursal setting. Languages look the way they do in order to tolerate variation and withstand rough handling as in impromptu speech. Analysing artificially homogenised, sterilised samples of language in isolation will give us a limited view at best.

Ideally, the results of restrictionists and expansionists should neatly supplement each other. Sometimes, however, their conceptual worlds are too different to allow translation from one into the other. Without arguing for the supremacy of one approach or the other we can simply note that, by and large, the development of linguistics has been in the direction of increased expansionism. Psycholinguists relate language to psychology, socio linguists to social structures, neurolinguists to human language processing, computer linguists to technology and artificial intelligence, applied linguists to language learning and teaching, historical linguists to changes in culture over time, students of style to intertextual considerations, and so on. And within language description itself we have learned to analyse, not only sounds, phrases, clauses and sentences, but also textual macropatterns and discourse.

These developments bring with them new challenges. One of them has to do with intercultural and contrastive rhetoric. It needs further theory and practical down-to-earth investigation. But it also promises meaningful practical applications, at best improving intercultural communication and understanding.

All in all, one of the major problems in language study is fragmentation, the tendency of many schools of linguistics to look at language from their own restricted, often forbiddingly technical points of view. It is of course true that one must build one's research on precise questions which isolate specific problems. But it is also true that linguists ought to be aware of problems beyond their own preserve, and, ideally, link their own work to that emanating from other schools and to down-to-earth observations of authentic and unwashed data. I have sometimes ended a talk with the utopian vision of a group of linguists representing different theories walking, hand in hand, into the sunrise. Among linguists, alas, such a rosy view is at best likely to provoke a wry smile, instead of leading to syntheses of so far incompatible theories.

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