A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS APPROACH TO ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

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Abstract: *Both English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes have advanced from the exploration of lexico-grammatical features during the 1980s and 1990s toward a thicker language description which includes not only lexico-grammatical features but also studies of genre-rhetorical features and of the social practices which shape academic texts in different disciplines (Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman, 1991). These latter studies have tended to focus on the conventions particular to specific discourse communities. However, as Bhatia (2002) has pointed out, there is significant overlap in such genres as research abstracts and introduction sections and perhaps in textbook language as well. This paper addresses an area of overlap in the academic writing of Spanish university students in English: the construction of authorial voice by through the use of impersonalization strategies. The analysis presented here shows that Spanish students transfer rhetorical conventions from Spanish into English, particularly in the case of the we strategy and, in the writing of more advanced students, the se passive strategy.*

Key words: *Spanish EFL writers, transfer, impersonalization strategies, English for Academic Purposes*

1. INTRODUCTION

The various approaches to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) have long realized (Barber, 1962; Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1964; Strevens, 1977; Strevens, 1983) that, as university teachers, we should focus on the syntax and vocabulary specific to the broad disciplinary areas of our students. This is fitting for a sub-discipline of Applied Linguistics which, along with English for Specific Purposes, prides itself on distrusting "theories that do not quite work out in the litmus-paper realities of the classroom", as Swales (1988: viii) has made clear.

As EAP has always been anchored in pedagogy, the careful design of didactic units was an obvious necessity, thereby requiring needs analysis, based on previous discourse analysis of the spoken and written academic texts, in many cases, particular to the fields in which the students are studying. Representatives of this period of discourse or text analysis studies are Bazerman's historical approach in S*haping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science* (1988), *Swales Genre Analysis* (1990), which focused on academic discourse and Bhatia's *Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings* (1993), which focused on business, legal and academic genres. To the previously mentioned studies, Contrastive Rhetoric has also added many analyses which contrast the written discourses of various languages in order to help students

to become aware of differences between the rhetorical conventions of academic writing in their native language (L1) and English (L2).

More recently, there has been less of a focus on more general concepts of EAP, which have been criticized as too broad and therefore insufficiently focused on the particular disciplines of the students (Bhatia, 2002: 28-29). Given the overwhelming evidence in favour of disciplinary approaches to the teaching of EAP regarding reading and writing (Hyland, 2000), it is difficult to ignore the differences inherent in the various academic fields in which teachers of EAP work. Nevertheless, I argue here for a complementary rhetorical approach, based on corpus studies of the transfer of rhetorical strategies from academic Spanish to academic English. This type of analysis, I propose, would still provide a "common core", from which other more disciplinary-centered work might proceed. I first present a framework for English-Spanish contrastive analysis which may be applicable to various disciplines. Then, I present work carried out on academic writing in English Philology, where I teach, and specifically an analysis study of impersonalization strategies in the academic English of Spanish university students.

2. CORPUS STUDIES: TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR ENGLISH-SPANISH CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

The ever-increasing interest in corpus-based cross-linguistic studies has had an especially great influence on lexical research (Bogaards and Laufer, 2004). Lexis easily lends itself to corpus studies, particularly when simple words are searched for (as compared to lexical phrases, for example, Moon, 1998) but the same cannot be said of syntactic phenomena. As Cosme (2004) points out, difficulties entailed in the automatic retrieval of syntactic patterns have meant that there is still a reliance on introspection and that this tendency has led to "intuitive statements" about which syntactic preferences that a particular language may have in comparison to another. Although such statements are found in many forms of L2 research, they are particularly prevalent in translation manuals. In their comparison of Spanish and English, López Guix and Wilkinson (2001) maintain that English favors parataxis while Spanish favors hypotaxis. In comparing English and French, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) note the preference for impersonal stance in English, which means more use of the passive voice, heavy nominalizations and abstract rhetor (e.g., The *data* show that...) in English.

Corpus-based studies on native texts (the British National Corpus, Davies' corpus of Spanish texts from the 16th century to present-day written text) have had a great influence on both synchronic and diachronic studies regarding lexico-grammatical findings. Learner corpora, however, and especially cross-linguistic learner corpora are just beginning to present reliable information on syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features of learner texts as well as more quantitative data on error typology. In addition to the base-line data for each group of EFL learners, corpus-based learner projects, such as the *ICLE Error Tagging*

Project (Louvain), can provide valuable insights into more theoretical questions such as language universals or language typology (Croft, 1990; Greenberg, 1974) or the ways in which syntactic, semantic and pragmatic cues might influence EFL learner behavior (Gass, 1989; Thompson and Hopper, 2001). The usefulness of L2 data as valid for the search for language universals has long been acknowledged (Greenberg, 1991; Huebner and Ferguson, 1991; Hyltenstam, 1986). Data from EFL learners from different mother-tongue backgrounds can also shed light on the relationship of lexis to syntax (Goldberg, 1995; Traugott, 1988), the L1 and second-language (L2) learning of lexis and grammatical properties (Bley-Vroman, 1989, 1990; James, 1989), the influence of *transfer*[1] from the L1 to the L2, or *cross-linguistic influence*, (Johansson and Hasselgard, 1999; Odlin, 1990; Sharwood Smith and Kellerman, 1986), and the way in which transfer variables might interact with non-structural factors, such as writing conventions between English and the mother-tongue (i.e., contrastive rhetoric). Among most grammarians, the correlation existing between grammatical structures

Table 1. Aspects for future contrastive error-analysis research.

- Discourse/pragmatic/stylistic
  - Construction of impersonal writer stance
  - Cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions
  - Subject-verb inversion (especially with those verbs which cause inversion in Spanish, but not in English, e.g., ocurrir, aparecer, etc.)
  - Indirect questions
  - Theme/rheme patterns (using punctuation marks)
  - Other word order problems
- Semantics/ lexico-grammatical
  - Complex lexical phrases (phraseology)
  - Multi-word verbs
  - Complementation of N, Vb, Adj.
  - Strings of semantically related words
  - Lack of equivalencies in profiling (Cognitive Grammar, e.g., rob/steal and rincón/ esquina)
- Syntax
  - Article use
  - Determiner use
  - Adverbial positions
  - Premodification and postmodification of N Ph (Particularly in head-initial constructions of possessive structures)
- Phonetics/phonology/writing systems
  - Cognate forms (an statue)
  - Phonetic influence on written form (e.g., is for it's)
- Non-structural factors
  - Differences in writing conventions

[1] Odlin (1989: 27) has defined transfer as "the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired".

and semantic/pragmatic functions is no longer a problematic claim. What still remains to be examined, however, is precisely which of these factors affecting grammatical-pragmatic relationships are those of real import[2].

For an international project, based at The Centre for English Corpus Linguistics in Louvain, I have designed a research framework for contrastive analysis, as presented in Table 1. The framework for the project is meant to apply cross-linguistically to learner data to be contrasted among EFL writer groups. Then, the non-native writer data will be compared with native-speaker data, of novice American writers (LOCNESS corpus, Centre of English Corpus Linguistics, Louvain). However, this framework will be equally useful, I believe, for EAP research teams who have in mind only English-Spanish contrastive studies. It covers five major aspects which, over the years, have come to my attention as entailing problematic issues for Spanish university writers of AE.

Although the framework is divided into five separate sub-categories, it is often difficult to assign Spanish EFL writers' errors or problems to a discrete category. This is so because, frequently, more than one factor is involved. For this reason, the present research will be of use to both those who are seeking to distinguish the grammatical from the diverse semantic/pragmatic factors in different L1 contexts (for example, written versus spoken production) and also to those who are interested in the various factors which may influence the discourse of ESL/EFL learners from different L1 backgrounds. For instance, in addition to the structural features (language typologies) which may be the source of transfer problems, there are also rhetorical conventions which loom large in the composition skills of EFL writers. Neff *et al.* (2003) found that Spanish EFL writers overuse *we can* followed by verbs of mental and verbal processes in comparison to their American university counterparts. For this finding, these authors have suggested, in part, typological causes. In Spanish, the modal verb "can" (*poder*) has an epistemic meaning which it does not have in English and this fact may lead Spanish EFL writers to believe that we can *wonder* might be equivalent to the Spanish lexical phrase *podemos preguntarnos* (Lit.: "we can ask ourselves"). But there are also other possible motivations which are not of a typological nature. There are differences in politeness conventions in addressing the reader. In academic writing, for example, Spanish prefers the use of the first person plural to address readers while English prefers impersonal stance markers (Hyland, 2000). As another possible influencing factor, the research team studied the conventional use of additive listing strategies by proficient writers of Spanish, who make use of "topic introducers", such as *Es preciso admitir que...* ("It is necessary to admit that…"), *Es conveniente apuntar que...* ("It is convenient to point out that…") and *Es necesario señalar que...* ("It is necessary to indicate that …"). These studies sought to show how a corpus-based contrastive approach might corroborate, or not,

[2] Even within the Systemic-functional Linguistics paradigm, there are those who view lexis as a "more delicate" level of grammatical description (Halliday, 1994), while considering that syntactic patterns constitute a more "core" element. Others (Francis, 1993; Sinclair, 1991) argue that explanations must take into account phraseology.

mainly intuition-based claims made about the stylistic preferences of one language as compared to another.

3. ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES IN SPAIN: "COMMON CORE" ELEMENTS

In spite of the differences existing in texts across the disciplines, there is at least one area in which all Spanish students experience problems: that of constructing academic texts with an impersonal authorial voice. In the academic writing of my students in English Philology at the Complutense University of Madrid, (Seminar in Discourse Analysis, 4th- and 5th-year students; the final research paper for 1st-year graduate students, DEA; Comprehension and Production of Written English, 2nd-year students; graduate students who are writing their theses, etc.) there is a notable reduction of grammatical errors as the students progress towards the final years of their career, showing a progression in the command of the linguistic code. In a cross-sectional study of the writing development through four years of university students studying English Philology, Neff and Prieto (1994) found that 4th-year English Philology students differed significantly from those of the 1st-year in having fewer surface syntactic errors even though the 4th-year students constructed sentences that were much more complex syntactically. That is, over the years, what remains are errors involving more than one factor, for example, both typological differences between English and Spanish and also differences in rhetorical conventions. However, the fewer number of surface errors makes the rhetorical-grammatical errors of the advanced students all the more evident. The point is that these types of errors are common to Spanish EFL writers in *any* academic discipline, since all disciplines require impersonalization.

It is also evident that, at least for the transfer of rhetorical conventions from academic Spanish to academic English, there is a continuum along which the strategies used by the Spanish university EFL writers fluctuate. The younger EFL writers tend to rely on the use of *we* to address readers, an obvious transfer from the Spanish convention of using nosotros to address readers: *we can see*, *we can find*, *we can observe*, etc. The more advanced EFL writers transfer a more sophisticated rhetorical strategy from Spanish: that of using the se passive in order to adopt an impersonal voice. Unfortunately, the transfer of this syntactic pattern usually results in clauses with the subject placed after the verb or in clauses with a double subject, as can be seen in the results presented in Table 2. As observed in the research presented here, when the we strategy begins to disappear, the clauses with double subject made their appearance.

These clauses with double subjects can have various sources and should not be confused with those double-subject clauses that are the result of the transfer of the unaccusative construction in Spanish (subject-verb inversion with verbs such as *comenzar* (begin), *aparecer* (appear), as in example (1). Nor of those that result from the incorrect use of constructions with anticipatory *it* + adjective + *to/that*, as in example (2). Both of these structures are common in undergraduate EFL writing but

occur only occasionally in graduate EFL writing.

> (1) Then appears the shadow of war. (4th-year English Philology)
> (2) It would be better for all the creation of a television that … (1st-year English Philology)

In the remainder of this paper, I report on data from two different studies involving undergraduate students' texts and those written by graduate students, both groups studying English Philology.

4. IMPERSONALIZATION STRATEGIES: TRANSITIONS FROM UNDERGRADUATE TO GRADUATE EFL WRITING

Word order (WO) errors in the Spanish EFL argumentative texts of more advanced students reveal a variety of very interesting typological word order problems related to the underlying nature of grammatical versus pragmatic word order. Most of these WO errors are linked to differences of information structuring in English and Spanish, but rhetorical conventions also play a role, as they are linked to impersonalization strategies found in Spanish students' argumentative writing.

4.1 Method

One part of the data for this study come from the *ICLE* Error Tagging Project (Granger, 2003; Neff and Bunce, forthcoming), for which 4th- and 5th-year students wrote argumentative essays totalling 50,000 words, on one of 14 possible topics; the other group of data come from research papers written by three graduate students of Critical Discourse Analysis at the Universidad Complutense (with a total of 32,737 words), a course for which the students must write an academic paper analyzing a piece of written, spoken and/or graphic discourse. The data collected involve three structures: the Spanish unaccusative construction, the attribution with *it* + adjective + *to/that* construction and the translation of the Spanish se passive (Neff and Bunce, forthcoming). Wordsmith Tools was used to search for the pertinent constructions. In this paper, I deal only with the oscillation between the use of the *we* strategy and the

Table 2. Types of metadiscourse strategies used by Spanish EFL student writers.

TYPE of PATTERNS	*ICLE* CORPUS (undergrads)	GRADUATE STUDENTS
The 'se' passive pattern	· It has been introduced a new plan… (Total: 2)	D- 21: It will be observed the image… R- 2 C- 0 (Total: 23)
WE as metadiscourse markers	· At the beginning of the play we can identify that there is a sort of introduction… (Total: 215)	D- 0 R- 22: We want to stress that… C- 0 (Total: 22)

Spanish *se* passive construction, which may result in clauses with two subjects.

4.2. Results and discussion

Table 2 shows the results for the two patterns, in the column to the left. The middle column shows the use of these patterns by undergraduate EFL student writers. The column to the right shows the graduate student results for the two patterns; the initials D, R, and C refer to each of the three graduate students.

The undergraduate students, with only 2 errors as a result of transferring the se passive from Spanish, had 215 uses of the *we* strategy. This figure represents 4.3 uses in every one thousand words. Often the undergraduate students seem to be using *we* + *can/must* as metadiscourse topic introducers, as in: *If we focus on this last literary point, we can consider…*, or *We also must pay attention to….* The tendency to transfer this rhetorical strategy from Spanish to English is almost certainly reinforced by the use of *we* by textbook authors in addressing their readers.

For the graduate students, the se passive cross-cultural influence shows 1.64 uses per every one thousand words while the *we* strategy reflects 1.71 uses per every one thousand words. It may seem that, in comparison with the undergrad students, the graduate students are actually committing more rhetorical-typological errors than their juniors. But when the data from the individual students are compared, one quickly observes that not only do the undergraduates' strategies differ from those used by the graduate students but the strategies used by the graduate students differ among themselves. One student (D) used the se-passive strategy, resulting in double subjects for each of the clauses in which he tried this strategy. When his graduate paper was returned to him, these errors were easily amended by placing the real subject in its proper place. Another graduate student (R) was still relying on the less sophisticated *we* strategy, like the undergrads. When his paper was returned, with the *we's* underlined, he adopted the se passive strategy and began to construct clauses with two subjects. Thus, the higher number of errors in the graduate students' texts seems to be a result of trying out more sophisticated impersonalization and evaluative strategies. It appears that the lower frequency of these two types of errors in the undergraduate texts is related to the simpler strategies used by these students, such as *we* or *we* + *modal verb*. This can be seen in the striking difference between the numbers in the last category shown in Table 2. It seems, then, that the attempted transfer of the *se* passive reflects a developmental continuum.

One of the graduate students' texts (C) seems to show a more sophisticated range of discourse strategies, such as the use of abstract rhetors (*the second part of the discourse deals with…*) or the initiation of some clauses with *there is* or *there are* (*There are eight terms used quite often during the discourse….*). It is interesting that the undergraduate students seem to avoid constructions with *there*. This tendency may be influenced by the infrequent use of the construction *hay* in academic Spanish, where more formal verbs would be preferred, such as *existir*, *aparecer* or *resul-*

tar. This same student, (C), writes with a direct and confident voice in order to emphasize the important points of her argument to the reader (*it is very important in this text to be aware of the use of the expression "common sense"*).

5. CONCLUSION

Most of the errors remaining in the academic writing of advanced English Philology students are those that concern rhetorical aspects which have two underlying sources for problems in constructing authorial voice: the transfer of typological and rhetorical conventions from the L1 (Spanish). These constructions are important because, in English, they constitute part of the strategies that academic writers may use to evaluate propositions while remaining in the background (Neff, 1991).

While in English there are many manuals and articles (Bazerman, 1995; Ventola and Mauranen, 1996; Biber, *et al.*, 1999) which can help novice writers in adjusting the authorial voice to both the genre and the implied reader – from bald-on-record assertions to propositions put forth with agentless passive hedges – this is not the case in Spanish. Such manuals as do exist in Spanish (Cassany, 1993; 1995) tend to be general in tone and do not give specific recommendations about norms for different disciplines. There would appear to be a lack of corpus-based studies in Spanish, which make it difficult, both for the apprentice writer of academic Spanish and for the comparative linguist, to identify, with any degree of reliability, the discourse strategies and syntactic structures used by expert writers in academic genres. Although there are a number of studies that deal with specific word order strategies in Spanish (Contreras, 1976), I have been unable to find in the literature a clear exposition of strategies that are actually used by professional writers in Spanish. Such a range of possibilities in Spanish would facilitate a comparison and give more support to my hypothesis that many of the errors encountered in our EFL studies are triggered by a transfer of discourse strategies from the native language. Nevertheless, my familiarity with academic writing in Spanish, and, more significantly, the explanations given by the PhD students themselves regarding their errors, allow me to put forward as a reasonable hypothesis the transfer of rhetorical strategies from Spanish to English academic writing along a developmental continuum.

[3] The Project, directed by Sylviane Granger, involves comparing the academic texts in English written by university students from different mother-tongues. The European teams participating in this first stage of the ICLE Error Tagging Project are: Belgium, Bulgaria, Holland, Italy, Japan, Poland, Spain, and Sweden.

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