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Linearity in Language. Rhetorical-discursive Preferences in English and Spanish in the Light of Kaplan's Model

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ABSTRACT

In the present work the author tries to analyse one of the fundamental concepts that underlie Kaplan's theory: his idea of "linearity". Rather surprisingly, despite its importance, it is a construct that usually goes undefined in the literature. Different parameters of rhetorical organisation will be considered in this paper in order to clarify the essence of linearity. We shall check then Kaplan's contention that English is a "linear" language whereas Spanish, a member of the Romance family, is characterised by a broken or non-linear structure. We shall also verify if there exist differences between English and Spanish in the discursive organisation of an expository text. Finally, we shall discuss which parameters appear to be more coincidental and more divergent within the rhetorical organisation of each language.

KEYWORDS: linear language, contrastive rhetoric, expository prose, rhetorical devices, Spanish rhetorical conventions, formal parameters.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past forty years there has been an increasing concern with the written text in all its manifestations: from being one of the least studied linguistic skills up to the end of the sixties it has become one of the most prolific areas of current research (Kaplan, 1987; Purves, 1988; Martin, 1992; Kachru B, 1992; Rubin, 1995; Connor, 1995, 1996; Davison, 1998; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan, 1987, 2000; Kaplan & Grabe, 2002, etc. The behaviour of Spanish learners of English as a second or foreign language has been studied by Santana-Seda, 1975; Montaña-Harmón, 1991; Lux & Grabe, 1991; Ostler, 1992; Reppen & Grabe, 1993; Monroy & Scheu, 1997; Moreno, 1997; Trujillo, 2002, etc.). This “discursive linguistics” in Enkvist’s words (1987) embraces text linguistics, stylistics, genre studies, speech analysis but also contrastive rhetoric (CR for short), a theory first formulated by Kaplan in 1966. The study of paragraph organisation in different languages (five basic types were established) was approached by Kaplan as the starting point to assess writing as product, one of the four fundamental skills required to master a foreign language within the behaviourist paradigm. The theory was also a reflection on certain schemes of classical rhetoric with a view to developing those skills needed to write properly in a foreign language context, mainly English¹. This implied in fact giving up the rhetorical conventions of the first language that might cause interference with the ones favoured by the target language. The focus nowadays has broadened up considerably encompassing “differences and similarities in writing across languages” (Connor, 2001: 28) including academic and professional writing (Swales, 1990; Mauranen, 1993; Tirkonnen-Condit, 1996, etc.).

Kaplan’s initial theory derived from an ontological stand very much like the one that underlines British contextualism as initiated by Malinowsky and Firth and continued by Halliday and followers of context linguistics: that logic is not a universal, but the product of a specific culture; consequently, every single culture has its own rhetorical schemes. In his own words, “Logic... is evolved out of a culture; it is not a universal. Rhetoric...is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture’ (1966: 2). And a few years later, “My original conception was that...rhetoric constituted a linguistic area influenced by the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis...I would still maintain... that rhetoric is a phenomenon tied to the linguistic system of a particular language” (1972: Preface). This idea, very much like the Vosslerian concept of ‘idiomatology’, would explain why the student of a

foreign language violates the expectations of the native reader. Both content and form would be surface manifestations observable, according to Scribner and Cole (1981), at three levels: the functional discursive (a given culture can favour say a much more expressive way of writing than another), the level of cognitive exigency (the way of structuring and organising information), and the pragmatic level (a given community's writing expectations). These three levels are mutually interrelated and highly conventional in each culture. Kaplan's model is based therefore on the empirical fact that linguistic systems differ not only at the phonological or lexico-structural level, but also in their rhetorical preferences. This determinist view, contrary to the notion of a universal grammar, does not establish significant differences at the cognitive level; it simply emphasises the idea that each language organises reality in a specific way. From a contrastive perspective, as envisaged by Kaplan's theory, it is obvious that the rhetorical option of each linguistic system implies an ontological limitation that is necessary to overcome within a second language learning context. In the case of English as a foreign language, the Spanish learner would have to leave aside the "broken" structure of his/her language, typical of the Romance languages, and move towards the "linear" structure of a language like English.

II. LINEARITY

Kaplan went farther however. He not only dared to present a typology of rhetorical preferences, but relying heavily on style manuals defined English as a 'predominantly linear' language unlike the 'broken' or indirect structure that, in his opinion, characterises Romance, Slavonic and Semitic languages (1966: 15). This self-indulgent view of the discursive reality has rightly been criticised as being ethnocentric, ill-defined and vague, lacking empirical support and portraying a stereotyped reality (Enkvist, 1997 –Connor (1996: 16) summarises further criticisms). Kaplan acknowledges this in his contribution to Sarangi and Coulthard (2000), and although he has modified his initial position in the sense that he no longer holds the view that rhetorical patterns reflect a particular way of thinking, but they are rather the result of different writing conventions that are learned, he adds that this does not alter the essential empirical fact that "there are differences between languages in rhetorical preference" (2000: 84). From this fundamental premise, some corollaries follow such as a) languages present 'gaps' not just at the lexical or structural level, but also at the rhetorical level; b) every speaker perceives these differences in comparing his/her language with other linguistic systems; c) there is a tendency to transfer unconsciously to the second language the resources and

rhetorical devices of the first language, and d) there are languages (there is no mention of English any more) whose rhetorical discourse is more linear than that of other languages. Kaplan simply acknowledges that “every speaker perceives his/her language as linear and all others as non-linear” (2000: 84).

This change in the perception of the dominant rhetorical trend (linearity /non-linearity) derives from the different perception that various authors, whose mother tongue is not English, have of their own language. Kaplan (2000) observed that whenever he presented to speakers of other languages his model in which English stood out as more linear than the rest, they considered theirs to be more linear than English. The concept of linearity has, on the other hand, a clear cognitive significance: despite Kaplan’s unambiguous statement (2000: 85) that Aristotle linear rhetoric is in no way cognitively superior to non-linear rhetoric, it is obvious that linearity is psychologically interpreted in a more positive key than non-linearity, as clearly reflected in the desire expressed by all to have a linear language. On the other hand, it is unquestionable that English occupies a hegemonic position in certain academic as well as non-academic circles. This leads to the construction of a rhetorical model of such a kind that whoever fails to imitate it is deemed to be at a disadvantage (Connor & Kaplan, 1987 – see, however, Kachru Y, 1997) either lacking in discourse sophistication or, even worse, in rhetorical coherence (Mauranen, 1993: 1-2).

A first step prior to any contrastive endeavour is therefore to try to define the concept of ‘linearity’. Only in this way will we be in a position to establish the linear /non-linear character of a text in a given language and draw conclusions across languages. We are fully aware that there is not such a thing as a homogeneous norm in academic writing: not all English writers use a linear style consistently. As early as 1974, Braddock pointed out that linearity was a simplified picture of English writing conventions as many professional native-speaker writers did not always write following the linearity principle. More recently Connor (2001: 39) expressed identical view with regards to article introductions. And Kachru, Y. (1997) on her part considers “problematic” to set up specific writing norms for English. More specifically, there are authors who voice their doubts that expository prose in English is a well-defined text type (Grabe, 1987; Biber, 1987, 1988).

Surprisingly, linearity is usually taken to be a self-evident, straightforward label that refers to formal discursal progression free from digressions without any further qualification. Such a generic definition needs, however, to be operationally defined for the construct to have a certain validity. This is what we have done by considering a number of formal parameters of rhetorical

organisation that are based on general Western rhetorical conventions². In Monroy & Scheu (1997) the following guidelines are established for a straight linear rhetorical pattern:

1. Thematic unit (TU). We consider a text to display this category (also referred to as ‘discourse topic’, Lautamatti, 1987) whenever there is a single thesis binding together the whole text; the presence of more than one thesis would be interpreted as an absence of the above-mentioned feature.

2. Thematic progression (TP). We refer here to the mechanism by means of which the writer establishes a direct relationship between all the different thematic sentences that link every paragraph with the central thesis. A weak or null relationship between the thematic sentences and the central thesis is understood to be deficient in this feature.

3. Paragraph unity (PU). This is achieved whenever a paragraph displays a monothematic structure (Smith & Leidlich (1980). It coincides with Morenberg and Sommers ‘direct paragraph’ (1999), where sentences develop the controlling idea by expanding, qualifying and illustrating it. The polythematic trend is considered, on the other hand, a feature of a non-linear language.

4. Personal tone (PT). This feature is revealed by the tendency to make use of pronominals that refer to the subject (consistent point of view –see Hinds’ (1987) ‘writer responsible vs. ‘reader responsible’ languages). The use of different points of view or of no human agents in thematic position would reflect the opposite, non-linear trend.

5. Inter-paragraph cohesion (CO). Cohesion between paragraphs is achieved by the presence in the text of elements linking paragraphs with one another in a co-referential, co-classification or co-extensive way (Halliday, & Hasan, 1976). Non-linearity is manifested in the tendency to avoid paragraph linkage.

6. Concreteness (CON). This feature refers to the tendency to use concrete words as they supposedly contribute to the global effect of linearity in the text. Greater reliance on abstract words would reflect the opposite, non-linear tendency. It must be pointed out that this parameter is somehow language-bound in the sense that, typologically speaking, there are languages who favour concreteness –English being a case in point (Vinay and Darbelnet, 1995) – as against other more abstract languages such as French or Spanish.

7. Sentence simplicity (SS). This basically involves the presence in the text of simple or coordinated sentences; the overuse of complex or subordinated sentences would reveal a non-linear characteristic³.

III. AIMS

Taking as our starting point Kaplan's premise that there exists a logical principle underpinning the discursive organisation of every language and that such a principle is rooted in Aristotle's logic and Galileo's systematisation, which the idea of linearity underlies (1980: 402), we try to prove the following null hypotheses: 1. There are no significant differences between English and Spanish university students in the discursive organisation of an expository text. 2. The rhetorical behaviour of the Spanish informants does not substantiate the idea of a non-linear logic (i.e. broken structure). 3. Finally, there is no parametric correspondence between English and Spanish with regard to the profile of rhetorical organisation for each of the two languages involved.

IV. METHODOLOGY

IV.1. Participants

Thirty four subjects were used as informants, seventeen fourth-year Spanish students of English and seventeen English students who were spending the year at Murcia University. The Spanish group was randomly selected from the sixty eight who regularly attend classes to match the seventeen Erasmus students who comprised the British group. None of them knew the purpose of the writing assignments nor had they taken part in any prior activity directly related to the aim of the experiment. Finally, all papers had a maximum length of eight hundred words.

IV.2. Instruments

Thirty four papers were written, seventeen for each group, bearing in mind the following principles put forward by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement: Study of Written Composition (IEA): we chose, firstly, the expository mode as Kaplan did initially (1966: 4); it seems the mode most commonly used to study intercultural differences. Secondly, an almost identical subject matter was used in both cases in order to ensure the register variable and the same type of text. True that within the category of expository writing several sub-genres can be identified (Grabe, 1987). In our case, we have used a humanities text type assuming that its frequency of occurrence can be similar in both languages. This is particularly the case with the

Spanish group. Despite sharing identical roots, the Hispanic tradition in written composition favours a more generic and literary-biased approach to writing conventions than the Anglo-American tradition, more concerned with the orderly arrangement of the parts of a written text. Literary authors are models to imitate, but more in vocabulary and critical reading skills than in the rhetorical organisation of the information. Although writing is explicitly taught at Spanish schools, it is only recently that linguistic analyses of non-literary written texts has been systematically undertaken (Onieva Morales, 1995). This penchant for literature is in no way exclusive to Spaniards. Kaplan himself complains that “Writing through composing....is the rarest of the writing types practised by literate individuals. It includes the creation of novels and short stories, of poems and plays, of theoretical and philosophical treatises by scholars, and – curiously– of the kinds of essays school children are most commonly asked to write”. (1988: 283).

IV.3. Procedure

The Spanish group was asked to write on “positive aspects of the English character” while the English group wrote about “positive aspects of the Spanish character”. Following Krashen’s suggestion made in his Monitor Model (1982) as to the possible relationship between time variable and product quality, it was decided not to confine the task to strict chronological limits so that each student was free to write at will although he/she was to hand in his/her assignment a week later. The task, on the other hand, was carried out at the beginning of the academic year on the basis that this was deemed the best period for gathering unbiased information from the students as to the purpose of the exercise. Although both groups obviously had some writing practice experience, they were not fully conscious of the rhetorical traditions existing in their respective cultures.

The pooling of the samples was carried out by three members of the Department of English Philology at Murcia University who gave a scoring to the writing assignments. Linearity was measured using the seven parameters of rhetorical organisation mentioned above. These categories were applied on a binary basis despite the fact that most of them, particularly the last one, are not easily amenable to a yes / no answer. We took the presence of each of them as a sign of ‘linearity’, and their absence as a characteristic of non-linear or broken structure.

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In order to see the amount or presence or absence of the above-mentioned parameters for each of the informants, we codified each subject's answers assigning 1 to an affirmative response and 2 to a negative answer in all the variables. Once all the texts were collated, *t* Student was applied to see if there were significant differences between these parameters in English as compared with Spanish.

PARAMETERS	LANG.	N	MEAN	SD	<i>t</i>
1. Thematic unit (TU)	Engl	17	1.23	0.43	0.68
	Span.	17	1.17	0.39	
2. Thematic progression (TP)	Engl.	17	1.23	0.43	0.28
	Span.	17	1.41	0.50	
3. Paragraph unity (PU)	Engl.	17	1.17	0.39	1.00
	Span.	17	1.17	0.39	
4. Personal tone (PT)	Engl.	17	1.29	0.47	0.09
	Span.	17	1.58	0.50	
5. Inter-paragraph cohesion (CO)	Engl.	17	1.35	0.49	0.18
	Span.	17	1.58	0.50	
6. Concreteness (CON)	Engl.	17	1.52	0.51	0.73
	Span.	17	1.58	0.50	
7. Sentence simplicity (SS)	Engl.	17	1.82	0.39	0.30
	Span.	17	1.94	0.24	

$p < 0.05$

Table 1. Parameters of rhetorical organization. Means and SDs

As Table I shows, there are no significant differences in any of the indexes analysed. However it is worth commenting on the tendencies which emerge in each of the seven parameters. In the case of Thematic Unit (TU), the means both of the English as well as the Spanish group show a positive tendency towards the presence of this feature. The two mean values (1.23 and 1.17) are closer to 1 (linearity) than to 2 (non-linearity), the Spanish value being slightly higher than the

English one. This tendency is further confirmed in Table II where 82% of the Spaniards and 76% of the British favour a linear tendency. t value, however, is non-significant (0.68) between groups at $p < .05$.

Unlike the Spanish group who scored higher (Table I), the English students shed a score in Thematic Progression (TP) identical with the one they achieved in the Thematic Unit parameter. The percentage of essays showing Thematic Progression (Table II) is high in both groups, Spaniards scoring slightly lower than the British (59% vs. 76% respectively). Despite the averages being overall more non-linear, they clearly show a non-significant preference for linearity (t value of 0.28).

Paragraph Unity (PU) characterises by a marked tendency towards linearity in both groups (Table I). Interestingly, the percentage of students favouring linearity is identical (82%) in the two (Table II). Although beyond a significance t value level, the data reveal a careful paragraph structure in both groups.

PARAMETERS	LANG.	1 (LINEARITY) % / N	2 (NON-LINEAR) % / N
1. Thematic unit (TU)	Engl.	76 (13)	24 (4)
	Span.	82 (14)	18 (3)
2. Thematic progression (TP)	Engl.	76 (13)	24 (4)
	Span.	59 (10)	41 (7)
3. Paragraph unity(PU)	Engl.	82 (14)	18 (3)
	Span.	82 (14)	18 (3)
4. Personal tone (PT)	Engl.	71 (12)	29 (5)
	Span.	41 (7)	59 (10)
5. Inter-paragraph cohesion (CO)	Engl.	65 (11)	35 (6)
	Span.	41 (7)	59 (10)
6. Concreteness (CON)	Engl.	47 (8)	53 (9)
	Span.	41 (7)	59 (10)
7. Sentence simplicidad (SS)	Engl.	18 (3)	82 (14)
	Span.	6 (1)	94 (16)

Table 2. Percentages and frequencies

As far as Personal Tone (PT) is concerned, there are clear differences between the two groups of informants. The mean value of the British seems to favour linearity (1.29) whereas the Spanish group mean leans towards non linearity (1.58). This is further reflected in Table II where a total of 71% of the British students adhered to linearity as opposed to 41% of the Spaniards. The difference is non-significant at $p < .05$, but a t value of 0.09 reveals that some significance is present. This supports Reid's study (1992) in which she found that native English speakers used more pronouns than Spanish speakers, and seems to contradict Monroy & Scheu's (1997) where the Spanish group scored higher in personal tone than the British group. This apparent discrepancy is due to a difference in the methodology used: in this experiment two different groups are involved, whereas in the 1997 study the informants were all Spaniards writing first in Spanish and then in English.

In Inter-paragraph Cohesion (CO) the British informants show a trend similar to the one observed in PT. Again, without being significant (t 0.18), they lean more towards linearity than the Spanish group (mean values 1.35 vs. 1.58 respectively). The percentage shed by the two groups (65% vs. 41%) -Table II) further confirms this tendency.

In Concreteness (CON), on the other hand, the British group shows no preference for either linearity or non-linearity, the mean value being almost equidistant between 1 and 2 (1.52). The Spaniards scored a mean (1.58) identical to the one found in the two previous parameters (CO and PT), reflecting therefore a non-linear tendency. Data from Table II provide some evidence to the effect that, even by a small percentage, the English are more inclined towards linearity, which is not surprising if we accept Vinay & Dalbarnet's claim (1995) that English, unlike French or Spanish, is a concrete, reality language. t -values, however, proved to be highly non-significant (0.73).

Sentence Simplicity (SS), is the parameter in which both groups deviate most sharply from the linearity features (1.82 and 1.94 mean scores). In the Spanish sample, there was only one instance in which simple and coordinated sentences surpassed subordinated structures. In spite of being non-significant (t 0.30), sentence simplicity was a feature neither of the British nor of the Spanish group: only 18% and 6% achieved it respectively. These results do not corroborate findings by Reid (1988), Montañó-Harmón (1991) or Reppen and Grabe (1993) who found that Spanish students tend to use an elaborate, ornate style with few simple sentences. The academic background of the informants (university level in our case vs. elementary (Reppen and Grabe) or secondary level (Montañó-Harmón)) could provide an explanation for such a behaviour. Also, the type of writing task (expository vs non-expository; and within the former a further subdivision between

C/C (Comparison /contrast) and G topic (description of a graph or chart) (Reid, 1990) can have a bearing, among further reasons, on the outcome.

6. DISCUSSION

Several remarks are fitting in connection with our aims. As stated at the beginning, we wanted to know, firstly, whether Kaplan's claim concerning the different rhetorical organisations of a discursive text was confirmed for English and Spanish. Our sample, although not very large, provides evidence to the effect that there is no such difference. None of the values turned out to be significant to a level $p < .05$, consequently one cannot talk of a relation between 1, which corresponds to the positive pole (i.e. linearity) of each parameter, and 2, reflecting the absence (or non-linearity) of the parameters in question. Only in the case of personal tone (PT) was a level of significance of $p < .09$. This, on the other hand, is understandable given the higher deictic usage of English as compared to Spanish.

Our second aim, which consisted of checking whether the rhetorical behaviour of the English informants justified the idea of linearity as against the non-linear or broken structure of the Spanish informants as postulated by Kaplan, was not borne out by our data. In the first parameter (TU), both groups show a clear preference for feature 1 linked to linearity. In fact, the percentage of the Spanish group is narrowly higher than that of the British group (82 % vs. 76 % respectively). As to thematic progression (TP), the English group does better than the Spanish. Nonetheless, the Spaniards incline lightly more towards feature 1 than towards feature 2. Mention has been made above of the fact that both groups yield an identical percentage in the third parameter (PU) linked to linearity. Admittedly, there are no significant differences between the English and the Spaniards regarding these three parameters. All one can state is that both groups show a slight trend towards linearity, but by no means is the British group more conspicuous for linearity than the Spanish one.

In the three following parameters (PT, CO and CON), the English group yields higher percentages in feature 1 than in 2. The Spaniards, on the other hand, obtained an identical result in the three (41 %). Thus, by a narrow margin, the Spanish group favours non-linearity in indexes four (PT), five (CO) and six (CON), though, again, the trend is statistically non-significant. Only personal tone proved significant at a $p < .09$. And the two groups favoured non-linearity in SS.

Our last aim consisted of seeing which parameters were more coincidental and more divergent in the rhetorical organization of the two languages under analysis. As Table II shows, it is

Paragraph Unity (PU) followed by Thematic Unity (TU) and Thematic Progression (TP) where there is greatest coincidence between the two groups, As most divergent parameter we find Personal Tone (PT), Inter-paragraph Cohesion (CO) and, not far behind, Sentence Simplicity (SS) and Concreteness (CO). A ranking of the parameters in terms of decreasing linearity shows that the only clear correspondences in both groups take place in the PU and the SS indexes. The former stands out as the most linear whereas the latter is the least linear feature displayed by all the informants. However, although the preference for linearity is identical in PU in both groups, this does not apply in the case of SS. Correspondences between the remaining parameters are not clear. True that TP and CON can arguably rank equally second and fifth in the two groups, but the percentage shed in either group reveals a different preference towards linearity. This is particularly the case with PT which ranks third in both groups and yet the British, unlike the Spaniards, lean more towards linearity. All the remaining parameters (TU, CO and TP) rank either differently or show opposite trends in linearity.

7. CONCLUSION

In general terms then, one cannot talk of linearity in English as compared to Spanish. In various parameters the tendencies of each group converge non-significantly towards either linearity (indexes 1, 2, 3) or non-linearity (index 7 and possibly 6). In the remaining parameters, the English group showed a non-significant tendency towards linearity for a *t* Student analysis with a $p < .05$. It is worth noticing that with the exception of PT, the rest of the parameters display an important degree of non-significance. Only in index 4 did the British group show significance at 9%, while the Spanish group remained equidistant between both poles, favouring neither linearity nor non-linearity. In general, one can say that linearity was adhered to by neither of the groups. It remains to be seen to what extent a larger sample and a more refined linearity scale would confirm or disprove these results.

NOTES

¹ The following titles are but a few of the many books devoted to academic writing in English: *The Literary Thesis: A Guide to Research* by G. Watson (1977); *How to write reports* by J. Mitchell (Fontana, 1974); *How to write essays* by R. Lewis (Heinemann, 1976); *Scientists must write* by R. Barras (Chapman & Hall, 1978); *Writing the research paper. A handbook*, by A.C. Winkler & J. R. McCuen (Harcourt Brace J., 1979); *Students must write* by R. Barras (Methuen, 1982); *Approaches to Academic Reading and Writing* by M.A. Arnaudet & M. E. Barret (Prentice-Hall, 1984); *Writing a Thesis. A Guide to Long Essays and Dissertations* by G. Watson (Longman, 1987); *The student's writing guide for the arts and social sciences* by Gordon Taylor (C.U.P., 1989); *Teaching creative writing* ed. by M. Monteith & R. Miles (Open University, 1992); *Academic Writing for Graduate Students. A Course for Nonnative Speakers of English* by J. Swales & Ch. B. Feak (The University of Michigan Press, 1994), etc.

² Books presenting analytical techniques do in fact include some of these parameters. See, for instance, Connor, U. and M.A. Johns. (1990, Eds.) *Coherence in writing: Research and pedagogical perspectives*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL. Also Purves, A. C. (1988). *Writing across languages and cultures: Issues in contrastive rhetoric*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

³ This division is no doubt very rough. It finds its justification only on the binary principle we have established to elucidate the concept of linearity. A sounder analysis would have to take into account the two basic discursive controlling mechanisms: topic and focus. Of special relevance is Kaplan's idea that focus is 'specifically language-bound' and that 'some languages have formulaic devices for topic establishment and syntactic manipulations for focus establishment' (1983: 150).

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