

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE – PROBLEMS OF A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL MINORITY

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A number of rhetorical features in texts, particularly above the level of the sentence, are based on the rhetorical values of our native culture. The native culture provides default rules for those aspects of text production that we are not usually conscious of but which shape our perceptions of convincingness in an important way. Members of linguistic and cultural minorities must therefore be aware of the ways in which their own cultural preferences differ from those of the target culture.

However, academics from small cultures do not have to and may not want to emulate all norms of dominant cultures. It is important to increase their awareness of features of textual rhetoric that may play a role in academic contexts, so as to enable them to make informed choices when they judge it to be necessary. The paper shows examples of culturally based rhetorical differences in the texts of Finnish and Anglo-American academics, and suggests ways in which the cultural barriers might be overcome.

INTRODUCTION

How a text should look is a matter of acquired taste. We are not born with ideas about good writing, and however strongly we might believe in claims about innate ideas of grammar, it has not even been suggested that we might have innate ideas about written prose. Yet such a suggestion would not be too far from the commonly held beliefs that good writers are good writers in any language, or that even though different cultures may have their own poetry and fictional style, when we come to science, we are dealing with a universal language. Such views are quite widely spread among both linguists and non-linguists.

Why it is important to show that cultural differences permeate the world of science as well as any other aspect of social and intellectual behaviour is because, as we all know, cultural differences are most problematic when users are not aware of them. Practically any native speaker of a particular language

can tell a foreign writer from errors or peculiarities in lexis and grammar. However, even if such mistakes are eliminated from a text, a number of "foreign" features are left at the discourse level, which affect our comprehension and assessment of a text, although we usually are not aware of them.

As readers, we tend to respond to texts on the basis of our culturally learned expectations concerning good writing and persuasive argumentation. If texts do not meet these expectations we tend to perceive them as unconvincing, incoherent, or even illogical. For most people, good writing reflects good thinking, and textual expression is inseparable from the content or flow of argumentation. Since it is natural for academics to wish to pass as good thinkers and convincing researchers, it is important for them to be aware of textual features which may create an unfavourable impression in readers from another culture.

This paper will maintain that typical discourse and rhetorical practices are an important part of a culture, and that the world of research writing is no exception to this. Examples from Finnish and Anglo-American academics' texts will be shown as evidence of cultural differences. After discussing the differences, the question of their consequences will be taken up: What possibilities do those writers have whose textual strategies depart from those of dominant cultures, and what can linguists do in order to help writers cope with the situation?

BACKGROUND: BASIC CONCEPTS AND DATA

The relevant difference between the Finnish and the Anglo-American culture for the present discussion is that the Finnish culture is a small, peripheral, internationally little known culture, whose academics must struggle for international recognition by employing languages other than their own. In contrast, the Anglo-American culture in a broad sense possesses the major language of international academic discussion, and is widely known in the world. Clearly, to treat the Anglo-American culture as one entity involves

considerable idealisations, much more so than is the case with Finnish culture. The Anglo-American culture is very heterogeneous both ethnically and linguistically, and comprises a number of significant subcultures. By comparison, the Finnish culture is relatively homogeneous, although it naturally also shows intracultural variability. Nevertheless, the present abstraction from intracultural variability is motivated by a desire to throw light on intercultural differences in textual rhetoric, and in particular to contrast a large and dominant culture with a small and peripheral one.

The text examples that will be shown to illustrate rhetorical preferences have been taken from the material of a larger contrastive study on textual differences in research writing (see Mauranen forthcoming, Ventola and Mauranen 1990, 1992). The material consists of three groups of texts: academic journal articles by Finnish writers both in their mother tongue and in English, and similar texts by native speakers of English; 19 texts altogether.

It is assumed that if the texts written by Finns are essentially similar to one another irrespective of the language they are written in, but differ from those written by Anglo-American writers, then the differences can best be accounted for by reference to culture-specific features rather than influences emanating from the lexicogrammatical structures of the languages concerned.

It is also assumed that the texts represent the same genre, that of the research paper, in the sense that the writers of these texts engage in the same kind of social activity, writing up research. This activity is shared by the international academic community. Academics all over the world seem to agree broadly that journal articles must do such things as describe methods and materials, provide evidence for arguments, and make certain kinds of intertextual references, and such features seem to constitute the genre of research reporting. The shared genre thus forms the basis of comparison for these texts.

If genre can thus be seen as reflecting the 'definitory rules' of the game of writing academic papers, that is, the rules which constitute the game, we could say that rhetoric is the domain of 'strategic rules', that is, rules which tell you how to play the game well (for a discussion of definitory and strategic rules, see Hintikka 1990). It seems that it is rules of the latter kind that are particularly culture-specific, and reflect the values of the writing cultures that people get socialised into as they learn to write. These culture-specific preferences operate within the confines of genres, and include such features as the degree of expressing authorial presence in text, avoidance of repetition, whether to go straight to the main point or to prepare for it gradually, etc. Rhetoric is understood here as persuasive discourse, not as eloquence or exemplary writing. A rhetorically good text is then one which makes its point effectively, and is perceived as having high credibility among target readers, rather than one which exhibits excellent style.

Two textual features will be taken up as illustrative of the differences in rhetorical preferences between Finnish and Anglo-American academics: text structuring around presenting a claim and textual reflexivity. Neither of these features can be fitted into a model of language description which takes into account lexicogrammatical features only. Nor are they features that writers are consciously aware of: Academics do not discern them systematically in their own texts or in other writers' texts. Yet writers appear to have some informal or intuitive awareness of such phenomena, since they usually recognise these features in their own writing when they are told about them.

These features also seem relatively resistant, once adopted, to external influences, since the Finnish writers studied here have spent most of their professional lives reading texts of the Anglo-American type. The writers also follow the same genre conventions as their Anglo-American colleagues in the basic makeup of the text. Yet they do not emulate Anglo-American models at certain levels of rhetoric.

TEXT STRUCTURES

A typical Finnish academic begins his research article in the following manner (Example 1):

Finland is one of the Nordic countries and it is located between the 60° N and the 70° N latitudes. It is known as a region where the summer may occasionally be warm, but during the winter, the temperature stays almost constantly below zero and frequently falls below -20°C also in the southernmost parts. Therefore its climate conditions are rather severe regarding the use of automobiles. However, motor vehicles are widely used and consequently the major part of the total distance driven comes from the operation below normal ambient temperature. Hence the effect of low ambient temperature on the use of automobiles is an important subject of research.

Technical Research Centre of Finland has been doing research on the effects of cold ambient temperature on the use of engines at the Laboratory of Fuel processing Technology since 1985. So far the emphasis has been on fuel economy and lubrication, while exhaust emissions have also been evaluated.

EXAMPLE 1.

The text begins with very general matters which do not provide many clues as to what the text is going to be about. It turns out in the course of the text that this initial section serves as a background to the core subject matter of the text. For the attentive reader, the core subject matter is in fact specified in the title: "Ambient Temperature and Fuel Effects on DI and IDI Diesel Cold Start Emissions". The title is indeed highly specific. Compared with the title, the beginning of the body of the text is very unspecific, and starts rather far from the target. This text strategy was quite typical in Finnish academic papers, but not in Anglo-American ones, which tended to introduce the central subject matter of the text much earlier. Evidence for the two strategies can be found, for example, by comparing the introduction of central referents to text, which takes place clearly later in Finnish than in Anglo-American texts (see Mauranen forthcoming).

The tendency of Finns to start their texts at quite a distance from the main topic is matched by their tendency to place important information towards the ends of texts or text sections, and to prefer argument structures whose main weight or main focus is at the end.

To see how the strategies contrast more specifically, let us take two parallel text extracts, one from a Finnish writer (Ex. 2) and one from an Anglo-American (Ex. 3). The passages have been chosen so that they include the presentation of and the discussion around the main point or the claim of the text. It was assumed at the outset that each academic paper would put forth at least one main point, and that the discussion around this point would be representative of the writer's preferred rhetorical strategy and style of argumentation. Analysis of the texts confirmed that main points were indeed locatable in virtually all papers, and the argumentation around them revealed different strategies.

The Finnish writer (Ex. 2) uses what might be called a strategy of final focus: he begins with premises (sentences 1–3) and finishes the first paragraph with the main point, which is presented as the conclusion from the premises (S4). The second paragraph follows a similar pattern: Ss 5–7 present premises, and S8 a conclusion. (The sentences in the examples below are numbered for ease of reference, and [R] stands for omitted bibliographical references in the original text.)

- (1) 'If two cancers have similar risk factors, it is to be expected that cancers of these kinds will become manifest in multiple cancer research which is based on individuals as bidirectionally increased incidences.
- (2) The known risk factors for breast cancer and cervical cancer are practically identical.'
- (3) In accordance with earlier research, breast cancer patients also had an increased risk of cervical cancer in this study [R] and similarly the cervical cancer patients had an increased risk of breast cancer [R].
- (4) In this situation the increased risk was thus bidirectional, as was to be expected.
- (5) The risk factors of breast cancer and ovarian cancer are also believed to be similar.

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- (6) In accordance with the above hypothesis, breast cancer patients showed a clearly increased risk of ovarian cancer.
 - (7) However, ovarian cancer patients showed a risk of breast cancer which was slightly smaller than average.
 - (8) That the incidence ratios of these cancers did not show a bidirectional increase to some extent argues against the similarity of their risk factors.

EXAMPLE 2.

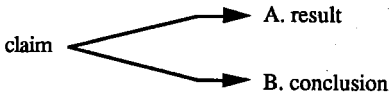
In contrast, the Anglo-American writer (Ex. 3) begins straight out with the main point (Ss 1–2), which is presented as the chief result of the study. This is then followed by specifications (Ss 3–4) and an explanation (S5). S6 adds another confirmatory detail.

- (1) When breast was taken as the index site, sequence analysis indicated a strong association between tumours of the breast and ovary in the premenopausal group, and an apparent decrease in RR with increasing age at first primary diagnosis.
- (2) For the reverse sequence of tumours, the association was not so clear-cut.
- (3) Small excesses or deficits of observed tumours may arise from spurious divisions in the population under consideration, and may therefore be the effect of methodology rather than aetiology.
- (4) Complementary analysis attempts to make some allowance for effects arising from methodology and, in this instance, while complementary analysis supports the association in the premenopausal group, with a more conservative estimate of RR, it indicates that for the remaining patients the observed number of tumours (33) was close to the expected number (28.63).
- (5) These results are strongly suggestive that menopausal status is important to the association.
- (6) The raised, but non-significant risk in the perimenopausal patients may therefore be due to heterogeneity of this group with respect to status.

EXAMPLE 3.

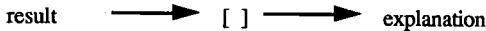
Summarising these presentation strategies, we could say that both writers made their first rhetorical choice with respect to the presentation of the claim either as a result or as a conclusion, as in the following diagram.

Basic strategy choice:



Depending on this choice, the strategies then follow like this ([] stand for digressions, repetitions, or details):

STRATEGY A



STRATEGY B



These were the two major strategies found in the texts. Both appeared in both writer groups, but a culture-specific difference in the strategy preference was very clear, in the direction that the examples showed: most Finns preferred the claim-as-conclusion strategy, while Anglo-Americans showed a strong preference for the claim-as-result. The Finnish strategy could then be called a final focus strategy, and the Anglo-American an initial focus strategy.

TEXT REFLEXIVITY

The second text feature which illustrates cultural differences in rhetoric is reflexivity. Reflexivity is the property of language which allows it to speak about itself (Lyons 1977). Reflexive text will then in this interpretation comprise those elements of text which are concerned with the current text, for example **In this article, we focus on the meso level, ...** Thus, while it is part of the text itself, it can also be distinguished, at least in relative terms, from the propositional content of the text. It also comments and explains the text, and orients the reader towards the author's perspective. This understanding of reflexivity is close to the notions of metatext and metadiscourse

which terms many authors prefer to use (e.g. Enkvist 1975; Crismore and Farnsworth 1990; Markkanen et al. 1990; Luukka 1992; also Mauranen 1993).

We could also characterise reflexivity as an expression of the self-awareness of the text, or more precisely, as the author's explication of his or her awareness of the text as text. By expressing awareness of the text, the writer also makes the reader aware of it, and thus engages the reader in a different game, as it were, from the one that is played when text is read for content. This game can roughly be equated with interactive functions of discourse, with emphasis on language in use rather than language as system.

Reflexive text plays an important rhetorical role in text. It can be regarded as rhetorical by its very nature, as going beyond the propositional content of the text, and in this way being part of the *elocutio* in traditional rhetoric. By virtue of its organising function, it also serves the *dispositio*. In general, it aims at influencing the recipient's interpretation of the content conveyed in discourse, and is therefore a means of persuasion. Reflexive text seems to convey rhetorical impressions which are not reducible to the organising function alone.

For example, in a small informal experiment on the perceived role of connectors in text, it turned out that a group of native speakers of English experienced effects of connectors which went well beyond the roles of organising text (for a detailed account of the experiment see Mauranen forthcoming). Neither can these effects be attributed to connectors' role as providing cohesion for text, which is their major role according to Halliday and Hasan (1976).

The experiment involved asking a group of eight subjects to respond to a text extract where all structurally non-obligatory connectors had been removed. In the second phase, the same subjects were asked to respond to the original version. The subjects were lecturers of English and language revisers in

technological universities in Finland. Six were native speakers of English, and two native speakers of Finnish, with near-native command of English. Example 4 below shows the first paragraph of the original text, with the connectors deleted for the modified version underlined.

- (1) In a recent study on 5- to 6-year-old children, Astington confirmed that they see a strong link between promising something and actually doing it: "To promise" means "you do it."
- (2) **However**, this link is much stronger for children than for adults, which leads children to assert that an unfulfilled promise was not a promise in the first place but, **rather**, a "lie".
- (3) **In other words**, for young children promising is not simply a speech act but something that includes execution of the promised action as well.

EXAMPLE 4.

When shown the modified text version, the subjects were asked to improve it by adding connectors as they thought fit. However, all subjects reported that they did not wish to make any additions, since they felt that the text was good, clear, and coherent as it stood.

At the next stage, the subjects were shown the full version of the text. The immediate reaction was that they felt a dramatic difference between the two versions. The emphasis was seen to have changed, and the text was said not only to be easier to read, but more logical and more convincing. It was also perceived to have more authority.

The effect that the connectors had on the experimental subjects was thus of a rhetorical kind – convincingsness, logicity, and authoritativeness are rhetorical attributes. Convincingsness and logicity would appear to be generally desirable goals in academic rhetoric. Authoritativeness seems open to both a positive and a negative interpretation, and Finnish writers have often expressed a negative view, seeing authority as patronising and constraining.

If we take a more comprehensive view of reflexive text and go beyond connectors, we can distinguish between different kinds of reflexivity by degrees of explicitness. The distinction is of particular interest from the perspective of comparing Finnish and Anglo-American texts, since Finnish writing has in different contexts been characterised as being more implicit than Anglo-American writing (e.g. Ingberg 1987; Tirkkonen-Condit 1988). It also reflects degrees in the self-awareness of the text.

A simple and illuminating solution is to divide reflexive expressions into two types: highly explicit and less explicit. In this dichotomy, reflexivity of high explicitness includes expressions which refer to the text, the writing of it, its organisation and language, as in *In the following section, a method of treating management is proposed ...* In contrast, low explicitness includes expressions which indicate the structure or function of parts of text, and which are meaningful only in their present textual context, but which do not refer to the text itself, like connectors which function textinternally: *In addition, Wallenburg et al. and Beaufils et al. have demonstrated that...* In fact, internal connectors, and connectors which can function either internally or externally account for the majority of instances of low-explicit reflexivity. Examples of the basic types of reflexive text are listed in the following:

A. High explicitness

1. *References to the text*

The paper concludes by explaining why ...

In the following section, a method of treating management is proposed ...

Let us now explore the implications of the above theorem.

2. *Discourse labels*

To illustrate the size of this distortion, ...

Before proceeding, let us return briefly to confirm that ...

3. Addressing the reader

Recall that t_n incorporates effects from the difference ...

- (1) Condition (b) is designed so as to ensure this result.
- (2) (The tedious algebra is left to the reader). (RG)

B. Low explicitness

Internal connectors

However, moreover, firstly, secondly, it follows, still, ...

The text materials were analysed in terms of the above classification of reflexive text. The main findings, as can be seen from Table 1, were (1) that the Anglo-American texts contained more reflexive text than the Finnish texts, and (2) that the difference between the text groups was greater for high than for low explicitness.

TABLE 1. Reflexivity of high and low explicitness in L1 English compared with all Finnish texts

	L1 Eng	All Finns
% high explicitness	12.93	4.45
% low explicitness	21.70	14.72
(Number of sentences	820	1304)

The figures are percentages of sentences with reflexive expressions of all sentences. Number of texts in L1 English group = 5, in All Finns group = 10

That the difference is clearer in highly explicit reflexivity strongly suggests that a culture-specific preference is at work. Because reflexivity of low explicitness is close to non-reflexive organisation of the text, it is probably less susceptible to writers' cultural preferences, and also possibly felt to be less optional for the general clarity of text.

A rhetorical strategy which uses plenty of reflexivity can be characterised as personal, explicit, and helpful. It guides the reader in the text, making him or

her aware of its organisation, functional parts, and central messages. It is more interactive, and could be described as reader-friendly. Interestingly, Anglo-American authors sometimes express very positive attitudes towards it (e.g. Crismore and Farnsworth 1990)

On the other hand, reflexive text can also be characterised as didactic, interfering, and patronising. Explicit guidance of the interlocutor's understanding is a typical didactic procedure, and saying obvious things can be felt to be condescending. Moreover, in guiding the reader's interpretative process, reflexive text also controls it, leaving less space for the reader's own interpretations. Scant reflexivity can be thus seen as leaving more scope for a reader's "seeing as" process, and be respectful of the reader in the sense of non-interference. This latter characterisation fits the generally negative attitude towards reflexive text which is often expressed by Finns. They tend to see it as superfluous decoration, and the sign of a poor writer.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, Finnish and Anglo-American academics showed cultural differences in the structuring of text and in the use of reflexive text. These two features may be connected in that they both provide a kind of framing for the main message of the text. Since Finns do not explain their text directly to the reader with the help of reflexive expressions, they establish the common ground between writer and reader by giving plenty of background information before they get to the most important matters. This is a way of providing advance orientation, which Anglo-Americans tend to do with explicit reflexive text.

However, even though both of these strategies become understandable if we observe them and reflect upon them, we do not normally pay conscious attention to such matters in the course of ordinary academic life. We simply seem to assume that everyone goes by the same rule in the academic world, and if a text differs from the way we would expect it to be it is not as it

should be. This is an obvious disadvantage to writers whose native culture values deviate from those of the dominant culture.

In the academic report writing situation two kinds of culture are at work at the same time. The first is the national culture of the writer. The second is disciplinary culture, that is, the institutions and traditions of the field of inquiry in question. A central demand in any academic discipline is that research reports are convincing to colleagues in the discipline. Readers must be made to believe that what are offered as facts are taken as facts and that arguments sound valid.

Academic writers primarily wish to be members of the disciplinary culture, and normally not at all of another national culture. A certain foreignness in style, lexis, or even grammar is not necessarily as serious as sounding unconvincing or stupid. A Finnish philosopher I was interviewing put this very clearly in saying that he did not want to sound English. Most people who write in his field are not native speakers of English anyway, so it does not matter whether your English is faultless and elegant. What matters is that a philosopher does not want to sound stupid.

Yet in order to achieve acceptability and membership in the disciplinary culture, non-native academic writers also have to take the foreign national culture into account in more ways than they are usually aware of. It is the convincingness requirement of the disciplinary culture that (paradoxically) lends importance to the national cultures. This is because there are culturally different preferences in academic texts, as we have seen.

A number of the rhetorical features that we use in texts, particularly those above the level of the sentence, are based on the rhetorical values of our native culture which we first get socialised into. The native culture provides as it were default rules for those aspects of text production that we are not usually conscious of but which fundamentally shape our perceptions of convincingness.

In consequence, Finns may unintentionally seem less convincing to their foreign, especially Anglo-American, colleagues than they might if their rhetorical practices were more similar to Anglo-American expectations. That is, they may sound more incoherent or illogical than they need to. This reduces their control over their own communicative output, and their rhetorical intentions may fall short of the target despite their best efforts.

There are basically two possibilities of solving the problem:

(1) **Integration:** adopt the norms and values of the dominant foreign culture, i.e. the Anglo-American, as well as possible. This can be seen as the only way of achieving credibility and full access to the international academic community.

The criticism against this solution is that many members of minority cultures may not be willing to change the practices most familiar and most convincing to them. They may not be easily convinced that if another culture is bigger and more influential, it is also better.

(2) **Emancipation:** take pride in your own cultural inheritance and develop that. Behave as an equal and use your own patterns of behaviour.

This solution can be criticised for its lack of realism: for instance the Finnish culture is a relatively peripheral minority culture; rhetorical preferences of Finns and Anglo-Americans are not differences of taste between equals. In practice Anglo-Americans can choose to ignore the ways in which Finns would like to express themselves.

Since neither of these straightforward solutions seems immediately satisfactory, the question arises whether we should not abandon the struggle and work for a truly unified academic culture, ironing out cultural differences as far as possible. Is there any point in keeping up national academic discourse

communities? Is it worth it to allocate resources to maintaining specific academic traditions in minority cultures? Why should we have any use for small, somewhat isolated scientific communities which tend to remain peripheral and may develop idiosyncratic features?

A number of ethical and aesthetic reasons can easily be found for preserving richness and variety in human culture, but I would rather in the present context take a purely utilitarian perspective: We may wish to preserve small cultures for no other reason than to keep up diversity. Insofar as diversity provides a fruitful basis for innovation, we should encourage the maintenance of smallish, local academic communities with their own discourse and rhetorical practices. They should be maintained as cultural rainforests, in order to reserve the possibility of an original contribution to the common pool of scientific thought.

Thus, insofar as rhetorical practices embody thought patterns, we should encourage the maintenance of variety and diversity in academic rhetorical practices – excessive standardisation may counteract innovation and creative thought by forcing them into standard forms. Of course, language and thinking naturally tend towards variety and to resist standardisation, but why not utilise the resources that are already there.

I would like to suggest, then, first of all, that we work towards a general tolerance and awareness of cultural differences in rhetoric. This means raising awareness of differences in text-level preferences among minority and majority cultures alike. Secondly, we need to equip writers from minority cultures with means of overcoming the cultural barrier when they wish to address audiences of majority cultures. Awareness of the differences is not enough for those who may be disadvantaged by it – they need practical skills for coping with the problem. Thirdly, I suggest that we might be more lenient towards non-native writers' lexicogrammatical errors, and instead encourage writers to signal their foreignness by lexicogrammatical means. Such signalling is within the conscious domain of readers who are not linguists or

might not yet be aware of cultural differences in textual rhetoric, and may thus alert readers to the non-native status of the writer and help understand and make allowances for other foreign features.

There are thus two important roles for linguists. First, as researchers, we need to provide systematic descriptions of areas of language use which are not known to users but which play an important role in successful communication. Secondly, linguists are needed as teachers, to provide instruction and practice in appropriate linguistic and communicative skills. There is an obvious practical need for this felt in peripheral cultures – but it would be enlightening and useful to members of dominant cultures as well.

If successful, such teaching may also redress some of the balance in the intercultural communicative situation: Members of the minority culture have the power of choice, the freedom provided by the ability to manipulate (at least) two codes of expression. In this way at least some of the problem of being unintentionally unconvincing can be removed. In the end, it may be the peripheral cultures who will gain most from the situation, since they will have to go through the enriching experience of awareness and expressing thoughts in alternative ways. They cannot opt out like members of dominant cultures.

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