



Disciplinary Dialogues

A comparative-rhetoric view of contrastive rhetoric

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I must confess that I have also criticized contrastive rhetoric (CR) research for having entertained an essentialist, static, and deterministic view of language and culture (You, 2008). I certainly appreciate Professor Li's observation that criticisms lashed against Kaplan (1966) have been couched in American individualism and a poststructuralist reading of his seminal piece. My criticisms of CR, however, were derived from my observation of its impact in China and of its historical connections with comparative rhetoric.

I first ran into the concept of CR when preparing my MA thesis on EFL writing in China. I photocopied sections of Connor (1996) in the National Library in Beijing and read them with great interest. In the mid-1990s, influenced by CR research in the United States, there was a surge of interest among Chinese scholars in Chinese students' rhetorical preferences demonstrated in their English writing. However, these scholars tended to reduce rhetorical practices to textual organization. Further, they assumed that Anglo-American English speakers were the only legitimate users of English and were, thus, *the* audience and *the* arbiter of student writing. For instance, in a study published in a prestigious Chinese journal of applied linguistics, Zhao (1995) asked his students and a native speaker to respond to an English essay written by a Chinese student. He found that Chinese- and English-speaking audiences preferred different reasoning patterns in expository writing. Then he drew a pedagogical implication: "The unique reasoning patterns commonly found in Chinese written discourse, such as the thesis statement appearing in the end, appearing in the middle, or hidden in the text, leads to a negative transfer in Chinese students' English writing. The teacher should never underestimate the greater harm caused by these patterns" (p. 26, my translation). Zhao failed to recognize the fluidity of language, audience, and the rhetorical situation. Although Chinese students wrote hypothetically for native speakers, in reality they tried to communicate with their Chinese audiences (i.e., teachers and peers) who truly mattered in the rhetorical situation (i.e., class assignments or tests). Zhao did not realize that these "uniquely" Chinese patterns could also be found in English texts authored by Anglo-American writers. In addition to deduction, other logical patterns are not uncommon in English essays either, such as induction and "chrono-logic," according to which a writer rigorously structures his or her thoughts as they occur associatively over time (Heilker, 1996). Zhao demonstrates a static, essentialized view of English language, Anglo-American people, and their culture.

In my doctoral studies, I was gradually drawn to comparative rhetoric, "the cross-cultural study of rhetorical traditions as they exist or have existed in different societies around the world" (Kennedy, 1998, p. 1). The debates among contrastive rhetoricians on Chinese students' thought patterns intrigued me. However, when these scholars referred to Chinese rhetorical tradition, they tended to resort to secondary sources published in English, often dated and inaccurate. This observation inspired me to delve into the Chinese tradition. Focusing on argumentation in early imperial China, I have examined both its oral and written forms in the royal court (You, 2010b; You & Liu, 2009).

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I have also traced the history of English composition in China. It is a history of Chinese teachers and students negotiating with local and imported rhetorical traditions to forge new ones (You, 2005, 2010a).

CR research can find its origin in comparative rhetoric. Kaplan (1966) opened his discussion by citing a definition of rhetoric offered by a comparative rhetorician Robert Oliver, who, since the 1940s, had been studying Asian rhetorical traditions. In 1971, Oliver published his landmark work, *Communication and Culture in Ancient India and China*. Inspired by Oliver's work, numerous studies have been published on rhetoric in ancient and modern China. While in his book Oliver warned against using a Western lens to understand rhetorical practices in non-Western societies, he was not immune to this methodological challenge. Several scholars have thus far challenged Oliver's representation of the Chinese tradition (Liu, 1996; Lu, 1998; Mao, 2003). For example, Mao (2003) pointed out that while Oliver had tried hard to represent ancient Indian and Chinese rhetorics on their own terms, the sources he used were sometimes not reliable, and the conclusions he arrived at subsequently turned out either too general or somewhat stereotyped. For instance, Oliver used Jesuit missionary accounts about the Chinese "apparent guardedness against talk" based on the eighteenth-century impressions of Asia. In addition, there were misinterpretations in Oliver which in part might have been created by his dependence on translated materials. With limitations characteristic of comparative rhetoric of his time, Oliver presented the Chinese tradition sometimes as lacking certain features commonly found in the Western tradition.

In the historical trajectories of comparative rhetoric and CR, there is an intriguing parallelism between Oliver and Kaplan: Both were pioneers in cross-cultural studies of rhetoric with a shared aim of promoting intercultural education. Both were extremely wary about imposing Western lenses on rhetorical practices of non-Western societies and individuals. However, due to the lack of first-hand sources and the influence of "deficit" views of the other in American academia, both have unwittingly committed missteps in their landmark pieces. For example, Kaplan (1966) cited Oliver's definition of rhetoric to frame his study of cultural thought patterns among ESL writers—"Rhetoric is a mode of thinking or a mode of 'finding all available means' for the achievement of a designated end" (p. 2). With this definition, both Oliver and Kaplan declared an Aristotelian perspective of communication. It entails examining communication in all societies with a taxonomy delineated in Aristotle's *On Rhetoric* (2007) and his other works, such as public deliberation, means of persuasion, logos-centered argumentation, and efficiency and clarity as rhetorical values. Kaplan's generalizations of cultural thought patterns have unfailingly reflected part of this taxonomy. Indeed, to avoid an Aristotelian perspective is difficult in Western academia. Its lasting impact in cross-cultural studies of rhetoric can be seen as recently as Kennedy (1998).

What I have learnt from my observations of CR is that I need to study and teach rhetorical practices of different societies as situated in specific socio-cultural contexts. This is a difficult task but something worth pursuing.

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Contrastive rhetoric is the study of how a person's first language and culture influence his or her writing in a second language. Research began in the 1960s, started by the American applied linguist Robert Kaplan. Since that time, the area of study has had a significant impact on the teaching of writing in both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. Contrastive rhetoric may refer to one of several concepts in linguistics: Contrast (linguistics) Contrastive linguistics Contrastive distribution Contrastive analysis Contrastive rhetoric Contrastive focus reduplication Contrastive stress Contrastive wa; see Japanese Wikipedia. Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to Wikipedia. The key question for Contrastive Rhetoric is whether there are differences between texts written by speakers of different languages and members of different cultures. Secondly, whether these differences results in poor marks in written assessment. The differences studied affected basically the organization and structure of texts. Rhetoric steps between the evidence and the audience and shapes the evidence into something other than what it originally was. Therefore, rhetoric is an unnecessary and dangerous distraction to a proper understanding of the underlying subject. This outlook on evidence is relatively young. In the sciences, it is traditionally rooted in the principles of positivism and, though the positivist. As discussed below, this point of view introduces the concern that the use of comparative law as rhetoric takes the arbitrator away from making the correct decision and instead encourages him or her to make a decision on entirely improper grounds. To face this criticism an altogether different perspective on rhetoric is needed.