

Chapter 3

Contrastive Rhetorics and World Englishes

ABSTRACT

This chapter provides the linguistic base to intercultural rhetorical research, exploring theories of linguistic relativity and contrastive rhetoric. It contextualizes much of this work into a broader social and cultural framework, showing how intercultural rhetorical patterns are not solely based on language, but also on other values, such as the eight common human thresholds of interaction. It also hypothesizes about the cultural and rhetorical relevance of English as a world language

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how distinct features of human languages might encourage correspondingly distinct cultural and rhetorical patterns, generally connecting specific languages such as English or Chinese to the eight common human thresholds. This body of research is known as the theory of linguistic relativity (for speech) and contrastive rhetoric (for writing), and for many reasons, it is critical to intercultural rhetoric and professional communication. First, because human language is the medium of most intercultural communication, it is important to understand how one language might predispose communicators to naturally draw on the common human thresholds differently than speakers of a different language. This language-rhetoric connection can significantly influence

how communications are developed, translated, and used in cross-cultural contexts. Further, as demonstrated by the work in contrastive rhetoric, the language-rhetoric connection can remarkably influence writing pedagogy, especially for second language writers. And third, if specific languages correspond differently to the eight etic thresholds, then language domination might lead to cultural domination, a line of research that is very critical because of the spread of English as a second language and Chinese, two world dominating languages.

This Chapter first explores linguistic relativity and contrastive rhetoric, connecting this work to the eight common human thresholds articulated in Chapter Two. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion about globalization and the role of English as the defacto language for globalization.

THEORY OF LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY AND SAPIR WHORF HYPOTHESIS

An important line of inquiry for professional communicators working across cultures is the connection between the native language and corresponding rhetorical and cultural patterns. Known as the theory of linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, this theory examines how the differences in the ways languages encode cultural, rhetorical, and cognitive categories influence the way people speak, write, and reason. In 1956, Benjamin Whorf describes the theory this way:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native language. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscope flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems of our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language [...] all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar; or can in some way be calibrated (pp.134-5).

Eventually, Whorf and others embraced two versions of the hypothesis: The strong version maintains that one's native language determines

thought and linguistic categories, while the weak version simply argues that a language encourages certain usage and perceptions. In other words, a speaker's native language is much like a computer's operating system, influencing what is inputted, what and how something is processed, and the output. Even though Sapir and Whorf reinvigorated the discussion in the 1940s through the 1960s, this connection between language and the brain has been strongly debated for more than 200 years or perhaps even as far back as St. Augustine or the Sophists.

Most early 20th century research in linguistic relativity examined the correlation between the availability of words in a certain language and how speakers of that language perceived color or time, with corresponding argument that if a speaker of the language did not have a word for it specific color, that speaker would not recognize (strong version) or leave in the background (weak version) the recognition of the color. For example, if we view the light spectrum as shown in Figure 1, we note that there are no clear separations of colors in the spectrum:

Because there are no clear separations of colors, according to most theorists of linguistic relativity, language is the vehicle for carving up the light spectrum. In other words, because English has the words of red, or blue or yellow, English speakers are predisposed to categorize the spectrum this way, while other languages that have words for colors such as blue-green or orange-yellow will predispose their speakers to categorize or carve up the light spectrum a different way. Thus, English speakers are more likely to categorize the spectrum with their words, as shown in the Figure 2:

Figure 1. Light spectrum



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