

Scientific discourse and contrastive linguistics: explicitness and the concept of reader/writer responsible languages

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Abstract Languages and the cultures they represent differ in the extent to which writers feel responsible for making themselves clear and to which readers are expected to puzzle through what has been written. To write explicit statements may be regarded as polite in one culture and patronising in another. This is the third article in a trilogy on scientific rhetoric; previous articles have discussed creating a research space and hedges.

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Contrastive rhetoric analyses of scientific discourse have drawn attention to the existence of differences in the level of explicitness between languages. English is usually said to lie at the higher end of the scale of explicitness of text organisation, clarity, and coherence: English readers indeed expect and require landmarks of coherence and unity as they read, and writers need to provide these transitional statements.²⁻⁷ Texts written in English thus reflect a more reader-oriented attitude: explicit statements are regarded as polite to readers and implicitness as impolite. When compared with the scientific rhetoric of Anglo-American writers, writers in other languages are much less inclined to regard explicitness as their responsibility.⁸

In Japanese,⁸ Korean,⁹ and Chinese¹⁰ scientific writing, texts are characterized by non-linearity; they generally lack transitions and illocution markers (words used to show the author's stance on a given subject), and readers are expected to piece together the thread of the writer's logic that binds the composition together so as to make a coherent text. According to John Hinds, writing that is too explicit is not valued in Oriental languages (Chinese, Korean, Thai and Japanese)^{8,11,12}; the task of the writer, argues Hinds, is not necessarily to convince but rather to stimulate readers to think for themselves, consider the observations made, and draw their own conclusions. Despite the respect that his research has enjoyed among linguists and contrastive rhetoricians, some critics have pointed out that Hinds bases his generalizations about Japanese expository prose on analyses of articles from one Japanese newspaper. Critics also assert that different genres may require different styles. This may be true, but Hinds' point is that there is a difference in the perceived coherence of Japanese and of Anglo-American texts, and this is an important and interesting issue.

Research articles written in Spanish¹³ and texts written in Portuguese¹⁴ are also negatively marked as to the presence of cohesive order to indicate the discursive logic of texts. A much lower density of periphrastic links, previews, and

reviews has also been noted in scientific papers written in French^{15,16} and in Slovene¹⁷ and German¹⁸ academic writing. Basing his arguments on the analysis of textbooks and high school essays, Michael Clyne argues that form is of greater importance in educational discourse in English-speaking countries than in German speaking ones, where content seems more important.¹⁹

In another paper, Clyne compared the linear organization of academic papers and articles written by English-speaking and German-speaking linguists and sociologists, and examined the hierarchical development of texts, the development of arguments, the symmetry of text segments, and the uniformity of formal structure.¹⁸ He found, *inter alia*, that writing by English speakers favoured a linear development and a greater use of "advance organizers" (used to clarify the organization of a text), whereas the writing of German speakers favoured digression and scattered organizers, if they used them at all. Clyne explains the differences in terms of cultural differences in attitudes about text readability: English-speaking writers strive to make their texts readable, whereas German writers emphasize content over form. Clyne formulated the hypothesis that the German discourse type, at its most striking, can be characterized as "cooked spaghetti",^{20,21} a style which stands in sharp contrast to its linear Anglo-American counterpart. Clyne argues that to describe an academic text as "easy to follow" would be complimentary in an Anglo-Saxon academic context, but might be intended as an insult among German academics whose texts are dominated by the primary function of Wissensdarstellung (knowledge representation).⁵

Along the same lines, Ventola and Mauranen²² and Mauranen²³ remark that Finnish scientists use less metalanguage (the use of language to describe or analyze language or to make statements about statements) for organizing texts, and show a more negative kind of politeness and a greater tendency towards implicitness than Anglo-American writers do. Some might consider Finnish prose to be aloof and uncaring toward the reader, but Mauranen claims that the Finnish style can be interpreted as polite and non-patronizing to the reader – what is obvious is left unsaid.²³

Scientific prose in Slavic languages also tends to be more concerned with presenting knowledge than addressing the reader,²⁴⁻²⁶ or, as Yakhontova aptly puts it in her study of conference abstracts written by Russian and Ukrainian academics in comparison to those written by Anglo-American scholars, Slavic academic writing tends to "tell" rather than "to sell".²⁷ This does not imply a lack of cooperation between the writer and the reader; it rather means that the expectations are different: the