

# A Contrastive Rhetorical Analysis of the News Reports in Iranian and American Newspapers

(A Case Study of News Reports in Tehran Times and New York Times)

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## Abstract

Contrastive rhetorical analysis as a way of understanding different ways through which writers from various cultural backgrounds shape their discourse was officially initiated by the works of Kaplan (1966). This study tries to use the methodology to investigate the news reports in two American and Iranian widely published newspapers. Using the analytical methodologies of contrastive rhetoric and genre analysis, 10 news reports written by Iranian and American journalist were selected and analyzed. Results revealed that though the genre written by both groups of writers followed the same generic or rhetorical organizational structure, the strategies writers from the two different socio-cultural environments took to realize the moves in the genres were different.

**Keywords:** Contrastive rhetorical analysis, Iranian and American journalists, Newspaper discourse, Genre analysis

## 1. Introduction

News is probably one of the vital needs of societies; from domestic to national, national to international, health and industry to sports and entertainment, news has played a crucial role in peoples' and governments' decision making. As such, the source and reliability of the news is of equal or even more significance than the news itself and that makes reporting the news a challenging and critical profession. Accordingly, investigating how news is reported is essential and further it would be illuminating to see how different news reporting organizations and cultures report their news for their readers.

Contrastive rhetoric analysis was coined by the American applied linguists Robert Kaplan (1966) who was interested in understanding the various ways and strategies through which second language learners of English composed their expository essays. Though the idea could have been dated back to the Sapir-Whorf "linguistic determinism" theory the weaker version of which still has publicity among linguists (Hunt and Agnoli, 1991), it was Kaplan who first used the term by demonstrating that language would affect the thought. In this methodology, the researcher is interested in the way text is

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rhetorically structured by writers from various cultural and social backgrounds. Being still applied by contemporary ESL scholars and researchers (Kubota and Lehner, 2004; Connor, 1996; Connor, 2008), his idea and methodology are still popular in linguistics, applied linguistics and pedagogy, known as New Rhetoric school of genre analysis (Hyon, 1996).

In the same line, John Swales (1981) proposed the genre analysis methodology to the field of English for Specific Purposes in which the researcher analyses the genre in terms of the rhetorical move structure in it. Central to Swales' tradition of genre analysis (known as ESP school of Genre Analysis (Hyon, 1996)) are the concepts of discourse community, the group of people among whom the genre is frequently used and mutually understood, and communicative purpose, the reason for which the genre is constructed and the purpose it serves. The difference between Swales' and New Rhetoric concepts of genre analysis lies in the fact that the new rhetoricians are more interested in the socio-cultural properties of the genres and the resulted differences manifested in genres written by different writers from divergent socio-cultural backgrounds while the ESP genre analysts are interested in the rhetorical structure of the genres and they do not limit their analysis to any linguistic or paralinguistic theories. This study, however, will consider news reports and the ways they are reported in New York Times and Tehran Times to check the generic characteristics of the genre across the two newspapers.

One of the pioneer studies of the journalistic genres is Van Dijk (1988) which introduced and investigated various media genres including the textual properties of the news reports. Other works on media genres would include those of Bell (1991), Fairclough (1995), White (1998), and Scollon (1998). However, these works have mainly looked at the textual

properties of the texts of news and none has considered the contrastive rhetorical properties of one written by the English writers versus those of the non-native writers.

On the other hand, one can mention a handful number of works on contrastive rhetoric analysis of the editorials. Probably, one of the first would be Dantas- Whitney and Grabe (1989) which investigated the textual characteristics of the newspaper editorials (such as nominalizations, third person singular etc) written by English and Portuguese writers and the way they presented information. The results revealed that the English writers were more formal than the Portuguese ones when writing the editorials. Another classic study was that of Tirkkonen- Condit and Liefander-Kiostinen (1989) which investigated editorials in Finnish, English and German newspapers to figure out the strength and the location of the major claim in the editorial. Findings revealed that the Finnish writers did not necessarily argue a point of view but rather provided information, and that the German ones usually situated the main argument at the beginning.

Bolivar (1994) proposed a minimum unit of analysis named "triad" which was realized in three modes of Lead, Follow and Valuate. Lead would introduce the topic, Follow would elaborate and discuss and Valuate would comment and conclude the argument or the viewpoint of the writer. While she found this based on the 23 editorials she has collected from The Guardian she concluded this feature may not necessarily be universal in all examples of editorials written in other languages. However, this model was applied by two Iranian researchers (Riazi and Assar, on the editorials written in Persian in Iranian newspapers and their analysis showed that the same units of interaction namely Lead, Follow and Valuate existed in those editorials. Further to this, Ansary (2004)

looked at editorials written by native and non-native writers of English in three different cultural contexts (The USA, Iran, and Pakistan). Though the writers had used various strategies to create the editorials and the consisting sections of those, the rhetorical organization of all followed the same pattern. This would confirm Bhatia (2004) where he mentions genre refers to language use in a conventionalized communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution, which give rise to stable structural forms by imposing constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discursive resources; and that genre has specific characteristics to itself which is independent from the characteristics of the individual writer, in other words, no matter who constructs the genre, it still follows some generic features which is observed universally; the realizations of the constituents of the text might be different and the strategies for writing each could be different from one writer to another, but the communicative purpose of each part of the text and the overall communicative purpose are the same.

In a more recent study Katajamaki and Koskela (2006) used Van Dijk's model of rhetorical structure to analyze editorials in three business newspapers in English, Swedish and Finnish. According to their findings and based on Van Dijk's model they identified three rhetorical moves in the genre of editorials across the three languages: The Introduction section, the intermediate section and the coda. While they mentioned that the stages involved in each of the mentioned sections could be different and drafted in different ways, the overall generic structure of the genre is the same in all three languages and they all contain the mentioned sections. Finally, Bonyadi (2010) conducted a contrastive study of the editorials in New York Times

and Tehran Times to provide the schematic structures of the editorials in the two papers. He identified three rhetorical moves in the editorials namely: The Introduction, The Body and The Ending. Like others, Bonyadi came to the conclusion that the editorials from both newspapers contained similar sections; however, writers in each language used their own strategies to acquire the communicative purpose of the genre. For example in the Introduction part, the NYT editorials were more evaluative than those in TT while TT editorials Introductions were more factual. Also, use of personal pronouns in NYT outnumbered that of TT. And in the Ending, TT editorials ended by an informative comment but the NYT editorials did not suffice to that and besides providing information, went further to make a prediction or state a necessity. As it can be seen, the literature in the analysis of editorials is rich as far as studies in this domain are concerned. This could partly be due to the fact that editorials not only contain facts and information about current affairs and issues but also personal opinions and viewpoints of the editors whose job is both to inform and comment. There seems to be room for further research in this field in general but lack of research in analyzing news reports could be particularly felt because there does not seem to be much research on the rhetorical structure of the news report in English news stories let alone a contrastive study of news reports in English and Persian.

## **2. Methodology**

Ten news reports from New York Times and 10 from Tehran Times were taken from the websites of the two newspapers on 17th September, 2012. All news reports were taken from the international news sections of the two websites. Judging from the names of TT news writers, the researcher made sure they were all written by Iranian journalist so that the genres taken from TT

would all be homogeneous and written by Iranians. The names on the NYT news reports were also checked and they all sounded English and Western, so it could be claimed that the genres in both groups were written by American and Iranian news reports writers. Using contrastive rhetoric and genre analysis methodologies, the researcher then analyzed the genres in terms of the organization of the rhetorical structure of the texts and the ways events and people were reported.

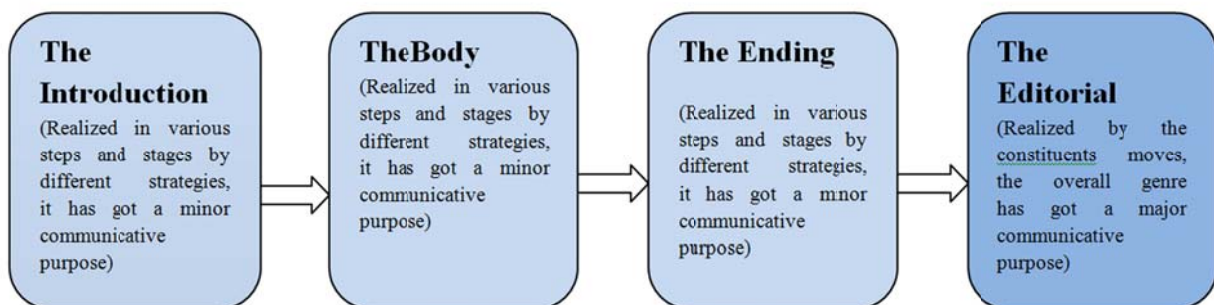
Bhatia (1993 and 2004) has outlined seven stages involved in practical genre analysis namely, placing the given genre-text in a situational context, surveying existing literature, refining situational/contextual analysis, selecting corpus, textual, inter-textual and inter-discursive perspective, ethnographic analysis, and studying institutional context. Once, the communicative purpose of the genre is identified the text is analyzed into the “moves” existing in the genre; the moves are in fact the rhetorical building blocks of the texts which carry sub-communicative purposes. These moves, put together, carry the overall communicative purpose of the whole genre. The criterion for identifying moves is mostly functional although structural considerations and discursal elements and markers could facilitate move identification, so a move could be as short as a phrase or clause or as long as a number of paragraphs (Bhatia, 2004).

### 3. Findings

Findings of the analyses confirmed the previous findings of contrastive rhetoric and genre analysis studies in that no matter who had written the genres, they had certain common generic characteristics; this was stated and demonstrated in the previous works in genre analysis and contrastive rhetoric. Both genres shared the same organizationally rhetorical structure. However, it was different from that of the editorials.

In the editorials, the writer would follow a linear structure to get from point A to B. That means for the editor to get his/her point through; s/he would start from an Introduction and then move to the body and then conclude h/s/her point in the Ending. The writer has an overall communicative purpose for writing the editorial which is realized by the three mentioned rhetorical moves which were mentioned above; however each move could be drafted and realized differently due to the socio-cultural differences of the editors from the two or more newspapers. Each rhetorical move would have its own mini-communicative purpose the sum of which would build up to the overall communicative purpose:

In news reports, however, a rather different rhetorical structure was identified. In the twenty news reports which were analyzed, the researcher did not find a linear rhetorical move structure where the writer would linearly pass from one



rhetorical move to another to build up the overall genre structure. The news reports were, in fact, based on a nucleus which was the major news event stated at the onset of the news report. This nucleus was later built on, developed and elaborated by minor news details and/or any relevant

### **Attack on U.S. consulate in Benghazi was spontaneous' – Tehran Times**

U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi was not premeditated, directly contradicting top Libyan officials who say the attack was planned in advance. "Our current best assessment, based on the information that we have at present, is that, in fact, what this began as, it was a spontaneous-- not a premeditated -- response to what had transpired in Cairo" "In Cairo, as you know, a few hours earlier, there was a violent protest that was undertaken in reaction to this very offensive video that was disseminated". Rice said, referring to protests in Egypt on September over an anti-Islam film. Protesters in Cairo breached the walls of the U.S. American Embassy, tearing apart an American flag.

"We believe that folks in Benghazi, a small number of people came to the embassy to or to the consulate, rather, to replicate the sort of challenge that was posed in Cairo"; Rice said. "And then as that unfolded, it seems to have been hijacked, let us say, by some individual clusters of extremists who came with heavier weapons... And it then evolved from there."

Ambassador Christopher Stevens, along with three other Americans, were killed in Libya following the assault on the American consulate in Benghazi, on the 11th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. Rice said the FBI is examining the attack, saying their investigation "will tell us with certainty what transpired." Rice's account directly contradicts that of Libyan President Mohamed Magariaf, who said this weekend that the attack was premeditated by individuals from outside Libya.

"It was planned, definitely, it was planned by foreigners, by people who entered the country a few months ago, and they were

planning this criminal act since their arrival" CBS News.

Rice said there were no Marines present to protect the consulate in Libya, saying the U.S. presence in Libya is "relatively new" since the revolution that overthrew former dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

"There are not Marines in every facility. That depends on the circumstances. That depends on the requirements" Rice said. "Our presence in Tripoli, as in Benghazi, is relatively new, as you will recall. We've been back post-revolution only for a matter of months"

But Rice said there was a "substantial security presence" at the consulate in Benghazi, noting that two of the four Americans killed there were providing security.

"We certainly are aware that Libya is a place where there have been increasingly some violent incidents" Rice said. "The security personnel that the State Department thought were required were in place... It obviously didn't prove sufficient to the - the nature of the attack and sufficient in that - in that moment" "But the president has been very clear. The protection of American personnel and facilities is and will remain our top priority" Rice added. "That's why we've reinforced our presence in Tripoli and elsewhere"

background information about the news and the context in which the event happened or was reported. The background information and the minor news details could in occasional places include comments, evaluations or toward the end of the news report make a concluding remark. Two examples from the selected genres taken from NYT and TT are given in the following in order to make things clearer.

As it can be seen, it is not possible to identify rhetorical moves that start and end one after each other to complete the story. Rather, there is the main news topic which is stated in the very beginning and developed throughout the genre towards the end. Interestingly, the same pattern occurs in the news report from the New York Times paper:

**Leader of Madrid Regional Government Resigns- The New York Times**

MADRID — Esperanza Aguirre, the head of Madrid’s regional government and one of Spain’s most influential and outspoken politicians, announced her resignation on Monday for personal reasons after receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer last year.

She said her surprise announcement was only partly motivated by her health problems, and that the decision was final. “There is no way back from this, this is crossing the Rubicon,” she said at a press conference, as she choked back tears.

Ms. Aguirre, who is 60, was at the forefront of Spanish politics for three decades, including as a former head of the Spanish Senate and as national education minister.

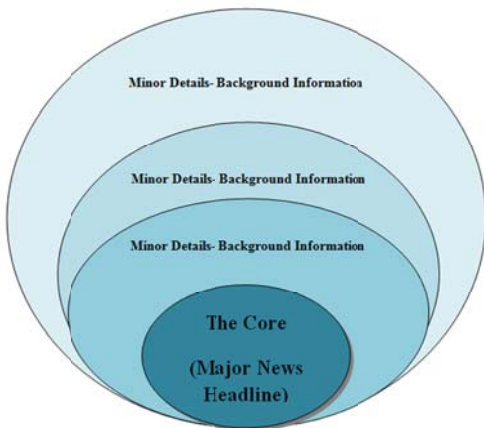
Since 2003, she ran the Madrid region, making her arguably the most powerful regional leader within the Popular Party of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy as well as a possible candidate to succeed him as the first female politician at the helm of the country. She will be succeeded as Madrid’s regional leader by her deputy, Ignacio González.

She recently opposed plans by Mr. Rajoy’s government to grant early release to a member of ETA, the violent Basque separatist group, who was jailed for murder but found to be terminally ill with cancer. Ms. Aguirre also ruffled feathers because of her demands that Sheldon Adelson, the American casino tycoon, be granted fiscal and other concessions in return for his company, Las Vegas Sands, building a giant gaming and leisure resort on the outskirts of Madrid.

In a statement, Mr. Rajoy paid tribute to Ms. Aguirre’s “huge political trajectory” and government accomplishments.

It could hence be concluded that the discourse is rooted from a major point and is then brought up by minors and relevant background information; hence in this case the genre is not seen as linear but rather cyclical. Despite the common rhetorical organization of the genre across the two papers, there are two noticeable differences. The first difference has to do with the number of direct speech reports or quotations in the reports of the two papers. While NYT reports had an average number of 3 direct reported speech quotations across the ones included in the study, TT had a considerably higher average number of 8-9 direct reported speech quotations across the samples included in the study. Although the reports in TT were lengthier and the word counts outnumbered those of the NYT reports, there could be other explanations for the difference in number of reported speech quotations. The use of abundant reported speech could be due to the fact that the writers in TT might have wanted to be more objective, reliable and sound confident in their reports. Consequently, they have borrowed a substantial part of the reports straight from the mouth of the people concerned. As far as the indirect reported speech was concerned, there was not a significant difference and both groups of genres contained a similar average number of 2-3 indirect reported speech. The reason could be you either quote something directly to be more confident and reliable or would just say it yourself. So, the writers in both papers have not considered indirect reported speech as a powerful strategy in reporting the news.

The second difference between the news reports of the two papers was that in NYT, however not very frequently, one could trace phrases for making speculations and comments [may have been.../ for personal reasons...] while in TT there was not even one case of making speculations or comments. Once again, this could be due to the fact that the reporters in TT want to be



**Figure 2.** A schematic representation of the genre of the News Reports (the cyclical model)

as objective as possible and avoid anything that would create a personal tone. As a result, they might use frequent use of reported speech, and probably those parts they would like to highlight more, to make their points as impersonal as possible.

#### 4. Conclusion

Having looked at the genre of the news reports, some findings of the previous research would be confirmed. As shown above, a genre is a construct whose structure is determined by the communicative purpose for which it is constructed and the implicit or explicit conventions of the research community where it is frequently constructed, understood and negotiated. In the case of the news reports also the same phenomenon occurs. In two rather different socio-cultural settings, a genre still follows the same organizational structure pattern. The difference, however, manifests where the individual writers, governed by their environmental situations and other circumstances, try to realize those rhetorical moves of the text to suit their purpose and convey their message in the most influential manner. This would consciously or unconsciously affect the reader and their confidence in the paper, the overall image of the newspaper and the professionalism of the journalist writing for the paper.

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