An Intercultural Rhetoric Investigation of the Discourse Topic in the English and Persian Editorials

Mahmood Reza Moradian*, Seyyed Mohammad Reza Adel², Mohammad Sadegh Tamri³
1Department of English Language and Literature, University of Lorestan, Khorramabad, Iran
2Department of English Language and Literature, Hakim Sabzevari University, Sabzevar, Iran
3Payame Noor University, Abadan, Iran
*Corresponding author

Abstract: Intercultural or contrastive rhetoric studies (Atkinson, 2004; Connor, 2004; Connor & Moreno, 2005; Kaplan, 1966, 1987, 2005; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; McCool, 2009; among many others) indicate that different cultures organize their written discourse differently. The concept of main idea as a major element of paragraph unity is thus heavily culturally motivated. As a rule of rhetoric, English students are trained to develop their paragraphs monotopically. This adds unity to the overall paragraph organization. Our thorough contrastive investigation into 102 Persian and English editorials (48 for Persian and 54 for English) gave further evidence of the existence of cross-cultural differences in written discourse. Analyses of Persian paragraphs under study showed that many of them (almost 20% of the data) contained more than one topic sentence, hence evidence of multitopicality. On the contrary, English paragraphs were unanimously organized monotopically. No doubt, the results of this research would bear direct relevancy to the first and second language writing and literacy development.

Keywords: Contrastive rhetoric, Main idea, Topicality, Monotopicality, Multitopicality.

1-Introduction
The specialists analyzing discourse assert that the spoken and written discourse manifest differences in their structures. Brown and Yule (1983), summarizing the works of a number of scholars studying spoken language (e.g. Labov, 1979; Goffman, 1981; and Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) note that "the syntax of spoken language is typically much less structured than that of written language" (p. 15). Spoken language, as they say, is composed of incomplete sentences and often sequences of phrases. So developing writing, as a more structured and organized skill, requires careful and planned instruction simply because it creates problems for language learners. Henner-Stanchina’s (1985) three semesters of teaching writing to intermediate ESL
learners at Queens College revealed two problems: grammatical problems and organizational ones. His observations showed that "learners were unable to write coherent paragraphs providing supporting details for one given topic sentence" (p. 91). His further analysis of the students’ ESL essays showed "an unawareness not only of cohesion/coherence techniques but of the very relationship between sentences" (P. 91). In general, they are, as he asserts, unaware of the rhetorical conventions which are common in English written discourse. As a result, students who are trying to improve the writing skills should be taught the common conventions of paragraph organization no matter whether they are learning their L1 or L2 or any other language. In line with the development of an organized paragraph, English students are taught to practice writing paragraphs containing a topic sentence and some supporting ideas (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1981; Baily & Powell, 1989; Messenger & Talor, 1989; Ruetten, 1997 and White, 1997). In English, the relationship between the topic sentence and the supporting sentences is said to be linear and direct (Kaplan, 1966). The English text is therefore expected to be coherent, and bears unity. Unity and coherence are characteristic of English paragraphs meaning oneness according to Baily and Powel (1989). Baily and Powel note that "for a paragraph to have unity, it must have "oneness". More specifically, each idea in the paragraph should be clearly supporting the "one main point", the topic sentence; normally there shouldn’t be any ideas that are irrelevant, that are not supporting the point of the paragraph" (p. 28). As a consequence, in the English conceptual paragraphs, one main idea is to be developed. This idea is generally called the main idea which is crystallized in the topic sentence. Messenger and Taylor (1989) also note that "[English] readers expect a paragraph to deal with one idea and develop it by illustrating, defining, analyzing, explaining, or in some other way developing or supporting it. And they expect that idea to be evident, often announced in a topic sentence early in the paragraph. If a topic sentence states a paragraph’s central idea clearly, and if that idea controls every sentence in the paragraph, readers will see and feel the paragraph’s unity "(p. 107).

In Persian, in contrast, the issue of paragraph development is easier said than done. Persian textbooks on writing preach ideas such as unity, clarity, relevance and the like, but they never provide writing activities in this regard. It seems that they just pay a lip service to the issue. The purpose of this article is to empirically test the issue of topicality in both Persian and English writing systems. We would like to see if Persian and English newspaper editorials, taken in this study as the unit of analysis, contain one or more main ideas. In other words, this article is intended to investigate if the Persian and English paragraphs are developed monotonically, bearing one main idea or multitopically having more than one main idea. This study is also an attempt to see whether Persian and English are different regarding monotonicality and multitopicality providing further evidence for the existence of cross-cultural differences in written communication.

**1-2-Review of Literature**

This study is related to intercultural or contrastive rhetoric. It is a rhetorical study in that paragraph organization of Persian and English is investigated at the textual level. It should be pointed out that many current rhetoricians define rhetoric in an expanded manner. To illustrate, Kennedy (1998) and Sullivan and Porter (1997) see rhetoric as an act of communication, not in its classical definition of style, argument, and persuasion, but as
utterances made for a purpose. Kennedy (1998) defines rhetoric as "a form of mental and emotional energy" (p. 3). Emotional reaction (e.g., fear, lust, hunger, curiosity) produces utterances. According to Kennedy, "rhetoric is a natural phenomenon: the potential for it exists in all life forms that can give signals, it is practiced in limited forms by nonhuman animals" (p. 4). Sullivan and Porter (1997), believe that rhetoric is "defined by its focus on ‘situation’ and by its concerns about how rhetorical situation guides production" (p. 25). It is a contrastive study as well simply because the discourse development of Persian and English is compared and contrasted. As noted earlier, this study was done within the field of intercultural or contrastive rhetoric founded by Robert B. Kaplan in 1966 and was promoted by Connor (2004). Kaplan believes that writers with different linguistic backgrounds and cultural traditions organize paragraphs differently. This is so because they tend to organize their thoughts and arguments differently. Kaplan’s (1966) pioneering studies analyzed the organization of paragraphs in ESL writing essays. He identified five types of paragraph development for five language groups. He concludes from his numerous analyses of essays written in different languages that Anglo-European Expository essays follow a linear development whereas paragraph development in Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic is based on a series of parallel coordinate clauses. Essays in oriental languages including Persian, Chinese, Japanese and Korean, etc., according to Kaplan, use an indirect approach and finally it comes to the point. In Romance languages and Russian, Kaplan asserts, essays are permitted a degree of digressiveness and extraneous materials that would seem excessive to a writer of English. Kaplan’s (1987) later studies on the cross-cultural rhetoric show that "there are...important differences in the way which discourse is identified in a text and in the way in which discourse topic is developed in terms of exemplification, definition, and so on" (p. 10). In a similar study, Ostler (1987) draws the conclusion that different languages have different preferences for certain kinds of discourse patterns. He notes that English expository prose has essentially linear rhetorical patterns which consists of a clearly defined topic, introduction and body which explicates all but nothing more than the stated topic, paragraphs which chain from one to the next, and a conclusion which tells the reader what has been discussed. Since Kaplan’s (1966) article, many changes have taken place in contrastive rhetoric studies, as reviewed by Kaplan (2000, 2005) and Connor (1996, 2002, and 2004). Kaplan himself has continued as a writer and powerful theorist for contrastive rhetoric to this day. In 2005, he provides an insightful discussion of the development of contrastive rhetoric, issues it has addressed, and its value to the field of second language writing. He describes the complexity of second language writing situations using a "model of concerns in contrastive rhetoric." The model depicts a generator (L2 writer) – text (L2) – receiver (L1 reader) communication situation, in which cultural preferences or tendencies can cause interference at multiple levels. Kaplan’s assertions are verified by other researchers in the field of contrastive rhetoric. Regent (1985), as an example, looks into the rhetorical macro-characteristics of medical articles in French and English. He finds that even in such scientific writing which might be expected to be relatively independent of national traditions; there are differences, indeed differences of a magnitude which cause comprehension problems. Regent states that French writers intend to communicate the scientific facts organizing the whole of the discourse around the data to be presented. As a result, the line of the argument is, according to Regent, of secondary importance, if it exists at all. In English, Regent notes, on the other hand, it is "precisely the line
of the argument which is of prime importance" (p. 119). Vahapassi (1988) does the same study on Finnish texts. He argues that Finnish writers "cram their texts as full as possible with various points, which they hardly elaborate at all. Their stand point often is not expressed until at the end of the texts" (p. 216). In line with the study done by Vahapassi, Clyne (1984) points that German scholarly writers tend to emphasize knowledge and theory at the expense of the reader, whereas English writers are more concerned with making their texts readable. She (1987) studied forty compositions written by the students from the four countries of England, Finland, Germany, and America. 10 compositions were analyzed for each language. The compositions were randomly selected from a pool of numerous compositions. Connor’s studies (1992, 2004) are also considerable and outstanding in this regard. The analysis of compositions, as Connor notes, revealed that the highly rated compositions follow an argumentative text structure including four major sections: situation, problem, solution and evaluation.

In 2004, Connor proposed a new umbrella term "intercultural rhetoric" to describe the current scope of cultural influences in writing and to connote the direction the field needs to go. He intended this umbrella term to include cross-cultural studies (comparison of the same concept in culture one and culture two) and also the interactive situations in which writers with a variety of linguistic and cultural/social backgrounds negotiate L2 writing in a great variety of situations for varied purposes. In that sense, rhetoric helps examine the accommodation readers, writers, and speakers exhibit in communication.

The studies reviewed so far discuss the writing organization of the expository text type. Researchers such as Dantas-Whitney and Grabe (1989) and Tirkkonen-Condit and Lieflander-Koistinen (1989) probe into the paragraph organization of persuasive text types such as newspaper editorials. They bring evidence of the existence of cross-cultural differences in written texts. Dantas-Whitney and Grabe (1989) compare editorial texts in Brazilian, Portuguese and English. Twenty editorials are investigated for fifteen linguistic variables. A significant difference is found on one dimension, that is, the presentation of the information, which includes the text features of use of nominalizations, prepositions, third person singular pronouns and locative adverbs. They show that English editorials use a more formal and detached style than Portuguese editorials. The English texts use more nominalizations and prepositions whereas the Portuguese texts use third person singular pronouns. Tirkkonen-Condit and Lieflander-Koistinen (1989), working on the same genre, try to locate the concise statement of the main point of the argument in a sample of newspaper editorials in Finnish, German and English. The result of their studies show that the German and English editorials invariably have a thesis statement or topic sentence often at the very beginning whereas the only editorials lacking such a thesis statement come from the Finnish sample. Moradian (2005), also, investigated 49 Persian and 49 English editorials in terms of the inductive, deductive and quasi-inductive writing styles. He showed that Persian and English are empirically different regarding the above-mentioned writing styles. Persian writers prefer deduction and quasi-induction while English writers prefer deduction and induction. English writers rarely use the quasi-induction. This style is welcomed by Persian writers making Persian different from English. Moreover, Ansary and Babaii’s study (2004) showed that there were statistically no significant differences between English newspaper editorials written by non-native editorial writers and native ones regardless of their socio-cultural context.
And finally, Bonyadi (2010) examined the schematic structures of Persian and English newspaper editorials to explore the discourse conventions employed in the editorials of The New York Times and Tehran Times. As he noted, 'the analysis of the selected editorials in the two papers indicated that the editorial writers not only tended to support their argument by factual information, usually presented through the first and second schematic structures – The Introduction and The Body – but also aimed at providing suitable rhetorical strategies to serve the factual information through the last schematic structure of the editorials, The Ending (p.340).

In this study, English editorials are compared and contrasted with English editorials in terms of the concept of topicality. Topicality includes the two subcategories of monotopicality and multitopicality. An editorial is monotopical if it deals with one main idea. And if such an editorial develops more than one main idea, it is multitopical.

2- Methods
The design of the study is descriptive because it intends to analyze the paragraph organization of English and Persian newspaper editorials. A random sample of 120 editorials taken from Persian and English newspapers with a wide circulation was meticulously read by three specialist raters who were Ph.D. majoring in TEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language). The raters were requested to enumerate the number of main ideas in each editorial. The final number of editorials delivered was 48 for Persian and 54 for English.

3- Results
The preliminary analysis of the data, as shown in Table 1, revealed that the 48 editorials in Persian contained 66 main ideas whereas the 54 English editorials contained 54 main ideas. This means that some editorials in the Persian data contained more than one main idea while each English editorial contained one and only one main idea.

Table 1: Summary of the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topicality</th>
<th>Editorial</th>
<th>Main</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the next stage of the analysis of the data, a one-way chi-square was run to see if Persian and English newspaper editorials are different or similar in terms of the writing styles of monotopicality and multitopicality. The expected frequencies are shown in Table 2 and the observed frequencies in Table 3. The calculation of the chi-square (x2) is, also, shown in Table 4.

Table 2: The Expected Frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Monotopicality</th>
<th>Multitopicality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persian</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Table 4 shows, the observed value of $x^2$ is 72.74. Because this value exceeds the critical value of $x^2$ (6.63) at the 0.01 level with the df of one, it gives evidence of the fact that Persian and English are different regarding monotopicality and multitopicality. As the results show, English writing is only monotopical while Persian writing is both monotopical and multitopical. In this study, the 54 English editorials were all monotopical while out of the 48 Persian editorials 39 were monotopical and the nine others were multitopical. As noted earlier, English writers tend to develop one main idea in each paragraph. In fact, they follow the way they have been trained. This is not the case for Persian writers. They feel more freedom in this regard. Sometimes, they develop paragraphs bearing just one main idea. Yet, at some other times, they develop paragraphs having more than one main idea.

4- Discussion and Concluding Remarks
The results of this study showed that Persian and English are different in their use of monotopicality and multitopicality. These findings lend support to the existence of cross-cultural differences between Persian and English. So this study supports the claims made by previous research (Clyne, 1984; Dantas-Whitney & Grabe, 1989; Kaplan, 1966; Tirkonen-Condit & Lieflander-Koistinen, 1989; Moradian, 2005; Regent, 1985; Vahapassi, 1988) that writing is a
cultural phenomenon. This is indicative of the fact that different cultures have different rhetorical preferences.

The key question raised is thus why is English monotopical and Persian both monotopical and multitopical? English writers, as Kaplan and his followers emphasize, follow the Anglo-European thought pattern which is direct, linear and to the topic away from any unnecessary digression. In addition, the English educational materials designed to teach writing unanimously preach the monotopical writing style which claims that one and only one main idea should be developed in a paragraph. They contain writing activities which help the English learners enhance writing appropriately. Some of these writing activities include pre-writing activities such as planning an outline which is a blueprint of the idea which is to be developed in a paragraph. Then, the writer makes a topic sentence or a thesis statement which bears the main idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence is supported by some sentences which are called supporting ideas. There is a close relationship between the main idea and the supporting ideas in the text so that they together make a cohesive and coherent paragraph having unity and clarity. All these characteristics neatly woven together in an English paragraph are in line with the development of a paragraph organization which is monotopical. This issue is also extended to ESL/EFL contexts. ESL/EFL students are trained to follow the same route. They are exposed to writing skills which lead to the development of a monotopical paragraph.

In contrast with the English writing system, the Persian writing system is, as was shown, both monotopical and multitopical. This shows that the problem of Persian writing is somehow different. Persian writing follows no clear and identifiable thought patterns. The raters identified Persian paragraphs with 1, 2, 3 and even 5 main ideas. This non-systematicity of Persian prose makes us pay more attention to it. Some part of the non-systematicity of Persian writing may originate from the dominant influence of the oral form on the written discourse. As noted earlier, spoken and written discourse are different in grammar and organization. In Persian, the border line between the spoken and written discourse is not clear-cut. It seems that the oral style is more widespread and dominant in Persian. Meskoob (1995) notes, in this regard, that Persian discourse analysts have ever been more dexterous and masterful at the oral style than the written because they utilize it more in their profession (p. 178). So in Persian, although the form of the paragraph is written, its internal rhetorical structure is oral. On the other hand, one of the main characteristics of the oral style in Persian is topic shift. The speaker or the orator, from time to time, shifts from one topic to another trying his best to make the issue as attractive and persuasive as possible. As a result, multitopical paragraphs which are, to a large extent, the legacy of the oral style are common in Persian.

As an example, given from the Persian data, two main ideas are introduced in editorial number twenty two (see Appendix 1). Even though the two main ideas are related to each other, they could have been written in one main idea at the beginning or at the end of the paragraph. This editorial was published in The Resalat Newspaper. The topic of this editorial is about the Eighth Conference of Islamic Countries held in Tehran in 1997. The first main idea of the editorial is about honor, dialogue and participation. The next coming sentences support this main idea in a loose way. In the middle of the editorial, another main idea is introduced which deals with economic, political and cultural issues on the conference agenda. Topic shift is also evident in
paragraph number sixteen. The paragraph starts with a scientific genre on agriculture. It turns into a political genre at the end of the paragraph making a multitopical paragraph, as a result.

It should also be born in mind that Persian prose of nearly all text types is heavily influenced by literature especially poetry. As an example, in a Persian lyrical poem (Ghazal), different themes or topics are raised. This is typical in Ghazals composed by Hafiz. He, as an example, embellishes his poetry with various points such as love, truth, reason, abstention, hypocrisy, etc. We can find many of these themes in a single Ghazal. This idea has created a hot debate among many Persian literary scholars. For example, Khoramshahi (2001) notes in this regard that "the style of Hafiz is not linear. This means that it does not follow a single line of meaning which is away from digression. It is not like a train which only keeps track of the rails" (p. 58). Later in the same book, he notes that Persian prose is under the heavy influence of Persian poetry and because of this, Persian prose has not yet found its own way of expression (p.172).

Dashti (2001), another Persian scholar, arrives at the same conclusion about Saadi’s Goleta. In his view, the book "does not have a central and basic thought" (p. 231). The issue is discussed in greater detail by other Iranian scholars like Zarrinkoob (1996, 2003), Ashoori (1996) and Meskoob (1994). From the readings of Zarrinkoob (1996, 2003), two main points can be derived for the sake of our argument here. The first point is that Persian poetry is originally influenced by Arabic mentality. The early Persian poets composed their poems in the Arabic language because of the spread of Islam and, afterwards, the fall of the Persian Kingdom. One of the main characteristic features of the Arabic style in the composition of verse was, according to Zarrinkoob, the variations and diversions Arabic poets utilized in their verbal communication due to their nomadic style of living. The Persian poets tried their best to compose pieces of poetry dealing with diverse points and various themes following the Arabic traditions. As an example, Hafiz, the great Iranian poet in 800 A. D., took many of the themes of his poetry from Arabic poets and the Quran (The holy book of Muslim). Ashoori (1996), also, looks at the Arabic influence but from a negative perspective. He believes that the Arabic linguistic system has plagued the Persian language like a viral disease. According to Ashoori (1996), the Persian morphology and syntax as the main components of the language are greatly influenced by Arabic. He notes that many Persian verbal expressions and nouns are derived from Arabic bases or they have Arabic words in them. In line with the same argument, Meskoob (1994) notes that Persian scholarly writers "are more familiar with the Arabic writing system than that of Persian. For this reason, their writing is Arabic-oriented" (p. 176).

The second point is that Persian prose is heavily under the influence of poetry. In other words, Persian prose writers follow the conventions of the poetic style. As noted earlier, the Persian poetic style which has been under the influence of Arabic enjoys variations and diversions. So, Persian prose writers would like their texts to deal with as many ideas as possible. This story goes on until the present time. Multitopicity is characteristic of modern Persian prose. As the results of this research showed, some Persian editorials contained more than one main idea.

The idea of Persian multitopicity is also related to literacy. In the Iranian context, literacy is limited to phonology, morphology and sentence structure. Writing and reading at the rhetorical level are quite neglected even though reading is more attended to. Learners are taught to read and get meaning out of a reading passage, but they are not told how it has been constructed and what processes it has gone through. A cursory glance at the Persian textbooks reveals the
bitter fact that they lack activities and exercises which will ultimately lead to the development of reading and writing skills at the rhetorical level. The same view is applied to EFL books in Iran. Writing is the skill which receives the minimum attention. We should bear in mind that the view is taken in the ESL/EFL contexts all over the world. Of the two productive skills, primary attention is paid to speaking. Writing has often been considered of the secondary importance in language learning (Reichelt, 2001). The point is that the Persian literacy context needs more attention compared to those of otherworld languages. In the Iranian context, sentence grammar is highly valued at the expense of the text organization. So, this area demands serious consideration on the part of Persian theoreticians, researchers and syllabus designers.

The results of this study are also related to interlanguage studies. Numerous researches (Corder, 1981; Farch & Kasper, 1983; James, 1981) show that L1 writing strategies are transferred to L2 writing. As noted earlier, the writing of individuals reflect the rhetorical patterns in their native culture. When individuals write in a language other than their native language, they tend to use their native patterns in the target language. Kaplan (1966) notes that the coordination and parallel construction is of Arabic writing characteristic. He brings evidence of the existence of these two patterns in Arabic students’ ESL writing. Ostler (1987) also shows that while Arabic speaking students seem to have mastered most of the English grammatical forms and idioms, they still produce "foreign-sounding" essays. The results of the present study showed that Persian and English cultures orient their discourse differently. Therefore, the existence of these differences should be emphasized in the English language teaching context to minimize their interfering effects on Persian ESL/EFL students.

References:


72