

Written Communication across Cultures

Pragmatics & Beyond New Series

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Written Communication across Cultures: A sociocognitive perspective on
business genres

by Yunxia Zhu

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A sociocognitive perspective
on business genres

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Notation conventions

GNE	Genetive's
H	Honourific
Class	Classification
Mod	Modest form for self
ASP	Aspect marker

Preface

This book reflects an extension of cross-cultural genre research as suggested by its title: *Written Communication Across Cultures*. In the past ten years, several insightful works have influenced my model development in this area. As an initial influence, I was inspired by Kaplan's approach for comparing English and Chinese rhetorical patterns. Dialogues and discussions in contrastive rhetoric provoked my mind to a series of research questions, which has gradually led to my inquiry into cross-cultural genre study. Later-stage influences include the psychology of language, genre analysis and intercultural and management communication, to name just a few. This book depicts my research exploration in incorporating genre study with cross-cultural dimensions and Chinese theories and the study has also made a valuable contribution based on my descriptive work.

Since the mid-1990s, several notable research experiences have further shaped my view about cross-cultural genre research and teaching. Working with Professor Herbert Hildebrandt was an immensely rewarding experience, and during this time I developed a keen interest in exploring and incorporating persuasion and rhetoric in cross-cultural genre study. I have benefited from collaborating with Dr. Catherine Nickerson and Dr. Francesca Bargiela in exploring various approaches for cross-cultural genre study. I have also benefited from my continued involvement throughout the past six years with the Intercultural Committee and colleagues in the Association of Business Communication in the United States and Europe, where I was encouraged to explore intercultural as well as culture-specific perspectives. Another influence worth noting is from Professor John Swales, Professor Vijay Bhatia, Professor Ken Hyland, Professor Jan Ulijn and Associate Professor Chen Ping, who have given me advice regarding genre study in general or Chinese genre specifics.

At a practical level, this book has benefited enormously from managers' contributions in three countries of Australia, New Zealand and China where data were collected and analysed in the light of the above-mentioned theoretical dimensions.

I would like to acknowledge and thank all those who have been involved in various stages of my research and the writing of this book. First of all, I am greatly indebted to Professor Herbert Hildebrandt, Associate Professor Tony Liddicoat, Reader Tony Diller, Professor Andy Kirkpatrick and Dr. Beverley Hong-Fincher who have contributed to my idea development at various stages of my research. Thanks are also given to Arjan van der Boon, Simon Hart and Alan Mateucci for helping collect data or organise questionnaire and interviews in New Zealand and thank Wang Jiakun, Sun Daogang, Zhang Qun, Zhu Yungang and Zhu Yungiang for a similar contribution in China. I would also like to acknowledge my thanks to my former institution, Henan University of Finance and Economics, for their support in providing business connections for conducting interviews.

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, which offered me further insight and guidance throughout the one-year revision of this book. Special thanks go to my friend Dr. Mandy Scott who has edited this book thoroughly and meticulously, and also go to Sun Zhu for the insertion of the Chinese characters and other types of research assistance for this book.

A special thankful note is given to Pingxin Zhang, my husband, who has always been there giving me full support including offering his contribution to earlier idea development of this book. I would like to thank my daughter, Mengzi Zhang, for her countless hours over the weekends accompanying me in my office while I was working through my book manuscript and also for being the first reader and critic of many of the chapters.

Finally, I would like to thank Sage and John Benjamins for permission to incorporate the major content of these two articles, which serve as the basis of analysis for Chapters 5 & 6 of this book.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and outline

Understanding differences in cross-cultural genre writing is becoming increasingly important for effective business communication as more and more countries are doing business internationally. This study aims to conceptualise cross-cultural genre study and analyse and compare English¹ and Chinese business genres. Specifically, it compares specific business genres such as sales letters, sales invitations and faxes collected from organisations in Australia, New Zealand (NZ) and People's Republic of China. The three genres are frequently used in business writing in all of these three countries. Practical imperatives also arise from business practices for conducting cross-cultural genre study. To set the scene for the discussion, the following quotes from a NZ and Chinese sales invitation may well illustrate the imperatives, which also offer a glimpse of the cultural differences in genre writing. The English invitation begins with:

*Dear Mr. Jones,
Here's your personal invitation to join 6000 fellow retailers, and 280 leading industry suppliers enjoying the Christmas Stocking Fair experience.*

The Chinese invitation starts with these lines:

*Dear Respected Mr. Lin,
How are you?
1998 arrived with hopes, opportunities and challenges. However, where are the opportunities and challenges? Please come and attend our 2000 Foreign Trade Expo. This event will be held December 1–3 in Beijing.*

These two invitations employ different persuasive strategies to invite the reader. The English letter reads rather informally by identifying itself as a personal invitation while the Chinese is much more formal by addressing the reader as *Respected Mr. Lin*. In addition, the Chinese invitation also introduces some background information relating to the general challenges of the year 2000 before the actual event is mentioned and the reader invited, thus indicating a seemingly indirect tendency. To further confirm my view regarding different writing conventions across cultures I showed the letters to two managers: one

NZ and one Chinese manager. The NZ manager was asked to comment on the English invitation and the Chinese manager on the Chinese. It turned out that they both agreed that the beginning was acceptable and common in their own culture respectively.

What was more interesting, however, was that the two invitations solicited different views when they swapped the invitations. The Chinese manager thought the English invitation was too informal and an invitation for a business Expo should be more formal; the NZ manager, on the other hand, commented that the Chinese invitation included too much information irrelevant to a foreign trade Expo.

What has happened here? At least, two sets of issue are apparently at play: (1) a certain set of writing conventions has been followed by members of a certain culture or discourse community; (2) what is considered acceptable and common by members of one culture may not be shared by those of another. These issues pose interesting challenges for writing business genres across cultures and therefore it is essential for us to have an in-depth understanding of not only our own genre conventions, but also those of other cultures. However, it may not be feasible for us to learn the specifics of writing about all cultures since there are so many cultures and professional communities in practice in this world. Therefore, developing a sound theoretical and knowledge-based framework can be an initial step towards this kind of understanding, which will help us explore the possible knowledge construct relevant to the writing practice of different cultures, hence the need to introduce the theoretical imperatives.

The theoretical imperatives

Although extensive theoretical modelling can be found in genre analysis (such as Swales 1990; Bhatia 1993), very little has been done in cross-cultural genre study in a similar thrust. In other words, the in-depth analysis of genre and cross-cultural comparisons remain two separate research areas. The imperatives, as well as challenges, to conceptualise cross-cultural genre study only increases since recently more and more researchers began to pay their attention to comparing genres, and in particular comparing genres in business communication (such as Akar 1998; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997; Louhiala-Salminen 1997; Orlikowski & Yates 1994; Mauranen 1993; Ulijn & Li 1995; Yli-Jokipii 1994). We therefore need to further develop the relativistic orienta-

tion for cross-cultural genre study such as shown in contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Connor 2002; Canagarajah 2002) and intercultural communication.

An earlier influence in the relativistic vein derives from Kaplan's (1966) model based on a comparison of directness and indirectness. According to Kaplan, rhetorical structures vary across cultures, and some Asian languages are characterized by the use of the circular style as opposed to the linear style in English writing. Kaplan made an insightful observation regarding cultural differences, and his pioneering work initiated further research to compare English and Chinese discourse. As a result, a number studies (Young 1994; Kirkpatrick 1993) have been conducted evolving around linearity and circularity. Their discussion has also initiated further studies to include other areas of contrast such as comparing genres which is to be detailed in Chapter 2.

This study was one of those inspired by contrastive rhetoric and it shares the starting point of comparing differences in rhetorical structures and stylistic features. However, it is not a mere continuation of the study on linearity and circularity of discourse patterns. In order to offer an in-depth interpretation of genre differences and to promote genre comparison from a multiple perspective, I will incorporate research findings from genre analysis, in particular, the sociocognitive genre study into this cross-cultural research project.

By sociocognitive study I mainly allude to genre research that focuses on genre knowledge and institutional understanding of the discourse community. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) initiated this kind of research in genre study. In brief, sociocognitive genre study can be seen this way. First, the origins of the sociocognitive approach can be traced back to the early stage of genre study in Schutz and Luckmann (1984) and Bakhtin (1986). Bakhtin's "deep semantics" indicates that genres are not just the "sites of actions", but also sites of ideological action which are intermingled with "concrete value judgements" (Schryer 1994) and express the shared "stock of knowledge" (Schutz & Luckmann 1984) and the shared values of the group (Paltridge 1997). These genre semantics can interact with intertextuality (Bakhtin 1986) and other genre dynamics which are useful for studying both genre conventions and genre change. Bakhtin's view regarding the shared relevant knowledge of genre has been inherited by later genre researchers such as explicated in Swales' (1990) discourse community and communicative purposes. Recent years have seen an increased interest in professional genre study. For example, Swales (1990) explicates the genre knowledge shared by the discourse community. Bhatia (1993) explores English promotion genres and Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) adopt a systematic approach to explore English scientific genres. A recent development is found in Trosborg (2000) representing a clear deviation from the traditional

rhetorical approach to a focus on uncovering the rich dynamic aspects of genre knowledge.

Other relevant literature regarding cross-cultural comparison can be found in cross-cultural pragmatics (Wierzbicka 1991) and intercultural communication (Gudykunst & Kim 2000; Hall 1976; Hofstede 1991). Contrastive rhetoric focuses on the study of rhetorical structures. Intercultural communication tends to use categories to compare traits across cultures, while cross-cultural pragmatics looks at speech acts as a major area of comparison. Each of these areas will add strength to comparing genres across cultures although they may not be directly concerned with comparing writing conventions.

To reiterate, we need to develop a more synthesised theoretical framework which will ultimately contribute to the new area of cross-cultural genre study.

The rationale, aim, and research questions

This study aims to promote genre comparison in the light of sociocognitive and cross-cultural dimensions which will be used to compare a range of business genres in English and Chinese. As noted earlier, these genres include sales letters, sales invitations, and business faxes. The data is largely drawn from business and professional genres collected and updated in the past few years across three countries, including Australia, New Zealand and the People's Republic of China. A specific description of data is given in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, which also include a detailed comparison of genres.

The rationale of the book is characterised by the use of the sociocognitive approach based on exploring “stock of knowledge” of the discourse community. In particular, the study focuses on exploring the depth of cross-cultural genre study by considering communicative purposes (Swales 1990), cognitive structuring (Bhatia 1993), and the deep semantics of genre (Bakhtin 1986), while broadening genre study by integrating insights from cross-cultural communication as well as the Chinese perspectives.

Specifically the study seeks to:

1. Explore and propose a sociocognitive theoretical framework for examining genre across cultures; enrich the proposed model by providing multiple theoretical dimensions and establish linkages to other research areas such as intertextuality, cross-cultural studies and Chinese theories.

2. Set the criteria for genre comparison from a multi-dimensional perspective, embracing sociocultural, economic and interpersonal contextual factors.
3. Compare the specific components of “stock of knowledge” employed by relevant discourse communities; compare various types of writing conventions in relation to the social and business practices of different cultures.
4. Incorporate and compare professional members’ viewpoints, thus confirming the shared social “stock of knowledge” employed in the culturally-defined writing conventions.
5. Explore the implications of this research for cross-cultural genre education and training, and develop an appropriate model for cross-cultural genre learning and teaching based on the findings of this study.

These aims can be achieved by exploring the existing literature in a range of relevant research areas besides a comprehensive study of empirical data, which is to be detailed later in this book. Based on a rationale of both genre writing and cross-cultural communication, specifically, these research questions are proposed:

1. How can we best approach the comparison of business genres across cultures?
2. What kind of persuasive orientations can be embedded in the English and Chinese cultural and rhetorical traditions? In what way will they possibly influence the writing conventions of English and Chinese business genres?
3. What are the major persuasive strategies employed by English and Chinese business letters? In what ways are they similar or different? What contributes to these similarities and differences?
4. What are the implications of this research for learning and teaching business language and intercultural communication? Above all, how can business organisations enhance their intercultural competency and employ appropriate communication strategies when writing cross-culturally?

The book sets out to answering these questions by means of exploring socio-cultural contexts, proposing a sociocognitive model for analysis and analysing specific English and Chinese genres used in business settings, which are to be further detailed in the following outline.

The outline of the book

The book is composed of the following nine chapters:

Chapter 1 offers a brief introduction to the rationale, aim and the organisation of the book. This chapter embarks on the concept that genre is related to the relevant “stock of knowledge” shared and programmed by the relevant discourse community within a certain sociocultural context. It also introduces and highlights the imperatives for developing a theoretical framework for genre comparison.

Chapter 2 gives an overview of cross-cultural studies in contrastive rhetoric and intercultural communication, and evaluates the impact of these research findings on cross-cultural studies. These research findings also represent the major cross-cultural dimensions and contexts to be incorporated into the study.

Chapter 3 examines the relevant literature relating to genre study from both English and Chinese sources. These two sets of literature are introduced with the purpose of providing a dual perspective for genre comparison. The chapter then proposes the model of genre comparison based on knowledge structure building developed from the sociocognitive genre study and the Chinese scholars’ views. In all, it details the major theoretical framework for cross-cultural genre analysis and stresses the interaction of genre and intertextuality, thus highlighting the contribution of this work to promoting cross-cultural genre study from a sociocognitive and intercultural perspective.

Chapter 4 offers a detailed introduction to the data collection procedures and interviews with both NZ and Chinese managers. Additional intercultural interview results such as NZ managers’ on the Chinese letters and vice versa have also been solicited and compared in the discussion.

Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 apply the proposed model but are characterised by distinct features of their own: Chapter 5 compares the rhetorical structures and promotional strategies used in English and Chinese sales genres, while Chapter 6 compares the effective persuasive strategies of the English and Chinese invitation letters with an emphasis on invitation as part of the social and politeness behaviour.

Chapter 7 uses the proposed approach to compare business faxes—a relatively new genre of business writing. This chapter also indicates the possibility of extending the use of the approach to high-tech related business genres, and this extension can go far beyond business genres and involves the influence of technology on genre writing in general. More importantly, it also discusses