The rhetorical structure of academic journal book reviews: A cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary approach

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Abstract

The academic journal book review (henceforth BR) introduces new books to a particular discipline and assesses their value in relation to the development of the field. Following the genre analysis tradition started by Swales (1990), several studies on BR rhetorical structure seem to support its generic status. However, it is still unclear to what extent factors like the language in which texts are written and the academic discipline to which authors belong may affect the rhetorical organisation of the BR. To explore these influences, the present paper analyses 120 BRs, 60 in English and 60 in Spanish, 60 of History and 60 of Law. The study draws on Suárez and Moreno’s (accepted) scheme of rhetorical functions (i.e. moves, subfunctions and options) in this genre and shows that, despite sharing similar patterns of organisation, English and Spanish book reviews respond to some language-bound and academic discipline-bound preferences. For example, English reviewers tend to develop the descriptive move 2 and the evaluative move 3 more independently, while the Spanish reviewers tend to fuse these two moves to a much greater extent. On the other hand, the Spanish law reviewers seem much more reluctant to highlight weaknesses at the end of their reviews than the Spanish history reviewers.

Key words: academic book review, genre analysis, rhetorical structure

Introduction

As many scholars seem to agree, the function of the academic journal book review (BR henceforth) is to introduce new books to a particular discipline and assess their value in relation to the development of the field (Gea Valor & del Saz Rubio, 2000-01; Suárez & Moreno, accepted). However, the BR has remained neglected until very recently (cf. North, 1992; Hyland, 2000) and few attempts have been made to identify the features defining it as a genre of its own.

One method that has proved to be useful in the definition and shaping of genres is move analysis (cf. Swales, 1990). Comparing studies on BR rhetorical structure such as Motta-Roth’s (1998), De Carvalho’s (2001), Nicolaisen’s (2002), Gea Valor’s (2004), and Suárez and Moreno’s (accepted) analysis of English and Spanish literary BRs does not yield important cross-linguistic and cross-disciplinary differences in the basic rhetorical organisation of BRs. Therefore, there seems to be empirical evidence that supports the consideration of the BR as a genre in its own right. On the other hand, some slight variations across academic disciplines and languages have been identified that should also be taken into account if we want to provide a more accurate picture of the rhetorical organisation of the BR. For example, De Carvalho (2001) in her study of Literary Theory BRs reduced the four moves identified by Motta-Roth (1998) in her study of a corpus of Linguistics, Chemistry and Economics to three moves.

Along the lines followed by the reported previous studies, the present paper tries to shed more light on the rhetorical structure of BRs by analysing two further academic disciplines that have not been explored so far: History and Law. This will involve the
analysis of 120 BRs, 60 of History and 60 of Law. In addition, the present study seeks to follow the tradition started by Suárez and Moreno (accepted) by carrying out a cross-linguistic study of the rhetorical structure of English and Spanish BRs on the basis of a much larger corpus that may allow us to corroborate the tendencies suggested by their study.

Data

The study is based on a corpus of 120 academic journal BRs: 60 in English and 60 in Spanish. Each subcorpus consisted of 30 BRs of History and 30 BRs of Law. Only texts published between 2000 and 2004 were included for the sake of recency. The texts were drawn from 20 journals. Half of the journals were in English and half in Spanish. Half were from History, and half were from Law. Six BRs were drawn from each journal. They were selected according to conventional sampling procedures.

Methodology. Move analysis

The BRs in the corpus were submitted to Move Analysis following Suárez and Moreno’s (accepted) rhetorical move scheme, which is, in turn, based on Motta-Roth’s (1998). After applying the above model of analysis to the corpus of the present study, the resulting scheme was the one presented in figure 1 below. The underlined sub-functions and options are new with respect to Suárez and Moreno’s (accepted) model:

FIGURE 1. Rhetorical move scheme derived from the analysis of history and law BRs

Move 1. INTRODUCING THE BOOK
Subfunction 1.1. Defining the general topic of the book and/or
Subfunction 1.1.1. Developing an aspect of the general topic and/or
Subfunction 1.2. Informing about potential readership and/or
Subfunction 1.3. Informing about the author and/or
Subfunction 1.4. Making topic generalisations and/or
Subfunction 1.5. Inserting book in the field and/or
Subfunction 1.6. Informing about the writing technique/methodology used by the writer and/or
Subfunction 1.7. Informing about the use of sources and/or
Fuzzy category 1.1. and (1.2. or 1.3 or 1.4 or 1.5) and/or

Move 2. OUTLINING THE BOOK
Subfunction 2.1. Providing an overview of the organisation of the book and/or
Subfunction 2.2. Stating the topic of each specific chapter/Stating the topic of parts of the book with no reference to specific chapters and/or
Subfunction 2.3. Citing extra-text material

Move 3. HIGHLIGHTING PARTS OF THE BOOK
Subfunction 3.1. Providing focused evaluation
Fusion of moves 2. & 3. Fusion of subfuncts. (2.1.or 2.2 or 2.3) and 3.1.

Move 4. PROVIDING CLOSING EVALUATION OF THE BOOK
Option 4.1. Definitely recommending the book or
Option 4.2. Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings or
Option 4.3. Not recommending the book despite indicated strengths or
Option 4.4. Providing neutral summary-conclusion of the book or
Option 4.5. Definitely not recommending the book

POSTSCRIPT
According to the present scheme, the subfunctions in Moves 1 (Introducing the book) and 2 (Outlining the book) are optional but not mutually exclusive, that is, a move can be realised by one or more subfunctions. In move 4, by contrast, options are mutually exclusive.

In Move 1 (Introducing the book) BR writers normally give a short account of the content of the book by means of sub-function 1.1. (Defining the general topic of the book). This is sometimes developed further by other fragments containing more detailed information about the general content of the book. These fragments are said to perform sub-function 1.1.1. (Developing an aspect of the general topic). Sub-function 1.2. (Informing about potential readership) states or ventures the audience to which the book is addressed. Sub-function 1.3. (Informing about the author) offers some information about the author’s academic background, previous works, interests, and so on. Sub-function 1.4. (Making topic generalisations) is used by reviewers to provide information related to the book, making use of their own background knowledge. Sub-function 1.5. (Inserting book in the field) serves to insert the book in the field by talking about previous books on the same topic or by pointing out a gap in previous, related books that the book being reviewed attempts to cover. Sub-function 1.6. (Informing about the writing technique/methodology used by the writer) tells the reader about the writing technique or method employed by the author. Sub-function 1.7. (Informing about the use of sources) describes the sources used by the author of the book.

As in Suárez and Moreno’s (accepted) study, the function of some of the fragments within Move 1 (Introducing the book) is fuzzy. That is, certain fragments can be said to develop two rhetorical functions at the same time in such a way that it is not possible to dissociate the two functions and assign those fragments to only one of the subfunctions.

Move 2 (Outlining the book), outlines the book under review. Despite containing some evaluative remarks, it is considered as an independent move for two reasons: a) because the degree of evaluation is minimal and b) because its rhetorical purpose is clearly to outline the book and not to evaluate it. Move 2 can be realised through one or more of the following sub-functions. Sub-function 2.1. (Providing an overview of the organisation of the book) describes the overall organisation of the book by stating the number of chapters. Sub-function 2.2. has two variants: Stating the topic of each chapter or Describing the content of the book with no reference to chapters. That is, the content of the book’s chapters is described either by stating the topic of each chapter making explicit reference to the various chapters, or by describing the content with no reference to the specific chapters. Sub-function 2.3. (Citing extra-text material) reports on the extra-text material appearing in the book being reviewed, such as bibliographies, appendices, tables, illustrations, and the like.

Move 3 (Highlighting parts of the book) is always realised through sub-function 3.1. (Providing focused evaluation). In this move reviewers usually point out positive and negative remarks on specific aspects of the book in order to give the reader a clear idea of their opinion on the book. Move 3 (Highlighting parts of the book) is sometimes joined with move 2 (Outlining the book) when the book reviewer clearly aims at describing the chapters of the book and providing focused evaluation on them at the same time.

Move 4 (Providing closing evaluation of the book) has a two-fold function: closing the
BR and giving a definite opinion on the overall value of the book. The evaluation of this last part of the review differs from the evaluation of move 3 in that it is more general. It is usually a summary of what has previously been said and aims at justifying the final verdict on the book. Within this move, there are five possible options. Option 4.1. (Definitely recommending the book) consists in a blunt recommendation of the book, sometimes even after having expressed negative evaluation in previous parts of the review. Option 4.2. (Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings) consists in giving a favourable verdict on the book being reviewed, but highlighting some negative points at the same time. Option 4.3. (Not recommending the book despite indicated strengths) is the opposite rhetorical function of option 4.2. (Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings). Option 4.4. (Providing neutral summary-conclusion of the book) consists in closing the review through a mere summary or conclusion of the book with no evaluation at all. Option 4.5. (Not recommending the book definitely) implies a total rejection of the book reviewed.

Occasionally, the BRs in the present corpora end with the move called Postscript, which is a final comment or reflection related to the book under review. The postscript can be distinguished from option 4.4. (Providing neutral summary-conclusion of the book) of the closing move because it always appears at the end of reviews after one of the other options in Move 4.

Results

The application of Move Analysis to the BRs in the corpus has led to the results displayed in Table 2 below. The figures indicate the absolute and relative frequencies related to the identification or not of the moves, sub-functions and options in question per academic discipline and language, irrespective of the number of occasions on which the different rhetorical functions occur. Table 2 also shows the results of the statistical comparison of the frequencies of occurrence of the various moves, subfunctions and options. The application of the chi-square test to the results has been three-fold: a) to compare these frequencies between the subcorpora of BRs of History and Law within each language (i.e. across disciplines, intralinguistically); b) to compare these frequencies between the BRs of History and Law (i.e. across disciplines) irrespective of the language; and c), to compare these frequencies between the English and Spanish corpora of BRs (i.e. across languages) irrespective of the academic discipline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move 1</th>
<th>ENGLISH BRs (60)</th>
<th>SPANISH BRs (60)</th>
<th>TOTAL (DISCIPLINE)</th>
<th>TOTAL (LANGUAGE)</th>
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<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>3</td>
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Conclusions

The results in Table 2 show that there are common, recognisable features across the two academic disciplines and across the two languages under study that make it possible to talk about the BR as a distinct genre. However, in general the results reveal more similarities across the two disciplines than across the two languages. In addition, disciplinary variation may also be observed intralinguistically.

Concerning the differences across the English and Spanish languages irrespective of the academic discipline, the present study has shown that the English reviewers tend to develop moves 2 and 3 more independently, while the Spanish reviewers tend to fuse moves 2 (Outlining the book) and 3 (Highlighting parts of the book) to a much greater extent. Finally, while the Spanish writers show a higher tendency to close their reviews through option 4.1. (Definitely recommending the book), the English writers are more likely to close their reviews through options 4.2. (Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings).

Concerning disciplinary variation irrespective of the language in which texts are written, historians seem to be more likely to develop the topic of the book with further details than lawyers through subfunction 1.1.1. (Developing an aspect of the general topic). On the other hand, lawyers seem more likely to make topic generalisations (subfunction 1.4.) than historians.

There are also interesting differences due to cross-disciplinary variation within the same language. For example, subfunction 2.1. (Providing an overview of the organisation of the book) is much more frequent in the Spanish subcorpus of Law than in the Spanish subcorpus of History. Especially revealing is the disciplinary variation in relation to options 4.1. (Definitely recommending the book) and 4.2. (Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings) in the Spanish corpus. While the Spanish subcorpus of Law presents a higher frequency of option 4.1. (Definitely recommending the book) than the Spanish subcorpus of History, it presents a much lower frequency of option 4.2. (Recommending the book despite indicated shortcomings). It seems that Spanish
lawyers are much more reluctant to highlight negative aspects of the book at the end of their reviews than Spanish historians.

All in all, the present study has shown that the BR is a genre with distinct features. However, both cross-linguistic variation and cross-disciplinary variation need to be carefully observed. Therefore, future cross-linguistic studies on BRs should take the disciplinary factor into account in the selection of their corpora for valid comparisons to be performed at this level of text analysis. The study has important implications in both the L1 and L2 writing classrooms. The findings are also helpful to prospective English and Spanish BR writers, especially from the fields of History and law.

References


