IS EVALUATION STRUCTURE-BOUND? AN ENGLISH-SPANISH CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF BOOK REVIEWS

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Thompson & Hunston (2000) give very convincing reasons why evaluation is “a topic worthy of study”. However, expressing one’s opinion towards someone or something is not an easy matter. Belcher (1995) proposes book reviews as a useful guide for students to approach the hard task of being critical with respect to previous texts. Motta-Roth (1995) and Hyland (2000) also view the book review genre as an evaluation-loaded genre by nature, especially, in comparison with all the other genres existing in the academy.

The present study -whose starting point is Mauranen’s (1994a) claim that the conception that a linguistic community has of a particular genre may vary considerably in another cultural setting-, aims at shedding some light on what has always been “a somewhat neglected genre” (Hyland, 2000) in the literature by carrying out an English-Spanish contrastive study on evaluation in general, and praise and criticism in particular. Praise and criticism were analysed both separately and in combination (i.e. distinguishing the cases in which a stretch of discourse is clearly positive or clearly negative, and the cases in which the authors recur to positive-negative / negative-positive binomials in order to mitigate or constrain their opinion).

The corpus of the study consists of 20 book reviews in English and 20 book reviews in Spanish, each group drawn from four different journals. The book reviews were analysed in relation to the distribution of evaluation throughout the different book review ‘moves’. All the book reviews were previously applied Motta-Roth’s (1995) move analysis, which is based on Swales’ (1990) CARS (Create a Research Space) model. Motta-Roth (1995) identified four moves which consistently recurred in her corpus of 180 book reviews (60 on linguistics, 60 on chemistry and 60 on economics). In the corpus of the present study, not only were Motta-Roth’s (1995) four moves identified but new and similar moves were also found in the two languages, which supports the idea that disciplinary features sometimes play more important a role than cultural patterns. Such a hypothesis was corroborated after finding out that English and Spanish behaved quite similarly in the sense that, in both languages, it was impossible to establish a fixed order of appearance of the various moves in each book review. Taking the different moves as reference, there emerged interesting results as to the way book review writers distribute their evaluative remarks throughout the book review. Not only hedge / mitigate / constrain book reviewers their opinions by creating negative-positive and positive-negative binomials, but they also manipulate the expression of their stance by placing their positive and negative remarks strategically (e.g. if a reviewer finds a given book quite good, he will tend to open and close the review with rather positive comments and leave the less favourable comments for the middle part – move 3: highlighting parts of the book / providing focused evaluation of the book-). This analysis also revealed that evaluation is not necessarily concentrated on an only move (move 3, which is the evaluative move par excellence) or to moves 3 and 4 (move 4 corresponds to the evaluative closing of the book being reviewed).

This contrastive approach also focused on the resources used and preferred by English and Spanish book review writers in both their positive and their negative remarks. In spite of the fact that English and Spanish basically use the same means to praise and criticise other authors’ works, the preference of use of those devices varies drastically between the two languages (for example, the number of adverbs used by English reviewers to express evaluation is much higher than the number of evaluative adverbs used by Spanish reviewers; by contrast, Spanish book review writers prefer prepositional phrases). The identification of the various grammatical categories involved in the expression of evaluation in the corpus was carried out
manually, the main concern being the search for meaningful units (in opposition to those formal approaches which concentrate on a few grammatical units and ignore the context in which such units appear).

Other questions that were dealt with in the present study include: “Do English and Spanish book reviewers use more negative evaluation than Spanish book reviewers or vice versa? What about positive evaluation?”; “Are there more or less co-occurring evaluative strategies in English book reviews or in Spanish book reviews?”

The study, which is the first one on book reviews from a contrastive perspective, provided interesting results at the micro-linguistic and macro-linguistic levels, as well as further insights into culture-bound rhetorical patterns. According to Stubbs (in press), book reviews are texts “…which young scholars sometimes have the opportunity to do quite early in their careers…”. So the pedagogical applications derived from this study will benefit professional book review writers as well students in general.

References


