

Comparative Study of Theme Functions in Spanish and English Academic Essays

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Abstract

While Spanish and English have been studied by researchers in a variety of second language situations, little research has been done comparing Spanish/English theme/rheme structures and none has compared how the two languages use theme structures in academic essays. This study analyzes the types of themes that appear in independent clauses in a sample of academic essays selected from two Spanish and English composition textbooks. Seven Spanish essays and seven English essays, all of which were written by professional writers, were matched for genre; the first 200 words of each essay (adjusted for clause completion) were examined to determine the number of independent clauses and the types of theme used. The results show the English essays had a higher number of independent clauses and thus a higher number of theme structures than did the Spanish essays. In addition, while both the Spanish and the English essays use topical themes in each independent clause, higher number of instances of implicit subjects, personal pronouns, and processes used to announce the theme of the clause. The differences indicated in this study suggest that Spanish/English and English/Spanish students would benefit from an explicit comparison of theme/rheme structures in order to better understand how information can be delivered in their target language.

Keywords: Spanish, English, theme, rheme, compare, contrast.

Resumen

A pesar de que los investigadores han estudiado el español y el inglés en diversas situaciones de segunda lengua, muy poca investigación se ha hecho con respecto a la comparación de las estructuras del tema y el rema y ninguna que compare cómo los dos idiomas utilizan las estructuras del tema en ensayos académicos. En este estudio se analizan los tipos de temas que se encuentran en una muestra de ensayos académicos seleccionados de dos libros de texto sobre composición en español y en inglés. Se emparejaron por género siete ensayos escritos en inglés y siete en español por escritores profesionales. Las primeras 200 palabras de cada ensayo (con ajuste para completar la frase) se examinaron para determinar el número de cláusulas independientes y los tipos de temas utilizados. Los resultados muestran que los ensayos en inglés tienen un número mayor de cláusulas independientes que los ensayos en español y, por lo tanto, un mayor número de estructuras temáticas. Además, aunque se utilizan temas tópicos en cada cláusula independiente, tanto en los ensayos en inglés como en español, existe un mayor número de casos de sujetos implícitos, pronombres personales y procesos que se usan para anunciar el tema de la cláusula. Las diferencias que se muestran en este estudio sugieren que tanto los estudiantes angloparlantes que estudian español y los hispanoparlantes que estudian inglés se podrían beneficiar de una comparación explícita de las estructuras del tema y el rema para alcanzar un mejor entendimiento de cómo se proporciona la información en la lengua objeto.

Palabras clave: *español, inglés, tema, rema, comparación, contraste*

Introduction

Comparative studies in English and Spanish focusing on contrastive analysis of phonological, morphological, and syntactical units (e.g., Benedet et.al, 1998; Saporta, 1955) have provided significant information about differences at the micro-linguistic levels. However, comparison at the macro-linguistic level of text is also relevant to students who are learning to communicate in a language. As Halliday (1970) claimed, the “basic unit of language in use is not a word or a sentence, but a ‘text’” (p. 160). A “text” may consist of only one word or one sentence, but its function as a communicative act is what makes it the basic unit of language in use. Contrastive analysis has the potential of being used to determine how a texts works within its own system to distinguish degrees of difficulty and identify specific problems. A macro-linguistic examination of theme structures can help learners clarify how such information structures are used within a language system to orient a reader/listener to the “message” in a text.

The present study analyzed the theme structures and compared and contrasted their use in fourteen academic essays in seven genres: Definition, Argument, Cause and Effect, Comparison and Contrast, Description, Narration, and Process, one each in Spanish and in English. The results of this research can be applied to teaching writing to Spanish/English speakers in both second and foreign language contexts. Students can benefit from an analysis in their native language of how theme structures function in academic essays, and teachers can benefit from understanding how this function can improve the students’ use of these language patterns in writing. In addition, this study can be a model for contrastive analysis, encouraging students to do their own examination of differences between their native and target language systems.

Contrastive Analysis and Theme/Rheme

Contrastive analysis, examining the similarities and differences between a learners’ native language and the language to be learned, can be an efficient tool for teaching language. Such analysis can provide language teachers with the basis to predict language areas where the students might experience problems or difficulty. Knowing what languages problems students may face allows teachers to apply a more effective pedagogy (McCabe, 1999). While initial work in contrastive analysis focused on micro-level issues, more recent studies have gone beyond micro-linguistic to macro-linguistic analysis (e.g., Belmonte, 1997; Carreiras and Clifton, 1993; Cassiellas-Suárez, 2003; Chartrand and Rising, 1995; Cook, 1988; González-García, 2010; James, 1980; Whitley, 1986). These studies have included pragmatic/functional aspects of language, such as contrastive textual analysis and theme/rheme distinctions in Spanish and English.

This field of research is providing language teachers with knowledge to develop efficient pedagogical instruments that help language students in their learning process. Wardhaugh (1970) pointed out the usefulness of contrastive analysis when he claimed that contrastive analysis “requires of the linguist only that he use the best linguistic knowledge available to him in order to account for observed difficulties in second language learning” (p. 126). Thus, rather than attempting to predict all potential problems, language teachers can focus on observed or identified difficulties and use their knowledge of the NL system to provide effective guidance to overcome the issues.

In the specific case of thematic progression researchers have analyzed the elements of information structures that play a role in guiding the theme of any message in any language. Calhoun (2010) defined an information structure as a way to describe “the salience and organization of information in an utterance in relation to a discourse” (p. 1). In other words, each element in a clause contributes to shaping the whole message. Similarly, Roberts (1996), using Halliday’s (1967) approach, considered how information structures can be analyzed as part of sentence-level structures. Roberts (1996) explained:

Information structure is a universal of human discourse, not dependent on the specific syntactic structures or other conventions which are developed in a given language to fulfill the associated functions.... we might expect that other languages would use very different means to achieve some of the same ends, or would use similar means to encode other kinds of information. (p. 2)

Even though the way in which information is structured might have variations across different languages, as Roberts suggested, the ultimate goal of any language system is to convey meaning and to deliver the message between its interlocutors.

The variation of the elements within a sentence regulate the way information is presented and control how the information is related to prior and current context. In order to understand the relationship between information being presented and its connection to context, researchers have examined theme and rheme types of structures as a way to explain how information is structured to convey meaning. For example, Halliday (1967) described a connection between information, structure, and theme. He defined theme as “a general term for those choices involving the distribution of information in the clause” (p. 1). Theme is concerned first with how the information is initially positioned in the clause; second, theme deals with the status of the clause elements as components of a message; and third, theme integrates what is being said with what has gone before in the discourse and its internal organization into an act of communication. An analysis of the syntactic functions of a theme and their combinations in actual use leads to comprehension of how a topic is presented and how the information is structured to convey meaning in any given language system.

Building in Halliday’s works, Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, and Yallop (2001) clarified that “what comes first in a clause expresses an important and separate kind of meaning” (p. 135). This first element is called Theme, and the rest of the clause is “Rheme.” Theme is the element that frames the speaker’s/writer’s message. For Halliday (1994), “a clause has meaning as a message. . . . Theme is the point of departure for the message. It is the element the speaker selects for ‘grounding’ what he is going to say” (p. 34). Identifying the theme/rheme boundaries of a clause may be complex, as a variety of elements may occur in theme position. However, once the themes are identified, the meaning of the whole message becomes clearer. Contreras (1976) agreeing with Halliday’s perception of the relevance of theme/rheme structures, claimed that “the theme and rheme organization of the sentence is not merely a peripheral stylistic matter, but it affects semantic interpretation in a rather central way” (p. 330). In other words, both Contreras and Halliday claimed that a significant part of a successful interaction between language interlocutors (i.e., speaker/listener and writer/reader) is based on the strategies used to structure the topic of any given message, and these strategies may vary across languages.

The various strategies and their meanings may co-occur within the theme position of a clause. Halliday (1994) classified these meanings into three theme types: topical theme, textual theme, and interpersonal theme.

Topical theme refers to the experiential element that has as its function the transitivity of the clause. Halliday (1994) demonstrated that this experiential element signals the division between theme and rheme, and can be “participant, circumstance, or process” (p. 53). Textual themes are the elements that “preface our experiential meaning ... whose function is to connect our message to the previous text” (p. 137). On the other hand, interpersonal themes indicate “the kind of interaction between speakers or the positions which they are taking” (Butt et al., 2001, p. 138). Moreover, when the topical theme forms a single component in the structure of the clause it is said to be a “simple theme” (p. 52). However, other theme elements, with textual and/or interpersonal functions, may interact with the topical theme as well. Butt et al. (2001) claimed that when theme structures include more than topical elements, all the theme elements co-occur as part of theme, i.e., come before the rheme. In these situations, the clause is said to have a “multiple theme.”

Researchers have used macro-linguistic contrastive analysis to show the way meaning is created by explaining connectivity between sequential elements (e.g., theme) in two language systems. For example, Belmonte (1997) studied the role of theme as a cohesive element at the discourse level. Based on theme/rheme studies of the English language, her hypothesis was that Spanish genres will apply different “estrategias textuales” (textual strategies) such as temporal references, qualifications, spatial references, support or dissent an argument through the application of various theme types (e.g., textual or topical). Belmonte (1997) analyzed 70 Spanish written samples from five genres: instructional, narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative. The results of her study revealed interesting aspects of theme/rheme structures in Spanish. For example, in the argumentative sample, Belmonte found a higher number of topical themes (e.g., Nominal Groups) than textual themes (e.g., Conjunctions) and claimed that such results differed from English in which textual themes are used more often. She analyzed only declarative and imperative sentences and, based on her results, concluded that although Spanish used the same textual strategies as English in each genre, the theme types and the language features (e.g., nominal groups, process, etc.) used to structure information were different due to the particular idiosyncrasies of Spanish and English .

The present paper consisted of analyzing the structures of theme in academic essays in Spanish and English, which is a genre not yet studied. Moreover, this study went beyond the analysis of such structures by discussing the pedagogical implications of teaching Spanish or English academic writing as a second and/or foreign language. Something that none of the previous researches have considered before. The contemplation of these pedagogical implications can help not only to better comprehend the way in which messages are announced in Spanish and English, but also to be better able to apply such knowledge to provide more effective guidance to Spanish/English learners of academic writing.

Methodology

This paper examines and compares the types of theme structures that occurred in the independent clauses of a 200-word sample of academic essays, matched for genres, one each in English and Spanish. The analysis applies key linguistic concepts of theme/rheme as information structures, and examines the role of theme in relation to textual theme, interpersonal theme, and topical theme as defined by Butt et al. (2001).

Data

The data set for this study is comprised of a convenience sample of fourteen academic essays, seven in Spanish, and seven in English. The essays were selected to represent a variety of genres as named and included in two college-level compositions textbooks, each of which was currently available for use in college classes. The English essays were selected from *The Writer's Selections: Shaping our Lives* by Kathleen T. McWhorter published in 2009; the Spanish essays were selected from *Composición: Proceso y Síntesis* by Guadalupe Valdés, Trisha Dvorak, and Thomasina Pagán, published in 2008. All fourteen essays were written by professional writers, and they were selected to establish a matched set of genres (one in each language): Definition, Argument, Cause and Effect, Comparison and Contrast, Description, Narration, and Process. If the textbook included more than one professionally written essay per genre, the first essay was selected. Essays were numbered for ease of reference. To find a reasonably representative but manageable data set, a minimum of 200 words per essay were analyzed to avoid fracturing complete clauses (i.e., over 200 words if needed to include the full independent clause).

Analytical Framework

The analysis of the data included four key steps. First, sentences were separated into independent clauses and by genres, with genre types separated based on the mode identified and named in the textbook from which it was drawn. Second, each clause was separated into theme and rheme structures (Halliday, 1967) relative to their genres. Further analysis focused on theme, with themes examined and classified into the three types: textual themes, interpersonal themes, and topical themes, based on explanations and examples in Butt et al. (2001). Fourth, topical themes were analyzed in more detail with regard to specific language features used in each language.

Topical themes were classified as Participants or Processes (Butt et al., 2001). Participants included nominal groups, implicit subjects, and personal pronouns which were identified and classified. A "nominal group" was any noun phrase that announced the subject of the independent clause. An "implicit subject" was defined as having no explicit noun or pronoun as the subject of the sentence, but the theme did have a verb specifically conjugated for a certain person, and hence a person as subject could easily be inferred. Personal pronouns included the occurrence of I, you, he, she, it, they in theme positions. Processes refers to instances where a verb occurred in theme position. In order to avoid confusion between the Process essays genre and Process (i.e., verbs as topical themes), this category was named Process/Verbs. Moreover, a sub-categorization of Process/Verbs with or without implicit subjects was added due to occurrences of such types in both Spanish and English samples.

Results

Independent clauses

An analysis of the number of words and number of independent clauses from the essays in the data set showed that the information in Spanish was comprised (i.e., structured) in fewer independent clauses than in English. As Table 1 shows, the Spanish essays included more words per clause, even though the number of words in the sample was very similar.

Table 1. Number of Words and Number of Independent Clauses.

Language	Number of words	Number of clauses
Spanish	1402	65/169 (38.5%)
English	1418	104/169 (61.5%)

The Spanish sample comprised 1,402 words in 65 independent clauses; the English sample comprised 1,418 words in 104 independent clauses. In the whole sample 38.5% of the independent clauses were in the Spanish sample and 61.5% were in the English sample. The following example from the data is the Spanish independent clause with the highest number of words:

SPA 6 (5) “El filme narra la experiencia de María Álvarez, joven colombiana de 17 años, hastiada tanto de la pobreza y el limitado ángulo de visión futura de su pueblucho como de su estúpido novio, quien ni valora la clase de mujer que es ni al hijo en formación que ella lleva entre el ombligo y la espalda.”

Trans: The film narrates the experience of María Álvarez, young woman of 17 years old, tired of both the poverty and the limited perspective of the future vision of her small town and her stupid boyfriend, who does not appreciate the kind of woman that she is nor the son in development that she carries between the belly button and the back.

Below is the English independent clause with the highest number of words in the sample:

ENG 1 (8) “First there’s the pre-employment drug test, now routine at more than 80% of large companies—and not just for the person who will be piloting the executive jet or loading plutonium rods into the reactor.”

The Spanish independent clause consists of 56 words. In contrast, the English independent clause only has 35 words. This shows how information was packed in the independent clauses in each language.

Because the data was selected to have matched genre samples, an analysis of independent clauses by genre could show relative differences. Table 2 shows the results of a more detailed analysis of the number of independent clauses across the seven genres.

Table 2. Total Number of Independent Clauses by Genre.

Genre	Sample	Total number of clauses
Definition	SPA1	10
	ENG1	12
Argument	SPA2	11
	ENG2	12

Cause and Effect	SPA3	11
	ENG3	15
Comparison and Contrast	SPA4	12
	ENG4	21
Description	SPA5	9
	ENG5	13
Narration	SPA6	5
	ENG6	14
Process	SPA7	7
	ENG7	17

Definition and Argument genres had similar number of independent clauses in each language. However, the results showed a difference in Cause and Effect, and even more considerable differences among the Comparison and Contrast, Description, Narration, and Process essays in each language.

Themes

Because the English sample had more independent clauses than the Spanish one (Table 1), the number of themes in the English sample would also be higher than in the Spanish one. Table 3 shows this comparison and the results for types of themes.

Table 3. Theme Type's Occurrences Relative to Total Number of Independent Clauses.
(Number of Instances/Total Independent clauses)

Language	Textual Themes	Interpersonal Themes	Topical Themes
Spanish	16/65 (24.6%)	11/65 (16.9%)	61/65(93.8%)
English	36/104 (34.6%)	20/104 (19.2%)	104/104 (100%)

While Spanish had 24.6% occurrences of textual themes, English had 33%. In the case of interpersonal themes, Spanish essays had 16.9%, and English ones had 19.2%. While 93.8% of the independent clauses in the Spanish sample had a topical theme, 100% of the independent clauses in English had a topical theme. Overall, the English sample had higher percentages of themes regardless of type.

Textual, Interpersonal, and Topical Themes

As the results in Table 3 revealed more frequent use of themes in the English sample than in the Spanish one, a more detailed analysis of the instances of textual, interpersonal, and topical themes would show relative differences of theme structures across genre. Table 4 presents a comparison of the occurrences of the textual themes across the seven genres in both English and Spanish.

Table 4. Textual Themes by Genre. (Number of Instances/Total Independent clauses)

Sample	Textual themes	Sample	Textual themes
SPA1- Definition	2/10 (20%)	ENG1- Definition	2/12 (16.7%)
SPA2- Argument	3/11 (27.3%)	ENG2- Argument	5/12 (41.7%)
SPA3- Cause and Effect	1/11 (9.1%)	ENG3- Cause and Effect	6/15 (40%)
SPA4- Comparison and Contrast	5/12 (41.7%)	ENG4- Comparison and Contrast	7/21 (33.3%)
SPA5- Description	2/9 (22.2%)	ENG5- Description	7/13 (53.8%)
SPA6- Narration	0/5(0%)	ENG6- Narration	5/14 (35.7%)
SPA7- Process	3/7 (42.8%)	ENG7- Process	4/17 (23.5%)
Total	16/65 (24.6%)	Total	36/104 (34.6%)

In the Definition essays Spanish had a slightly higher use of textual themes than English. Similarly, the Comparison and Contrast in Spanish used 41.7% of textual themes, and English used 33.3%. The Process essay in Spanish had 42.8% while English had 23.5%. Conversely, Argument, Cause and Effect, Description, and Narration English essays used textual themes more frequently. Interestingly, the Narration essay in Spanish did not use textual themes at all. However, the number of textual themes compared to the number of independent clauses in English was higher than in Spanish.

Table 5 presents a comparison of the occurrences of the interpersonal themes across the seven genres in both English and Spanish.

Table 5. Interpersonal Themes by Genre. (Number of Instances/Total Independent clauses)

Sample	Interpersonal themes	Sample	Interpersonal themes
SPA1- Definition	3/10 (30%)	ENG- Definition	4/12 (33.3%)
SPA2- Argument	1/11 (9.1%)	ENG2- Argument	2/12 (16.7%)
SPA3- Cause and Effect	2/11 (18.2%)	ENG3- Cause and Effect	3/15 (20%)
SPA4- Comparison and Contrast	2/12 (16.7%)	ENG4- Comparison and Contrast	3/21 (14.3%)
SPA5- Description	0/9 (0%)	ENG5- Description	2/13 (15.4%)
SPA6- Narration	2/5(40%)	ENG6- Narration	2/14 (14.3%)
SPA7- Process	1/7 (14.3%)	ENG7- Process	4/17 (23.5%)
Total	11/65 (16.9%)	Total	20/104 (19.2%)

The English Definition essay used 33.3% of interpersonal themes while the Spanish one 30%. In the Argument essay the use of interpersonal themes was higher in English too with 16.7% compared to 9.1% in Spanish. Similar trends happened in Cause and Effect, Description, and Process genres in which English essays used more interpersonal themes than Spanish ones. However, in the Comparison and Contrast and Narration Spanish essays a higher use of interpersonal themes was observed. In total, English used interpersonal themes more frequently with 19.2% over 16.9% of Spanish usage.

Finally, the same analysis was done to topical themes. Table 6 presents the results of the topical theme examination in the seven genres studied.

Table 6. Topical Themes

Sample	Number of topical themes	Sample	Number of topical themes
SPA1- Definition	7/10 (70%)	ENG- Definition	12/12(100%)
SPA2- Argument	11/11 (100%)	ENG2- Argument	12/12 (100%)
SPA3- Cause and Effect	11/11 (100%)	ENG3- Cause and Effect	15/15 (100%)
SPA4- Comparison and Contrast	11/12 (91.7%)	ENG4- Comparison and Contrast	21/21 (100%)
SPA5- Description	9/9(100%)	ENG5- Description	13/13 (100%)
SPA6- Narration	5/5 (100%)	ENG6- Narration	14/14 (100%)
SPA7- Process	7/7 (100%)	ENG7- Process	17/17 (100%)
Total	61/65 (93.8%)	Total	104/104(100%)

English used topical themes in all the independent clauses across the seven genres. Definition and Comparison and Contrast Spanish essays, on the other hand, did not use a topical theme in each independent clause. The Definition essay had 70% use of topical themes and the Comparison and Contrast had 91.7%.

Both languages use the three types of themes to announce the theme of each clause. However, the frequency of use of the different types of themes was higher in the English sample.

While topical themes showed a similar frequency of occurrence in the two languages, further analysis reveals some difference in the language features that were used in the topic themes (i.e., in Participant and Process). Table 8 shows the frequency counts of the features found.

Table 8. Topical Theme Language Features

Spanish		English	
Category	Instances	Category	Instances
<i>Participant</i>		<i>Participant</i>	
Nominal group	41/61 (77%)	Nominal group	47/104 (45.2%)
Implicit subject	16/61 (26.2%)	Implicit subject	1/104 (0.1%)
Personal pronouns	4/61 (6.5%)	Personal pronouns	54/104 (51.9%)
<i>Process/Verb</i>		<i>Process/Verb</i>	
Verb fronted with implicit subject	16/61 (26.2%)	Verb fronted with implicit subject	1/104 (0.1%)
Verb fronted without implicit subject	0/61 (0%)	Verb fronted without implicit subject	2/104 (1.9%)

Both languages used Nominal Groups frequently. However, Spanish showed a higher frequency with 77% than did English with 45.2%. Similarly, implicit subjects were more frequently found in Spanish (26.2%), and there was only one instance of them in the English sample (0.1%). A large difference also occurred in the use of personal pronouns. While English had 51.9% occurrences of personal pronouns as topical themes, Spanish only has 6.5%. Also, whenever an implicit subject in Spanish was counted the verb that took the topical theme position was counted under the category of Process/Verb. This was different with the English instances of Process/Verb as topical theme because out the three Process/Verb instances; one of them was an imperative clause and had an implicit subject. In the other two, there were no implicit subjects, but it was the Process/Verb the one carrying the existential meaning.

Discussion

As the results indicate, while Spanish and English academic essays did include similar theme types, there are also differences in the way the two languages orient readers to the message of a clause. These similarities and/or differences guide the apprehension and the production of information presented in Spanish and in English. This understanding has teaching/learning implications that provide teachers and learners better comprehension of the way in which messages are announced in Spanish and English and the language features applied to deliver such messages. Thus, teachers can provide more effective guidance to Spanish/English learners of academic writing.

The results revealed a substantial difference in the number of independent clauses in the English and Spanish samples despite a similar number of words in each. The Spanish data showed fewer independent clauses to develop topics; the English sample had a higher number of independent clauses. The similar number of words in each sample but different number of independent clauses suggest that the way information was packed in each data set diverged. The difference in the Spanish sample indicated that a major amount of information was delivered in each independent clause. Thus the way Spanish and English embed information in independent clauses was different.

One pedagogical implication of the differences in the number of independent clauses may be the amount of information that students would embed in one independent clause. While students of Spanish might write short clauses in their academic essays, students of English might do the opposite and embed more information in each independent clause, which would be odd in either case. Thus, language teachers would need to pay close attention to the way their students combine information in each clause and guide them to fulfill each language expectations in this regard.

Further the differences in the number of independent clauses occurred across genres. The English sample had more independent clauses than Spanish ones. For example, the range of difference between the Definition and Argument essays in each language was of three independent clauses, 21 in Spanish and 24 in English; Cause and Effect and the Description essays had slightly higher number, 28 in the Spanish sample and 20 in the English sample; and the Comparison and Contrast, Narration, and Process essays had the highest differences, 24 in Spanish and 52 in English. Such results further support the findings that Spanish embeds more information per clause irrespective of academic genre.

As English had a higher number of independent clauses in the data, English also had more instances of theme types (e.g., textual, interpersonal, and topical themes) than did the Spanish sample. Both Spanish and English samples included the three types of themes, but there were differences in the frequency of types of theme.

Regarding the use of textual themes, McCabe (1999) pointed out that “in both cultures, there seems to be a... small number of textual Themes” (p. 221). The analysis of textual themes in this study revealed several interesting aspects about the type of connections that writers of academic essays use in Spanish and English. For example, 34.6% of the English sample but only 24.6% of the Spanish sample had textual themes. While the difference is not high, the tendency suggests that English may use textual themes more often to orient the reader to make connections between information structures. The results showed that Spanish and English use textual themes to establish connections among clauses in the text, but the general use of textual themes is not very frequent. In both samples less than 40% of the independent clauses had textual themes, which supports McCabe’s claim.

However, the Cause and Effect and the Narration essays in Spanish showed only one and no instance of textual themes respectively. Contrary to the same genre in English in which 40% and 35.7% of the independent clauses used textual themes respectively. In the Spanish Cause and Effect essay the only textual theme identified was *en tanto que*, which can be translated “while.” In contrast, the English Cause and Effect essay had textual themes such as *now*, *in the future*, and *and*. While Spanish Narration essay had no instance of textual themes, in the English Narration essay expressions such as *year earlier*, *tomorrow*, and *before* occurred as textual themes. In this respect, Whitley (1986) pointed out in that

[t]he difference between the two languages is that ... English occasionally dislocates to show a changed thematic structure, but more commonly it uses a phonological procedure, whereas Spanish can use the latter but more often adopts a change in word order [in theme position] (p. 237).

According to this explanation, Spanish and English use different strategies to connect ideas between clauses. Spanish tends to change the word order as a strategy to call attention to one theme or another, which, therefore, affects the way the theme of the clause is announced. For example, Spanish would allow the writer to change the order of the words in multiple possibilities, so that the theme would be easily modified. The following is an example taken from the data set:

SPA3 (4)	“ <u>voy</u> a emailearlo ahorita,” (Topical theme: Process/Verb)
<u>Trans:</u>	(I) (will) go to email it right now,
Possibility (1)	“ <u>a</u> emailearlo ahorita voy,” (Textual theme)
<u>Trans:</u>	to email it right now (I) (will) go,
Possibility (2)	“ <u>ahorita</u> voy a emailearlo,” (Textual theme)
<u>Trans:</u>	right now (I) (will) go to email it,

In contrast, although English also has a certain degree of flexibility because, as Whitley claimed, in spoken language, phonological procedures (e.g., intonation) may be used to emphasized relevant information, in

written language, the alteration of the order of the elements within a clause is mainly limited to “adjuncts of time, place, and reason” (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). Thus, in a sentence like

ENG 3 (8) “They listen for a radio query and respond”

A possibility to change the word order may be:

?*For a radio query*, they listen and respond

Nevertheless, such possibility would be odd, especially in academic writing, so the writer may need to use textual themes (e.g., adverbs, conjunctions,) as textual themes to relate clauses one to each other because modifying the word order of elements within the clause is a strategy unlikely accepted in English.

Teaching/learning considerations of these differences in the use of textual themes in these genres suggest that students writing Cause and Effect and Narration essays in the target language may have difficulties applying the use of textual themes in either language. While English learners of academic writing native writers may lack textual themes when writing Cause and Effect and Narration essays in English; Spanish learners may overuse textual themes in these genres when writing in Spanish.

Interpersonal themes in the English sample occurred in 19.2% of the clauses and in the Spanish only in 16.9%. These results of the frequency of interpersonal theme showed differences in the tenor of these academic essays in each language. McCabe (1999) pointed out that “writers can choose to make their intervention more or less obvious, and they can do so through the interpersonal metafunctions in several different ways” (p. 222). Based on this claim, the genres in which less than 10% instances of interpersonal themes occurred in Spanish (e.g., Description and Argument) may suggest that the kind of interaction (i.e., tenor) between Spanish writers and their readers in academic essays is more distant than the one between English writers and their readers in which all genres had above 10% use of interpersonal themes.

Topical themes presented the closest similarities in each language. Topical themes occurred 100% in the English sample and 93.8% in the Spanish one. Only four independent clauses in Spanish did not have a topical theme. The Definition essay had three occurrences and the Comparison and Contrast had one. Such occurrences, as noticed in the following examples, were all questions and suggest different interactions between the writer and the reader in Spanish essays.

SPA1 (1) “¿Qué es la persuasión?”

Trans: What is the persuasion?

SPA1 (2) “¿Cuáles son las claves para convencer a una persona de que cambie su comportamiento?”

Trans : What are the keys to convince to a person to change his/her behavior?

SPA1 (3) ¿Qué impulsa a alguien a gastarse el dinero en ese y no en otro producto?

Trans: What impulses to someone to spend the money in that and not in another product?

SPA4 (12) ¿Pero qué es un blog?

Trans: But what is a blog?

Because English writers did not use questions in the sample examined, 100% of the independent clauses had a topical theme. The use of questions in these Spanish essays has tenor implications that indicate different possibilities of interaction between writers and readers. While questioning is a possible structure in English (as the translations from the Spanish question show), the possibility to question readers in academic essays is usually avoided.

This has another pedagogical implication in academic writing. It would not be surprising that Spanish learners of English question readers in academic essays, especially in Definition and Cause and Effect essays, a practice that is generally eluded in the English academic writing as the examination of this English sample revealed. Language teachers may need to clarify this to students writing English essays and encourage them to change questions into statements to fulfill the English expectation of the academic genre.

Because most independent clauses in both samples had a topical theme, further examination of the language features, used to realize such topical themes, revealed differences in the occurrence of Participant and Process/Verb as topical themes. Both languages used the same language feature types (i.e., Participants: nominal groups and implicit subject; and Processes/Verbs: with and without implicit subject), but the frequency of these varied in each language.

In Spanish 26.2% of the independent clauses had a verb fronted in theme position and implicit subjects. In English, only one of the independent clauses had an implicit subject, and the clause was an imperative:

ENG 1 (3) "Do your level best or some reasonable simulation thereof for 8 to 10 hours."

This difference of more than 25% showed an interesting aspect of the way implicit subjects are used to structure information in each language. Belmonte (1997) pointed out that "en inglés, la presencia del sujeto es obligatoria y, por lo tanto, no es posible encontrar un proceso verbal tematizado en una oración declarativa" (p. 64) [in English the presence of the subject is obligatory, and therefore, it is not possible to find a verbal process being thematized in a declarative sentence]. Thus, Spanish allows implicit subjects and verbs in theme position more frequently. While Spanish independent clauses fronting verbs may be imperative clauses, the use of implicit subject is not limited to such type of clauses as the following example shows:

SPA 1 (10) "Y argumenta la razón del éxito que tuvo aquel primer anuncio de la historia."

Trans: And (he) argues the reason of the success that (it) had that first advertisement of the history.

As the example demonstrates, in the Spanish sample the use of implicit subject is not limited to imperative independent clauses as it may occur in other types of clauses (e.g., declaratives.) In contrast, in the English sample the use of implicit subject was limited to imperative independent clauses, and such type of clauses were not frequently used in this data set of academic writing.

However, two instances of the topical themes in English were Process/Verb without an implicit subject but infinitive verb forms. These occurrences were the following:

ENG2 (8) "Let's call it the Naked Machine, for that's more or less what it is."

Trans: *Vamos a llamarla la Naked Machine, porque eso es lo que más o menos es.*

ENG4 (11) "To do so would be to deny a part of myself."

Trans: *Hacer eso sería negar parte de mi ser.*

Although such structures are possible in Spanish as the direct translation of these examples showed, in the first example, Spanish would conjugate the verb to adapt it to the subject, so an implicit subject *nosotros* (we) would be implied in front of the verb form; and in the second example, the use of infinitive verbs in theme position, while possible in Spanish as the translation shows, did not occur in the Spanish sample.

Moreover, while in Spanish, only 6.5% of the topical themes were personal pronouns, in English, 51.9% occurrences of personal pronouns were identified. In this sense, Whitley (1989) argued that "Spanish pronoun forms differ very strikingly from their English counter parts in their sentence positions and in how they double up and combine with one another" (p. 187). Two factors may influence this difference between Spanish and English. First, in the Spanish sample studied, the use of nominal groups as topical themes was fairly frequent. As the results demonstrated, the percentage of occurrences of nominal groups as topical themes in Spanish was 77% within its own system, while in English, nominal groups occurred 45.2%. Such totals revealed a higher tendency of usage of nominal groups as topical themes in Spanish over English. Second, Halliday (1994) claimed that in English "the item most often functioning as unmarked theme [...] is the first person pronoun I [...] Next after that come the other personal pronouns *you, we, he, she, it, they* [...] Then come other nominal groups and nominalizations" (p. 44). In the data set examined, 32 instances of "I" were found; 12 instances of "you;" 5 instances of "he;" 3 instances of "we;" and 2 instances of "they." These results support Halliday's (1994) argument; English uses personal pronouns as topical themes more frequently.

The results in the variety of the language features used to realize topical themes in English and Spanish academic essays also has teaching/learning repercussions. This analysis suggest that Spanish learners may overuse explicit subjects (e.g., nominal groups, personal pronouns) when writing academic essays in Spanish due to the fact that English requires an explicit subjects more often than Spanish. In contrast, English learners may drop explicit subjects and use Process/Verb in theme position irrespectively the type of sentence (e.g., imperative, declarative) to be written. Language teachers may need to explain such differences in order to avoid confusion on the use of implicit and explicit subjects in different types of sentences.

The results of this study indicate differences in the way that theme is announced in Spanish and English. Second or foreign language composition teachers would need to help students comprehend that language features are both grammatically constrained and culturally expected. For example, teachers should draw attention to specific theme types (e.g., textual, interpersonal, topical) and the language features (e.g., implicit/explicit subject) of academic essays so that students can adapt their writing habits to the way is expected in Spanish and/or English. Second or foreign language composition teachers also need to examine and help students raise their awareness of the communicative structures of academic essays; students would benefit from understanding the differences and similarities between the two languages in terms of distinctive communicative

goals and textual structures. Understanding the nature of theme would enable students to better shape their ideas and to combine these elements effectively in terms of both achieving their communicative goals and producing writing that fits the target language expectations.

Further studies may consider issues related to the amount of information packed in rheme position. In Spanish, a major amount of information is presented in rheme position. Such a pattern seemed to happen consistently in the Spanish data set analyzed in this study. It would also be interesting to examine more specifically the difference between independent clause structures, particularly the coherence elements taking place in rheme position to determine the way each language realizes textual unity. Finally, future research could compare academic essays written by Spanish or English students to see how they apply the thematic progression patterns matching the structures of each system.

Conclusion

The language features found in this study revealed consistent patterns that distinguish theme structures in Spanish and English. The number of independent clauses identified in the data set, the use of textual themes to connect independent clauses to each other, the use of interpersonal and topical themes to interact with the reader; and the use of implicit/explicit subjects, personal pronouns, and process/verb; show the ways in which theme structures vary between English and Spanish.

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