

Intercultural Communication: Arab Culture and Reason in Contrastive Rhetoric Theory

التواصل بين الثقافات: الثقافة والعقل العربي في نظرية التباين الخطابي

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Abstract:

The present paper addresses the problematic contention among practitioners of Contrastive Rhetoric Theory as they strive to reach a universal rhetoric to ensure an effective intercultural communication. In the last sixty years, opponents and proponents of the theory engaged in a heated argument over the notion of "Culture" as the main variable in this subfield of linguistic studies. This methodological article thoroughly analyzes the source of antagonism among practitioners and alternatively advances a rather scientific method that takes "Reason" as the main independent variable instead of "Culture". This study reveals that culture is such a vague concept that causes severe disagreement, while reason is rather a static and unequivocal constituent which itself intrinsic to Culture. The following review article takes Arab cultural group as its showcase to explain the urge to move from culture to reason in contrastive rhetoric studies.

Keywords: intercultural communication; contrastive rhetoric; culture; Arab reason.

ملخص :

تتناول هذه الورقة الخلاف الإشكالي بين ممارسي نظرية التباين الخطابي وهم يسعون للوصول إلى بلاغة عالمية لضمان تواصل فعال بين الثقافات. في السنوات الستين الماضية، دخل معارضو هذه النظرية ومؤيدوها في جدال حاد حول فكرة "الثقافة" باعتبارها المتغير الرئيسي في هذا المجال من الدراسات اللغوية. هذه المقالة المنهجية تحلل بدقة مصدر العداء بين الممارسين وبدلاً من ذلك تقدم طريقة علمية إلى حد ما تأخذ "العقل" باعتباره المتغير الرئيسي المستقل بدلاً من "الثقافة". تكشف هذه الدراسة أن الثقافة هي مفهوم غامض يسبب خللاً حاداً، في حين أن العقل عنصر ثابت إلى حد ما ولا لبس فيه وهو بحد ذاته جوهري في الثقافة. تأخذ المقالة المراجعة التالية المجموعة الثقافية العربية كعرض لشرح الحاجة للانتقال من الثقافة إلى العقل في دراسات التباين الخطابي.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التواصل بين الثقافات؛ التباين الخطابي؛ الثقافة؛ العقل العربي.

1. INTRODUCTION

The observer of scientific history notices that science evolves progressively, advancing from a prior *mosaic* of accepted theories to the next. No accepted theory stood up intact against the jostling stride of time. Now, the philosopher of scientific theory observes that any subsequent theory (or mosaic of theories) prevails over its antecedents, by providing more accurate accounts of the natural and/or social phenomena under investigation (Barseghyan, 2015). If history of science demonstrates that we are moving forward to understand the world around us, philosophy of science indicates that we are getting closer to unveil the *truths* about our experience as human beings in this world. Not so far from this view, the theory of Contrastive Rhetoric (CR), as the main concern of this review paper, has undergone the same odyssey as most language theories. Promoters of this theory had in their minds the sole purpose of achieving effective communication across cultures in a world where English is highly used in academic sphere and scientific composition. It started as a doctrine in cultural and language studies known as *Cultural Relativism*, whose proponents claim that individuals of a given cultural group share similar worldview different from members of other groups. Despite severe criticism this doctrine received, American anthropologists took the rather arguable view a step further to claim that not only each cultural group has exclusive framework through which its members perceive the world around them, but the language spoken by each group determines that framework underpinnings (Connor et al., 2008).

The synthesis of these two doctrines, cultural relativism and language determination, resulted in the *in*-famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Recently, the deterministic prospect to culture has been severely criticized and heavily accused of being “racist” and even “inhuman” (Atkinson, 2004) and the hypothesis was thence rejected. Nonetheless, the hypothesis held the seed for another theory in SLA, when Kaplan, a second language professor, noticed that his students, coming from different cultures, adopt different rhetorical structures as they compose in his English classes. He discussed his findings in a seminal paper that launched later a whole field of study in applied linguistics, referred to as *Contrastive Rhetoric* (Kaplan, 1966). As the nature of scientific inquiry is based on falsifiability, Kaplan’s theory could not resist the spinning wheel of scientific progress, and received itself strong antagonism (Atkinson, 2004; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Matsuda, 1997). In the present review, I consider the arguments promoted by the competing parties over the theory of CR, proponents and opponents, and provide alternative methodology to CR studies to remedy the shortcomings highlighted by CR opponents.

Before I draw attention to the shortcomings exposed by CR opponents, I would like to discuss briefly the theory of CR from a neutral (almost historical) point of view. As a subfield in applied linguistics, the study of CR emerged roughly in the second half of the twentieth century with the seminal work of Robert Kaplan (1966), where he analyzed around 700 essays written by students from different cultural backgrounds –an intercultural context where effective communication is key to the success of his pedagogical experiment. The results of his extended analysis revealed astonishing variance in what he referred to as *thought patterns* which intervenes with potential communication. Discussion of this variance in relation to the students’ cultures indicated concurrence of specific structural patterns in the students’ essays coming from the same cultural group. Following this astonishing discovery, the author divided his students/participants into four cultural groups (Arabs, Oriental, Romance and Russian) and assigned a distinctive blueprint for each group by *literally* drawing “schematic doodles” for every rhetorical (or *thought*) pattern for that matter. Hereafter, his work has received severe criticism from two competing sides regarding culture –those who promote intercultural universality above antagonism among different social, religious or political communities, or those who celebrate cultural uniqueness, politically call for tolerance among these communities, and hence keep them relatively distant. Nevertheless, the author has indeed established a new field of study known as Contrastive Rhetoric, in which language analysts and applied linguists have been investigating the different rhetorical structures identical to certain cultural groups and adopting the results of their investigation in pedagogical contexts, mainly in second language teaching, for the purpose of achieving effective intercultural

communication.

The ultimate goal from reviewing the theory of CR in the present paper is to bring about eventual reconciliation to theoretical inconsistencies caused by this antagonistic approach to the correlation between culture and rhetoric. Thence the design of this review falls somewhere in between Theoretical and Methodological articles (American Psychological Association, 2020). As most theoretical researches, the present paper traces the evolution of CR theory since its emergence in the 1960s (Kaplan, 1966) until recent works in the field (Connor, 1996; Connor et al., 2008). For its methodological rigor, the present review ultimately aims to refine the central construct of CR theory –*culture*, which caused spilling of much ink so far, by replacing it with a constituent construct far more scholastic and scientifically manageable –*reasoning*. The focus, however, in this paper is narrowed to address only Arab cultural group as opposed to the four groups Kaplan discussed in his paper. Hence, a thorough discussion of *Arab Reason* is sought to be enlightening for the purpose this paper.

2. Setting a working terminology

Part of the antagonism aroused by Kaplan's work lies specifically in how practitioners, proponents and opponents, approached the problem itself due to the contentious terminology adopted by them. Dealing with such vague notions as *contrastive study*, *rhetoric*, and *culture* entails a prior contextualization or rather restriction of such loose concepts in order to arrive at an agreement upon a practical terminology used in this field of study. The term *contrastive* may convey a sense usually found in contrastive analysis or even error analysis known to most applied linguists. However, the subfield we are about to dive in shall not foreground some divergence in second language performance, such as grammatical lapses or violation of structural conventions that require an appropriate remedy in order to achieve a close-to-native use of the target language. CR as its most recent version does not imply a dichotomy of normative versus peculiar use of language at the micro level, nor the notion of paradigmatic rhetorical structures strictly applicable to English that ESL learners need to abide to in order to achieve accuracy at the macro level (as opposed to the original design employed by Kaplan). While contrastive studies often adopt top-down inquiries to check the applicability of language theories in second language classroom, CR practitioners follow a purely inductive method, by analyzing already existent text corpora then subsequently achieving universal grounds for intercultural communication. Some prominent practitioners in the field (Connor et al., 2008) even chose to substitute the term *contrastive* with *intercultural* (Intercultural Rhetoric instead of Contrastive Rhetoric) to avoid confusion with other practices in language studies.

Similarly, *rhetoric* as a term has been used, at least in western civilization, for more than two millennia, attaching too many conceptualizations to the term. Moreover, practitioners in neighboring disciplines have used the term *rhetoric* differently, hence broadening the connotation scope of the word even more. Any attempt here to satisfy the reader with a quick and simpler definition of rhetoric would be misleading. However, from one of the earliest and most used definitions of rhetoric, we might arrive at an understanding of the term as used in this research. Aristotle, the founder of the study of rhetoric, defines the term as the ability to “see the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, 2007, p. 36). Rhetoric, according to this concise definition, is not persuasion as a function, but rather a social and linguistic competence that allows interlocutors to decide on the appropriate sequence of utterances to achieve adherence of the audience. As far as the present study is concerned, the analyst needs to focus, not on the purpose of rhetoric as a social action –persuasion, but rather on *the complex set of epistemological choices interlocutors make to construct their arguments*. Due to the complexity of human reasoning, these choices vary from as narrow a level as choices of single words, to broader levels as structural sequences. Regardless to the contentious definitions of *rhetoric*, the present paper adopts this single complying conception as its working definition of rhetoric.

The most crucial and equally arguable construct in the discussion of CR is *culture*. Being so vague to determine, most opponents (Kubota; 1999, 2001; Matsuda; 2001; Scollon 1997; Spack 1997; Zamel 1997) and sometimes even proponents (Connor, 2002; Connor et al., 2008) of CR addressed the notion of culture since Kaplan's paper appeared. According to these criticisms, pioneering investigations in CR relied heavily on Sapir-Wharf theory of linguistic relativity in its strong version that asserts the dominance of language over thought. They also claim that initiatives in the subfield adopted a less scientific approach to culture, by addressing the *temperament* of a given culture and then intuitionally relate it to writings by students from that culture (Leki, 1991). This approach to culture is often considered more of an intuitive endeavor to account for variance among writing structures rather than a scientific approach to culture. The notion of ethnocentric perspective to cultures, as Anglophone culture at the center while other cultural groups patterned around, had been equally rejected as being too *essential* and static. Formerly, the essential perspective to culture identified Anglophone rhetorical structure as a linear and straightforward chain of reasoning, and represented reasoning in other cultural groups in fixed patterns, like circles (Korean and Chinese for instance) and parallel constructs (Arab culture). Practitioners in the field argued that such a view which takes culture and rhetoric as simple shapes and patterns is static and represents mere popular stereotypes about other cultures, while cultures as other social phenomena is very complex and constantly changing due to interactions with other constructs. Opponents of CR see that CR early initiatives perceived culture as a mere temperament and approached it in an essential, static and ethnocentric perspective.

The elusive conceptualization of as a vague notion as culture led language analysts to reconsider earlier version of CR and to rely on more scientific findings from neighboring disciplines, mainly discourse analysis, anthropology and philosophy. New directions in the subfield shifted from the comparative approach between rhetorical structures of different cultures, English being at the center and other cultural groups as *marginal*; toward a descriptive approach that focuses on the reciprocal relation between culture and rhetoric and on explaining the correlation between these constructs. However, the tsunami provoked by poststructuralist claims about human complexity roared over essentialist conceptualization of culture and other social phenomena. Hence, contrastive analysts applied new and rather more dynamic perceptions of culture in language analysis, leading to more controversy among CR practitioners about the notion of culture. In his comments on recent publications in CR, Atkinson (2004), for instance, declares that culture, mainly in its deterministic utilization, has become the most contentious concept in the second half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, contrastive analysts, myself included, cannot conduct research without adopting this deterministic approach to culture; otherwise, their work would be pseudo- or even non-scientific.

The necessity to circumvent such a dilemma in CR studies entails the substitution of *culture* as a crucial construct in the field by another construct equally important and simultaneously yields to systematic approach. In previous investigations, I sought to adopt this new perspective about culture in CR (Lebiar, 2017). Nevertheless, the correlation between culture and language seemed to be deeper and more complex than I assumed. Texts analysis revealed the existence of several rhetorical traits, which are subtly present in Arab thought regardless to time and place. This drew me to the hypothesis about the existence of *ahistorical* components in Arab culture responsible of shaping rhetorical structures and grammar choices as Arab individuals engage in any intellectual activity directed to communicate with individuals from different cultures. This observation confirms the existence of a static component compulsory enough to determine thought patterns and rhetorical structures adopted by individuals living in this large part of the world (Middle East and North Africa) and in this long period of human history (about a millennia). Moreover, Arab nations, or the so-called Arab world, experience grave cultural stagnation on many intellectual levels; so grave it becomes self-evident; so grave any intellect with enough common sense would address this problematic. Hence, Arab intellectuals are required more than ever to engage in a critical inquiry about their cultural heritage, applying purely scientific methods and techniques away from any controversial components such as *culture*. What is, then, this alternative construct that transcends

historical and social confines in a large and diverse region as the Arab World, and simultaneously allows a scientific scrutiny of its significance in academic context where intercultural communication became de rigueur for students and researchers?

3. Arab Reason

A journey within the realms of such a vibrant sphere could not be achieved without reference to the foremost genuine project aiming to establish an epistemological *Critic of Arab Reason* conducted by Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri (Al-Jabri, 2009/2011). As a professor in the department of philosophy of science, Al-Jabri investigates the formation and structure of Arab Reason in a large-scale treatise of four volumes. Adopting a purely epistemological approach, the author argues that Arab Reason, formed in the Era of Codification about a century after the foundation of Islamic civilization (8th century A.D.), is based on a set of fundamentals that have been always present in Arab culture from the pre-Islamic era up until the present time. These fundamentals, drawn from the author's systematic analysis of the history of scholastic production, remain an active dynamo underlying scientific enterprise in Arab culture, regardless of time and space variance.

Like "culture," "reason" as a term could be confusing due its variant usage in different disciplines and schools of thought, but in this study, it is restricted to one specific definition that highlights the present problem. Borrowing from Lalande's distinction between *constituent* and *constituted* reason, Al-Jabri (2009/2011) argues that "Arab Reason," as the subject matter of this study, stems from combining the two notions of reason together. On the one hand, *constituent* reason is "the faculty whereby every human being can extract necessary and universal principles from the awareness of relations between things" (p. 8). It could be perceived as the universal cognitive activity that allows individuals, as thinking beings, to formulate theories and concepts about reality around them. On the other hand, *constituted* reason is "the sum of principles and rules that we rely upon in our inferences" (p. 8). The latter notion of reason differs, either slightly or considerably, from one individual to another depending on cultural and historical contexts. In the discourse of Arab civilization, as any other civilization, one *reason* is producing the other in a continuous and interwoven correlation. In other words, constituted reason, that is the cognitive conventions founded in a given culture, shapes the constituent reason of individuals from that same culture; and the cognitive faculty of individuals –constituent reason, produces the set of theories and ideas creating a system of conventions for their culture. Under the light of these insights, a working definition of Arab Reason that serves the objectives of this research is *the set of philosophical underpinnings established by the sum of cognitive experiences in Arab-Islamic civilization since the Era of Codification and simultaneously underlying any intellectual production of individuals from this sociohistorical sphere*.

Moving from "culture" to "reason" in CR studies sounds too ambitious and over-confident, mainly as I invite practitioners to substitute one basic premise in the study of CR. However, in the following I shall argue in favor of the necessity of this theoretical adjustment. Following a working definition of Arab Reason, practitioners now approach this specific component of Arab culture from a scientific perspective. Al-Jabri, for instance, identified the main epistemological fundamentals perceiving the formation and evolution of "Arab Reason" from an academic point of view, focusing on seminal treatises written by highly authoritative figures in the Arab-Islamic civilization, such as Al-Farahidi, Al-Shafi'i, Al-Kindi and Al-Farabi along with many others. He asserts that Arab Reason is formed and shaped by such "scholastic" works and figures. Similarly, the following paper urges analysts to focus on the same "scholastic" method to analyze traits of *reason* in rhetorical and textual structures rather than inferring cultural schemes. By the same token, and thorough inquiry in the realm of Arab Reason must start from the Era of Codification although the dawn of Arab-Islamic civilization is marked way before this era. The lack of scholastic recordings before the Era of Codification in earlier periods makes it impossible to undertake a scientific investigation into Arab culture.

I shall also argue that any attempt to reveal subtle and prevailing correlation between cultural components and epistemic activity requires addressing “scholastic” materials, as Al-Jabri (2009/2011) defends this stance in his treatises on Arab Reason:

The ‘Arab reason’ can be viewed as a prevailing reason over the foundation of the totality of the principles and norms establishing knowledge in Arab culture. In such a situation, it is most likely to initiate an objective scientific analysis of these principles and norms which, at the same time, are the basics of knowledge, or its systems, in Arab culture. (pp. 9-10)

Again, the argument here relies on the necessity of establishing a pure scientific analysis of variables, mainly the cultural component responsible of shaping intellectual activity in Arab culture. Reason as defined above, according to the author, prevails over any intellectual activity regardless to time confines; this working definition also allows an objective analysis of the formation of reason in Arab culture and its inevitable influence on contemporary intellectual activity. Recent theories in cultural study proved the dynamic ever-changing nature of human experience in a given community, as mentioned earlier; hence, to rely on *reason* as one specific component restrains such a vigorous variable like *culture* and allows thorough scientific inquiry.

The aim from this paper is not to radically exclude *culture* from CR studies, but merely to limit the scope of inquiry to a specific component in culture –*reasoning*. As in Freudian theory of psychoanalysis, culture functions as the *unconscious* of reasoning, where individuals from a given culture think *through* specific rational underpinnings almost unconsciously, and by the same token, these individuals contribute in shaping these same underpinnings of the culture they belong to. Culture, hence, provides the individual with a referential framework through which he/she perceives the external world. At the same time, the individual’s rational activity, observed in scholastic production, shapes this referential framework (Al-Jabri, 2009/2011). This reciprocal process operates by the same mechanism of “constituent and constituted reason” discussed above.

The necessity to rely on *reason* stems, not only from the feasibility of a thorough scientific inquiry, but it is conceivable for the contrastive dimension of CR studies. *Reason* as encouraged to be used in this review does not imply universal reason known mostly in western philosophy since Aristotle, but it is associated with specific cultures. Reasoning, constrained by the set of intellectual instruments found in a given culture, varies from one culture to another, and this variation could be scientifically studied, not by referring to as a complex and dynamic structure as culture, but rather through a solid referential framework that could be safely essentialized and even contrasted across cultures. Drawing on the same analogy between culture and unconsciousness, *reason* functions as the manifest of culture just as conscious is the manifest of the unconscious, and as psychoanalysts draw conclusions about the unconscious through analyzing dreams of patients, applied linguists could analyze *latent* cultural components of individuals from the rhetorical structure of their composition.

This discussion of Arab reason leads us to narrow the focus of CR from *culture* to *reason*, which is a product of culture, allowing us to avoid disputes over the inclusion of *culture* in CR studies. Such disputes spans from the undesirability to consider culture as a static or essential notion in human experience, to the denunciation of CR studies for their non-scientific and intuitive approach due to their reduction of such a complex notion as culture to mere stereotypical temperaments. *Reason*, therefore urges this review, substitutes *culture* in CR theory; *reason* could be essentialized as the sum of static principles and norms associated with intellectual activity in a given culture; *reason* provides scholastic materials with a set of epistemological fundamentals that could be traced and hence scientifically scrutinized.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper sets as its ultimate goal the reconciliation of inconsistencies found in the field of CR studies. Findings in such studies faced severe criticism for their reliance on rejected hypotheses like Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in their earlier phase; later on, CR studies evolved to more refined version, yet their advocacy of challenged doctrines like Cultural Relativism and Cultural Determinism presented another cause of antagonism between proponents and opponents in the field. The vague conception of crucial constructs in CR investigation contributed to the dispute, as both contentious parties could not come to agreed-upon definition of such *loose* terms as “culture” and “rhetoric.” The lion’s share of the problem, nonetheless, derived from the *modus operandi* adopted by practitioners to approach *culture*. Critics of CR studies find this approach to culture as intuitive and non-scientific, due to its treatment of such an ever-changing construct as culture that renders it to a mere temperament. This approach, claim critics, is rather *essential* and *static* as opposed to the complex and dynamic nature of culture.

To achieve the goal set for in this paper, the design and methodology of this article does not seek to present findings in CR field of study, but traces the advancement of this field to identify inconsistencies in its theory and among practices of its advocates. By identifying two sources of inconsistencies, this paper presents alternative solutions to overcome antagonism among practitioners. Ultimately, the terminology used in this field needs to be carefully adjusted to achieve common grounds for researchers. This review also ambitiously seeks to present alternative methodology to overcome contention caused by the rather arguable approach to *culture* as one of the main constructs in CR theory.

The two-fold goal we hope we have achieved in this review article rests on setting agreed-upon terminology and advocating for a refined construct to substitute *culture* in CR studies. Among the crucial terms, this article discusses the notion of *contrast*, which is part of the study name. “Contrastive” in CR does not necessarily foreground peculiar performance in second language class that usually caused by first language influence. Nonetheless, CR advocates try to lay common grounds for researchers all over the world despite their cultural diversity. Hence, prominent practitioners in CR prefer to label this subfield as *Intercultural Rhetoric* instead of contrastive rhetoric (Connor et al. 2008; Helal, 2013). The other half of the study name, “rhetoric,” has also a share in the emerged inconsistencies, for its varied use across different disciplines in social sciences and humanities. However, the appropriate conceptualization of the term stems from the very origins of its study, Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*. It is brilliantly defined by Aristotle as the competence of finding the appropriate “means of persuasion.” Rhetoric, hence, as the *means* of deciding on the appropriate words, sentences and even sequence of ideas in utterances and written texts, presents the subject matter of analysis in contrastive rhetoric studies, not persuasion as a an end. This working conceptualization of “rhetoric” is yet to help overcome the contention caused by interwoven use of the term in CR studies.

Culture seems to present the most debatable term used in CR researches, not only because of the many accepted definitions of the term in social studies, but also to its dynamic nature and sensitive status. The present study does not aim to limit the definition of such a widely used term, but the ultimate aim of this work is to substitute this contentious variable by another, which is less complex and less dynamic, but simultaneously open to scientific scrutiny: *Reason*. The approach to culture in CR studies presents the breach where most severe criticism centers on, for most studies are accused of rendering such a complex, ever-changing faculty as culture to merely a static, stereotypical temperament, and hence the studies are denounced for their intuitive and pseudo-scientific methods. Reason, contrariwise, could be safely essentialized and traced in scholastic documents from a given culture, which allows for a purely scientific study of this element in culture without causing much antagonism.

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