A study of critical attitude across English and Spanish academic book reviews

Ana I. Moreno [a,*], Lorena Suárez [b]

[a] *Instituto de Estudios Documentales sobre Ciencia y Tecnología (IEDCYT), CSIC, C/Joaquín Costa, 22, 28002 Madrid, Spain*
[b] *Departamento de Filología Moderna, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Campus de Vegazana s/n, 24071, León, Spain*

Abstract

Since the 1990s cross-cultural studies of academic genres are becoming increasingly relevant. One genre that has recently attracted cross-cultural attention is the academic book review. The aim of the present paper is to provide insight into what is expected in terms of overall critical attitude towards the books under review when writing in this academic genre for international journals by comparison to what is conventional in journals of smaller discourse communities. Based on two comparable corpora of 20 academic book reviews of literature in English and 20 in peninsular Spanish, the study compares how much and what kind of critical attitude (positive vs. negative) is typically displayed by expert L1 writers of such texts. Critical attitude is defined in terms of 'critical acts,' which are identified and measured in a way that takes the co-text and the context into account. The results show that the peninsular Spanish writers of literary academic book reviews are much less critical in general and show a much lower tendency to evaluate the book negatively than their Anglo-American counterparts. Results are discussed in the light of information provided by informants.
© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: EAP; Academic book reviews; Evaluation; Critical acts; Critical discourse analysis; Cross-cultural studies

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, more and more academic interactions are taking place in international environments, involving more and more scholars from an increasingly greater number of countries. For instance, Spanish scholars have increasingly made their presence more noticeable in these settings since the late 80s, mainly because of the pressures they felt to publish and present their research in English (Gómez, Sancho, Bordons, & Fernández, 2006). Having to use a language in which they are not fully proficient and for an unfamiliar audience, academics from linguistic backgrounds other than English have found themselves at a disadvantage with respect to other scholars who were already used to publishing and presenting internationally.

Aware of the difficulties these scholars were having in making their research visible to an international audience, a few applied linguists started to carry out cross-cultural studies in the 1990s to find out how the rhetoric of the

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34 91 563 54 82x303; fax: +34 91 564 26 44.
  E-mail addresses: amoreno@cindoc.csic.es (A.I. Moreno), dfmlst@unileon.es (L. Suárez).

academic article in English compared with the rhetoric of this genre in other L1s in order to identify where the possible difficulties might lie (e.g., Taylor & Tingguang, 1991, in relation to Chinese; Duszak, 1994, Polish; Moreno, 1998, Spanish). Drawing on Kaplan's (1987) influential hypothesis of the relevance of first-language rhetorical patterns on second-language choices, such linguists speculated that some of the difficulties might be related to cultural differences in the use of features at rhetorical levels of analysis, i.e., text-linguistic phenomena that go beyond the propositional level. Cross-cultural variation was uncovered in aspects such as rhetorical structure and the use of metadiscourse, which are much more difficult to perceive at first sight than lexis, word order or sentence structure. As more comparable corpora of expert L1 texts started to be collected and analysed, and more rhetorical and pragmatic features in more academic genres were explored across English and many more languages such as Arabic, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Russian – to name but a few- otherwise unnoticeable cross-cultural differences started to emerge.

One genre that has only recently attracted some cross-cultural attention is the academic book review. Its major purpose in international journals is not only to inform readers about new books in a given discipline but also, and mainly, "to evaluate the scholarly work of a professional peer within the scholarly community" (Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998, p. 40). In a cross-cultural study of academic book reviews published in Spanish-, French- and English-written medical journals, Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza (2004) compare negative appraisals, showing that the reviewers of the Spanish-written corpus make more negative appraisals than their French and English counterparts. Suárez and Moreno (2008), for their part, compare the rhetorical structure of this genre in two comparable corpora of Anglo-American and peninsular Spanish academic book reviews of literature, showing that the tactical choices made at the move level (introducing, outlining, highlighting and evaluating the book) are somewhat different across the two communities of expert L1 writers. Moving forward from this research on academic book reviews, the present study hypothesises cross-cultural variation in the overall critical attitude towards the book under review displayed by Anglo-American and Spanish literary scholars, where 'critical attitude' is taken to mean personal opinions, both positive and negative, on the book or an aspect of it. Critical attitude will be measured in this paper in terms of 'critical acts,' exemplified by (1a) and (1b) below:

(1a) And—as always in a book of Kate Flint's—the bibliography is simply extraordinary. [elt76-11E]
(1b) *Cómicos ante el espejo* llena una laguna bibliográfica. [ale246-18S]

   ("*Cómicos ante el espejo* fills a bibliographical gap.")

In order to provide insight into what is expected in terms of overall critical attitude toward the books under review in international journals by comparison to what is conventional in journals of smaller discourse communities, the study will compare the frequency and type of critical acts (positive vs. negative) in two comparable corpora of Anglo-American and peninsular Spanish academic book reviews of literature written by expert L1 writers. This investigation will thus cast some light on which of the two comparable discourse communities is more critical in general and which makes more positive vs. negative critical acts. The study will then explore possible reasons for eventual cross-cultural variation in these two rhetorical features by comparing relevant practices and cultural assumptions underlying each writing culture. Writing culture is understood not in the traditional sense of national or *received* culture, but rather in a way that acknowledges the different domains of social action and interaction around which writing cultures are created, including disciplinary discourse communities. Dynamic rather than static, writing culture in this sense is not only seen as a *product* but also as a process through which cognitive knowledge is both shared and learned (see Atkinson, 2004).

2. The comparable corpora

Since our concern was with expert writers' tactical options when displaying their own opinions, our approach required the analysis of independent but comparable academic book reviews (i.e., not translations) written by competent L1 writers (Connor & Moreno, 2005; Moreno, 2008) or, at any rate, acculturated into the tradition of academic writing in question. For constructing the corpora, confounding factors like the *historical time* in which the texts had been published and the *academic discipline* were taken into account because they might affect the frequency and type of critical acts made (Salager-Meyer, 2006). For this reason, only texts published in 2000, 2001 and 2002, and from two comparable discourse communities within two similar disciplinary fields were included.

Within the general area of the humanities and social sciences in which the book review genre appears to be particularly relevant (Spink, Robins, & Scamber, 1998, p. 369), we chose to focus on the field of literary studies on the grounds that interactions across the English and peninsular Spanish discourse communities are − with the except of English departments − less frequent than in other fields (Cal Varela, Fernández Polo, & Rodríguez, 2005). This choice allows us to control for one further confounding factor: the possible influence of the conventions of one discourse community on the other, which is increasingly likely to occur as a result of the globalisation process affecting academic interactions, especially in the fields of science, technology and medicine (see Gómez et al., 2006, p. 281).

Book reviews published in journals well-known within the two discourse communities of literary scholars were chosen in order to ensure that the texts had been written by expert writers who knew sufficiently well what was expected, or at any rate, whose choices had been considered appropriate or acceptable in the final shape by the gatekeepers of the corresponding discourse communities. The journals selected for the English corpus are the following: *The Review of English Studies* (published in Great Britain; texts from 2002); *Notes and Queries* (published in Great Britain; texts from 2000); *English Literature in Transition. 1880−1920* (published in North-America; texts from 2002); *Studies in Romanticism* (published in North-America; texts from 2001). Those included in the Spanish corpus are: *Revista de Literatura* (published in Spain; texts from 2000); *Revista de Poética Medieval* (published in Spain; texts from 2001); *España Contemporánea* (published in North-America; texts from 2001); *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea* (published in North-America; texts from 2002).

As can be seen, the English corpus aims to strike a balance in terms of the British and the North-American varieties of English in order to control for possible variation across them. Although the Spanish corpus only contained texts written by Spain-based scholars, half of the journals were published in North-America and had been co-edited by North America-based and Spain-based scholars. This decision was taken in order to control for one further confounding factor: the size of the audience (Burgess, 2002; Fredrickson & Swales, 1994). In short, the English corpus aims to represent the English that is considered acceptable by British and North-American journals − the two English varieties most relevant to Spanish scholars from a language learning and publication point of view, while the Spanish corpus aims to represent acceptable peninsular Spanish both nationally and internationally.

Twenty book reviews in English and 20 in Spanish are considered in the present study, five per journal. Since the length of individual texts was also felt to be a potential confounding factor, reviews that were exceptionally short or long were excluded from the sample. Table 1 below shows the average number of words per book review and the average number of words per corpus.

As shown in Table 1, the two corpora are also roughly similar in length, a requirement considered essential for the purposes of the present research since it ensures that the authors in each corpus had similar opportunities to write critical views on the books under review. An additional advantage is that overall quantitative results need not be normalised per number of words, but can be provided in frequency terms in relation to each text and each corpus. The sample, converted into electronic form, has been named the *LIBRES* (for *LI*terary *B*ook *Re*views in *E*nglish-*S*panish) corpus.

3. Method for identifying, interpreting and quantifying critical acts

Identifying critical acts in the two corpora mainly involved identifying the evaluative language used for expressing opinion on the book under review. As the literature on evaluation in discourse shows, a great range of evaluation resources are available to writers (Johnson, 1992; Martin & White, 2005; Thompson & Hunston, 2000; White, 2003). Studies carried out within various frameworks confirm that evaluation has three basic functions, namely: expressing the speaker's or writer's opinion, establishing an interpersonal relationship with the hearer or reader, and organising

Table 1
Number of words in the LIBRES corpus

	English	Spanish
Total number of words	21,382	22,084
Average number of words per book review	1,069.1	1,104.2

the discourse (Thompson & Hunston, 2000). The present paper focuses on the first one, i.e., that of expressing the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities that he or she is talking about, where in this case the particular entities focussed on are the books under review or some aspect of them.

Given the disciplinary-bound, subjective, implicit and sometimes ambiguous nature of evaluation (Hyland, 2005b; Martin, 2003; Swales & Feak, 1994), identifying critical acts on the basis of only explicit evaluation resources was considered insufficient. What is more, departing from a pre-established compendium of evaluation resources was also considered an inadequate method to answer our research questions, since it was impossible to predict a priori the whole array of text realisations that writers might use to offer their opinions on or attitudes towards the books, or all the possible text signals that might help us to predict them. In addition, observing much larger sections of the text than those provided by a single concordance line was sometimes necessary to interpret evaluation phenomena on safer grounds.

For all these reasons, we decided to take a corpus-driven approach (Butler, 2004) based on the manual analysis of the texts, one which took the co-text and the context into account. Our aim was to identify all those text fragments in the book reviews that served writers to make positive or negative judgements on the book under review. The criteria utilised were one of Thompson and Hunston's (2000, p. 22) four evaluation parameters, i.e., the good-bad, and one of Martin's (2000) appraisal systems, i.e., appreciation.

Critical acts in the framework of the present study are defined as positive or negative remarks on a given aspect or sub-aspect of the book under review in relation to a criterion of evaluation with a higher or lower level of generality. Various criteria of evaluation can be used by authors to assess the various aspects of a book: how interesting, useful or relevant it is, its clarity, the rationality of its price, and so on. In his interdisciplinary study of praise and criticism in academic book reviews, Hyland (2000) provides a useful taxonomy of categories or aspects which are commonly assessed, such as the general content of the book, the style, text and publishing issues and the author. Drawing on this taxonomy, the present study classified all the critical remarks in the two corpora according to the particular aspect and sub-aspect of the book that was being assessed in the texts and the evaluation criteria used to assess each aspect. This analysis revealed that the most recurrent criteria of evaluation and aspects commented upon were: (a) the relevance of the points raised in the book as a whole, (b) the value of the book in general, (c) the clarity of the discussion in the entire book and (d) the amount of information provided in the book.

3.1. Critical acts on the propositional plane vs. evaluation on the metadiscourse plane

The type of evaluation item that is more likely to give us the clue to interpret a given text fragment as a positive or negative critical act is a linguistic item – which may be a word or combination of words – situated on the propositional plane of language, by contrast to those evaluation items situated on the interpersonal metadiscourse plane, like modal items, for instance (cf. Hyland, 2005a; Moreno & Suárez, 2008; Vande Kopple, 1985). Even on the propositional plane different types of items may have different evaluative functions. Let us take the following example, where an aspect of the book under review (its long chapter centered on the Ruskin-Whistler controversy) is evaluated and where what is said about it is that it **may** be <u>especially</u> *interesting* for readers of ELT. (A note on notation: in examples (2a–2b) items have been marked differently in order to highlight their different evaluative functions; in what follows the English examples have been more extensively commented upon than the Spanish ones for the sake of the international reader).

(2a) Readers of ELT **may** be <u>especially</u> *interested* in the long chapter centered on the Ruskin-Whistler controversy. [elt76-11E]

(2b) …[la lectura] de la que **puede** ya considerarse una *singular*<u>ísima</u> *obra maestra* de la teoría… [rpm139-19S]

   ("…[the reading] of what **may** already be considered as a <u>really</u> *extraordinary masterpiece* on the theory…")

The items highlighted in (2a) – <u>especially</u>, *interested* and **may** – and in (2b) – <u>ísima</u>, *singular* and **puede** – contain evaluative meanings, but perform different evaluative functions. The adjective *interested* in (2a) and the adjective *singular* (*extraordinary*) plus the evaluative noun *obra maestra* (*masterpiece*) in (2b) show appreciation of the aspects of the book commented upon, leading us to interpret these two evaluative remarks as positive. The adverb <u>especially</u> in (2a) and the superlative suffix <u>ísima</u> in (2b) signal instead the degree or force of the appreciation and thereby project the extent of the writer's reaction towards the aspect commented upon (the so-called 'attitudinal markers' or

'emotionally-charged intensifiers' discussed in Gea Valor, 2000, p. 64). Both language items in combination, espe-cially *interested* in (2a) *and singular*ísima *obra maestra* (really *extraordinary masterpiece*) in (2b), serve to evaluate an entity whose referent is in the world outside the current text, i.e., the aspect of the book under review. In this sense, they can thus be considered as situated on the propositional plane.

By contrast, the modal verbs **may** in (2a) and **puede** (*can* or *may*) in (2b) serve to soften slightly the force of the proposition by adding the extra meaning of *tentativeness*. Since their epistemic meaning affects, or modifies, the meaning of the entire proposition they accompany, without adding any new propositional content to the text, i.e., noth-ing new about the entity of the external world referred to, they can be considered as part of the metadiscourse plane, and hence, as anticipated earlier, will not be focused on in the present paper. What is important to note is that, of all the evaluative items used, it is the semantic meaning of the adjective *interested* in (2a) and the semantic meaning of the adjective *singular* plus the semantic meaning of the compound noun *obra maestra* in (2b) which clearly contribute to our interpretation of (2a) and (2b) as positive critical acts. It is also crucial to point out that, although it may contain various evaluation items, each text fragment functions as just one critical act, as understood by the present study; for this reason, each of these text fragments was registered in our database as just one case.

3.2. The role of the co-text and context in the interpretation of critical acts

Another important aspect of our method of analysis is that it acknowledges that critical acts can be interpreted as positive or negative by virtue of not only semantic but also pragmatic interpretation operating on and beyond the prop-ositional level. Let us consider the following examples of critical acts.

(3a) *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* has been produced on heavy slick paper with generous margins (and an awkward shape), which not only makes it almost impossible for someone without large hands and muscular forearms to hold the book in a comfortable position for reading but also raises the price to $74.95. [elt76-11E]

(3b) …Miguel Medina…abordó…una empresa muy ambiciosa cuyo resultado es el libro que hoy reseñamos, re-pleto de sabiduría humana y teatral, sugestivo en sus reflexiones… [ale238-1S]

("…Miguel Medina…carried out… a very ambitious project whose result is the book under review here, filled with human and theatrical wisdom, suggestive in its reflections…")

While the phrase *an awkward shape* in (3a) clearly leads the reader to interpret the critical act involved as negative, it is not so clear — at least out of context — that a phrase like *with generous margins* in (3a) should also be interpreted as a negative remark. It is the co-text provided by the following relative clause, *which not only makes it almost impos-sible* …, that leads the reader to interpret the more descriptive previous remarks *heavy slick paper* and *generous margins* as negative critical acts, since the relative clause in question provides the relevant contextual assumptions that allow readers to interpret them in that way. Something similar occurs with the ambiguous phrase *ambiciosa* (ambitious) in (3b), which again can only be interpreted as positive by considering it in the context of the following co-text.

Examples (3a) and (3b) clearly illustrate how the interpretation of critical acts as negative or positive depends upon a close reading of the co-text within the same sentence and on attentive consideration of the contextual assumptions brought to bear by such co-text. In other cases, this interpretation is facilitated by the surrounding co-text beyond sen-tence boundaries. This phenomenon is illustrated in example (4) in relation to the evaluative meaning of the adjective *interdisciplinary*. This example contains two critical acts, each of which begins with a number in brackets and ends with double-slashes//.

(4) … [1] *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* is interdisciplinary in the broadest sense.//Amid this richness [2]…some chapters seemed to me more successful than others…//[elt76-11E]

If proposition [1] in (4) is read in isolation, it might be difficult to decide how to interpret the critical act inferred from it, since *being interdisciplinary in the broadest sense* may be taken as a positive or negative quality depending on the value-system of a given discourse community. However, if we go on reading the following sentence, the retrospec-tive label *this richness* helps to disambiguate this possibly uncertain interpretation since the noun *richness* leads us

more clearly to interpret the quality of being interdisciplinary as a positive value of the book. In that sense, although proposition [1] does not unambiguously encode a critical attitude, the reader is able to infer that it is functioning in this way from the metadiscourse label referring back to it in the upcoming sentence. It should be noted that the retrospective metadiscourse label itself (*this richness*) does not add any new propositional content to the text. That is why metadiscourse labels of this kind have not been counted as additional critical acts: only the text fragments to which such metadiscourse items refer.

Even apparently neutral stretches of discourse can be interpreted as positive or negative critical acts thanks to the larger rhetorical context in which they appear, as can be seen in examples (5a) and (5b) below:

(5a) [1] The book is especially impressive in its uses of nineteenth-century science.//For example, [2] Flint makes a brilliant application of debates from experimental physiology to George Eliot's puzzling short novel *The Lifted Veil*.//[3] Another chapter explores the way in which scientists themselves searched for an 'expressive set of visual images' which could satisfactorily convey their explanations of the unseen forces that act on the physical world.//Similarly, [4] the nineteenth-century predecessors of Freud, she argues, were drawn to a 'vocabulary of surface and depth, of the hidden and the revealed, of dark and of light' which was also applied to the topography of modern cities, especially to the threats posed by both the literal and the figurative 'underworld'.//[elt76-11E]

(5b) [1] Este libro comienza con mal pie.//[2] Su primera frase (si dejamos al margen presentaciones, dedicatorias, agradecimientos etc.) es una afirmación terminante: "El teatro a la italiana es introducido en Madrid por el arquitecto italiano Filippo Juvarra en el siglo XVIII."//[ale208-10S]

("This book gets off on the wrong foot. Its first sentence (if we leave aside introductions, dedications, acknowledgments and so on) is a categorical statement: 'The Italian style theatre is introduced in Madrid by the Italian architect Filippo Juvarra in the 18th century.'")

The first act in example (5a) can be interpreted as unambiguously positive because of the presence of the adjective *impressive*, whose standard semantic meaning is usually positive. But the important point is that this positive critical act creates a prospection that leads the reader to predict that the following fragment of text will provide the justification for evaluating the book as impressive from the perspective mentioned (Moreno, 2003; Sinclair, 1993). Critical act [2] can also be interpreted directly as positive because it fulfils the prospection created in act [1], and the adjective *brilliant* clearly leads in that direction. Critical acts [3] and [4], however, do not contain explicit evaluative language. Their interpretation as positive critical acts completely rests on the prospection created in critical act [1] that support will be provided for the previously-stated more general positive critical act. Something similar occurs in the Spanish example, the main difference being that the general critical act [1] in (5b) is negative and therefore prospects some specific negative critical comment(s).

The above examples have aimed to clarify how the procedure used in the present study to identify and interpret critical acts takes into account the different status of the text fragments under consideration. It is in fact in our view possible to distinguish three main cases of text fragments functioning as critical acts on the propositional plane:

(i) those text fragments which, by virtue of their semantic meaning, lead directly to the interpretation of a given positive or negative comment on the book or a sub-aspect of it—examples (1a)−(1b) and (2a)−(2b)—;

(ii) those which, though in principle semantically ambiguous or neutral, by virtue of the relevant contextual assumptions made explicit in the immediately surrounding text, unambiguously lead to the interpretation of a positive or negative comment on the book or a sub-aspect of it − examples (3a) and (3b)—;

(iii) and those which can be interpreted as critical acts because a) they are later on encapsulated by a retrospective metadiscourse label that makes their pragmatic function clear − example (4) − or b) because they are fulfilling a prospection created in the previous discourse about a forthcoming positive, or negative, critical act − examples (5a) and (5b).

Finally, the present study has also considered text fragments that comment on how the book could have been better or could have been improved, i.e., unreal suggestions for improvement (cf. Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 134). Such comments are usually expressed indirectly, as can be observed in examples (6a) and (6b) below.

(6a) …its theoretical sections would certainly have benefited from greater clarity of definition. [res246-5E]

(6b) … y, asimismo, también sería deseable una mayor atención a la calidad del material gráfico que proporciona. [ale241-2S]

("…and, likewise, it would have been better if the book had paid more attention to the quality of the graphical material provided.")

3.3. Quantifying critical acts

The most challenging part of our method was quantifying critical acts in a way that allowed a meaningful cross-cultural comparison (Moreno & Suárez, 2008). In line with a functional perspective to the study of language and texts, our method of measuring critical acts was not based on grammatical criteria, thus diverging in this respect from similar studies on English academic book reviews, such as Hyland (2000). This decision was taken for three reasons: first, because positive and negative critical acts are sometimes clustered within the same sentence; second, because critical acts in the same sentence do not always refer to the same aspect of the book under review; and, third, because previous studies have pointed out that peninsular Spanish and English differ in the way that information is packed into clauses/sentences. As Dafouz Milne (2003, p. 41) also shows in her contrastive study of newspaper editorials, peninsular Spanish writers prefer to produce longer sentences coordinated by additive markers, while British English writers use shorter sentences separated by full stops. If this is also the case in this genre—as it seems to be—, then Spanish writers may have been more likely to pack more critical acts within the same sentence. The need thus arose to break the text up into units on other than syntactic terms.

Our operational definition of 'critical act' is thus any structural unit, irrespective of its lexico-grammatical configuration, that contains both the aspect or sub-aspect commented upon and what is said about it, as shown by the critical acts in extracts (7a) and (7b), below. (A note on notation: the braces { } indicate the beginning and end of a sequence of critical acts; the critical acts in each sequence are highlighted in bold and numbered in the preceding squared brackets []; the information in parentheses () before each act indicates the aspect or sub-aspect of the book evaluated in that act, which is sometimes referred back to again by other acts in the same sequence or is implicit; and the information in parentheses () after each act indicates the criteria of evaluation used to assess the given aspect or sub-aspect). According to this definition, sequence {1} in extract (7a) contains one sentence and two critical acts, sequence {2} in (7a) contains one sentence and four critical acts; and the sequence in extract (7b) consists of one sentence and two critical acts.

(7a) {1(AUTHOR'S WRITING STYLE) [1] **Hofkosh illuminates what she writes about** (CLARITY)//, even when (BOOK'S CONTENT) [2] **she doesn't say quite enough** (QUANTITY)//}
{2 (CHAPTER'S CONTENT) [1] **The chapter on Mary Shelley's stories**, for example, **is** probably **the most underwritten** (QUANTITY)//, and still [2] **it is interesting** (INTEREST)//and [3] **informative throughout** (QUANTITY)//, [4] **full of insights about gift-book anthologies and about Shelley's tactics for handling the confines of that literary outlet**… (INSIGHT)//} [srf466-19E]

(7b) {(CHAPTERS IN GENERAL) [1] **Son capítulos que no desmerecen de los anteriores** (VALUE)//, pero que [2] **suponen menos novedades** por estar estudiada esta época en la *Historia de los Teatros Nacionales* (NOVELTY).//[ale208-10S]

("{(CHAPTERS IN GENERAL) [1] **These chapters do not compare unfavourably with the previous ones** (VALUE)//, but [2] **they are not so novel** since this age has been studied in the *Historia de los Teatros Nacionales* (NOVELTY).//}")

Another pattern is the presence of two critical acts between which there is a general-specific relationship. The sentence in extract (8) below illustrates this pattern. As can be seen, the second act is more specific and serves to support the first one, which is more general. The attitudinal interpersonal metadiscourse device (*quite unproblematically*) confirms this division into two acts, since it only seems to evaluate negatively the proposition provided in the second act.

(8) {(BOOK'S CONTENT) Similarly, [1] **Irwin remains blind to gender issues** (CRITICAL JUDGEMENT)//, as when [2] **he** *quite unproblematically* **approves of Hardy's assertion that Stephen should have dragged Elfride to the altar and forced her to marry him** (CRITICAL JUDGEMENT//.} [elt94-12E]

4. Contrastive results and discussion

As can be seen in Fig. 1 below, there is a much higher frequency of critical acts in the English corpus (459) than in the Spanish corpus (299). This difference is mainly due to the different weight that negative critical acts receive across the two corpora. While the frequency of positive critical acts is similar in the two corpora (289 in the English corpus vs. 258 in the Spanish corpus), the frequency of negative critical acts is radically different, with 170 negative critical acts in the English corpus and only 41 in the Spanish corpus.

If we now compare the distribution of positive and negative acts in relation to the total frequency of acts across the two corpora by using the non−parametric Chi-square test of homogeneity in a contingency table, the difference obtained is statistically significant for $p < 0.01$ ($x^2 = 1$, $N = 758$, $=49.03$, $p = 0$.). Although both corpora contain more positive critical acts, they are proportionally much more frequent in the Spanish corpus (86.28%) than in the English one (62.96%). By contrast, the relative frequency of negative critical acts is much higher in the English corpus (37.03%) than in the Spanish one (13.71%). This difference is especially revealing if we consider that 90% of Spanish academic book reviews, versus 25% of Anglo-American ones, contain less than three negative acts (see Table 2 below). These results apparently contradict those obtained by Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza (2004) (see Section 1). However, it would be necessary to know the exact contents of their Spanish-written corpus − e.g., some of the book reviews included in their corpus are translations from English and some may have been written by South-American writers − and to apply the same method for identifying and quantifying negative appraisals before these discrepancies can be adequately assessed.

Our findings show that Anglo-American and peninsular Spanish writers of academic book reviews of literature use different strategies to achieve the purpose(s) of this genre within the two comparable discourse communities. While the Anglo-American book review writers display a much more critical attitude in general and a more balanced critical approach in particular, their peninsular Spanish counterparts clearly prefer to be more descriptive or, at least, more positive in critical approach by showing a much lower tendency to evaluate the book or some aspect of it negatively.

4.1. Getting behind the data: Creating more context through e-mail interviews

In order to integrate the quantitative corpus-driven research, structured e-mail interviews were sent to the main participants involved in the production of exemplars of this genre in this discipline, i.e., the literary book reviewers included in the sample. One purpose of this procedure was to obtain information that could better explain the observed differences in critical attitude and approach (see Connor, 2004b). Although the evidence is too limited to generalise from, since only four Anglo-American reviewers and three Spanish reviewers responded, some of their answers
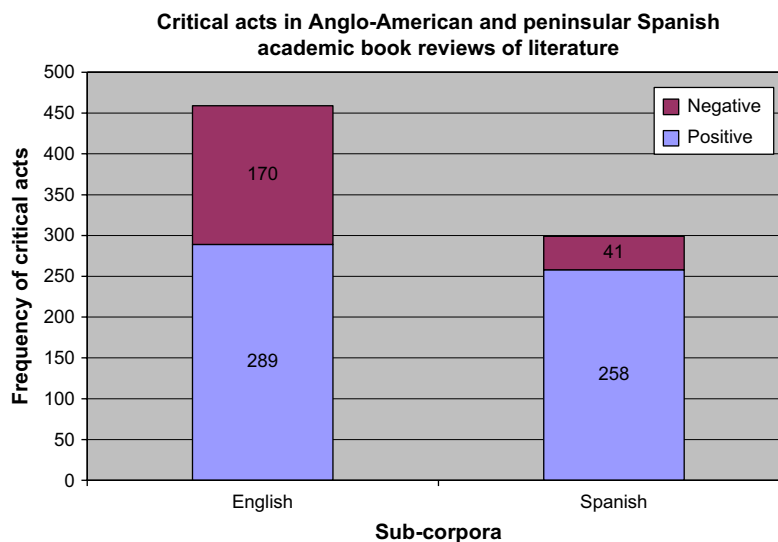

Fig. 1. Absolute frequency of critical acts in the *LIBRES* corpus.

Table 2
Absolute frequency of critical acts per book review in the LIBRES corpus

Book review	Critical acts in English		Critical acts in Spanish	
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
1	24	7	19	0
2	4	1	19	9
3	18	18	3	1
4	15	15	17	0
5	4	8	17	1
6	15	16	9	3
7	19	0	15	0
8	22	3	16	0
9	25	8	16	3
10	11	19	11	18
11	22	12	6	1
12	19	19	2	0
13	5	4	2	2
14	15	13	13	0
15	10	8	21	0
16	13	7	9	0
17	14	4	11	0
18	11	0	6	0
19	17	8	33	3
20	6	0	13	0
Total	289	170	258	41

suggest slightly different views of academic book reviewing and different practices in some respects that might explain the differences. Both the Anglo-American and the Spanish informants consider that a book review should be honest and balanced, or even negative if the book deserves it. However, while none of the Spanish informants see the point in reviewing a book that is very bad, the Anglo-American scholars assume that very bad books may also get reviewed. Compare citations (9S) and (9E) below:

(9S) Normalmente, si todo es criticable en un libro, lo más recomendable es no hacer siquiera la reseña. (''Normally, if everything is criticisable in a book, it is most recommendable not to review it at all.'')

(9E) Depends on the book! If it's terrible, really terrible, then you have to say so. ….What you want the reviewer to do is say what they think fairly, elegantly, and constructively.

Another potential explanatory factor might be that, whereas none of the Anglo-American literary scholars has ever reviewed a book written by a colleague or a friend, and none would consider this practice acceptable, the three Spanish reviewers have sometimes done so, and admit that this factor shifts or may shift their critical approach. One Spanish informant even confesses that he would only review the book by a friend, if he considers the book good, as illustrated by (10) below:

(10) Sí, he escrito reseñas de colegas y amigos. … Creo que, en efecto, sí condiciona la reseña la relación que se tenga con la persona que sea autora del libro. Lo que yo he intentado siempre es, cuando la persona era amiga, hacer la reseña sólo en el caso de que el libro me pareciese bueno. (''Yes, I have reviewed books written by colleagues and friends …. I believe that the relationship with the author of the book indeed influences the reviewer's critical approach. What I have always tried to do is, if the person is a friend, to review the book only if I consider it good.'')

Another interesting difference observed is that, whereas all the Anglo-American informants had been invited to write the reviews, two of the three Spanish informants had sometimes taken the initiative to submit their reviews and one of them had even been solicited reviews by the authors of the books themselves. As reported by two Spanish informants in (11) and (12) below,

(11) La gran mayoría me fueron solicitadas, o bien por las revistas, o bien por los autores. ("I was solicited most of the reviews, whether by the journals or by the authors.")

(12) Al principio las proponía yo (unas diez), …. ("In the beginning, I would submit them on my own initiative (about ten) …")

5. Concluding remarks

The present paper has reported on a cross-cultural enquiry into how much and what type of critical attitude towards books under review in academic book reviews it is appropriate for Anglo-American and peninsular Spanish literary scholars to display. The quantitative results have shown that the Spanish writers are less critical/evaluative in general and relatively much more positive than their Anglo-American counterparts. The qualitative method has suggested the influence of such potential factors as whether the reviewer has been invited by the journal or the author of the book or has taken the initiative to submit the review, the kind of relation between the reviewer and the author of the book, and the informants' view of the quality of the books that should be reviewed.

If these practices and cultural assumptions about literary academic book reviewing underlying these two writing cultures were representative of the two discourse communities at large, they might explain why the Anglo-American literary book review writers are in a better position to provide their opinion more freely and objectively than their Spanish counterparts. Although it would of course be necessary to follow up this survey with a larger sample to confirm the influence of these factors, the kind of procedure used has proven to be adequate to uncover some relevant contextual information that might explain the quantitative results, thereby contributing to work in the emerging field of intercultural rhetoric research (Connor, 2004a).

Our paper suggests that intercultural variability in this case could be more related to the size of the academic community the reviewer and the author of the book belong to than to the size of the audience in the broader discourse community. Given the denser relational networks of smaller academic communities, authors are more likely to have closer personal relations with their reviewers and greater possibilities to play a role in their future career than in larger discourse communities. Thus, the reviewer's attitude towards the book under review (and indirectly its author) in smaller academic communities is more likely to be affected, however much integrity the reviewer has, than in larger discourse communities. This is where the display of critical attitude in the discourse of academic book reviewing could be seen as a reflection of the social power relationships established among active participants in the discourse community. The display of critical attitude can also be considered as an element of social practices in the sense that its skilful management allows reviewers to establish the desired relationship with the author of the book under review. By exploring this kind of interactions, this paper contributes to the developing field of critical discourse analysis (cf. Choulariaki & Fairclough, 1999).

The purposes of academic book reviews are complex and multiple (Swales, 2004) but, as suggested by our study, this multiplicity seems to be balanced in a different way across the two writing cultures under comparison. Although book reviews in both writing cultures are expected to have both an informative and an evaluative function, the evaluative function of Spanish literary book reviews appears rather blurred against a background of other more prominent social and career purposes. If genres are characterised primarily by the set of communicative purposes identified and mutually understood by members of the professional or academic community in which they regularly occur (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 2004), then it may be relevant to ask whether we are talking exactly about the same genre when we consider academic book reviews produced by Anglo-American and peninsular Spanish literary scholars at the present time.

Preparing would-be scholars in writing book reviews for academic journals in both a national and an international setting should very beneficial, since writing exemplars of this genre is one of those tasks academics may have to do sometime in their life, even at college. As Swales and Feak (1994, p. 131) note, certain instructors in the USA from a wide range of programmes already ask students to write critiques as assignments on a regular basis. Cross-cultural studies like the present one may then have important implications for these academic writing courses, because they clearly show how meaning cannot be dissociated from culture and social interaction (Kramsch, 1993, p. 206). Understanding the cultural and social context in which meaning will need to emerge in the book review genre should help to orient future English and peninsular Spanish writing courses that include this genre both as L1 and L2.

Based on the present results, we predict that peninsular Spanish literary scholars may have initial difficulties with writing effective critique assignments or publishing academic book reviews in Anglo-American journals due to the

somewhat different critical approaches they are used to taking. As one of our external informants suggested, a total lack of unbiased objective assessment has the effect of ''undermining the reliability and credibility of the reviewer and of the book's worth.'' Since a direct unconscious transfer of the Spanish conventions might affect the effectiveness of their texts in international journals, the first lesson to teach these writers about this genre, after discussing its purpose, could be that ''no book review should be just praise'' (cf. Tracy, 1997, p. 117).

Acknowledgements

References

Atkinson, D. (2004). Contrasting rhetorics/contrasting cultures: why contrastive rhetoric needs a better conceptualization of culture. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 3*, 277−289.

Bhatia, B. K. (2004). *Worlds of written discourse*. London: Continuum.

Burgess, S. (2002). Packed houses and intimate gatherings: audience and rhetorical structure. In J. Flowerdew, & C. N. Candlin (Eds.), *Academic discourse* (pp. 197−215). Great Britain: Longman.

Butler, C. S. (2004). Corpus studies and functional linguistic theories. *Functions of Language, 11*(2), 147−186.

Cal Varela, M., Fernández Polo, F. J., & Rodríguez Juiz, V. (2005). A survey of the English language needs of the research and teaching staff at the University of Santiago: preliminary results on necessities and lacks. In M. L. Carrió (Ed.), *Perspectivas Interdisciplinares de la Lingüística Aplicada* (pp. 211−220). Valencia: UPV-AESLA.

Choulariaki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Connor, U. (2004a). Introduction. Contrastive rhetoric: recent developments and relevance for English for Academic Purposes. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 3*, 271−276.

Connor, U. (2004b). Intercultural rhetoric research: beyond texts. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 3*(4), 291−304.

Connor, U., & Moreno, A. (2005). Tertium comparationis: a vital component in contrastive research methodology. In P. Bruthiaux, D. Atkinson, W. G. Egginton, W. Grabe, & V. Ramanathan (Eds.), *Directions in applied linguistics: Essays in honor of Robert B. Kaplan* (pp. 153−167). Clevendon, England: Multilingual Matters.

Dafouz Milne, E. (2003). Metadiscourse revisited: A contrastive study of persuasive writing in professional discourse. *Estudios Ingleses de La Universidad Complutense, 11*, 29−52.

Duszak, A. (1994). Academic discourse and intellectual styles. *Journal of Pragmatics, 2*, 291−313.

Fredrickson, K., & Swales, J. M. (1994). Competition and discourse community: Introductions from 'Nysvenska Studier'. In B.-L. Gunnarsson, P. Linell, & B. Nordberg (Eds.), *Text and talk in professional contexts* (pp. 9−22). Uppsala, Sweden: ASLA.

Gea Valor, M. L. (2000). *A pragmatic approach to politeness and modality in the book review articles*. Valencia: Universitat de Valéncia. SELL Monographs. Lengua Inglesa.

Gómez, I., Sancho, R., Bordons, M., & Fernández, M. T. (2006). La I + D en España a través de sus publicaciones y patentes. In J. Sebastián, & E. Muñoz (Eds.), *Radiografía de la investigación pública en España* (pp. 275−302). Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva.

Hyland, K. (2000). Praise and criticism: interactions in book reviews. In K. Hyland (Ed.), *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing* (pp. 41−62). Harlow, England: Longman.

Hyland, K. (2005a). *Metadiscourse*. London: Continuum.

Hyland, K. (2005b). Stance and engagement: a model of interaction in academic discourse. *Discourse Studies, 7*(2), 173−192.

Johnson, D. M. (1992). Compliments and politeness in peer-review texts. *Applied Linguistics, 13*(1), 51−71.

Kaplan, R. B. (1987). Cultural thought patterns revisited. In U. Connor, & R. B. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text* (pp. 9−21). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lindholm-Romantschuk, Y. (1998). *Scholarly book reviewing in the social sciences and humanities: The flow of ideas within and amongst disciplines*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Martin, J. (2000). Beyond exchange: APPRAISAL systems in English. In S. Hunston, & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Evaluation in text. Authorial stance and the construction of discourse* (pp. 142−175). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Martin, J. R. (2003). Introduction. *Text, 23*(2), 171−181.

Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation. Appraisal in English*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moreno, A. (1998). The explicit signalling of premise-conclusion sequences in research articles: a contrastive framework. *Text, 18*(4), 545−585.

Moreno, A. (2003). The role of cohesive devices as textual constraints on relevance: a discourse-as-process view. *International Journal of English Studies, 3*(1), 111−165.

Moreno, A. (2008). The importance of comparing comparable corpora in cross-cultural studies. In U. Connor, E. Nagelhout, & W. Rozycki (Eds.), *Contrastive rhetoric: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric* (pp. 25−41). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Moreno, A., & Suárez, L. (2008). A framework for comparing evaluation resources across academic texts. *Text & Talk*, 28(4).

Salager-Meyer, F. (2006). From "Mr. Guthrie is profoundly mistaken." to "Our data do not seem to confirm the results of a previous study on.": a diachronic study of polemicity in academic writing (1810−1995). *Ibérica, 1*, 5−28.

Salager-Meyer, F., & Alcaraz Ariza, M. A. (2004). Negative appraisals in academic book reviews: a cross-linguistic approach. In C. Candlin, & M. Gotti (Eds.), *Intercultural aspects of specialised communication* (pp. 149−172). Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Sinclair, J. M. (1993). Written discourse structure. In J. M. Sinclair, M. Hoey, & G. Fox (Eds.), *Techniques of description: Spoken and written discourse, a Festschrift for Malcolm Coulthard* (pp. 6−31). London: Routledge.

Spink, A., Robins, D., & Scamber, L. (1998). Use of scholarly book reviews: implications for electronic publishing and scholarly communication. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science, 49*(4), 364−374.

Suárez, L., & Moreno, A. (2008). The rhetorical structure of literary academic book reviews: an English−Spanish cross-linguistic approach. In U. Connor, E. Nagelhout, & W. Rozycki (Eds.), *Contrastive rhetoric: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric* (pp. 147−168). Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Swales, J. M. (2004). *Research genres*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (1994). *Academic writing for graduate students*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Taylor, G., & Tingguang, C. (1991). Linguistic, cultural, and subcultural issues in contrastive discourse analysis: Anglo-American and Chinese scientific texts. *Applied Linguistics, 12*(3), 319−336.

Thompson, G., & Hunston, S. (2000). Evaluation: an introduction. In S. Hunston, & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Evaluation in text. Authorial stance and the construction of discourse* (pp. 1−27). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tracy, K. (1997). Constructing an academic book review. *Human Studies, 20*, 117−123.

Vande Kopple, W. J. (1985). Some exploratory discourse on metadiscourse. *College Composition and Communication, 36*, 82−93.

White, P. R. R. (2003). Beyond modality and hedging: a dialogic view of the language of intersubjective stance. *Text, 23*(2), 259−284.

Ana I. Moreno is a tenured senior lecturer at the Universidad de León. Currently she is a researcher at Madrid's *Instituto de Estudios Documentales sobre Ciencia y Tecnología* (IEDCYT) − CSIC where she conducts studies using discourse analysis to give an intercultural perspective on scientific information and communication. She has published in *ESPJ, Text&Talk and JEAP*.

Lorena Suárez received her PhD. in English Philology from the University of León, Spain. Her fields of study are contrastive rhetoric and discourse analysis. She has focused her research on the book review genre, from the perspective of genre analysis and evaluation in discourse.