

The exploration of the evaluative voice in book reviews: a cross-cultural approach¹

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Introduction

Book reviews (BRs) are meant to cast a critical light on the novelties and advances of a given discipline. The use of a critical voice in this academic genre very much depends on factors that go beyond the text itself and are rooted in the discipline community of the reviewer and in other extralinguistic factors such as the his/her position with respect to that of the reviewed. The linguistic and cultural context in which the review emerges may also account for the (non-) critical positions book reviewers adopt. In this paper, a cross-cultural perspective is taken to explore the influence of the linguistic and cultural context in the degree of “evaluativeness” of the BR. Thus, this paper is conceived as a contribution to the intercultural research on academic writing and, more specifically, on BRs, which has already been adopted to identify divergences between, for instance, English and Chinese (Taylor and Chen, 1991; Bloch and Chi, 1995), English, French and Spanish (Salager-Meyer *et al.*, 2003), English and French (Salager-Meyer *et al.*, 2005), English and Italian (Giannoni, 2006), and English and Spanish (Salager-Meyer and Alcaraz Ariza, 2003; Suárez, 2006; Moreno and Suárez, 2008a, 2008b).

The aim of this study is to draw conclusions about whether the same disciplinary community (historians) use BRs for the same (critical) purposes when working in two different linguistic and cultural contexts (English and Spanish).

For such purposes, two features are analysed: (i) the frequency of use of positive and negative evaluative acts, and (ii) their distribution along the text, following the BRs move structure described by Motta-Roth (1998). Evaluative acts are defined, following

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Suárez and Moreno (2008a, 2008b) 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 degree of generality’ (2008b: 18).

Corpus and method

To carry out this study, a corpus of 60 History BRs (30 in English and 30 in Spanish) was collected as a “comparable corpus” (Connor and Moreno, 2005; Moreno, 2008). This comparability was here ensured by the fact that all the BRs were book reviews (not book notes or book commentaries) published between the years 2000 and 2007; the texts within each subcorpus were comparable in length; all of them were single-authored and written by different reviewers; all of them referred to just one book, avoiding edited books or proceedings, and all of them dealt with contemporary history. Finally, all the book reviewers contributing to the journals in English were affiliated to British institutions, and all those contributing to the Spanish journals were affiliated to Spanish institutions. To ensure comparability of readership and quality, the journals selected were all included in the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH) of the European Science Foundation and all of them were ranked A or B.²

The corpus collected amounted to a total of 87,092 words. History BRs were found to be considerably longer in English than in Spanish. Thus the total number of words of the English subcorpus is 52,351 words (1,745 words per text on average) versus 34,741 words in the Spanish subcorpus (1,158 words per text on average). The fact that we were not dealing with comparable corpora in terms of extension was accounted for in the methods by normalizing results per 1,000 words.

Each evaluative act was tagged as positive or negative. Following Suárez and Moreno (2008a, 2008b) each act was identified not as a grammatical unit but as a functional unit: any structural unit, irrespective of its lexicogrammatical configuration, that

² The journals in English comprised: *English Historical Review* (A); *History of European Ideas* (B) and *History Workshop Journal* (A). The Spanish Journals included: *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* (B); *Hispania: Revista Española de Historia* (A) and *Pasado y Memoria* (B).

contains both the aspect commented upon and what is said about it. Here are some examples which illustrate the way in which the tagging of evaluative acts was carried out:

[1-] Its style will not excite, but [2+] diligent mining of the book will reward the conscientious reader. [English Historical Review BR 2]

[1+] *Un discours national?* ofrece respuestas, [2+] nos pone ante una visión clara, sugerente, y en muchos aspectos innovadora de la realidad española del ochocientos; y [3+] al mismo tiempo coloca al lector frente a nuevas preguntas o preguntas renovadas. [Hispania BR1]

[[1+] *Un discours national?* provides answers, [2+] offers a clear, suggestive and, in many ways, innovative vision of the Spanish reality in the 1800s and, [3+] at the same time, challenges the reader with new or renewed answers.] [My own translation]

Results and discussion

The data obtained after the normalisation of evaluative acts (positive and negative) per 1,000 words in the two subcorpora show that, in general terms, there are similar total frequencies of use of evaluative acts in both subcorpora. We also observe that in both subcorpora positive evaluation is more frequent than negative evaluation.

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	TOTAL
BRITISH BRs	5.9 /309 (64.6%)	3.22 /169 (35.3%)	9.17 /478
SPANISH BRs	11.08 /385 (91.8%)	0.97 /34 (8.1%)	12.06 /419

Table 1. Normalized and raw figures of positive and negative evaluative acts in British and Spanish history BRs. Percentages in brackets.

However, Spanish BRs show a much greater imbalance between positive and negative evaluative acts than the British texts, where the frequency of negative acts is quite relevant (35.3%) if compared with the Spanish BRs (8.1%).

To gain further insights into the degree of evaluativeness in British and Spanish BRs, the distribution of evaluative acts along the BRs was explored. According to Motta-

Roth (1998), the rhetorical structure of BRs consists of four moves, identified in terms of the function they play in the genre: 1) Introducing the book, 2) Outlining the book, 3) Highlighting parts of the book, and 4) Providing a closing evaluation of the book. BRs present a more global view of the book at the beginning of the text (Move 1) where general information about the book is provided, placing it in the disciplinary context. Moves 2 and 3 display a more detailed description of the book, and a focus on more specific aspects. Finally, Move 4 presents again a more general view and the appraisal of the book is given within the disciplinary context.

Following Motta-Roth's proposal, the BRs rhetorical structure was identified and the counting of evaluative acts across moves was carried out, showing the following results:

		BRITISH BRs	SPANISH BRs
MOVE 1	Positive	0.74 /39 (88.6%)	0.69/24 (100%)
	Negative	0.09/5 (11.3%)	0/0 (0%)
MOVE 2	Positive	1.85/97 (86.6%)	3.91/136 (99.2%)
	Negative	0.28/15 (13.3%)	0.02/1 (0.72%)
MOVE 3	Positive	2.63/138 (52%)	4.43/154 (83.2%)
	Negative	2.42/127 (47.9%)	0.89/31 (16.7%)
MOVE 4	Positive	0.66/35 (61.4%)	2.04/71 (97.2%)
	Negative	0.42/22 (38.5%)	0.05/2 (2.7%)
TOTAL	Positive	5.9 /309 (64.4%)	11.08/385 (91.8%)
	Negative	3.22/169 (35.3%)	0.97/34 (8.1%)

Table 2. Normalized and raw figures of positive and negative evaluative acts per move in British and Spanish history BRs. Percentages of use per move in brackets.

Two diagrams show the flow of positive/negative evaluation along the texts:

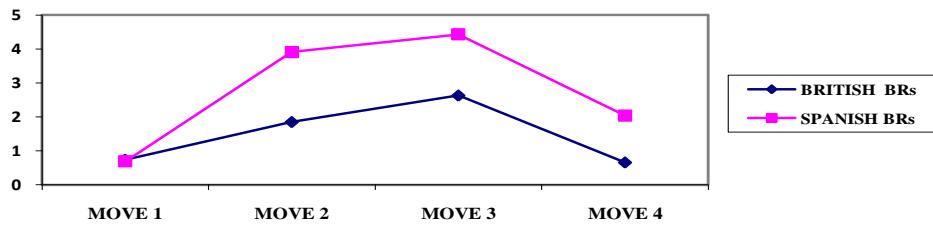


Figure 1. Distribution of **positive evaluative acts** per move in British and Spanish history BRs.

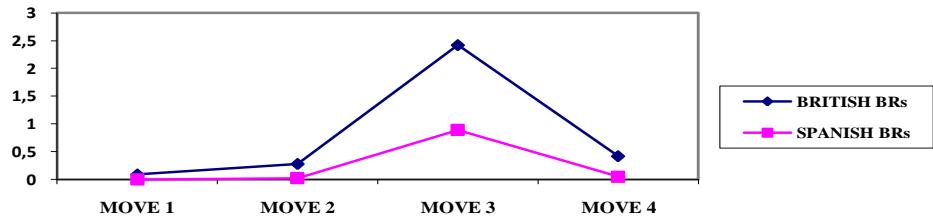


Figure 2. Distribution of **negative evaluative acts** per move in British and Spanish history BRs .

There are no relevant differences in the way positive and negative evaluation is distributed along British and Spanish BRs. What we find in both contexts is: (i) a tendency to praise the book in the central moves, both when general aspects of the book (structure and organization) are commented upon (Move 2) and when chapters or detailed aspects are under focus (Move 3), and (ii) a tendency to criticize only specific aspects of the book (Move 3). Thus, the flow of evaluation is similar in both cultural contexts, with peaks of praise and criticism in the central parts of the BR. It can be inferred, therefore, that there are common, conventional generic patterns of evaluation distribution shared by the disciplinary community of historians in both cultures. The obvious difference between these texts in both linguistic and cultural contexts lies, however, in the degree and the intensity with which those patterns are used. British book reviewers tend to (i) praise general aspects of the book under review, (ii) evaluate specific issues positively or

negatively to the same degree and (iii) recommend or not the book under review. Spanish book reviewers, on the contrary, tend to (i) praise both general and specific aspects of the book and (ii) usually recommend its reading. Criticism is scantily used when highlighting specific points and, in the final stage, when offering general appraisal. The absence of criticism both of general and specific issues in Spanish BRs indicates, then, that in Spanish history BRs issues of the field are not normally problematised.

These findings were corroborated by the results obtained from a questionnaire submitted to the book reviewers and the editors of the journals involved in the present study. As stated in the questionnaires, even if Spanish reviewers and review editors shared with their British peers expectations that this academic genre will be both informative and evaluative, the Spanish book reviewers tended to show a general mistrust with respect to the function of the BR as an evaluative genre. The fact, then, that Spanish BRs do not serve as a platform for disciplinary discussion and debate might explain why it is very common to leave the writing of these texts in the hands of junior researchers and the low rating given to BRs in CVs and academic activity in Spain.

In all, the functional divergences observed between Spanish and British history BRs can be explained in terms of a different understanding of what the main purpose and function of the BR should be. Although there is common agreement that BRs fulfill two primary functions, informative and evaluative (Hyland, 2000; Gea Valor, 2000-01; Salager-Meyer *et al.*, 2005; Suárez, 2006; Moreno and Suárez, 2008a, 2008b; *inter alia*), we can certainly conclude from the present study that the cultural variable influences the degree of ‘evaluativeness’ history BRs display and thus the primary function they fulfil. In fact, the evaluative function of the Spanish history BR can be questioned and, as a result, its identification as an evaluative academic genre.

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