

## **On the Quantification of Subjective Analysis in Cross-Linguistic Studies of Rhetoric\***

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### **1. Introduction**

Many studies of rhetoric and argumentation apply analysis models which necessitate subjective judgments by the analyst. The researcher may want to judge whether a sentence is intended by the writer<sup>1</sup> to be taken as evidence for the claim in proceeding sentence, or whether a particular sentence constitutes a claim by the writer. Or a researcher might be looking to determine whether a particular paragraph contains the main point a writer is trying to make. Such judgments are subjective in the sense that the human analyst must make judgments based upon their linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge; judgments cannot be solely defined by the form of the statement, for example, and left to a computer or non-expert to analyze.

It is attractive to make many such judgments and analyze the results quantitatively. This approach has been productive in identifying intra-group trends which can then be compared with other groups. Does the sequencing of a claim and its evidence differ between English and Japanese editorials (Spreadbury 2018)? Do American and Japanese NPOs employ different argumentation strategies in their mission statements (Kitazawa 2018)? Do Korean and English research papers differ in the structure of their introductions (Ryoo 2008)? Do Americans and Japanese tend to organize their TED Talks speeches differently (Sakurada 2018)? These recent studies represent just a handful of the multitude of studies in which this approach has produced results.<sup>2</sup>

Studies such as these may explain their methodology in detail, give examples, or even show and explain full analyses of a number of texts. However, due to the number of data being analyzed, these papers cannot explain or often even show their full analyses of all data. The authors might be thought to be saying, ‘This is my methodology and here are some examples. I analyzed  $n$  more data in the same way.’ In this kind of research in particular, where we have hidden analyses, we must give extra consideration to whether the analysis is consistent (the author applies a framework consistently, analyzing similar data in similar ways) and reproducible (other researchers can take the methodology as presented and obtain

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<sup>1</sup> This paper mainly has in mind written monologues and thus uses the terms ‘writer’ and ‘reader’. This does not imply that similar phenomena may not occur in spoken language.

<sup>2</sup> These studies may create original models suited to the phenomena being analyzed, or may apply existing frameworks such as RST (Mann & Thompson 1988), Toulmin’s (2003) argumentation model, or Schellens’ (1987) argumentation schemes in a top-down manner.

similar results).

This short paper has two main focuses. Firstly, I discuss the methodological issues of reproducibility and consistency that arise in the quantitative analysis of subjective judgments. Many examples here are from Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST), this framework being one which necessitates nuanced judgments on the nature of the relationship between units of text without relying on form. I discuss how perfect reproducibility and consistency are not possible with such fine-grained judgments, as well as possible strategies to mitigate these issues when we cannot rely on form. In particular, I discuss (i) expanding our definition of form beyond traditional signal words; and (ii) how characteristics of unsignalled relations, such as their being communicative acts which entail social responsibility on the part of the writer (Mann & Thompson 1986), allow us to better test for their existence.

Secondly, I discuss the issue of exceptions to general trends. A study may discover differing trends between languages, but likely there will be examples which go against the prevailing trend in each language. I draw hints from the discussion of similar issues in Conversation Analysis (CA) to stress the importance of a principled analysis of exceptions, and link this to Matsuda's (1997: 53) "dynamic model". I argue that taking exceptions seriously, and not simply focusing on the most salient trends, has two main benefits: (i) We gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under examination and how writers' purposes influence their choices of different rhetorical patterns; and (ii) we help avoid the perpetuation of stereotypes and taking away of student agency which have been criticisms of Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) observations when applied to foreign language education (Kubota & Lehner 2004; Matsuda 1997) by focusing on function and purpose, not simply broad inter-language differences.

### **1.1. Not the focus of this paper: studies without a quantitative focus**

Purely qualitative studies are not the focus of this paper as reproducibility and consistency are less of an issue here. Such studies are characterized by a relatively low number of data analyzed which can be presented in full to the reader, and their value tends to be in their presentation of insights into new or under-explored phenomena, rather than the sort of generalizations and trends which one hopes to discover through quantification.

An example of such a study would be Hinds' (1990) famous paper showing a similar organization among six texts from four different Asian countries; the value of this study is not that it allows us to make generalizations about how texts are commonly organized in these countries. Rather, Hinds uses the texts to discuss flaws in the traditional dichotomy of induction and deduction as applied to the organization of texts, and suggests how a text may be well-formed and coherent in ways not expected from an English-speaking background.

Another example would be Hoey's (2000) study of some stylistic features of two passages from two works of Chomsky. Again, the contribution here is not one of generalization; we do not get a model of how Chomsky might phrase any given argument. Rather, the examples are used to shed light on the under-explored phenomenon of hidden evaluation, as well as discuss the rhetorical strategies which are used to preemptively dissuade opposition to one's claims.

## 2. Issues in the Quantification of Subjective Judgments

In this section, I will discuss the issues which arise when we attempt to quantify judgments in the analysis of text which rely on our linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge as humans, focusing on unmarked clause relations<sup>3</sup>, particularly of the type used in the RST framework. I will discuss how relying on form as a standard for judgment is not possible with clause relations, and discuss pitfalls to avoid when making form a standard in studies of other phenomena. Finally, I will discuss strategies to increase the accuracy, consistency and reproducibility of analysis without relying on form.

In reading a text, one interprets relations between clauses and sentences (or even larger sections of text) which are not explicitly marked in the text itself. Three examples of the phenomenon in question and their explanations follow:

- (1) I know you have some great credentials. You don't fit the job description  
because this job requires someone with extensive experience.

(Example from Mann & Thompson 1986: 65)

Mann & Thompson (1986: 65) argue that the relationship which holds between the two sentences here is one of concession. The speaker's main point is located in the second sentence, but they also acknowledge the point in the first sentence, and concede that it partially goes against their main point. If one were to explicitly signal this relation, one natural choice would be *although* (***Although*** *I know you have some great credentials, you don't...*). In this case, however, the relationship is unsignalled but is clearly still present. In other words, the writer intends the reader to understand the implicit relationship, and a failure to do so on the part of the reader would significantly damage the coherence of the text in their mind.

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<sup>3</sup> For brevity's sake I will refer to 'clauses' and 'clause relations' throughout this paper, though such relations are considered to hold between not only clauses but also between sentences and other spans of text.

- (2) 国連安全保障理事会の決議に違反するだけでなく、漁船や民間航空機に被害が及びかねなかった。北朝鮮が危険な挑発を繰り返すことは、決して容認できない。<sup>4</sup>
- ‘Not only does the missile launch go against the United Nations Security Council resolution, there was also the possibility of damage to fishing vessels and civilian aircraft. We certainly cannot allow North Korea to repeat its dangerous provocations.’

In this example from a Japanese newspaper editorial, how are we to understand the relationship between the two neighboring sentences? Despite the lack of an explicit signal (*therefore, this is why*, etc.), the first sentence clearly provides grounds for the claim in the latter sentence. The writer is arguing that it is **because** the missile launch went against the UN resolution and had other possibilities of damage that we cannot allow such provocations.

- (3) Could you open the door? Here’s the key.

(Example from Mann & Thompson 1986: 62)

In this example, Mann & Thompson (1986: 62) describe the relationship between the two sentences as one of enablement. That is, the information in the latter sentence enables the listener to fulfill the directive in the first.

These relations are integral to the functioning of a text. Mann & Thompson (1986: 76) challenge us to read such examples without interpreting such relations. Try doing this with example (3) above, for example, and the communication is no longer coherent. We do not know what the utterance *Here’s the key* has to do with the order to *open the door*. This idea will be discussed in greater depth later in section 2.2.

### 2.1. Difficulties with form

Such unsignalled relationships between sentences are extremely common (Mann & Thompson 2000: 10; Spreadbury 2018: 60). Furthermore, this is a natural way of writing and interpreting a text. We, in our everyday capacities of reader and writer, have little problem here.<sup>5</sup> The problem arises when we, as analysts, must make consistent and reproducible judgments on the nature of such relationships. How can we consistently recognize the same relationship when it arises at different points in the text? And how can

<sup>4</sup> This text is originally from The Yomiuri Shimbun, “Kita misairu hassha kokusai hōimō e no mubōna chōsen da” [NK missile launch: A reckless challenge to international containment], May 30, 2017. The English translation following the Japanese text is my own.

<sup>5</sup> “The moment you put together any two sentences for a purpose, your listener or reader looks for a sensible relation between their topics . . .” (Winter 1994: 49).

we be sure that others would make the same judgment as us?

The examples above show that it is difficult to define (and thereby judge) such relationships on the form of the statement alone. We cannot rely on traditional markers of relations such as *but*, *because*, and *although* to always be present. Nor will the writer always spell out the relationship explicitly (*The reason why is...*). The problem is compounded when we realize that such signals, when present, do not actually specify a certain relation but rather simply constrain the possible interpretation of what relation holds. In other words, the relationship between signal expressions and the relations they signal is many-to-many, not one-to-one (Mann & Thompson 1986: 71).

For example, just with the signal word *but* we cannot tell if a relationship of concession holds (where the writer accepts the first statement) or an antithesis-thesis relationship holds (in which the writer rejects an idea in the first statement and commits to the idea in the second) (Mann & Thompson 1986: 71). This is shown in the two constructed examples below.

(4) I do like you, but I can't lend you the money you need. (Concession)

(5) This film is meant to be good, but I can't find any point of merit in it.  
(Antithesis-thesis)

Thus, while a linguistic/logical test involving the insertion of signal words between clauses may seem like one obvious test of whether certain relationships hold between them (and this is certainly one helpful strategy), its effectiveness is diminished in light of the many-to-many relationship between relations and typical signal words discussed above.

A broader, more schematic view of form—going beyond specific signal words—is helpful here. In antithesis-thesis relationships, for example, phrases which distance the writer from the first statement (such as *meant to* in (5))<sup>6</sup> are suggestive even if *but* were not present (Mann & Thompson 1986: 66). Two other schematic patterns are shown for this relationship in Mann & Thompson's (1986: 66) examples. I will construct new examples while keeping the schematic patterns the same:

(6) I don't like tennis. I like football.

(7) Some view e-sports as child's play. I view them as true competitive sports.

Notice that in (6) we keep the subject and verb the same across both sentences, only

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<sup>6</sup> Or *claims to be* in a Mann & Thompson (1986: 66) example of the same relation.

negating the verb in the first sentence. In (7) we keep the verb and its polarity the same but change subjects between the sentences, the second subject referring to the writer. We can view these patterns as typical indicators of two antithesis-thesis scenarios, one in which we disavow a view we might be mistakenly thought to own and give our true view, and another in which we reject the view of another party and assert our own opposing view. While recognizing that form cannot be fully relied upon in judgments of this type, it is helpful (in so far as it increases the consistency and reproducibility of the analysis) to be explicitly aware of suggestive forms such as those discussed above.

It is worth mentioning that for some studies, there may exist a more objective measure or form-based definition which can be used. However, we must be careful here on two fronts. First, we consider if our objective measure is not obscuring some nuance of the phenomena (most likely by being too broad or selective). Discussing quantification and codeability in CA, Ten Have (1990) brings up West's (1984) study in which a formal, operational definition of an 'interruption' is used. Ten Have (1990) then gives an example of a doctor-patient interaction conversation which includes several instances of simultaneous speech which would be marked as 'interruptions' under West's rigid definition, but which do not have the aggressiveness this term suggests, instead seeming to be supportive of the interlocutor's interactional goals. The message here is that formal definitions must not be allowed to mistakenly subsume functionally dissimilar phenomena under a single presumed function based on superficial similarity of form.

Second, we must be careful that a reliance on form does not exclude functionally equivalent acts which take an entirely different form. Take for example Hayashi's (2018) discussion of Ford & Mori's (1994) paper which compares English and Japanese strategies in giving an account of (giving reasons for) one's opinions in the face of (expected) disagreement. Ford & Mori (1994) found evidence that the account-giving function of *because* was split between two different causal markers, *kara* and *datte*, in Japanese, with *datte* tending to be used to forcefully assert one's claim in the face of perceived disagreement, and *kara* tending to be used to fill in a perceived gap in the listener's knowledge. Hayashi (2018) criticizes the focus on translationally equivalent forms without taking into account the possibility of other ways in which the same interactional task may be achieved.<sup>7</sup> Entirely hypothetically, Hayashi (2018: 9) states that English might make the same distinction as Japanese using another form than adverb clauses, or perhaps a non-verbal resource such as gesture is used in one of the languages but not the other to achieve a relevant interactional task (Hayashi 2018: 15).

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<sup>7</sup> Schegloff (1993: §4) eloquently discusses this issue with regard to quantitative analysis in CA. See also Nishijima (2018) for a recent discussion of form vs function, and issues with using translations in cross-linguistic comparisons.

## 2.2. Other testable characteristics

Other tests we can employ in our analysis follow from Mann & Thompson's (1986) work on the characteristics of these relationships. Clause relations are viewed not merely as an inference by the reader, but also as a "communicative act" (Mann & Thompson 1986: 72) or something which is "asserted" by the writer, in the sense that the writer intends it to be understood (Mann & Thompson 2000: 6). Mann and Thompson (1986) discuss (i) how explicitly denying the (implicitly asserted) relational proposition would severely damage the coherence of the text, and (ii) how the writer bears a social responsibility toward these relational propositions, just as they would toward any normally stated proposition.

With regard to denial, examples (8b) and (9b) below display a lack of coherence as the middle sentence loses its purpose within the text.

- (8) a. I think John is going on vacation. I saw him packing his suitcase yesterday.  
 b. I think John is going on vacation. I saw him packing his suitcase yesterday. That's not a reason why I think he is going on vacation, though.
- (9) a. Booking in advance is possible. Our email is restaurant@fake.email.com.  
 b. Booking in advance is possible. Our email is restaurant@fake.email.com. You won't be able to book via email.

In (8a) we naturally interpret a 'reason' relation between the two sentences. In the latter sentence, the writer is stating the reason for their thoughts given in the first sentence. In (9a) we can interpret an 'enablement' relation. The sentence giving us the restaurant's email address is enabling us to fulfill the act of booking stated in the first sentence. When these relations are explicitly denied, the coherence of the whole is lost.

On the point of social responsibility toward a proposition one states, if I were for example to tell you that a certain theme park was closed, and you looked it up and discovered that it was actually open, you would rightly be able to force me to bear social responsibility for my statement: *But you said it was closed!*. Similarly, if you were to send an email to the restaurant in order to make a booking after reading (9a), and were told that booking via email is not possible, you would rightly be able to argue back, *But it says I can here!*.

In this way, when we want to analyze texts for the presence of such relations, we can insert explicit statements of denial as in (8b) and (9b) as a test and judge the cohesiveness of the result. Of course, this is still a subjective judgment. However, such tests have the benefit of forcing us as analysts to engage more deeply with the relation we presume to hold: What would it mean for this relation not to hold here? Does that allow a different interpretation or is coherence lost entirely? We can get caught in one rhetorical interpretation of a passage when multiple interpretations are possible. Mann et al. (1989:

33) compare this rhetorical ambiguity to grammatical ambiguity, where we are similarly apt to latch onto one of multiple possible interpretations.

The consistent application of insertion of explicit denial of a relation as a test improves consistency by making it less likely that two sections of a text with a similar ambiguity could be judged one way in the first instance and another in the next. It also improves reproducibility in the sense that it is less likely that two analysts will latch onto different interpretations of the same ambiguous section. This is of course on top of the obvious benefits to accuracy which come from engaging more deeply with the text and considering the rhetoric from different angles.

It is worth noting that linguistic/logical tests of this kind which do not change the subjective nature of the judgment being made but rather aid the analyst in confirming their intuitions are not uncommon in the field. Hoey (2000: 28-9) frequently uses question criteria to identify clause relations, a test which involves inserting a question between two clauses which (given a certain clause relation) the second clause should seem to answer. The example below shows this approach in action in identifying a Situation-Evaluation relation between the first and second clauses of an invented text.

- (10) First clause: *I saw the enemy approaching.*  
 Question: **How did you evaluate this?** or **What did you feel about this?**  
 Second clause: *This was a problem.*

(Example from Hoey 1983: 53, cited in Hoey 2000: 29)

In conclusion, in this section we have seen how clause relations are undefinable using form, but how an expanded, schematic definition of form can be at least suggestive of relations. We have also seen how the characterization of clause relations as communicative acts which the writer holds social responsibility for allows us to test for the presence of relations by examining their coherence after inserting an explicit denial of the relation. Such tests still rely on the analyst's subjective judgments based heavily on their social and cultural knowledge. However, consistent application of such tests allow the analyst to engage more deeply with the text and to reveal potential rhetorical ambiguities, increasing consistency and reproducibility. In this sense, such tests are similar to those of question-insertion employed by Hoey (2000).

### 3. Trends and their Exceptions

Some quantitative work in rhetoric seems to be satisfied with reporting a differing trend between languages with regard to some phenomenon, with much less focus being placed on the exceptions to the trends and the deviant examples in each language group. This is undesirable for two main reasons. First, it leads to a shallower analysis and understanding of the behavior in each language group, hindering the pursuit of such common CR goals

as practical application within language teaching and translation. Hayashi's (2018) paper on contrastive studies within CA discusses how an excessive focus on broad trends and inter-language differences can mask the nuances of the phenomena being examined. We have seen one example from this paper in section 2.1, and another example will follow shortly.

Secondly, a focus on broad trends is particularly pernicious when CR research is to be applied to the teaching writing in a foreign language. Recall Kubota & Lehner (2004) and Matsuda (1997) criticisms of CR, where by painting the differences between languages with too broad a brush, CR research is seen to be perpetuating stereotypes and diminishing student agency. Conversely, an approach which takes exceptions to trends seriously and asks why they occur can uncover the function of rhetorical patterns and puts the focus back on the purposes of the writers themselves.

Hayashi (2018) brings up several case studies in which a focus on the a differing trend between two languages may have prevented a more nuanced look at the phenomenon under examination. Regarding the study of Fox et al. (1996) on scope of repair, Hayashi (2018: 11) argues that it is too hasty to conclude that the narrower scope of repair seen in the Japanese examples can be wholly or partially explained by the looser grammatical ties between sentence elements in Japanese.<sup>8</sup> We must also consider other factors which may be influencing the scope of repair. For example, in repair involving overlap, the length of the overlap may affect the scope of repair (Hayashi 2018: 11).

This links well with the aforementioned concerns of some within CR that a focus on overly linguistic and cultural explanations for broad rhetorical differences can have negative impacts when applied to foreign language education. Such an approach is said to run the risk of "colonialism" (Kubota & Lehner 2004: 18) as well as violate the "personal identity" (Matsuda 1997: 51) of the learner-as-writer and take away their "agency" (Matsuda 1997: 49). This is because, in a sense, the learner would be being told, 'Follow this typical style because that's simply the way we do it in this language/culture.'

While not completely denying the existence of "static model" factors (linguistic, cultural, and educational explanations), Matsuda (1997: 53) invites us to consider "dynamic model" factors—more local factors such as a writer's knowledge of the subject matter, their experiences, and their membership of discourse communities—which are seen as better explaining the rhetoric employed by the writer. Matsuda (1997: 53) presents the example of a Japanese student writing a letter to the editor an American university newspaper. While the influence of her native language and culture, as well as her education in Japan, will affect the rhetoric she employs, other more local factors linked to her personal goals and experiences will prove far more decisive. Perhaps she has

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<sup>8</sup> Looser ties between sentence elements in the sense that word order is more free, and there is no conventional subject-verb agreement in Japanese (Hayashi 2018).

experience of editing a newspaper herself, or perhaps she lives in the same residence as the editor of the newspaper.

In stressing the importance of taking exceptions to trends seriously, and investigating the functions of and purposes behind deviant examples, I echo the concerns stated above. When we look at more local factors behind why a certain pattern was chosen, we become able to tell learners not ‘This is how its done in this language so do this’, but rather, ‘In this discourse community, when you have these concerns and these purposes, this pattern is effective in meeting your goals.’ In this way, the agency is returned to the learner who is equipped to choose rhetorical patterns which effectively fulfill their personal needs and aims. Thus, not only does such an approach lead to better understanding of the phenomena being examined, it is also meaningful for practical applications in language education.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have presented some difficulties in attempting to use form to provide an objective definition for the sorts of phenomena we may be interested in in studies of rhetoric, and have advocated for a broader, more schematic view of form, as well as the use of tests based on the known characteristics of implicit phenomena. The hope here is to better guarantee the consistency and reproducibility of analysis while maintaining the nuanced and fine-grained judgments we may want to make.

I have also called attention to two points to consider when a form-based or otherwise more objective standard of judgment is decided upon. We must not allow vastly functionally different phenomena to be categorized together on the basis of formal similarities. Nor must we allow a focus on formal equivalences to obscure other possible ways of achieving the same function in one or more of the languages.

Additionally, I have discussed the need to look beyond differing surface level trends and suggested a focus on function and purpose and how these are accomplished in different languages. Trends, yes, but also looking carefully at the exceptions to those trends and why they may occur. I argue that this will better illuminate the phenomena under investigation, and so better meet such common goals of contrastive studies as application to language teaching and translation. I have also made the case that such an approach serves to meet the concerns of researchers such as Matsuda (1997) and Kubota & Lehner (2004) by avoiding superficial stereotyping and helping maintain the agency of students when applied to foreign language teaching.

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