

A Contrastive Study of Letters of Recommendation in Persian and English

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Abstract- A letter of recommendation (LR) is one in which the writer assesses the capabilities, characteristics, and qualities of the person being recommended in terms of that individual's ability to perform a particular task or function. This study aims to compare and contrast letters of recommendation in Persian and English in terms of textual features, structure and content. The data consists of fifteen English and fifteen Persian LRs recommending the applicants for the PhD programs in English and Persian literature. The English LRs have mainly been written for American universities and the Persian ones for universities inside Iran. The model of comparison consists of two parts: a quantitative and a qualitative analysis. The first part of the analysis focuses on comparing textual features such as linearity, symmetry, data integration and sentence type in the LRs of these two languages. The second part focuses on comparing the structure and content of the three sections of the LRs namely introduction/frame, body/evaluation, and conclusion/prediction. Regarding textual factors the results showed that while the two languages are rather similar in digressiveness, Persian seems to be less symmetrical than English. Data integration is also more evident in English LRs than the Persian ones. For the sentence type it was noticed that English favors a topic sentence cue while Persian favors sentence bridges. The results also revealed that while English LRs follow a rather rigid organization which can be short, informal and writer-responsible, the Persian LRs are longer, more formal, more fluid in their organization and reader-responsible. The results of the study can be used in genre-based approaches to writing and in translation and communication across academic and professional institutions.

General Terms- Contrastive Rhetoric; Discourse Analysis; Written Genres

Keywords- Letter of recommendation; contrastive rhetoric; genre; Precht's model

1. INTRODUCTION

Contrastive rhetoric or as Connor (2004) calls it intercultural rhetoric investigates the use of genres across cultures. Studies in the area of contrastive rhetoric focus on the discourse structure of written or spoken genres in different languages and cultures. One of the widely used genres within academic settings is the letter of recommendation (LR) which has developed into a specific discourse genre with its own distinctive characteristics. Liu (2007) believes that a letter of recommendation has three main characteristics: the participants (the writer, the candidate or applicant, and the reader) are from the same discourse community, its writing and reading constitutes a specific speech event (that of recommending the applicant), and the communicative purposes are shared by all the participants. These are the defining features of the term 'genre' as it is used in the literature (Richards and Schmidt, 2002).

Letters of recommendation have a long history in the Western world and as Cotton (1981) believes it can be traced to the middle of the third century B.C. In an Iranian setting, however, it is a relatively new genre and it seems that as a written genre dates back to the advent of the modern institutions of higher education in the first half of

the twentieth century. The speech event in both Persian and English is the same: the writer recommends the candidate for a certain program and the reader uses the recommendation as one of the information resources to evaluate the candidate. Nonetheless, the same speech event can have different realizations across different cultures, although they have core characteristics cross culturally (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1995). Each language has its own rhetorical conventions and written genres are not constrained just by lexico-grammatical features but by sociocultural conventions as well (Connor, 1996).

This study aims to compare the letters of recommendation in Persian and English in order to reveal the possible differences and similarities in terms of textual features, structure and content. The framework that was proposed by Clyne (1991) and adopted and modified by Precht (1998) in her cross-regional study of LRs has been used here in comparing Persian and English LRs. This study tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. In what ways are Persian and English letters of recommendation similar or different?
2. Can we use models within contrastive rhetoric to understand these similarities and differences?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Contrastive rhetoric (CR) has its origins in Kaplan's (1966) seminal and controversial article which examined different patterns in the essays of students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Kaplan's (1987) revised position is that rhetorical modes are possible in any language, but do not occur with the same frequency or in parallel distribution. CR triggered a host of studies on comparing and contrasting different genres across cultures that shed light on both notable differences and similarities in the discourse structure of academic texts in different languages and cultures. The strong claims of CR by its focus on the differences and attributing it to different thought patterns were later alleviated by the studies which focused on similarities (Cahill, 2003).

New developments in CR have expanded its realm into genres other than academic essays and articles. Connor (2002) thinks that CR has moved toward a context-sensitive research approach and Canagarajah (2002:68) thinks that CR research needs 'to develop complex types of explanation for textual differences' if it wants to maintain its usefulness in the teaching of academic writing. This all means that the new trends in CR have brought different perspectives in the research paradigms available for comparing and contrasting a certain genre in different cultures.

Richards and Schmidt (2002: 224) define genre as 'a type of discourse that occurs in a particular setting, that has distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms of organization and structure and that has particular and distinctive communicative functions'. Based on this definition a letter of recommendation is a typical example of a genre since it occurs in a particular setting; the participants form a discourse community. It has its own distinctive and recognizable patterns and norms of organization and structure. It also has the communicative function of recommending a candidate for a course. Precht (1998) believes that LRs serve the two functions of academic discourse mentioned in the literature, namely the gatekeeping and the social functions. Like other academic writing tasks it is written by one academic for other academics to read. There is, however, one difference as there is no training on writing LRs. This means that it may be influenced by native cultural conventions of the writer. Thus it seems to be a good example for the investigation of structures and patterns of a specific culture.

Precht (1998) analyzed LRs from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Eastern Europe. Significant differences and distinct regional patterns were found in both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the letters in her comparative study. She tried to come to a characterization of the regional LRs through looking at the patterns that evolved through her analysis. Austin (1998) focused on cross-cultural pragmatic differences in her discussion of letters of recommendation. She compared LRs in English and Japanese academic settings and their influences on how an LR is created and interpreted. Using

comparative rhetoric analytic framework, Liu (2007) compared LRs written by Chinese and English native speaker professionals. The findings showed similarities in micro discourse structure but differences in discourse content between the LRs. Liu holds that the similarities show that both writers implement their recommending acts by stating the purpose, presenting their evaluation and prediction of the person, but the difference in choice of the content and organization is more associated with culturally situated genre practice.

Hou and Li (2011) investigated English cover letters written by Taiwanese and Canadian college students. Adopting a genre analysis framework, their study used a move-based analysis to investigate the similarities and differences in the cover letters written by the Taiwanese students and their Canadian counterparts. The uses of positive and negative politeness strategies are also analyzed. The results indicated that there are significant differences in length, lexical density, and descriptions of desire for applying the job across their two sets of data.

A study of the literature on CR clearly shows that letters in general and special letters like LR have been compared and contrasted from different aspects and for different purposes. There are, however, few studies on comparing letters in Persian and English, particularly LRs. Due to the significance of such studies in theories of genre and writing in general the present study was designed to compare Persian and English LRs using the framework proposed by Precht (1998). The two sets of letters are compared and contrasted to highlight their similarities and differences. The results provide a better picture of this genre across these two languages regarding their discourse structures, content, and organization. They also reveal the preferences of each language to choose among the various choices available in realizing this genre.

3. METHOD

A set of thirty letters of recommendations were selected for the purpose of the study; fifteen Persian and fifteen English LRs. A corpus of fifty LRs was prepared for this study. Most of the English LRs were collected through personal communication to the applicants. For the Persian LRs in addition to personal communication the admission committees of universities made it possible to access samples of LRs for the purpose of the study. The LRs were collected during the first semester of 2014/2015 academic year. However, they belong to the time span of the last three years. Most of the applicants have been accepted for the PhD program they had applied for. The English ones had been all written for candidates to recommend them for the English literature PhD programs. The Persian LRs had been written for applicants of the Persian literature PhD programs. These LRs were randomly selected from the small corpus created for this study. The letters were selected from literature applicants since it requires rather similar capabilities or interests cross culturally. The caliber of the candidates was also determined to be similar in

order to alleviate its possible impact on the content of the LR and hence its effects on the results of the study. The candidates were all strongly recommended for the PhD programs in either English or Persian literature by their professors. For the LR that were collected by personal communication or by the cooperation of universities ethical issues were considered by following the principle of confidentiality.

The set of LR for the purpose of this comparison is rather small; nevertheless, since this particular genre has an exceptionally narrow focus with fixed function and setting, this sample seems appropriate for the purpose of contrastive rhetoric. The LR were all written by professors or academics in the field of literature: English literature for the English LR and Persian literature for the Persian ones. The applicants and the writers of the letters were not controlled for gender as there were both male and female individuals in both groups and in both languages. The length of the letters was not also controlled, though Persian letters had on average higher length than the English ones.

Following the procedure adopted by Precht (1998) the analysis were carried out in two parts. The first part of the analysis focuses on comparing manifest textual features of the letters cross culturally. Precht's (1998) procedure is originally based on a modified version of Clyne's (1991) framework. Clyne identified some areas of divergence between texts from different cultures. The areas that have been used in analyzing LR cross culturally include digressiveness/linearity, textual symmetry/asymmetry, data integration, advance organizers and sentence types. These elements have also been used in other analytic models in the realm of contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1995). Digressiveness is determined by any sentence that moves away from the topic of the letter. The lack of digression leads to linearity. Symmetry is determined by having short introductory and concluding paragraphs and body paragraph(s) longer than the introduction and conclusion since this is the typical organization of letters in general. Data integration is decided upon by having evidences for the claims made by the writer. Data listed as a proposition without interpretation is considered as non-integrative. Advance organizer refers to the moves by the writer that give advance notice to the reader of the order of topics to be discussed. As for the type of sentences the framework focuses on the presence or absence of topic sentences, enumerative sentences and bridge sentences. This latter type links ideas from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the next. The Persian and English LR were examined to determine the presence of the above features and to figure out their differences and similarities. The occurrences of each of the above features were counted for each letter.

The second part of the analysis in Precht's (1998) model focuses on comparing the structure and content of the texts. This model is originally a modified procedure that corresponds to Bhatia's (1993) third level in genre analysis that was adopted by Precht (1998) for the purpose of

comparing the structure and content of letters of recommendations. Based on this framework patterns are identified within requirements of the communicative function of the specific genre. The analysis focuses on identifying differences in evidence and development within the three major parts of Introduction/Frame, Body/Evaluation, and Conclusion/Prediction. Each part is constituted by a certain number of items. The items of Introduction include the purpose of the LR, context in which the writer knows the candidate, and the writer's personal comments on the applicant's qualifications. Body can be either in topical or in chronological format with evidences that are either in the form of a listing of facts or of stories about the candidate. Conclusion usually ends LR with the prediction the writer makes on the applicant's future success in the program applied.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the first part of analysis the frequency of each feature in each of the letters were counted. Table 1 below displays the results for the first part of the analysis based on the frequency of the features in each letter within the two sets of LR. The results of the first half of the analysis revealed the following differences between the Persian and English LR.

Table 1. Quantitative results for the first part of analysis

Features	Persian	English
Digressiveness	4	2
Linearity	11	13
Symmetry	10	14
Asymmetry	5	1
Integration	10	14
Non-integration	5	1
Advance organizers	8/15	12/15
Topic sentences	7/15	14/15
Enumerative sentences	14/15	10/15
Bridge sentences	6/15	1/15

Digressiveness/linearity: Though the results show differences regarding this feature, the difference is not big. It seems that the two sets of letters are similar in this aspect. It may be due to the fact that LR are short and narrowly focused and thus there is little room for digression. This can also be a reason for the digression in the Persian letters since they are longer than the English ones. The difference may also be attributed to sociocultural differences as Clyne (1991) claims. In other words digression may be tolerated more in Persian than English.

Textual symmetry: the Persian letters exhibit less symmetrical organization. The asymmetry in LR seems to be the result of non-linguistic considerations. The organization of letters in Persian in general is more fluid

comparing to the rather rigid formats of English letters. The same ritualized three-part organization of letters is not followed in Persian. The traditions behind letter writing practice in the two cultures have caused these differences in organization. The short history of LR in Persian and the fluidity of letter organization can lead to this cautious claim that most of speech events now performed through a written genre used to be oral in Persian. These differences can be the reason for the differences in textual symmetry.

Data integration: It seems that data integration is more important for the English writers of LRs. Mauranen (1993) links data integration to the broader category of reader versus writer responsibility in a language. Limon (2007) maintains that there are differences between languages and cultures as to whether the reader or writer should accept responsibility for effective communication. He thinks that English is a writer-responsible language meaning that if communication fails the writer has to be blamed for not making enough effort to create a sufficiently clear and well-organized text. In some languages, on the contrary, it is seen as the reader's responsibility to understand what the writer intended to say. Hinds (1987) thinks that Japanese is an example of a reader-responsible language in which the writer prefers to offer hints rather than make explicit and direct statements. This is in line with Clyne's (1987) study that put forward the claim that writing in English favors a linear development, while this may not be so in other languages. Clyne (1987) explains the differences by referring to different attitudes towards readability. This may be different across languages and hence results in these differences revealed in this comparison.

Advance organizers and sentence types: These aspects serve as a metalinguistic cue to the reader and help reader to organize the information in the text. The differences between English and Persian LRs in using these devices reveal that each language (culture) favors certain signals over the others in the text. In other words, these devices vary across cultures due to sociocultural differences. While topic sentences form an important element in English paragraphs they are not so in Persian. This may be counted as another evidence for the claim that English is a more writer-responsible language than Persian, while in Persian it is seen as the reader's responsibility to understand what the writer intended to say and writers may offer hints and nuances rather than make direct statements in the form of having a topic sentence followed by supporting sentences. The same conclusion can be drawn from the differences between English and Persian by comparing the occurrence of enumerative sentences in the two sets of LRs. In the English LRs the writer categorizes applicant's characteristics in the topic sentence and develops and supports the topic introduced in the topic sentence by the developing or supporting sentences. The difference in the count of bridge sentences seem to confirm Clyne's (1991) claim that topic sentences are in an indirect relationship with the bridge sentences.

Structural patterns: The introduction/body/conclusion format has been followed in both English and Persian LRs.

Introduction: The introduction works as the frame for the letter, the body presents the evaluation for the applicant, and the conclusion presents predictions for him/her. This macro structure can be recognized in each LR. There are, however, variations in the two sets of LRs. The patterns applied in the organization of letters and the methods used to support are different across the two languages.

Frame refers to the introductory remarks that preface the body. In the frame of these letters, the writers explain the reason they are writing the letter, i.e. to recommend the applicant for the PhD program. Both sets of data exhibit moves that explicitly express the intentions of the writers. It was, however, noticed that English LRs contained more direct expression of the writer's intention than the Persian set. Stating the purpose has been regarded as a type of advance organizer by Precht (1998). The frame can be analyzed by focusing on its three main elements: the degree of explicitness in stating the purpose of the writing, the context in which the writer knows the candidate, and the degree of distance or warmth the writer displays in recommending the candidate. Frequencies of these elements of the frame for each set of LRs have been shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Frequency of the elements of the frame

Features	Persian	English
Purpose stated	12	15
Context stated	12	14
Personal comments	14	8

Both English and Persian writers of LR immediately justify their reasons for writing the letter, though this was not the case for three letters in Persian. Fourteen out of fifteen English writers mentioned the context in which they know the candidate in the frame. The emphasis on this personal content of the relationship has been achieved either through the content itself or through possessive pronouns which display the writers' relationship to the candidate. The Persian letters contain a list of capabilities with little data integration. There is also less reference to the context in which the writer knows the applicant.

Body/Evaluation: Although the body of all the letters can be labeled as evaluative, evaluation has been expressed differently in English and Persian. These differences can be studied by focusing on two variables: topicality versus chronology, and factual reporting versus storytelling. Letters have been organized either in a topical format or in a chronology, and supporting evidence consisted either of a listing of facts or a sequential description about the applicant. The chronological/topical dimension can be decided upon objectively, although determining the kind of supporting evidence is rather subjective and judgmental. When there was a sequential description rather than a list of facts the letter was determined to use storytelling support. The English LRs were different in this propensity as shown in Table 3. English letters follow a topical organization, with each topic prefaced by an evaluative

statement and followed by evidence. Even facts like scores have been included in most letters to support the evaluative statements. The story has been used as a supporting device for evaluation of subjective statements. The final paragraph in the evaluation is generally about the candidate's personal characteristics. This final paragraph is not present in all Persian LRs.

Conclusion/Prediction: This part seems to be the most similar part across English and Persian. All letters contained predictions of the future success of the candidate. There was no prediction in just one of the Persian letters. There are, nevertheless, some differences: The English writers predict the success more cautiously than the Persian ones. This caution has been expressed by using conditional markers like 'if and providing' or the use of certain modal auxiliaries like 'could' and 'would' instead of 'can' and 'will'. In the Persian LRs there is no use of equivalent devices available in Persian. The prediction is usually followed by an appeal that the applicant be admitted. Although this appeal is present in both sets of LRs, in Persian letters there are fewer offers for further contact while the English letters contain such offers. This offer for contact can make the appeal seem more serious for the reader. The conclusion also makes reference to the benefits that the applicant would receive from being admitted to the program. This feature is more evident in the English LRs than the Persian ones.

5. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Patterns that emerged as a result of the analysis of the English and Persian LRs contribute to the characterizations of the LRs in these two languages. The Persian letters could be classified as Topical Personal Endorsement and English ones as Topical Factual Endorsement. The differences can also be interpreted by considering sociocultural differences that have led to different realizations of the same speech event. The differences within LRs display the lack of consensus among the participants on the format of LR. The format seems to be more rigid in English than Persian. The results showed that while English has a writer responsible writing practice, Persian seems to be more reader responsible. This claim needs further investigation as generalizing from this small set of data of this particular genre cannot be generalized for all other genres in Persian. As for the length of the letters it seems that Persian writers think of length as a positive evidence for the claims in the letter; the stronger that they recommend the applicant, the longer their LR would be. Length does not seem to be viewed as such by the English writers as they have used short letters even when they strongly recommend the candidate for the program. The story telling support of English letters create an informal and rather warm tone, while the Persian writers try to maintain the formal tone by offering support through a listing of facts. In other words, the Persian LRs

are more formal than English ones. Finally, the most notable difference in conclusions of the letters is the occurrence of personal appeal in all English LRs, but not in all Persian letters.

It should be pointed out that such cross-cultural studies are descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature. Awareness of these patterns in structure and forms of support might be helpful in interpreting LRs. The results can also be used in writing courses since tips and strategies can be extracted from the results obtained through this analysis. They can also provide insights on and requirements that have to be met while translating LRs for applicants who apply for universities abroad. The differences in structure revealed through this analysis show that any direct translation of Persian LRs to English can have unwanted effects on their interpretation.

This study claims some differences regarding the nature of writing in Persian in comparison to English; its reader-responsibility, its preference for bridge sentences over topic sentences, its preference for asymmetric organization in letters, etc. These conclusions were obtained from the comparison of LRs in Persian and English and need to be further investigated across other genres within the two languages. As it was argued LRs are exceptionally narrow in both their focus and function, this exert influences on the choices available for writing in general and thus the results may not be the same if one investigates other genres of the same language. Studies can be designed to investigate the same genre with participants from other academic majors since the fact that the participants of this study were literature majors may have contributed to the obtained results. Other studies may also control gender to tap on any differences that may be attributable to gender. Finally, it should be noted that the investigators of this study tried to interpret LRs that were not originally addressed to them but to academics with literature major. Besides, the investigators are native speakers of Persian with English as their second language and this may have exerted some influences on the conclusions.

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