

CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC

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November 5, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=67236>

Contrastive Rhetoric

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Applied Linguistics, Second Language Writing, Rhetoric

Proponents: Robert B. Kaplan

1. Origin and Primary Proponent

Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) is a highly influential theoretical framework within the field of Applied Linguistics, formally postulated in the mid-1960s by American scholar **Robert B. Kaplan**. Kaplan's seminal 1966 paper, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," laid the essential foundation for this theoretical approach. The theory emerged largely from practical observations concerning the academic writing produced by non-native English speakers who were attempting to meet the rigorous demands of Western university contexts. Prior to Kaplan's work, much of the research on second language acquisition focused almost exclusively on grammatical and lexical errors, treating difficulties in composition as simple extensions of these sentence-level issues. Kaplan, however, hypothesized that fundamental problems in non-native writing were rooted not merely in faulty grammar, but in the organizational and argumentative structures--the rhetoric--that learners often unconsciously transferred from their native language (L1) traditions.

Kaplan's initial formulation sought to redirect the conversation about second language writing proficiency, shifting focus away from surface errors to the macro-level architecture of communication. He proposed that the expectations and conventions governing effective argument display are deeply culture-bound. A student whose L1 employs a rhetorical style characterized by indirection, parallelism, or elaboration before stating the main point would naturally attempt to employ these same organizational patterns when composing in English, a language that generally prizes a direct, linear, and topic-sentence-driven structure. This recognition of systematic, cross-linguistic differences in the construction of persuasive texts became the defining objective of Contrastive Rhetoric, positioning it as a critical area of study bridging linguistic studies, cultural analysis, and pedagogy.

2. Core Theoretical Framework: The Kaplan Hypothesis

The central tenet of Contrastive Rhetoric, often referred to as the **Kaplan Hypothesis**, posits that the rhetorical preferences inherent in an individual's native language culture influence the structure and organization of writing produced in a second language (L2). This influence manifests as a type of **L1 transfer or interference**, but operating specifically at the discourse level--the level of paragraph organization, argumentation flow, and the presentation of evidence--rather than solely at the grammatical or phonological level. Kaplan famously illustrated these hypothesized rhetorical patterns using diagrams, comparing the perceived straightforward linearity of English prose to the potentially more indirect, circular, or parallel patterns hypothesized in languages such as Arabic or

Chinese.

The theory states definitively that diverse languages contain varying rhetorical traits, specifically concerning the varying manners in which speakers or writers build and display an argument. For instance, while English expository writing typically follows a linear, deductive approach (main thesis statement followed by supporting details), other linguistic traditions might favor an inductive structure where the main point is reached only at the conclusion, or a parallel structure where ideas are linked primarily through coordination rather than strict logical subordination. Understanding these deep-seated cultural preferences is considered essential for both diagnosing and remediating the systemic difficulties faced by non-native students attempting to meet the demands of L2 academic discourse, as their writing may be organized perfectly according to L1 rules but appear incoherent or illogical according to L2 norms.

3. Key Concepts: Rhetorical Variance and Transfer

Contrastive Rhetoric identifies several key concepts crucial to understanding the mechanisms of L1 rhetorical pattern transfer. One essential concept is the distinction between **rhetorical organization** and **grammatical error**. CR highlights that difficulty in L2 writing often stems from a lack of awareness of L2 organizational schemata rather than a simple failure to apply L2 grammar rules correctly. As the source content suggests, Contrastive Rhetoric is more complex than mere grammatical errors--it comprises the intricacies of non-native languages when spoken or written by the non-native speaker, focusing on issues of coherence and argument staging which are fundamentally cultural.

A second fundamental conceptual area involves the classification of common rhetorical patterns observed across different language groups. Kaplan's initial classifications were groundbreaking, though later scholars refined and debated them extensively. The original models included: **Linearity** (often attributed to English/Germanic languages), **Zig-zag or Indirection** (sometimes attributed to Romance languages), **Parallelism** (attributed to Semitic languages like Arabic), and **Spiral or Circularity** (attributed to certain Asian languages). These patterns, while recognized as broad generalizations, underscore the core idea that rhetorical performance is intrinsically linked to inherited cultural expectations regarding effective communication, persuasion, and even cultural notions of politeness and deference.

4. Methodological Approach and Scope

Contrastive Rhetoric studies generally employ a dual methodological approach designed to substantiate the hypothesis of L1 rhetorical transfer. First, researchers engage in **descriptive analysis**, rigorously comparing the rhetorical structures found in published, high-quality texts written by native speakers of the two languages being contrasted (L1 and L2). This step aims to

establish the typical, conventional, or preferred argumentative architecture of each language culture. For example, a study might analyze the use of hedging devices, the frequency of topic sentences, or the use of introductory elaboration in scholarly articles published in Korean versus American academic journals.

The second, and more empirical, step is the **learner text analysis**. Here, researchers examine compositions written in the L2 by students whose L1 is the contrasting language. The theory predicts that the non-native L2 texts will exhibit systematic structural deviations from L2 native norms, manifesting patterns characteristic of the writers' L1. For instance, an Arabic speaker's English essay might display excessive parallelism and elaborate digressions before reaching the main point, reflecting organizational norms common in traditional Arabic prose. This methodological process provides the evidence base for identifying where cultural rhetorical training is necessary for effective Second Language Acquisition.

5. Applications in Second Language Pedagogy

The findings derived from Contrastive Rhetoric have had a significant and lasting impact on the pedagogy of second language writing instruction, especially in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programs. Recognizing that organizational patterns are profoundly culturally conditioned means that writing instructors cannot assume that L2 learners simply lack vocabulary or sentence structure skills; instead, they may lack the specific cultural schemata required for organizing an argument appropriately and persuasively in the target language context.

CR applications advocate strongly for **explicit instruction** in L2 rhetorical norms. Instead of simply focusing on error correction, teachers utilize CR insights to design curricula that highlight the differences between L1 and L2 discourse conventions. This includes teaching students how to manage the flow of information expected by the target audience, such as positioning the topic sentence clearly at the start of a paragraph, utilizing strong transitional phrases to signal logical progression, and understanding the appropriate degree of directness considered acceptable in Western academic contexts. By raising learners' meta-rhetorical awareness, CR assists students in overcoming deep-seated transfer issues that traditional, grammar-focused language instruction often fails to address effectively.

6. Major Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its foundational importance, Contrastive Rhetoric has faced substantial criticism, particularly regarding the limitations of its early formulation. The most pervasive critique targets Kaplan's original 1966 diagrams, which are sometimes viewed as **oversimplified, ethnocentric, and overly deterministic**. Critics argue that reducing the rich rhetorical variation within vast language families (e.g., classifying all "Asian languages" with a single circular pattern) risks

generalizing cultural thought patterns and creating harmful stereotypes about specific groups of learners. Furthermore, the original theory was criticized for focusing predominantly on five language groups, limiting its capacity to serve as a truly global predictive model.

A second major limitation concerns the concept of **homogeneity**. Critics point out that rhetorical practices are not monolithic, even within a single linguistic community or nation. Factors such as academic discipline (e.g., the requirements of scientific writing versus literary criticism), genre (e.g., a formal memo versus a public policy proposal), and individual educational background introduce substantial variation that the basic CR model does not fully account for. Modern scholars have often moved toward the broader field of **Intercultural Rhetoric**, which moves beyond simple binary comparisons (L1 vs. L2) to explore the complex, dynamic, and negotiated interactions that occur when writers operate in global and multilingual contexts, recognizing that individual writers often draw on multiple and fluid rhetorical traditions simultaneously.

Further Reading

[Robert B. Kaplan - Wikipedia](#)

[Contrastive Rhetoric - Wikipedia](#)

[Applied Linguistics - Wikipedia](#)

[Second Language Acquisition - Wikipedia](#)