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# Textual Organization of Request Letters in Spanish and English and of Request Memoranda in Spanish: an Exploratory Study<sup>\*1</sup>

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This paper describes a genre-based analysis of a group of request letters in Spanish and English and of request memoranda in Spanish, all produced by native speakers of Spanish<sup>1</sup>. The framework of analysis adopted is based on the concept of genre proposed by Swales (1990) and Bathia (1993). The generic description of these letters and memoranda shows which moves appear to be more conventionalized. The relationship between contextual factors and the choice of moves is explored. This paper concludes that this type of analysis can provide useful insights into the design of teaching materials for business communications in Spanish and English.

Key words: genre-based analysis, generic structure, moves, written communications, request letters and memoranda.

Ce travail présente une analyse basée sur le genre d'un groupe de lettres de motivation en espagnol et en anglais et d'avertissements en espagnol, toutes écrites par des **locuteurs** natifs de l'espagnol. La structure d'analyse adoptée s'appuie sur le concept de genre proposé par Swales (1990) et Bathia (1993). La description générique de ces lettres et avertissements montre les mouvements les plus communs. Quelques hypothèses ont été proposées en rapport avec la relation entre les facteurs contextuels et le choix des mouvements. Fondés sur ces résultats, nous espérons utiliser les découvertes comme base pour la création des matériaux d'enseignement en espagnol et en anglais.

Mots clés: analyse basée sur le genre, structure générique, mouvements, communications écrites, lettres et avertissements.

Este trabajo presenta un análisis basado en el género de un grupo de cartas de solicitud en español e inglés y de memorandos de solicitud en español, todos escritos por hablantes nativos de español. La estructura del análisis adoptada se sustenta en el concepto de género propuesto por Swales (1990) y Bathia (1993). La descripción genérica de estas cartas y memorandos muestra los movimientos de solicitud más comunes. Se plantean algunas hipótesis acerca de la relación entre los factores contextuales y la escogencia

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de los movimientos. Basados en los resultados, esperamos utilizar los hallazgos como base para el diseño de materiales de enseñanza en español e inglés.

Palabras clave: análisis basado en el género, estructura genérica, movimientos, comunicaciones escritas, cartas de solicitud y memoranda.



## INTRODUCTION

The definition of genre as a socio-linguistic activity in which participants are able to achieve particular goals (Swales, 1990) has been largely applied to the study of texts used in professional settings. For Feez (1998), genre offers the opportunity for students to engage in culturally related learning. As a result, raising the awareness of genre knowledge in the production of both written and spoken texts should be incorporated into the English instruction syllabus.

The study of genre analysis is related to how members of a discourse community engage in a particular communication practice. On the whole, scholars agree that such a practice can be described as a “staged and purposeful activity” which serves to achieve important social goals (Swales, 1990; Martin, 2000). However, the delimitation of generic staging is still an undefined subject. Studies carried out on this theme differ on the criteria of delimitation (Ventola, 1987; Martin, 1992; Paltridge, 1995; Bhatia, 1993, among others). Paltridge, for example, states that the demarcation of the limits that conform to the textual boundaries must be of a cognitive type in terms of convention, accuracy, and content rather than of a linguistic type. The criteria of identification of move units used by Bhatia (1993), Swales (1990) and Teh (1986) are defined on the basis of the content and on the basis of the cognitive strategies that the writer uses to achieve his communicative purposes. According to Bhatia the use of move analysis reveals the typical structure of a genre corresponding to a particular area of knowledge. Teh also bases the identification of textual units or moves on the perspective of the analysis of the cognitive structure that is revealed in the structure of the text. He defines it as a set of steps that the writer uses to express his communicative purposes. For these authors, this type of analysis helps to identify the purpose of each move and to establish possible variations in the structure of discourse.

One particular aspect emerging within the study of a genre is how the context constrains the kind of language choices speakers make. Research has demonstrated that strategies followed in business communications, for instance, can also be culture-bound. In the analysis of moves, Teh (1986) identified some variation in the order of moves in Japanese business writing compared to



those found in the writing of native English speakers. More recently, studies on business negotiations have suggested that although business communication is a universal activity, the way business representatives resort to communication strategies with their counterparts all over the world may vary across languages and cultures (Graham, 1990; Giménez, 2001; Pinto dos Santos, 2002). The same authors maintain that raising awareness of cultural sensitivity is paramount in the L2 classroom. They suggest that the design of materials for the teaching of English programmes should be based on the context, and the habits and needs of those engaged in the target situation, rather than on ready-made recipes that simplify reality. In order to be able to meet such requirements, it is necessary to explore the kind of communication practices of the target context of which the learner will be a part. This process starts by raising awareness of the specific generic features of the texts that learners are typically confronted with during their communicative tasks.

The way writers within the context of the Colombian-Caribbean business community communicate with business representatives of other companies, has so far not been investigated. In particular, the similarities and differences in the choice of moves and strategies to express requests to various audiences in Spanish and English has not been explored. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out the kind of communication strategies that business representatives of companies based in Cartagena and Barranquilla use to make requests of colleagues within their own companies and representatives of local as well as international companies. In doing so, this paper also explores the relationship between business writers' choices and contextual factors such as audience (internal, local, and international) and generic distinctive features across two types of genre (letters and memoranda). The extent to which strategies identified in Spanish texts are similarly used in English is also explored.

The teaching of business correspondence in the Colombian-Caribbean region has been traditionally based on material design, as stated above, and on ready-made recipes which simplify reality. The approach in such cases is to teach formulaic language which students have to fit into their texts, ignoring contextual factors that may be important for successful communication. In exploring the use of a descriptive rather than a prescriptive approach to writing,



findings from this study may serve to meet, in particular, the communication skill needs of business representatives of the Caribbean region of Colombia. One way to achieve this could be to expose students to parallel corpora of material used in professional settings. The advantage of using parallel corpora is that the learner can intuitively “discover and formulate facts” (Thompson, 2001) about how language functions in a particular context. It is acknowledged that allowing students to develop their own understanding of language favorably affects learning (Bolitho and Tomlinson, 1995; Ellis, 1997). Thus, making use of corpora in a way that enables students to engage in real discourse (Gavioli and Aston, 2001; Mishan, 2004) may be a starting point in trying to help students identify the kind of purpose and strategies that business representatives of local companies use to communicate with their counterparts.

The remainder of this paper is organized in the following way: 1) the methodology, which comprises background information of the population sample and the main aspects involved in the analysis; 2) a detailed description of the results in terms of number and types of moves identified in each type of text, as well as a comparison of the textual organization across the three kinds of text; 3) a discussion on the implication of findings for the generic structure of the texts and an attempt to explore the relationship between contextual factors and the choice of optional moves; and finally, 4) conclusions and pedagogical implications.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

This work is part of a research project that aims to identify the global and internal structure of moves in letters and memoranda in Spanish and English, produced by native speakers of Spanish working for business organizations in Barranquilla and Cartagena, two Colombian cities. An earlier survey of communication skill needs of business representatives held in this region showed that request letters are one of the most frequently used type of written communication (Martínez *et al.*, 1998). Out of 737 Spanish documents collected, eighty-three were request letters and thirty-three were request memoranda. In the same way, out of 419 English documents, fifty-two were



request letters. In this first stage of the project, seventy-six request documents were analyzed. They are as follows: thirty-eight letters in Spanish, sixteen letters in English, and twenty-two memoranda in Spanish. At this stage of the project, the analysis of letters of request in English written by native speakers has not been considered due to constraints in getting access to these kinds of texts. The small amount of request letters written by native speakers of English obtained from the initial survey of communication skill needs did not lend itself to a cross-language comparison with the texts studied.

Genre analysis in business communications has mostly been carried out following the theory of move analysis. Swales (1990) maintains that from the teaching perspective, it is useful to think of a genre as consisting of a series of moves. For this reason, it is thought that the method proposed by Swales is not only appropriate to identify textual units in letters and memoranda, but also to identify possible similarities and differences in letters and memoranda typical of the same context, and written to achieve similar purposes in Spanish and English.

The analysis of the textual organization involves three aspects: identification of the purpose of the texts, identification of the moves (each move is determined according to content and purpose, as proposed by Swales and Bhatia), and identification of the obligatory and optional moves. The study involves a comparison between patterns of moves between English and Spanish letters, as well as letters and memoranda in Spanish. Statistical analysis was carried out in order to identify differences and similarities across the text types used in this study.

## **2. RESULTS**

Letters in Spanish and English and memoranda in Spanish have an obligatory move of request, i.e., the overall communicative purpose is stated in this move. The request is accompanied, in general, by a description of what is requested. It appears mostly in the first move in fifty-three out of seventy-six request documents analyzed, distributed across data as follows: in twenty-three out





of thirty-eight letters in Spanish; in ten out of sixteen letters in English; and in twenty out of twenty-two memoranda in Spanish.

Six optional moves were identified across the texts. They were named according to the purpose and content conveyed in each move. The names are: justification, information, additional request, establishing credentials, maintaining communication, and ending politely.

Table 1 shows the number of moves and frequency of use across the texts studied. The analysis shows that letters in Spanish and English have the same average number of moves, which is 2.8, whereas request memoranda in Spanish have an average of only 1.6 moves.

Table 1. Number of moves in the texts

Number of moves	38 request letters in Spanish	16 request letters in English	22 request memos in Spanish
One move	3 (8 %)	4 (25 %)	10 (45 %)
Two moves	15 (39 %)	4 (25 %)	10 (45 %)
Three moves	10 (26 %)	3 (19 %)	2 (9 %)
Four moves	8 (21 %)	2 (13 %)	0 (0 %)
Five moves	2 (5 %)	2 (13 %)	0 (0 %)
Six moves	0 (0 %)	1 (6 %)	0 (0 %)
Average number of moves	2.8	2.8	1.6

## 2.1. Types of moves in request letters in Spanish

The following moves were identified as the most frequent ones in the thirty-eight request letters in Spanish:

- Request
- Justification
- Information
- Additional request
- Establishing credentials



- Ending politely.

Of the six moves above, the move of request is considered obligatory (it occurs in all letters), while the others are optional. In the following, each move is explained and exemplified.

- *Request*

This request move contains the communicative purpose of the text and ends, in general, with a description of what is being requested. Here the addresser presents the communicative purpose of the letter. The most common purposes associated with the request in letters in Spanish appear to be requests for information, documents, authorization, quotation, and collaboration. Example:<sup>2</sup>

De acuerdo a conversación telefónica sostenida en días anteriores, estamos interesados en que nos suministren la siguiente información en lo concerniente al sector del gas:

- Proyectos a realizarse en el sector del gas natural.
- Las principales empresas dedicadas al transporte de gas en las distintas ciudades.
- (...)
- (...)
- Las principales revistas, periodicos, folletos dedicados a investigar en este sector, para asi poder establecer los puntos de apoyo.
- *Agradecemos especificar de cada empresa la siguiente información: nombres de las personas a quien dirigirse, dirección, teléfono, fax, apartado aéreo, ciudad, etc.*

In this move, the addresser asks for information and describes what s/he wants.

- *Justification*

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2 Transcription of moves is literal.



In this move the addresser gives reasons to convince the addressee of the convenience of answering positively to the request. An example is given below:

*El objetivo de Produgases es tratar de establecer contactos con las principales fuentes de información, para así comenzar a introducir la empresa en otros mercados atractivos para invertir; lo cual es de gran importancia para ambas partes, ya que es una política atractiva de expansión para cualquier empresa.*

As can be seen, the addresser emphasizes the importance of giving the information requested.

- *Information*

The purpose of this move is to provide information about the central point of the message or to provide additional and interesting information for the addressee. This is an example of this kind of move.

*Recurrimos a ustedes para informarles que estamos organizando EL PRIMER FESTIVAL GASTRONÓMICO ITALIANO a realizar el día 6 DE NOVIEMBRE en el PARQUE SANTANDER, ubicado entre las carreras 54 y 58 con la calle 64.*

In this particular case, the addresser informs the reader about an event that is about to take place.

- *Establishing credentials*

The addresser intends to capture the attention of the addressee to impress him/her, and thus, obtain a positive answer to the request. Example:

*Conocedores de su gran espíritu de colaboración, le informamos que desde hace 7 años existe en la ciudad una Fundación sin ánimo de lucro que lleva por nombre FUNDACIÓN SONRISA, cuyo único fin es hacer sonreír a un niño de escasos recursos en NAVIDAD.*



*Cada año, un grupo de amigos conscientes de las necesidades que sufrimos en nuestro Departamento reunimos en un barrio o población en condiciones infrahumanas a más de 1.500 niños para llevarles regalos y diversión en un día cercano a la NAVIDAD, para ello, organizamos actividades preliminares con el fin de recoger fondos para llevarles a cabo nuestra labor.*

The addresser describes the main activities of the organization.

- *Additional request*

The addresser uses the context to make another request, related or not to the communicative purpose of the letter. Example:

***Move 1. Request***

*Por medio de la presente solicitamos a ustedes disminuir nuestra comisión al recibir las Tarjetas de Crédito Credencial Master Card del 6% al 5.8% que es el valor que actualmente nos cobran las entidades de las diferentes Tarjetas de Crédito existentes.*

***Move 2. Additional request***

*De igual forma, deseamos que diariamente se nos autorice una copia detallada del corte de los vouchers que ingresen al sistema de Redeban, para un mejor control.*

In this case, the addresser has made another request, related to the communicative purpose of the letter.

- *Ending politely*

Endings to request letters are characterized by a polite note, in order to obtain an appropriate response from the addressee. Example:

*De antemano agradecemos su atención y estamos a la orden de suministrarles cualquier información que puedan necesitar.*

In this case, the addresser gives an end to the communication by thanking the addressee and offering services in return.



The six moves discussed above are those most frequently used. There were other less frequent moves, such as an additional greeting (to get a better reception from the addressee), reiteration of the request (to emphasize the communicative purpose), and enclosing documents (to specify the documents enclosed).

## 2.2. Types of moves in request letters in English

Sixteen letters were analyzed. The most frequent moves are:

- Request
- Establishing credentials
- Additional request
- Maintaining communication
- Ending politely.

In contrast to Spanish letters, request letters in English do not contain a move of justification.

- *Request*

As observed in the letters in Spanish, the request letters in English also have an obligatory request move. This move begins by specifying the communicative purpose and, in general, ends in describing what is requested. The most common purposes associated with the request in letters in English appear to be requests for information, cancellation of transactions, and quotations. Example:

*THE EXPECTED VOLUME OF CCC BUSINESS IS ABOUT EIGHT MILLION DOLLARS AND THE SIZE OF INDIVIDUAL TRANSACTIONS IS ABOUT FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS.*

*WE ARE INTERESTED IN YOUR FINANCIAL OFFER FOR CREDIT AT 180 DAYS AND UP TO 36 MONTHS.*

- *Polite ending*



This is the most frequently used move after the obligatory move of request.

Example:

*THANKS AND REGARDS.*<sup>3</sup>

- *Establishing credentials*

As in Spanish, this move is used to describe the main activities of the organization. Example:

*COSTAGAS S. A. is a natural gas transmission company with pipelines spanning over the Northern Coast of Colombia. The company also sells compressed Natural Gas for vehicles (CNG) in its own refilling stations, and install and maintain CNG kits to convert gasoline-powered vehicles into natural gas powered vehicles.*

- *Maintaining communication*

This move is used to indicate a way to continue the communication.

Example:

Our address is: COSTAGAS S.A., Calle 60 No. 77 - 55 Barranquilla,  
Colombia, South America.

PHONE: 4134678

FAX: 4147690

APARTADO AEREO: 5350

### **2.3. Types of moves in request memoranda in Spanish**

Twenty-two memoranda were analyzed. The following moves were the most frequent ones:

- Request
- Justification

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3 Eleven out of sixteen letters in English analyzed were written in upper case letters.



- Additional request
- Ending politely.

As in letters, the request move is considered obligatory and contains the communicative purpose. Example:

*Teniendo en cuenta que el plazo máximo para la entrega de los formatos establecidos por la Contraloría Distrital es de abril 1 de 2003, le solicito diligenciar el formato A00 adjunto y entregarlo a la División Administrativa y Financiera, para su oportuno envío.*

As in letters, the move of request begins with the request and ends with its description. In a few cases, the addresser mentions what originated the request. It is assumed that both the addresser and the addressee know the subject of the communication. In the request memoranda, the addresser, in general, begins with the main point; for this reason, there are only one or two moves. Example:

***Move 1:***

*Agradecemos a ustedes nos reporten por escrito el detalle de los equipos que son reemplazados en sus respectivas plantas, para proceder a darlos de baja del registro de Activos Fijos una vez que se verifique su desmonte. La misma recomendación aplica cuando se trate de equipos de oficina, equipos de computación, vehículos y herramientas mayores que estén fuera de servicio o dañadas.*

***Move 2***

*Solicitamos dar las instrucciones necesarias al personal encargado de estas labores en cada planta o dependencia a su cargo.*

A comparison between patterns of moves in English and Spanish letters as well as letters and memoranda in Spanish, is provided in the next sections.

## **2.4. Textual organization of the three text types**

Table 2 shows the frequency of use of the moves in the three types of texts. Overall, a request move is obligatory across the three types of texts. The optional



moves of “additional request” and “polite ending” also occur in each type of text, though the latter is rather rare in memoranda. Other optional moves such as “justification,” “information,” “establishing credentials,” and “maintaining communication” that may occur in letters in Spanish and English, do not occur or may rarely occur in the memoranda. A detailed comparison of the textual organization between letters in English and Spanish, as well as letters and memoranda in Spanish [and memoranda] is provided below.

Table 2. Textual organization of letters in Spanish and English, and memoranda in Spanish

Moves	Letters (in percentage)		Memoranda in Spanish (in percentage)
	English	Spanish	
Request*	100	100	100
Justification	0	50	18
Establishing credentials	32	11	0
Information	0	24	0
Additional request	32	11	18
Maintaining communication	31	0	0
Ending politely	50	32	9

### 2.4.1. Similarities and differences in the textual organization of Spanish and English letters

As can be seen in Table 2, the letters in Spanish and English have an obligatory “request” move. They also share three optional moves: “establishing credentials,” “additional request,” and “ending politely.” “Ending politely” seems to be the most frequently used optional move after the obligatory request move in both languages, though its frequency of use tends to be higher in English than in Spanish.

Despite the overall similarities described above, letters in Spanish have two moves which were not found in letters in English: the move of “justification” and the move of “information.” Conversely, the move “maintaining





communication” seems to be relatively common in English, but apparently, it does not occur in Spanish.

#### **2.4.2 Similarities and differences in the textual organization of letters and memoranda of request in Spanish**

Table 2 shows that letters and memoranda in Spanish share the obligatory move of request. However, the justification, frequent in the letters in Spanish (50 %), is less frequent in the memoranda in Spanish (18 %). In the same way, the move of polite ending is more frequently used in letters (32 %) than in the memoranda (9 %). The letters in Spanish have two moves which do not occur in the memoranda: information (24 %) and establishing credentials (11 %).

### **3. DISCUSSION**

The analysis of the textual organization of letters and memoranda of request revealed important features that may have implications for the generic structure of the texts. The similarities and differences in the choice of moves identified in the three types of texts may be associated with some contextual factors surrounding the communication practice of writing requests.

At a general level, the similarities in the textual organization across text types identified in the analysis can be associated with overall pragmatic purposes and the inherently social nature attached to these texts. This can be seen from two perspectives. Firstly, the obligatory move of request and the occurrence of additional requests across the texts can be linked to the fact that all texts share the same pragmatic purpose, i.e., to make a request. Secondly, the choice of “ending politely move” throughout the sample, also confirms the social nature of the text associated with letters and memoranda.

At the same level, the analysis also yielded important discourse features that can be seen as potential markers to distinguish the generic structure of letters and memoranda of request. This textual variation could be triggered by some contextual factors associated with this type of communication practice. One possible factor is related to the audience. Letters and memoranda used in this



study are used to interact with different types of audiences. Letters in Spanish were addressed to business representatives of local companies; memoranda were also addressed to the managerial level within the same company; and finally, letters in English were addressed to business representatives of companies based abroad, in particular in an English-speaking environment. A second explanation may be found in the various purposes of making a request. The request letters in Spanish were written with different purposes to those of the letters in English. For instance, a request for “collaboration” was found in Spanish, but not in English; conversely, a request for “cancelling transactions” was found in English, but not in Spanish. However, the amount of data in this study does not allow us to establish the relationship between the purpose of making a request and the choice of optional moves.

One discourse feature that could be used to establish a difference between the generic structure in letters and memoranda is related to the number of moves. The information may be more elaborate in letters in both languages than in the memoranda. This is reflected in the average number of moves, which appears to be higher in letters in both languages than in the memoranda. The wider choice of optional moves in letters (e.g., establishing credentials, information, maintaining communication, and justification) that do not appear or rarely appear in memoranda, also supports the above claim.

At a more detailed level of analysis, the findings also point to a possible textual variation across the two genres (i.e., letters or memoranda of request), as well as within the same genre in the two languages (i.e., request letters in English and Spanish). Such differences can be seen in the choice of optional moves.

The frequency of use of the move “ending politely” across texts also indicates a difference between the two genres and the two languages. Across the two genres, the lower frequency of use of the move “ending politely,” for instance, may suggest that memos are less socially oriented than letters. This could be interpreted in two ways. What seems to count, is the fulfilment of the request; thus, little weight is given to establishing or keeping an existing business relationship. However, it is also possible to say that this choice is due to the fact that a more straightforward relationship is expected among colleagues within a company. In contrast, in letters -typically sent to outsiders, e.g.,



business representatives from other companies, national or international- it is expected that the relationship is more distant. Therefore, the frequency of polite expressions tends to be higher in letters than in memos. At the level of languages, “ending politely” seems to be more central to writing a request to international companies whose recipients are from a different cultural background and speak a language other than Spanish. Moreover, the higher frequency of use of this move in letters in English may also be the result of awareness of cultural sensitivity learned during previous English courses, or through observation to the English writing style of their business counterparts from English-speaking countries.

Across languages, the choice of “additional request” is more noticeable in letters in English than in Spanish. Perhaps, writers like to adopt this strategy to fully take advantage of the time invested in the communication. Letters sent to international companies may demand more time and effort than those sent to local companies. For the same reason, it could be argued that the optional move “maintaining communication” can be more associated with letters written in English than in Spanish. Communication with local companies may be much easier to establish.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

According to the preliminary findings, it may be assumed that, on the whole, business representatives of Colombian-Caribbean companies who are native speakers of Spanish may follow a similar textual organization when writing memos and letters of request in Spanish and English. They tend to use an obligatory request, typically reinforced by an additional request and the optional move of “polite ending”. However, contextual factors that surround the writing of requests may influence the textual organization of each type of text. In particular, there seems to be a close relationship between the audiences and the choice of optional moves. It should be noted that the small size of the corpus does not allow us to make a more detailed analysis. Thus, at a later stage, the use of a larger corpora will allow us to examine more closely the relationship between the choice of optional moves and the target audience of each type of text. In addition to this, the analysis of letters of requests written in English by native speakers would provide us with a better understanding



of the influence of cultural factors on the choice of a particular optional move in this kind of text.

Despite the above constraints, we believe that these preliminary findings can shed some light on the design of materials based on a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive approach. Such an approach should include the use of parallel corpora through which students are not only exposed to authentic use of language, but also develop their ability to discover by themselves, the similarities and differences in the textual organization of written requests in business communication in the Colombian-Caribbean context.

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