

Cross-Cultural Genre Analysis: Application Letters

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Abstract

Analyzing genre means investigating instances of conventionalised or institutionalised textual artifact in the context of specific institutional and disciplinary practices, procedures and cultures in order to understand how members of specific discourse communities construct, interpret and use these genres to achieve their community goals and why they write the way they do. The genre of application letters written by English natives have been studied (Bhatia, 1993) and some 'moves' have been identified. The purpose of the present study was to do a similar investigation on the same genre written by Iranian applicants and to explore and trace any possible similarities and differences in terms of the moves applied. In so doing, twenty seven unsolicited application letters were randomly selected. Data analyses revealed that although Iranian applicants do follow regular, conventionalised and institutionally-encouraged patterns similar to English natives'; they also differ in some other respects. Cross-cultural and institutional differences are referred to provide possible explanations for points of departure.

Key words: Genre Analysis, Application Letters, Iranian applicants

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, the term 'genre' is thought of as referring to a sociolinguistic activity in which the participants are able to achieve particular goals (Henry & Roseberry, 2001). Learning a genre is not simply learning linguistic forms and conventions. It is also learning how to participate in the actions of a community. Genre analysts seek to find out not only about those textual and linguistic properties, they also attempt to approach genres from a socio-critical perspective in order to study what people 'do' with language and how they do so (Bhatia, 2002).

Genre analysis in ESP began with Swales' pioneering work on the introduction to an academic article. Swales notes that there is a regular pattern of 'moves' and 'steps' that appear in a certain order in the majority of introductions investigated (Dudley-Evans & John, 1998). Swales (1990) believes that it is useful to think of a genre as consisting of a series of 'moves'. A move can be thought of as part of a text, written or spoken, which achieves a particular purpose within the text. The move contributes in some way to fulfilling the overall purpose of the genre. For example, the move Facilities and Activities of a brief tourist information text (Henry & Roseberry, 1996, 1998) describes in an interesting way what a visitor to a particular place might do. This contributes to the overall purpose of the genre: to persuade tourists to visit the site.

The term 'step' is used to mean how the writer or speaker chooses to realise, or execute the move (Bhatia, 1993). For example, the writer of the Central Idea (thesis statement) in an essay introduction may choose from a variety of rhetorical options how to interest the reader, for instance, by asking a question, or by stating a fact (Henry & Roseberry, 1997). If the move can only be realised by a series of strategies in a particular order then, following Swales (1990), steps can be thought of as 'strategies' to materialise those moves. Adopting Hasan's (1989) notion that some 'elements' of texts are obligatory and some optional, Henry and Roseberry (2001) consider some moves to be obligatory and some optional.

In the area of EOP, Bhatia (1993) has shown that the techniques of genre analysis developed originally for the study of academic texts can be applied to business letters and legal documents. His seminal works focus on Sales Promotion Letters and Job Application Letters.

He does suggest seven moves of a letter of application, but his main concern is to show how the structure of a 'typical example' of a letter of application is similar to the structure of a sales promotion letter. He does not appear to have based his analysis on a corpus of native speaker letters, nor does he attempt to identify the strategies, or their salient linguistic features (Henry & Roseberry, 2001).

2. The Present Study

2.1. Aim

The genre chosen for the analysis was 'application letters' written in Farsi by Iranian applicants. It was intended to compare and contrast the 'moves' frequently applied by the native speakers of English with those employed by Iranian applicants when they apply in Farsi. Bearing in mind Bhatia's (1993) and Henry & Roseberry's (2001) results, the study aimed at identifying the moves of application letters in a particular context of Iran and to see if contextual and linguistic variations result in variations in moves application, order, or omission.

2.2. Data

Twenty seven unsolicited application letters were randomly selected. They had been written by MA and MS holders applying for teaching on a casual basis at tertiary levels of Payame-Nour universities of Tabriz or Maraghe. All letters were in Farsi.

2.3. Method

Swales' (1990) definition of 'moves' and 'steps' makes up the basis of the analysis. A move, he defines, is a unit that relates both to the writer's purpose and to the content that s/he wishes to communicate. A step is lower level text unit than the move that provides a detailed perspective on the options open to the writer in setting out the moves. Bhatia's study (1993) is also resorted to in cases of resemblances or divergences between his findings and the present one (Table 1). Furthermore, Henry & Roseberry's (2001) findings were borne in mind while analysing, comparing, and contrasting the moves (Table 2).

Henry & Roseberry (2001) believe that letters of application do not seem to have any obvious linguistic markers of move boundaries. As a result, their analysis depends on the 'intuitive notion of topic' (Brown & Yule, 1983). The same notion was followed throughout this study.

Table 1. Moves of the application letters, (Bhatia, 1993)

Move 1	Establishing Credentials
Move 2	Introducing the candidature
Move 3	Offering incentives
Move 4	Enclosing documents
Move 5	Using pressure tactics
Move 6	Soliciting response
Move 7	Ending Politely

Table 2. Moves of the application letters and their definition, (Henry & Roseberry, 2001)

<i>Move</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Opening	The writer identifies the target and invites the target to read the letter
Referring to a job advertisement	The writer refers to the advertisement in which the position was named and described
Offering candidature	The writer states an interest in applying for the position
Stating reasons for applying	The writer gives reasons for wanting the position
Stating Availability	The writer indicates when he or she would be able to take up the position
Promoting the candidate	The writer presents selected information demonstrating qualifications and abilities relevant to the desired position

Stipulating terms and conditions of employment	The writer indicates expectations regarding salary, working hours, and other relevant contractual matters
Naming referees	The writer names referees who will support the candidature
Enclosing documents	The writer lists documents enclosed with the letter
Polite ending	The writer ends the letter in a conventional manner
Signing off	The writer signs his or her name in a respectful manner, thus claiming ownership of the letter

A close comparison of the previous studies and the results thereof indicates that there is a good amount of variation even among English natives who write application letters. Furthermore, some moves of the second table belong to solicited application letters and; hence, would not be expected to be observed in this research.

2.4 . Findings and Results

The descriptive analysis of data appeared to suggest that a set of certain moves used by the native speakers and identified in earlier investigations are also employed by the Iranian applicants in the context described above. Six moves were identified to be so. They included:

- Move 1: Addressing (opening)
- Move 2: Introducing the candidature
- Move 3: Promoting the candidate and offering incentives
- Move 4: Request and application (offering candidature)
- Move 5: Ending politely
- Move 6: Signing off

2.5. Analysis of Moves

Move 1: Addressing (opening)

All letters, except one, contain move one. Applicants address the head of the university at the beginning using more or less similar lexis. Even though the letter would be finally answered by someone else, the hierarchal order demands the applicants to begin that way. As it is expected from Iranians, they use politeness markers quite frequently and the mundane openings are ‘fatted’ lexically.

Move 2: Introducing the candidature

All applicants naturally introduce themselves in the next move in which they are very similar lexically and structurally. Indispensable with move 2, is the inclusion of first name, last name and father’s name. Variation exists as some give more detailed information on place of birth, residence, etc.

Move 3: Promoting the candidate and offering incentives

The third move contains some information of the applicants materialized through steps that in turn inform the reader about their educational and academic background, their present academic activities and positions somewhere else, military service status, marital status, etc. It is obvious that some of these steps are optional and vary from letter to letter.

- An interesting difference between the steps or the strategies natives versus Iranian applicants adopt is the point that native English speakers present selected information demonstrating their qualifications and abilities relevant to the desired position whereas Iranian applicants include some information that has got nothing to do with their qualifications, skills, or abilities for the teaching job, e.g. they have written about their military service status, marital status.... .
- The second feature which is worth noting is that contrary to the native speakers who use verbs indicating positive self evaluation in a rather direct manner, Iranian applicants tend to sell their qualifications indirectly.

For instance, compare the sentences of some native speakers with those of Iranian applicants.

Native Speakers:	I consider myself as an overachiever I consider myself adaptable I feel that I possess the ability to do X
Iranian Applicants:	I'll do my best to meet the standards I'll be glad if I can be of some help

Move 4: Request and application (offering candidature)

As the applicants move to move 4, they unanimously state the purpose for which they write; namely, applying for teaching. Most would tend to appear polite and humble in their assertion and they seem to prefer a non-direct style. Some interesting observations that manifest points of discrepancies with native English applicants are:

- Some applicants resort to social and religious values to advocate and justify their application such as 'the obligation of the knower [the applicant, here] to disseminate his or her knowledge', 'the responsibility of the people in charge for academic justice', ...
- Informal style gets evident in some cases for sympathetic functions, e.g. the unemployment of educated Iranians, being married and the financial problems of the married people... Native speakers are explicitly taught to 'neither pat themselves on the back nor ask for sympathy' (Geffner, 2001). Iranian applicants seem to favor being meek and humble and, in some cases, resort to 'emotional potential' inherent in their linguistic devices.

Move 5: Ending politely

Lastly, the letters are ended quite politely. A distinctive step of the last move is the applicants' tendency to 'thank in advance'. Most applicants end their letters conventionally and quite similarly.

Move 6: Signing off

The writer signs his or her name in a respectful manner, thus claiming ownership of the letter. A typical feature of this part is providing the reader with the applicants' phone numbers and their addresses.

3. Conclusions

The findings of the present study seem to support the results of previous investigations particularly in EOP area particularly in terms of the moves. Yet the strategies or steps Iranian applicants of this study had used to execute the moves were different. The differences might be due to

1. Cross-cultural differences: Though defining culture is a thorny task, it goes without saying that the two cultures differ in many respects. Even in academic contexts the differences are reflected lexically, structurally, and generically. Resorting to cultural and religious beliefs, values... are a good example.
2. As stated before, the data of the present study focused on unsolicited application letters only. Naturally some moves identified by Henry and Roseberry (2001) did not exist.

Although applicants are told 'what' to write; i.e. an application letter, they are not told 'how' to. The interesting point, however, is the conventions and regular patterns they adhere to while writing. It seems these patterns have been institutionally and culturally well-established, reinforced and encouraged and that applicants themselves help with their conventionalization as they seek academic and pragmatic success. EOP genre analysis has a long way ahead. The findings might shed some light, though little, on the Iranian EOP context and reveal some facts about the cultural and mental behaviors of the so-called would-be members of tertiary level teaching community. In addition the results of the study would be of use and help for those Iranians involved in writing (or teaching how to write) application letters for multi-national and international companies. Iranian writers might need to be made conscious of the differences that exist.

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سرسر

بررسی ژانر نامه‌های درخواست کار در فرهنگ‌های انگلیسی و فارسی : تفاوت‌ها و تشابه‌ها

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اعضا جوامع، نهادها و مؤسسات خاص با استفاده از ژانر مخصوص به خود اهداف خود را بهتر تعقیب و در برقراری ارتباط بین خود مؤثرتر عمل می‌کنند. منظور از ژانر، سبک‌ها و الگوهای نهادینه شده‌ای است که اعضاء یک مؤسسه یا نهاد در زبان خاص خود استفاده می‌کنند. در فرهنگ و زبان انگلیسی ژانر مربوط به نامه‌های درخواست کار مورد مطالعه قرار گرفته است (بهااتیا، ۱۹۹۳) و بعضی الگوهای ثابت و معین شناسایی شده‌اند. در این مطالعه نامه‌های درخواست کار متقاضیان ایرانی مورد بررسی قرار می‌گیرد تا تفاوت‌ها و تشابه‌های احتمالی مشخص گردند. بیست و هفت نامه تقاضای کار (نوشته شده به فارسی) به طور تصادفی انتخاب و بررسی شدند. تجزیه و تحلیل نامه‌ها مشخص می‌کند که هر چند متقاضیان ایرانی نیز الگوهای خاص و تثبیت شده‌ای را - مشابه انگلیسی زبانان - در نوشته‌های خود استفاده کرده‌اند، تفاوت‌هایی نیز با انگلیسی زبانان از خود بروز داده‌اند. دلایل احتمالی این تفاوت‌ها تحت عنوان "تفاوت‌های فرهنگی-نهادی" مورد بحث و بررسی قرار گرفته‌اند.

کلمات کلیدی: تحلیل و بررسی ژانر، نامه‌های تقاضای کار، متقاضیان ایرانی

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