Comments on Karyn Thompson-Panos and Maria Thomas-Ruzic's "The Least You Should Know about Arabic: Implications for the ESL Writing Instructor".

Barbara Johnstone
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A Reader Reacts . . .

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I am writing in response to the article by Karyn Thompson-Panos and Maria Thomas-Ružić, “The Least You Should Know About Arabic: Implications for the ESL Writing Instructor” (TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 17, No. 4, December 1983). My remarks are not intended as a rebuttal of the article, which I think provides a valid and useful overview of the sorts of problems Arabs tend to have in ESL writing classes. Rather, I would like to bring to the authors’ attention, and to the attention of other readers of this journal, some research on Arabic rhetoric which helps to explain some discourse-level characteristics of Arabs’ writing in English in a more satisfactory way than has previously been suggested.

Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić correctly point out that Arabic and English “use different organizational styles” (619), and that written Arabic sentences are characterized by a high degree of parallelism and coordination (620). To the work cited by Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić about Arabic sentences (Kaplan 1966, Cowan 1978, Yorkey 1977), I would add the work of Ostler (1980), as yet unpublished, as far as I know. The question is why Arabs should write in this way. Presumably, they use parallelism and coordination for the same reason that English writers use subordination: because these linguistic features are rhetorically effective. To say, as Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić do, that “Arabic sentences emphasize sequences of events and balance of thought” (620), is correct, but it is not enough: it does not explain what there is that is persuasive about this sort of discourse strategy.

In their section on Arabs’ writing style, Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružić cite the work of Shouby (1951) and others on the

1 I am less sure about their claims about Arabic paragraph development (620); in my analyses of written texts in Modern Standard Arabic, I have found that orthographic paragraphs in Arabic are very often only one sentence long. The cohesive flexibility seems to be in the number of clauses a sentence can have (from one to at least eighteen) and in the way these clauses are interlinked, rather than in sentence-to-sentence connections in paragraphs (Koch 1991:63).
“Arab mentality,” work in which it is claimed that “Arabs stand a
good chance of being misunderstood, in Arabic, unless they over-
assert and exaggerate” (619). Work like Shoub’s amounts to nothing
more than reverse ethnocentrism or gratuitous self-criticism, and it
does not deserve to be cited in a thoughtful article like the one under
discussion. To say that something is an “overassertion” or an
“exaggeration” is by definition to say that it is not rhetorically
effective. Shoub’s condemnation of Arabic style results from his
application of English rhetorical standards to non-English rhetorics,
a very tempting but very dangerous trap for contrastive rhetoricians.
What Shoub calls “overassertion” would be far more neutrally
referred to as “repetition,” and an analysis of how repetition
functions as a persuasive device in Arabic discourse would also
provide a framework for understanding Arabs’ use of parallelism
(which is repetition of syntactic form) and coordination (without
which parallelism is not linguistically salient).

In a study of the nature and function of repetition in Arabic prose
(reported in Koch 1981, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c), I have attempted to
discover how repetition functions rhetorically. Briefly, my findings
have been these. Repetition is a very salient feature of the writing of
the authors whose work I have examined, all of whom are widely
read and considered to be lucid and persuasive. For example,
synonymous or nearly synonymous terms are coordinated in lexical
couplets, like the English aid and abet, but they are far more
common and far more creative. Arabic root-and-pattern morphology
creates two loci for repetition on the morphological level: repetition
of lexical roots, as in the occurrences occurred, and repetition of
morphological pattern, to which the closest English equivalent
would be rhyme. On the phrase and clause level, there is widespread
repetition of form (parallelism) and of content (paraphrase). One
particularly interesting kind of paraphrase is what I call “reverse
paraphrase,” or paraphrase in which the same action or event is
described from two opposite perspectives, as in The Syrians are a
complete nation, standing by itself. And the Syrian nation is not a
part of the Arab nation.

What is all this repetition for? Is it just that Arabs love repetition
(as the introduction to one ESL writing text puts it), or that they are
culturally unable to be concise? Clearly not. Repetition, I claim, is a
rhetorical strategy, a way of persuading. Repetition works rhetori-
cally by creating presence, that is, by bringing argumentative claims
into affective proximity, into the here and now of discourse. The
more often something is said, the more likely the audience is to
believe it. In formal English discourse, this rhetorical technique is
frowned upon and is sometimes referred to as "browbeating." But in informal discourse, English speakers make frequent use of this technique.

Repetition is not the only way of making ideas present in discourse. The historical present tense brings past events into the present, and various deictic pronouns (this idea, these points) and verbs like look and see are used in argumentation to make ideas seem close. The Arabic particle 'inna ('verily'; sometimes translated as really by Arab ESL students), and the verb rā'a ('see') are frequently used for this purpose.

In English, the model for effective argument is the Aristotelian model of proof, which calls for subordination of supporting ideas to the "main idea" (a concept which is often foreign to Arab ESL students). In Arabic, it is the presentation of an idea—the linguistic forms and the very words that are used to describe it—that is persuasive. In argument, Arabic speakers present their truths by making them present in discourse; by repeating them, paraphrasing them, and calling attention to them with external particles like 'inna.

I hope that readers who are interested in the preceding remarks will refer to the longer articles in which they are more fully presented. Once again, my remarks are not intended as a corrective to Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ružič's article, but rather as an addendum to it, and as a reminder to contrastive rhetoricians that real understanding of non-English rhetorics must be predicated on thorough analyses of the rhetorical workings of non-English texts.

REFERENCES


The Authors Respond . . .

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“The least” in our title, “The Least You Should Know About Arabic: Implications for the ESL Writing Instructor,” was used expressly to indicate to the reader that the article addresses only those very salient features of Arabic which had been found to contribute to some noted weaknesses in Arab students’ written English. The article makes no claim to be a comprehensive contrastive study of Arabic and English, nor an in-depth analysis of Modern Standard Arabic. Many of the language aspects we treated, in fact, we approached from a consideration of error and transfer. While we chose to place more focus on word- and sentence-level features, we feel our treatment of stylistic and rhetorical differences (1983: 619-621), though brief, was accurate and appropriate to the article’s objectives. Barbara Koch’s work in Arabic text analysis engages her in a more comprehensive investigation of Arabic rhetoric and discourse than was within the scope of our article. Nonetheless, we very much welcome Koch’s elaboration of points we made concerning differing writing styles in written Arabic and English. Furthermore, it is certainly encouraging to see that the long-neglected area of Arabic discourse is being addressed (Ostler 1980, Koch 1981, 1983), and we look forward to seeing more of this work available in published form.

Koch criticizes our reference to the work of Shouby (1951) and others who have written of the greater use of “exaggeration” and “overassertion” in written and spoken Arabic discourse. We agree with Koch that the more neutral term “repetition” is preferable to the use of “overassertion” and “exaggeration.” However, the use of such evaluative terms can be very significant insofar as they represent the native English speaker’s natural, judgmental reaction to rhetorical features transferred from Arabic to English. Specifically, the rhetorical devices for repetition in Arabic, while most
effective in Arabic discourse, can be ineffective or at least distracting when transferred to English, especially in written discourse. Of course the inherent problem in contrastive rhetoric is the difficulty of establishing an objective reference point; one takes one's own language as the standard when making judgments of style and effectiveness, as Koch also points out. In our section on style, we discuss several stylistic devices of written Arabic, such as greater use of exaggeration and assertion, relative to English, as well as repetition, rewording, and restatement. We took two things to be implicit within the context of the article: 1) that the features of “overassertion,” “exaggeration,” and “repetition,” in fact, reflect elements of effective rhetoric and good style in Arabic; 2) that it is when these elements are transferred to English in paragraph and composition writing that they are less than effective. As such, we are neither defending ethnocentric positions nor criticizing non-English rhetorical styles; rather, we point out some differences that exist, and stress that a recognition of these differences is necessary if the Arab learner and the ESL instructor are to be successful in their efforts to work toward more effective, well-written English. We appreciate Koch’s legitimate concern for the importance of maintaining objectivity in the discussion of contrastive rhetorical devices.

We realize the importance of cross-linguistic and cultural sensitivity, not only in the ESL classroom but in other Arab-American encounters, an issue which we have more fully addressed elsewhere (Thomas-Ružič and Thompson-Panos 1980, 1981). For example, para- and extra-linguistic features of spoken Arabic transferred to English can “miscommunicate” excitability and aggressiveness to an English speaker. In writing, other evidence of transfer which detracts or miscommunicates in some way can be found. For example, Arab students might find written English “cold” and “disjointed,” or perhaps “understated” and “blunt,” relative to Arabic. Also, the “lack” of coordination in written English could be said to result in a “choppy” style lacking fluidity. Certain rhetorical features of English would be undesirable and ineffective if transferred to Arabic.

Koch’s discussion of the various devices for repetition in written Arabic, such as the use of synonymous pairs, repetition of lexical roots and morphological patterns, parallelism, and paraphrase are very relevant. They support previous findings that parallelism and coordination are very salient elements of written Arabic, but they go further in showing how these various “repetitive” devices function not only on discourse and sentence levels, but on morphological and lexical levels as well. As for the doubts Koch voices about our comments on paragraph style, we refer again to Kaplan (1966, 1967) and Yorkey (1977).