Culture and Rhetorical Expectations: A Perspective for Technical Communicators

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Abstract

In this article, I discuss how individuals who communicate about technical and scientific topics (i.e., technical communicators) can apply ideas from the theory of rhetoric to communicate more effectively with individuals from other cultures. In so doing, I present a question-based strategy technical communicators can use for planning how they will develop different communication products (e.g., written reports, instructions, websites, etc.) for audiences from cultures other than their own.

1. Introduction

The international nature of business means that individuals who share scientific or technical information with non-specialists are increasingly interacting with clients and colleagues from other nations and other cultures. Sometimes, these interactions are telephone conversations; increasingly, they involve email messages or online postings. Effective cross-cultural communication, however, involves more than good language skills. Rather, what one discusses, when, and how can vary along cultural lines. Thus, understanding such stylistic expectations is central to effective intercultural exchanges.

Rhetorical theory can provide technical communicators, those individuals who engage in such activities professionally, with a framework for analyzing and anticipating different cultural communication expectations. By understanding how ideas from the theory of rhetoric can be applied to intercultural communication, technical communicators can interact more effectively in global business situations. This article introduces various rhetorical concepts or categories affecting the exchange of information among individuals. It also presents a question-based framework technical communicators can use to do initial audience analysis. Through such an approach, technical communicators can better understand and design more effective materials for audiences from cultures other than their own.

2. Rhetoric as Strategy

Rhetoric is often defined as "the art of persuasion." That is, when presenting ideas and information, individuals use specific strategies to persuade an audience to view something from a particular perspective or to perform a certain task. This strategic approach is a fundamental part of the human communication process. When individuals speak to others, they use words in a strategic way to entice that person to listen, to keep that individual's attention, or to try to elicit a particular response/behavior.

For technical communicators, this connection between communication and behavior is essential to making sure information (e.g., instructions) and ideas (e.g., cautions or warnings) are used as intended by the readers or users for whom the technical communicator is developing materials. In this way, technical communication is strategic. That is, it is based upon how well the technical communicator who creates such materials understands and can address the expectations (i.e., the reading and the usage patterns) of a given audience.

By applying concepts from rhetorical theory to identify categories related to persuading individuals to use information in a certain way, technical communicators can do the kind of initial research needed to develop products that best meet the needs of different audiences. Technical communicators can then use the resulting information to create materials that different audiences are more likely to use as is intended. For these reasons, technical communicators can benefit from an introduction to key rhetorical concepts and suggestions for how these concepts might be used to guide research on the communication expectations of different audiences.

3. Forums and Expectations

Rhetorical strategies – or strategies for presenting information – are not random. Rather, they tend to be set by the *forum* – or the context, setting, or genre – in which information is presented. Each forum has a particular set of unwritten rules for what one can and cannot say to achieve a particular end. Forums also have implicit conditions for how one should or should not say something in order to achieve an objective.

Consider the forum, or context, of a telephone call. In this forum, the phone rings, and someone on the other end picks up the receiver. What do most persons expect that individual to say? "Hello?" And what response is expected of the caller? "Hi, this is . . . can I speak with . . . ?" And the response to that? "Sure, just one minute." Now, chances are that this situation is not the exact one callers encounter every time they use the phone. The overall format, however, is generally the same. That is, the forum brings with it assumptions for how each involved party expects the other to act and react. It also affects how different discourse patterns foster such behaviors.

If an individual deviates from the norms expected in a forum, irritation and confusion can ensue. If, for example, the phone rings, and someone answers by saying, "Speak!" The caller is taken aback, for the response is unexpected. In fact, the caller likely thinks the other person is very rude. The conversation continues: "This is . . . Can I speak with . . . ?" The voice on the other end snaps back, "Of course you can; you seem fully capable of being able to speak with me.!" (note the literal interpretation of "can" in this example), and then slams down the receiver. Why is this situation so confusing? Because it was not the kind of communication behavior most individuals expect to encounter in this forum (i.e., context). As this behavior was unanticipated, it is perceived as perplexing or rude. Thus, while the purpose of the forum (i.e., contacting someone via telephone) was the same in both situations, different expectations of how to use language to achieve that purpose led to confusion.

In a similar way, communication expectations can cause confusion in cross-cultural exchanges. That is, different cultures tend to have different expectations of how one should present information within the same forum – or, in the case of a written business exchange, the same genre. Americans, for example, expect a business letter to directly state the purpose for which the letter is being written: "I am writing this letter in order to . . ." Yet, for many Japanese readers, such a direct statement is often considered rude. Rather, the writer is seen as treating the reader like a small child by stating the purpose of something that should be obvious to both parties. In this case, different cultural presentation expectations related to the same forum cause cross-cultural confusion.

Within this notion of the forum, there seem to be three central areas that cause particular problems in relation to cross-cultural communication. By understanding how cultural factors affect each area, technical communicators can design their messages to address different cultural expectations. Such a strategic approach to communication can, in turn, improve the effectiveness of cross-cultural interactions.

4. Purpose of the Forum

The first, and perhaps the most interesting, of these rhetorical points is the *purpose* of the forum. Each form (or genre) has a purpose it is designed to achieve. The purpose of the forum/genre of an instruction manual, for example, is to provide individuals with the information they need to perform a particular process.

The problem is that different cultures often associate different purposes with the same forum/genre. Take the previous example of the forum of a business letter. For most Americans, the purpose of this forum is to provide key information and important details related to a particular business transaction. The average American reader therefore expects certain kinds of topics to appear within that letter – topics related to the purpose of the letter, which is to clarify a particular transaction. For many Japanese readers, the purpose of a business letter is to invite the recipient to enter into a

relationship (ideally, a long-term one) with the sender. For this reason, the topics many Japanese readers expect to encounter would allude to the sender's ability to form and to sustain a relationship with that recipient.

For this reason, the first step to effectively understanding the communication expectations of individuals from another culture is answering two key research questions:

- What is the purpose of this forum/genre in my culture?
- What is the purpose of this same forum/genre in the culture of my audience?

If there is a cultural difference, then individuals need to rethink how they will communicate with members of another culture in this forum. They will also need to consider if a different forum might be a better means of achieving a particular purpose with audiences from a different culture.

5. Topics and the Forum

The concept of what *topics* an individual is expected to address within the context of a forum is the next factor to examine. If cultures associate different purposes with the same genre, then they will also expect different purpose-related topics to be discussed within that genre. In the case of the average US business letter, the purpose of providing information leads writers to cover the topics of factual data related to a project (e.g., key dates, values, measurements, guidelines, etc.). In contrast, many Japanese business letters focus on establishing a relationship with the recipient. As a result, expected topics in this forum might include the background of the sender, displays of the sender's knowledge of the recipient, and mutual gains that could be achieved from both parties working together.

Thus, once technical communicators have determined the purpose of a forum, they must then answer the follow-up research question

- What topics must one discuss in this forum in order to meet the expectations of individuals from another culture?

This answer can help individuals appear more credible, for their audience will be less inclined to view them as speaking "off topic."

6. Proofs

Three additional rhetorical points, known as *proofs*, also need to be raised in relation to forums and topics. They are best known by their ancient Greek names, ethos, logos, and pathos.

6.1 Ethos (Credibility)

The fist of these points is *ethos*, which is often translated as "credibility." That is, what does one have to say or to write for the intended audience to consider him or her credible enough to listen to or to read? On a simple, stylistic level, ethos could mean what kind of vocabulary one is expected to use or how good one's grammar and spelling are.

From an intercultural perspective, ethos can be far more complex. Things to consider in relation to culture and ethos include:

- How important is formality, what degree of formality is expected, and how should one address those expectations? (e.g., Do you begin a business communiqué with the relatively informal "I received the email you send last week." or with the more formal "I have the honor to inform you I received your email sent November 6, 2000."?)

- How do persons introduce themselves to others in a communiqué? Is it as an individual ("Hi, I'm Pat Smith.") or as part of a group ("Hi, I'm a representative of this organization.")? If one needs to be part of a group, is it a family group ("Hi, I'm X's cousin."), a professional association ("I'm with the X organization."), or some other institutional affiliation ("I'm a graduate of X." or "I'm an employee of X.")?

- What examples or analogies should persons use to show the audience that the presenter has a credible/competent understanding of a particular topic? (e.g., To describe how the members of a team should work to achieve a goal, do you use examples from the sport of baseball – which has a relatively limited global following – or form soccer/football, which has a much wider international following?)

The answer to these questions depends on the culture one is from. For technical communicators who are creating materials for audiences from other cultures, the question to answer is:

- What do individuals from this culture expect me to say/write in order to appear to be an individual worthy of time and attention?

6.2 Logos (Logic/Organization)

The second proof is *logos*, or logic. That is, how does one logically develop or organize items such as executive reports, instruction sets, or websites? Things to consider in relation to logos and culture include:

- Do individuals rely on stating facts to show the logical reason for why a particular course of action should be taken? If so, what facts can one safely assume the audience already knows? (In this instance, the omission of certain facts could cause confusion, while stating "common knowledge" could be perceived as patronizing.)

- Do individuals explicitly state the results and the implications of data that is presented, or should one allow the audience to come to such conclusion on its own?

- Does one need to provide headings and sub-headings to let readers know when different kinds of information are being presented, or is such an approach considered patronizing? If so, should such headings be numbered? And how should headings be worded to indicate the logical transition between and connection among ideas in a given item?

Again, all of these factors depend upon one's cultural background, for different cultures have different ideas of what constitutes a logically developed argument.

6.3 Pathos (Emotion)

The third and final proof is *pathos*, which is traditionally translated as appeals to emotion. In this case, the questions technical communicators need to ask should be:

- What factors constitute objectivity (i.e., an absence of emotion) and subjectively (i.e., the inclusion of one's personal feelings) to the audience? And does the audience prefer objectivity or subjectivity when reading information or ideas about the topic on which one is writing?

- Are individuals expected to include emotional topics or examples when presenting information? (Should one use a particularly gruesome example to illustrate why a particular technology should only be used in certain ways?) If so, how extreme can or should such examples be, and how many are appropriate to use?

- What words are considered emotionally charged and should be avoided (to prevent offense) or used (to create a certain mood) depending on the audience?

Again, the answers to these questions depend on one's cultural background, and effective technical communication with individuals from other cultures involves doing the level and the kind of research needed to know the answers to these questions.

7. Conclusion

Sharing technical and scientific information with individuals from other cultures is not an easy process. For this reason, technical communicators can benefit from a framework that helps them understand differing cultural communication expectations. This essay has overviewed how concepts from rhetorical theory can provide such a framework. By using rhetorical concepts, technical communicators can do the kind of research needed to better understand audiences from cultures other than their own. And by addressing different rhetoric-based research questions, technical communicators can better design informational and instructional materials for a wider range of individuals.

8. Related Readings

The following readings can provide more information on the ideas discussed in this article:

Artemeva, N. (1998). The writing consultant as cultural interpreter: bridging cultural perspectives on the genre of the periodic engineering report. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 7*, 285-299.

Tebeaux, E. (1999). Designing written business communication along the shifting cultural continuum: The new face of Mexico. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 13, 49-85.

St.Amant, K. (2006). Globalizing rhetoric: Using rhetorical concepts to identify and analyze cultural expectations related to genres. *Hermes – Journal of Language and Communication Studies, 37,* 47-66.

Ulijn, J. M. (1996). Translating the culture of technical documents: Some experimental evidence. In D. C. Andrews (Ed.), *International dimensions of technical communication* (pp. 69-86). Arlington, VA: Society for Technical Communication.

Woolever, K. R. (2001). Doing global business in the information age: Rhetorical contrasts in the business and technical professions. In C. G. Panetta (Ed.), *Contrastive Rhetoric Revisited and Redefined* (pp. 47-64). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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