

本书以符号学的理论为分析工具,结合修辞学、话语语言学、认知语言学、跨文化交际等学科的理论,对以英语作为第二外语(ESL/EFL)的写作的修辞特征进行分析,为分析和评价ESL/EFL写作提供新的方法和视角,填补其理论研究的不足,并帮助写作者提高书面沟通和写作的能力。



英语写作修辞的 符号学研究

——ESL/EFL写作的新视角

*A Semiotic Study of English
Composition-Rhetoric*

—A New Perspective on ESL/EFL Writing

◎ 龙金顺 著



厦门大学出版社
XIAMEN UNIVERSITY PRESS

国家一级出版社
全国百佳图书出版单位

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

英语写作修辞的符号学研究/龙金顺著. —厦门: 厦门大学出版社, 2011. 4

ISBN 978-7-5615-3832-6

I. ①英… II. ①龙… III. ①英语-写作-符号学-研究 ②英语-修辞-符号学-研究 IV. ①H315

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2011)第 020653 号

厦门大学出版社出版发行

(地址: 厦门市软件园二期望海路 39 号 邮编: 361008)

<http://www.xmupress.com>

xmup@public.xm.fj.cn

厦门集大印刷厂印刷

2011 年 4 月第 1 版 2011 年 4 月第 1 次印刷

开本: 889×1240 1/32 印张: 8

字数: 226 千字 印数: 1~1000 册

定价: 27.00 元

本书如有印装质量问题请直接寄承印厂调换



Preface

With economic globalization and highly-advanced networks, written communication has become one of the core competencies at present. The ability to communicate ideas and information effectively through the global digital network is crucially dependent on good writing skills. Command of good writing skills is increasingly viewed as vital to equip learners for success in the twenty-first century. Writing ability in second languages (SL) or foreign languages (FL) is directly related to the students' employment and future development. Learning how to write effectively in SL/FL is one of the most challenging aspects of SL/FL learning. Since writing is a kind of activity integrated with language ability, social ability and problem-solving ability, more and more scholars have attempted to understand and interpret this complicated mental activity from different perspectives.

In the latter half of the 20th century in the West, writing theories underwent a developing stage from “written product” through “writing process” to “metacognition” and “social cognition”. Successively there appeared the teaching methods about product, process, context and social cognition. In recent years, SL writing has been a much more independent discipline—some scholars have started to reflect on its history, reexamine the basic assumptions about SL writing and its instruction, synthesize the researches, and build some models and theories. These scholars have inherited and borrowed the rich fruits in writing and rhetoric of first language, and other related fields, and have made a lot of fruitful researches integrated with the actual situations of SL writing. At present, the scholars are making deeper researches on SL writing and instruction.

However, despite the noticeable achievements made in English

composition studies abroad, according to the analysis, a comprehensive theory of SL writing—an integrated theoretical system—still lacks in this field. At present, this field lacks a coherent understanding of how people actually learn to write in a second language and how teaching contributes to this learning. It has become a consensus among relevant researchers that a practical and effective writing pedagogy should combine all the major approaches to writing in an organic way.

In recent years, the Chinese scholars have begun to focus on the research into this field. The studies in ESL/EFL composition and instruction have transformed from the introduction and application of foreign theories to the innovation of theories, and have borne rich fruits in this field in China. Some scholars have set out to carry out researches and discussions from different angles and in various ways, such as content, methodology, and developmental trend.

The actual situation in China is that the depth and breadth of ESL/EFL composition studies need to be further expanded; the plentiful research findings are scattered and lack systematicity; the efficiency in teaching English composition remains to be improved. The solution to these problems is that we should not copy the existing foreign theoretical models, but use different methods according to the specific situations in China, have a synthetic analysis of the isolated research findings in order to reveal the essential characteristics and common laws of the Chinese learners of English composition, and eventually establish the ESL/EFL composition theories adapted to the Chinese realities. However, all of these require us to explore this field constantly, renew our ideas and convert our perspectives.

Studies have shown that semiotics is both a kind of theory that interprets social-cultural phenomena, and a kind of methodology. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as part of the semiotic system. They study how meanings are made: as such, being concerned not only with communication but also with the construction and maintenance of reality. Semiotics supplies people with a new



thinking mode, which can be used to analyze the phenomena or problems in the fields of linguistics, literature, culture, politics, economics, art, news communication, etc. Rich semiotic theories constitute a great theoretical treasure-house, from which an effective methodology can be obtained to settle some problems in ESL/EFL composition rhetoric. How to succeed in doing it is a new question for study at present.

Initiated at the turn of the 20th century, upsurging in the 1930s and 1940s, and thriving up to the present, semiotics has moved beyond the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system, from structural semiotics and interpretative semiotics to cultural semiotics and social semiotics, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations. In this course, semiotics has always been involved in two kinds of research activities: one is the incessant exploration into the basic theories of semiotics; the other is the concrete analyses carried out in various fields of research, incorporating all these findings into the same framework of methodology, and regarding them as different representations of the generation, transmission and interpretation of meanings. Semiotics plays the role of “organizing science” for different disciplines, and meanwhile, these disciplines constitute the actual application of semiotic theories.

A semiotic text analysis scrutinizes the various signs and codes in the text in an attempt to characterize their structure and identify their potential meanings, especially socio-cultural meanings. Semiotics seeks to analyze texts as structured wholes, involving identifying the components within the semiotic system (such as word, context or genre), and the structural relations between these components (such as syntagmatic, paradigmatic or logical relations). Semiotics stresses the semiotic structures and relations both within and outside the semiotic system, and their interactions. Semiotics adopts a multimodal and interdisciplinary analytic methodology.

Semiotics also emphasizes the rule system which plays a dominant

role in the text, and the semiotic context in which the meaning is formed. The production and interpretation of the text depend on communicative codes or communicative rules, because the meanings of signs pivot on the codes where signs lie. Codes provide the frame of the generation and interpretation of meanings. This frame can be used both by the text producer and by the text interpreter. When constructing the text, we usually choose the codes which we are familiar with, and link them so that the meanings produced by the codes can be interpreted by the reader. Every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and subcodes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices. However, ESL/EFL writers, because they are not familiar with the coded programs of the language in use, encode the text wrongly so that it is difficult for the reader to understand the text, only causing the cultural shock.

Writing deals with the production of the text and semioticity is one of the important characteristics in the text. Creating a text involves relating it to relevant signs and codes. Codes are not simply conventions of communication, but rather procedural systems of related conventions. Codes organize signs into meaningful systems, correlating signifiers with signifieds, and transcend single texts, linking them together in an interpretative framework. Composition-rhetoric, the art of using codes effectively to organize signs to form a text, studies all kinds of rhetorical phenomena in writing, and treats these phenomena as special ways to construct and maintain the text through signs and codes. Composition-rhetoric is concerned with diction, figures of speech, topic, context, rhetorical situation, rhetorical strategies, rhetorical purpose, rhetorical structure, cohesion, coherence, style, and genre, etc. All of them can be regarded as codes, which organize signs to help us to discover the world and ourselves, and to construct the text. Writing involves mental as well as physical activity, and it involves readers, texts as well as writers, including their interaction. Semiotics helps us to discover and interpret these processes of semiotic

interaction not only within but also outside the text. When dealing with ESL/EFL writing, semiotics extends and broadens this area of inquiry to even a non-linguistic perspective, including culture.

To sum up, semiotics studies the substantive characteristics and the operational mode of the sign. A given text is a sign, which operates within the text and is of specific semantic functions. The generation of sign meanings rests with the practical application, which proceeds within the text and works in a given society and culture. This point stands out clearly in ESL/EFL writing. Thus, ESL/EFL writers should cultivate their own semiotic competence, that is, the ability of how to use signs and codes to know, to interpret and to construct the world.

The objectives of this study are: 1) With semiotic theories as analysis tools, this study adopts an across-disciplinary research methodology. It makes a pioneering attempt to explore the distinctive rhetorical features in constructing EFL/ESL written texts both linguistically and culturally, to combine fruitful findings in such disciplines as rhetoric, text linguistics, contrastive rhetoric, informatics, communication studies, intercultural communication and cognitive linguistics, etc, and to make a qualitative and empirical analysis of all aspects of English composition-rhetoric. Its final goal is to find some solutions to the problems of ESL/EFL composition, and to make up for the deficiency of being isolated and lacking systematicity of ESL/EFL composition theories; 2) This study attempts to combine semiotic theories with English composition-rhetoric in order for ESL/EFL writers and teachers to cast a new light on English writing. It is hoped that this study can help ESL/EFL writers and teachers better understand the meaning generation of English texts, discover some rules and methods of English composition-rhetoric, foster their ability in rhetoric and communication, and improve their English writing and teaching; 3) By interpreting the semiotic theories and by analyzing various structures and relations within and outside the

text, this study explains the relationship between semiotics and composition-rhetoric, provides a new perspective on ESL/EFL writing studies, adds a new methodology to assess and analyze ESL/EFL written texts, and makes up for the insufficiency of the theory and research in ESL/EFL writing.

Just like other tentative researches, there exists much room for improvement in this study, for this is a preliminary attempt to combine semiotics with composition-rhetoric in English and especially the quantitative analysis merits discussion and application in the future.

Key words: composition-rhetoric; semiotic study; new perspective; ESL/EFL writing





Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to extend my heartfelt thanks to those who have helped me all the way make this book possible.

My sincere gratitude first goes to my esteemed supervisor Professor Hu Shuzhong, for his most enlightening lectures; for his creative recommendations and critical comments; for his generous guidance and continuous encouragements. Without his patience and efforts, this book would be impossible.

I also owe an enormous debt to Professor He Zhaoxiong, Professor Mei Deming, Professor Li Ji'an, Professor Zou Shen, Professor Yu Dongming, Professor Zhang Jian and some other teachers from Shanghai International Studies University, whose lectures or constructive suggestions have helped to facilitate my effort to compose this book.

Special acknowledgement must be reserved for my friends or colleagues, Yuan Xue, Yun Hong and Cao Lei, who have assisted me to collect data for the preparation of this book.

I am truly grateful to the writers listed in the works cited for their valuable ideas and information.

Wang Yangfan, the editor at Xiamen University Press, deserves special thanks for her capacity for patience and flexibility.

Last, but not least, I am deeply indebted to my beloved wife and daughter, who have supported my devotion to this book throughout.

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Introduction

With economic globalization and highly-advanced networks, written communication has become one of the core competencies at present. The ability to communicate ideas and information effectively through the global digital network is crucially dependent on good writing skills. Command of good writing skills is increasingly viewed as vital to equip learners for success in the twenty-first century. Writing ability in second languages (SL) or foreign languages (FL) is directly related to the students' employment and future development. Learning how to write effectively in SL/FL is one of the most challenging aspects of SL/FL learning. Therefore, writing has become part and parcel of learning and teaching SL/FL. With the expanding of such disciplines as rhetoric, contrastive rhetoric, text linguistics, composition studies, genre analysis, cognitive linguistics, and intercultural communication, there is an increasing interest today in new theoretical approaches to studying SL/FL writing as well as teaching SL/FL writing.

0.1 The State of Affairs of ESL/EFL Writing

0.1.1 The Definitions of ESL/EFL Writing

“Writing” here will refer to composing the written text (as opposed to orthography). ESL stands for English as a Second Language, and EFL stands for English as a Foreign Language. ESL is usually used when people learn English in an English-speaking country, while EFL is usually used when people learn English in a non-English-speaking country. An ESL situation exists when the local

community is mainly English speaking, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia, while EFL contexts are those in which English is not the host language, such as China. Like most polarizations, however, this distinction obscures more complicated realities who are migrants and who may therefore need occupational and survival writing skills, and those who plan to return to their own countries once they complete their courses. EFL contexts may include those where an indigenized variety has emerged (Singapore) or where colonization has afforded English a prominent role in local life (South Africa) and those where English is not so often used (China).

Here ESL writing will be defined as writing done in English other than one's mother tongue. The term "second language" will encompass both second (writing in a context in which English is dominant) and foreign language (writing in a context where English is not dominant); EFL writing only refers to writing in a context where English is not dominant.

0.1.2 Background to This Research

According to the academic tradition in the West, the research on English composition-rhetoric can be traced back to more than two thousands years ago, when Aristotle formed the classic rhetoric, which has exerted a profound influence on and provided the impetus for the development of the research and teaching of writing in the West. The major components of this theory—*invention*, the ability to generate ideas; *disposition*, the ability to organize ideas; *style*, the use of language appropriate to circumstances—compose the basic formula in the process of English writing. Persuasive appeals are taught: *ethos* (the personal appeal of the sender), *pathos* (appeals to the emotions or values of the receiver), and *logos* (appeals to reason). The intended targets of the appeals (sender, receiver, and content) help organize many written texts.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, with the development



of American higher education, the new institutions became the hotbeds in which the rhetoric of composition would grow. For the newer departments of learning (most of them departments of science), writing was more important than speaking, both as a pedagogical tool and as the practical expression of knowledge. Composition teachers sought a rhetoric that focused on writing, which treated the modes of written discourse as extensively as the old rhetoric had treated the types and occasions for speech, and acknowledged the new scenes of an educated person's activity—the office and the laboratory—which, unlike the court and the pulpit, required writing more than speech. In short, the composition-rhetoric that emerged in the later nineteenth century attempted to apply the available elements of rhetoric—classical and contemporary (that is, belletristic and epistemological) to writing (Hu Shuzhong, “English Rhetoric” 104).

At the start of 20th century, classic rhetoric began to be revived, and to enrich the field's understanding of the breadth of rhetorical function. “The study of rhetoric has been rediscovered not only as a means of improving efficiency in verbal presentation, but as an analytical tool that can be used by different disciplines for uncovering certain aspects of discourse” (Mauranen 20). Directed by this theory, which emphasizes the written product, the teaching methods of composition are easy for teachers to operate and control.

With the lapse of time, rhetoricians have put forward some new theories and put them into practice: The new rhetoric is an amalgam of many approaches, all of which focus on the role of communication in the management of interpersonal relations within social systems (Johannesen 51). The new rhetoric has broadened its aim and no longer confined itself to teaching the art of formal persuasion but included formation in every kind of symbol-using. The new rhetoric is especially relevant for those interested in second language writing: Toulmin's model of argumentative writing and Perelman's “new rhetoric”. They have provided a focused examination of audience

(Connor 66-67). Expressive rhetoric focuses on the discovery of meaning in the writer himself and emphasizes writing as an opportunity to explore one's inner feelings, which has innovated the teaching of writing and has helped highlight cross-cultural difficulties in ESL/EFL writing; cognitive rhetoric, emphasizing the connection between writing and thought and encouraging many cross-cultural studies of writing, elaborates more complex ideas about writing process and stresses the writer's ability to employ cognitive strategies to identify rhetorical problems and respond to them; social-epistemic rhetoric focuses on the context and situation of writing, emphasizes the different assumptions that writers from different groups and cultures bring with them, and views the writer as the subject constructed through the social process and the ideological motivation. Postmodern rhetoric regards writing subjects as noncentered, as effects of language, of conflicting and libidinally motivated discourses.

In summary, ESL/EFL writing has grown mainly out of the work done in composition studies and applied linguistics. However, although modern rhetoric is becoming more complicated, the relationship between writing and rhetoric is becoming much stronger than ever and both of them cannot be separated from each other.

0.1.3 Studies in Europe and America

In the latter half of the 20th century, writing theories underwent a developing stage from “written product” through “writing process” to “metacognition” and “social cognition”. Successively there appeared the pedagogies about product, process, context and social cognition. Writing is a comprehensive activity integrated with language ability, social ability and problem-solving ability. Scholars have attempted to understand and interpret this complicated mental activity from different perspectives.

Based on Vygotsky's Theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (86), the Theory of Scaffolding, put forward by some