

Differences of functions of the first paragraphs between Japanese and British newspaper reports

- from the contrastive rhetoric view -

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It has been noted that different languages and genres have different rhetoric styles.

For example, Kaplan (1966) analysed the compositions written by students learning English as a second language and divided them into five different rhetoric categories. Hinds (1983) studied the newspaper columns “Tensei Jingo” in Asahi Shinbun newspaper and claimed that Japanese rhetoric is different from the English equivalent and Japanese style of writing, “ki – shoo – ten - ketsu”, which doesn’t exist in English, is widely accepted among Japanese. These studies claim that different languages have different rhetoric styles.

Nagano (1983) studied “TV column” on TV from the point of “when the main topics appear” and stated that, in contrast to written texts, main topics are likely to be represented towards the beginning of the “TV column”. This study shows that different genres also have different rhetoric styles.

This thesis attempts to analyse the rhetorical differences between Japanese and British newspaper reports. I especially focus on the functions of the first paragraphs and analyse 1. how much of the contents of the main topics are contained in the first paragraph, 2. how much of the contents of the other paragraphs are contained in the first paragraph, 3. the first paragraphs’ contents in details.

Asahi Shinbun (hereafter AS), widely read Japanese newspaper, and The Guardian (hereafter G), widely read British newspaper, were used in this study. I analysed 30 newspaper reports on “East Timor’s independent vote” in each newspaper.

In terms of 1. how much of the contents of the main topics are contained in the first paragraph, approximately 80% of the first paragraphs of AS contain all the main topics of AS newspaper reports, whereas approximately 40 % of G ones do. Considering the result of 1., the first paragraphs of both newspaper reports could have different functions. So I categorised the first paragraphs into 6 types according to these

two criteria, “whether the first paragraphs contain the main topics” and “whether the first paragraphs contain the contents of the other paragraphs”. AS mainly uses type ①, which is “the first paragraphs contain all of main topics of newspaper reports and also contain the contents of the other paragraphs”. On the other hand, G mainly uses type ③ and ⑥, which contain only the contents of main topics (or part of them) of newspaper reports.

Next, I studied 2. how much of the contents of the other paragraphs are contained in the first paragraph and found that the first paragraphs of AS contain 48 % of the rest of the contents of the report whereas the G equivalent only about 22 %. From this result, it would seem that the first paragraphs of AS contain most of the contents of the main topics of the newspaper reports and also most of the contents of the whole report. Consequently readers can gain much information on newspaper reports only by reading the first paragraphs of AS. In contrast, G tends to contain much less of the contents of the main topics and covers less of the contents of the whole report.

These differences come from the differences of the functions of the first paragraphs each newspaper has. That is, the first paragraphs of AS are functioned as the general contents of the whole report, and readers can benefit from this rhetoric as they can get a general idea of what a newspaper report is written about, only by reading the first paragraph. On the other hand, the first paragraphs of G tend to focus on only the main topics or part of them compared to AS. Consequently readers understand the main topics of newspaper reports clearly and the first paragraphs make a strong impression on readers.

Finally, I classified 3. the first paragraphs’ contents in detail and classified the first paragraphs into 7 categories. Many of the first paragraphs of AS are classified as “the contents dealing the main topics and the contents summarising the other paragraphs”. Many of the first paragraphs of G are classified as “contents dealing the main topics (or part of them)”, and also, in contrast to AS, approximately 20 % of G contain the other elements, such as “containing story-like contents” and “abstract contents”, which are intended to attract the readers’ attention to articles.

From the results of 1. - 3. it became evident that AS and G have distinctively different functions. The first paragraphs of AS are characterised as “giving general contents of newspaper reports”, whereas G as “stressing on main topics and also, to some extent, using story-like contents and abstract ones to attract readers’ attention.”

It could be said that one of the reasons of these differences partly comes from the fact that each newspaper report has different cultural characters. Nishihara, S and

Shibata, T (1998) suggest that Japanese newspaper agencies should work with the motto “fuhēn futō” (no-bias, no-sect) and inevitably calls for a detached, non-committal, dry description with no personal touch from writers. On the other hand, they note in English newspaper reports, reporters sign their names and are required to give their own point of view.

Applying this to this thesis, it would seem that in AS, as reporters are only required to write objectively what happened, they don't emphasise one particular aspect of their own choice in the first paragraphs and just list the events one by one objectively. As a result, the first paragraphs give the general content of a report. As for G, as reporters have responsibility to write their version of what happened, they describe only the main topics in the first paragraphs and also using “story-like contents” and “abstract contents”, they present their own point of view about what happened.

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