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**CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF TRANSMITTAL LETTERS  
AND MEMORANDA IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH**  
**Análise Contrastiva de Cartas de Transmissão e Memorandos  
em Inglês e Espanhol**

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**Abstract**

*The objective of this article is to present an analysis of the generic structure of transmittal letters and memoranda. The study described in this article is part of a research project being carried out at Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia as an extension of DIRECT – Development of International Research in Commerce and Technology. This study uses a genre-based analysis to describe and compare the textual organization of 42 letters and 38 memos in Spanish and 16 letters and 13 memos in English, the latter written by non-native English speakers in the business field. The theoretical framework for this paper finds support in Swales' (1990) and Bhatia's (1993) concepts of genre. The move analysis method adopted is also based on the mentioned researchers' and on Teh's (1986) proposals for move delimitation. The resulting analysis reveals more similarities than differences in terms of generic structure, purpose and move characteristics. The researchers hope that these findings will serve to design appropriate Spanish and English teaching materials for the business sector.*

**Key-words:** *genre analysis; business field; discourse; moves.*

**Resumo**

*O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma análise da estrutura genérica de cartas de transmissão e memorandos. O estudo descrito neste artigo faz parte de um projeto de pesquisa que está sendo realizado na*

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\* Vilma Ortega is member of a research group composed of María Stella Martínez, Francisco Moreno, Nora Choperena, Heidi Robles, Luz Villarreal and Sibila Maury.



*Universidad del Norte, em Barranquilla, Colômbia. Esse projeto é uma extensão do Projeto DIRECT – Em Direção à Linguagem dos Negócios. O estudo utiliza a análise de gênero para descrever e comparar a organização textual de 42 cartas e 38 memorandos em espanhol e 16 cartas e 13 memorandos em inglês, sendo que os últimos foram escritos por falantes não-nativos de inglês que atuam na área empresarial. O arcabouço teórico para este estudo baseia-se nos conceitos de gênero propostos por Swales (1990) e Bhatia (1993). A análise de movimentos adotada baseia-se nas propostas de delimitação de movimentos dos pesquisadores mencionados acima e também na de Teh (1986). A análise resultante revela mais semelhanças do que diferenças em termos de estrutura genérica, propósito e características dos movimentos. Os pesquisadores acreditam que esses achados contribuirão para a elaboração de materiais didáticos em espanhol e em inglês para o setor empresarial.*

**Palavras-chave:** *análise genérica; área de negócios; movimentos; discurso.*

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to report a descriptive analysis of the generic structure of transmittal letters and memos both in Spanish and English and to present findings from a cross-language comparison of the generic structure of these documents. Such memos and letters were collected from companies located in Barranquilla and Cartagena (two cities on the Atlantic coast of Colombia). These documents were examined to determine the distinctive patterns in each genre in order to establish similarities and differences between them.

Research findings showed that similar patterns of moves are used to express the same communicative purposes in both genres and in both languages. However, some conventionalized expressions in transmittal moves vary. Our findings also showed that in the letters and memos analyzed in English and Spanish, there is an *obligatory move*



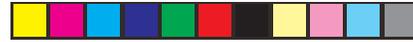
and other *optional* moves. This paper presents a brief description of some conventionalized expressions within the moves. Finally, it mentions the pedagogic implications of this analysis for the business field.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This paper has found theoretical support in genre and discourse community concepts posed by Swales (1990). According to Swales, genre is a communicative event that is characterized by a set of communicative purposes shared by the members of a professional or academic community. This shared set of communicative purpose(s) shapes the genre and gives it an internal structure (Bhatia, 1993). The professional or academic community is said to define its own linguistic conventions (Herzberg, 1986). This is what is known as discourse community, defined by Swales (1990) as a social-rhetorical group with conventional and functional linguistic manifestations. According to Swales, a discourse community has the following characteristics:

- An agreed set of public goals.
- Information exchange mechanisms among its members.
- More than one genre in the communicative furtherance of its aims.
- Specific lexis.
- A “threshold level [...] with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise”.

Bearing in mind that discourse is determined by conventions set by the members of a community (Herzberg, 1986), it is necessary to focus the study of discourse on a functional basis. This will permit us to distinguish the discourse characteristics of such a community. The study of genre is important in order to analyze the characteristics of discourse since each genre has special characteristics determined by a discourse community (Bhatia, 1993) and by the goals that it wants to achieve (Swales, 1981).



Some studies of discourse communities and their possible genres have been carried out. Among these we can mention the study of academic scientific texts by Swales (1990), Bazerman (1988), Myers (1989), Salager-Meyer (1994). All of these describe the linguistic features that differentiate the genres of this scientific discourse community. Entrepreneurial communication has also been studied (Teh, 1986, Swales and Rogers, 1994, Bhatia, 1993, Barbara et al, 1994, 1996, Davis and Scott, 1992 and Thompson and Thetela, 1995).

Although most studies on genre have concentrated on English texts, some can be found in Portuguese (Berber Sardinha, 1993); in Spanish (Valero-Garcés, 1996); in Japanese (Kaplan, Touchstone and Hagstrom, 1995); in Scandinavian languages (Fant and Grinstead, 1995).

In Colombia, a study on entrepreneurial genres has not been conducted yet. This area has been very constrained and studies only deal with technical aspects of communication like those appearing in chapters of business administration texts or in some theses (Choperena et al, 1993) and in business administration workshops. This means that firms understand the importance of communication for achieving their purposes, but they probably do not know how to make such communication more efficient (Choperena et al, 1993; Guerrero et al, 1996). In other words, there is probably no shared intercommunication mechanisms among the members of such communities to provide information and feedback (Swales, 1990), since they might lack knowledge of a theoretical structure that defines the scope and nature of the entrepreneurial discourse community of a region.

As it has been said above, genres are defined as communicative events among individuals of a discourse community. Within the entrepreneurial communication, some of those genres will be recognized as types of communications, such as letters and memoranda which are characterized by their structural linguistic conventions.

To analyze the letters and memoranda, move analysis has been adopted because it is a useful tool to identify the textual units corresponding to the stages which make up the generic structure of the analyzed texts. The move analysis in this paper also includes the

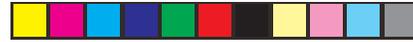


identification of some strategies which are used to accomplish the various communicative purposes and a brief account of conventionalized expressions which help to achieve the communicative purpose in each move. To delimit each move, the method proposed by Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993) and Teh (1986) has been adopted. The identification categories of textual units used by Bhatia (1993), Swales (1990) and Teh (1986) are defined on a content basis. These researchers have found the *cognitive structure* a very useful strategy to identify the textual units that make up the generic structure of a text. The cognitive structure is a set of steps and strategies that the writer uses to achieve his communicative purpose (Teh, 1986). According to Bhatia (1993), the typical regularities of organization in the genre must be seen as cognitive because they reflect the strategies that members of a particular discourse or professional community typically use in the construction and understanding of that genre to achieve specific communicative purposes. The authors mentioned above claim that this type of strategy helps the researcher to identify the purpose in each move and to set possible variations in the discourse structure. In a study on promotion letters carried out by Teh (1986), the researcher found that the type of movements of the documents written by national and multinational companies varied within a same cultural context and language. For this reason we think that the approach proposed by Swales, Bhatia and Teh is appropriate not only for the identification of the textual units of letters and memos but also to identify possible similarities and differences in the conventions used by the members of an entrepreneurial community both in English and Spanish.

### 3. Methodology

The corpus of this study consists of 42 letters and 38 memos in Spanish and 16 letters and 13 memos in English which were collected from companies located in Barranquilla and Cartagena. The analysis schema for the study of the texts consists of the following aspects:

- Identification of the purpose of the text.
- Identification of move patterns; each move is determined by its content and purpose.



- Identification of obligatory and optional moves.
- Identification of some conventionalized expressions used by the writer to achieve his communicative purposes.

The above aspects refer to both languages: English and Spanish. The last step was the comparison between these two languages with respect to generic structures, purposes and general characteristics of the most frequent moves. (See Tables 5-8).

#### **4. Description of generic structures of transmittal letters and memos in Spanish**

The number of moves in both Spanish letters and memos range from 1 to 5 (Tables 6 and 8). In both genres, transmittal letters and memos, there is a move which always appears. It was called an *obligatory move* (Tables 5 and 7), which is the transmittal move. These documents also present other moves which may or may not occur and these are the *optional moves* (Tables 5 and 7). Although the range is from 1 to 5 moves, most of the analyzed memos (85%) presented a generic structure of 1 to 2 moves. The first move is obligatory and the second one is either a move of request, clarification, or justification. In the memos, the most frequent optional moves are request, clarification and justification. In the same way, most letters (78.9%) showed a generic structure of 1 to 2 moves. One of these moves is also the obligatory move and the other can be either request, offering as a closure, thankfulness or information, which are the most frequent optional moves in the analyzed letters (Table 7). There are other different moves which appear in both memos and letters but the number of documents in which they are present is insignificant, so they will not be dealt with in this paper.

The tables below summarize the above information showing the different moves, their corresponding percentage of occurrence and their types.

MOVES	# OF LETTERS	% OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE
Transmittal	42	100.0	Obligatory
Request	10	24.2	Optional
Offering as a closure	4	10.5	Optional
Thankfulness	4	10.5	Optional
Information	4	10.5	Optional

Table 1: Letters

MOVES	# OF MEMOS	% OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE
Transmittal	38	100	Obligatory
Request	8	21	Optional
Clarification	8	21	Optional
Justification	7	17	Optional

Table 2: Memos

It can be observed that the request move follows the transmittal move in frequency.

#### 4.1 Description of moves

**Transmittal move.** This move was present in all letters and memos which were examined (42 letters and 38 memos). It is usually

the first move. Its purpose is to announce the sending of objects and documents like bills, proforma invoices and copies of documents in general. For example:

“*Adjunto* estamos enviando factura ...” (letter)

This move is introduced by expressions like “adjunto”, “me permito enviarle”, “con la presente estamos enviando”. With these expressions the writer involves himself. One characteristic of this move is the announcement of the material which is being sent and its description. For example:

“Me *permito enviarle* ejecución presupuestal del Art. # 381...”

The writer announces the sending of the document with the expression “me permito enviarle” and then he describes the document.

**Request move.** The purpose of this move is to request either a piece of information or the performance of an operation. It is an optional move because it only appears in 10 out of 42 letters and in 8 out of 38 memos (Tables 1 and 2). We can illustrate the purpose of this move as follows:

“*Favor* informarnos sobre los resultados de estas evaluaciones...” (letter)

“Solicito me informe sobre la instalación de elementos en los equipos. *Favor* informar los de 16 simms de 4 mb”... (memo)

As it can be observed, the writer uses polite expressions like “favor”, “agradezco” to introduce the request.

**Offering as a closure.** This move was not very common in the transmittal letter samples. Only 10.5% showed this move (Table 1) and it did not appear at all in the memos examined. The letters are ended with this optional move to close the letter by offering additional information, a future contact and collaboration. The writer uses courteous and willing expressions like “gustoso” and “con gusto”. We can illustrate this with the following examples:



“Cualquier información *estaré gustoso de suministrarla*”...

“*Con gusto suministraremos información* adicional de ser requerida por Uds...”

**Thankfulness move.** It is a conventionalized move. It was present in only 10.5% of the letters and absent in the memos. The letter is closed with this move and thankfulness expressions are used to close the letter. For instance:

“*Agradeciendo* su atención ...”

“*Agradeciéndole* la atención que le merezca la presente...”

**Information move.** This move was found in 4 letters (10.5%) of the sample (Table 1). The purpose of this move is to give further explanation about the document announced in the transmittal move. The content of the move and its relation with the other moves, especially with the transmittal move, indicate that the writer is giving some information. There are no distinctive markers. In the following example, the information move is the last move in the letter. It is related with the transmittal move.

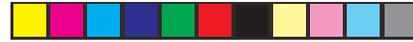
“Adjunto estamos enviando la carta de colores de la porcelana sanitaria.”

(transmittal move)

Then, the information move:

“El Distrito contará a finales de Febrero con cartas de colores adicionales para entregar a los constructores y subdistribuidores, como también para atender sus necesidades”.

**Clarification move:** In the memos, this is one of the most frequent moves among the optional ones. 8 out of the 38 memos examined showed this move. It was the second one in the generic structure of these memos. Its purpose is to clarify different issues related to the transmittal move. Actually, most clarification moves do not show distinctive markers. Their contents indicate that they are clarification



moves. However, we can find expressions like “aclaramos”, “en razón a...” in some moves that the writer uses to make explicit the move’s purpose. For example:

“*Aclaramos que el I.S.S. tomó como fecha de partida diciembre/83 hasta abril/94.*”

In the example below the clarification move follows the transmittal move:

“Adjunto le envío la página No 5 del manual en referencia con las modificaciones para su aprobación. *Las demás páginas del manual permanecen sin modificación alguna*”.

The content of the move and its relation with the preceding transmittal move may allow us to infer that it is a clarification move.

**Justification move.** This was found in 7 out of 38 memos. This, together with the clarification move, is one of the most frequent among the optional ones in the memos examined. In some documents, the justification move follows the transmittal move; in others, it precedes it. Its purpose is to justify the sending of a document. The writer makes the reader see the reasons for sending the document. Expressions like “con el fin de” and “en razón a” are used. For example:

“Adjunto copia del certificado de Existencia y Representación Legal del Canal, expedido por la Cámara de Comercio de Barranquilla, *con el fin de difundir internamente lo relacionado con la nueva naturaleza jurídica del Canal ordenado por la ley 182 de 1995.*”

## 5. Description of the generic structure of the transmittal letters and memos in English

The moves in the English transmittal letters examined (16) range from 1 to 6 (Table 8). In the memos (13), the moves range from 1 to 5, but 46.1% have a generic structure of one move (Table 6). These documents are sent via fax with memo formats. For this reason we



analyzed them as memos. Both genres, letters and memos, have an obligatory move which is the transmittal move and other optional moves which may be request or clarification in the memos, or request, information and offering as a closure in the letters (Tables 5 and 7). This can be summarized in the following tables:

MOVES	# OF MEMOS	% OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE
Transmittal	13	100	Obligatory
Request	4	31	Optional
Clarification	3	23	Optional

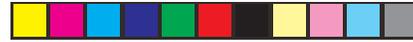
**Table 3: Memos**

MOVES	# OF LETTERS	% OF OCCURRENCE	TYPE
Transmittal	16	100.0	Obligatory
Request	7	43.7	Optional
Information	4	25.0	Optional
Offering as a closure	5	31.3	Optional

**Table 4: Letters**

Both memos and letters present the request move as one of the most frequent optional moves.

**Transmittal move.** As in Spanish, memos and letters in English have this obligatory move sharing almost all the same characteristics.



The purpose is to announce the sending of a document or an object. It is very common to find expressions like “send”, “attached”, “enclosed” in this move. The writer uses imperative forms which become instructions and polite expressions. We can see one of these in the following example:

“*Enclosed please find* the documents, listed below, which were presented to us” (letter).

“*Attached please find* one key for tool box” (memo).

**Request move.** This move is an optional one and is very frequent in both English memos and letters. In general, this move follows the transmittal one in both genres. The purpose of this move is to request a document or the performance of an operation. For example:

“We would appreciate it if you send us confirmation of reception of the above mentioned check” (letter).

“Please read the articles and give copy of them” (memo).

This move is introduced by polite expressions like “please” and “appreciate”.

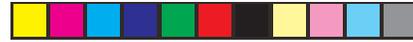
**Clarification move.** This move was relatively frequent in the memos (Table 3).

Its purpose is to make something clear. The expression “please note that...” was found to introduce this move. For example:

“*Please note that* we only have packaging material for this week  
“... ”

“*Please note too that* we have 2.540 FT container of packet product in stock...”

**Information move.** This move was found in some letters (Table 4). Its purpose is to inform or explain more about a document or an object sent. No distinctive markers are used to introduce this move. Only the content itself and its relation with the other moves indicate the type of move.



The writer provides information and description as a strategy. The following example illustrates this:

“This invoice includes the remainder of your last order and your new order for a 40’HC container...” ( letter).

The above statement is a description of the invoice that is being sent.

**Offering as a closure.** The purpose of this move is to close the letter. The writer offers to help the client and to serve him/her on another occasion. Courteous expressions characterize this move. The writer uses these expressions as well as instructions to achieve his purpose. For example:

“*Please* contact me if you have any questions on the material presented”...

“If any problems should arise *please* contact us immediately and we will furnish name and phone number of U.S.D A. official”...

This move was present in both Spanish and English letters (Tables 1 and 4 ) but in Spanish there was a smaller percentage.

Tables 5-8 summarize the differences and similarities of Spanish and English transmittal memos and letters.

SPANISH TRANSMITTAL MEMOS	ENGLISH TRANSMITTAL MEMOS
<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Most memos have one move.</li> <li>➤ One obligatory move (transmittal move).</li> <li>➤ Optional moves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ request move (most frequent)</li> <li>➤ clarification move (2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent)</li> <li>➤ different types of optional moves.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>2. Purpose</b> To send documents.</p> <p><b>3. Characteristics</b></p> <p>a) obligatory move:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement of the documents being sent.</li> <li>• Enumeration</li> <li>• Description</li> <li>• Use of conventionalized expressions.</li> </ul> <p>b) Request move: Use of polite expressions.</p>	<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Most memos have one move.</li> <li>➤ One obligatory move (transmittal move).</li> <li>➤ Optional moves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ request move (most frequent)</li> <li>➤ clarification move (2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent)</li> <li>➤ different types of optional moves.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>2. Purpose</b> To send documents.</p> <p><b>3. Characteristics</b></p> <p>a) obligatory move:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement of the documents being sent.</li> <li>• Enumeration</li> <li>• Description</li> <li>• Use of conventionalized expressions.</li> </ul> <p>b) Request move: Use of polite expressions.</p>

**Table 5: Comparison of Spanish and English memos - Similarities**

SPANISH TRANSMITTAL MEMOS	ENGLISH TRANSMITTAL MEMOS
<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <p>Maximum number of moves: 4 50 % of memos have only one move. 35% of memos present 2 moves.</p> <p><b>2. Characteristics</b></p> <p>Transmittal move (obligatory): Sender's personal involvement (use of the first singular or plural person)</p>	<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <p>Maximum number of moves: 5 46.1 % of memos have only one move. 23% of memos present 2 moves</p> <p><b>2. Characteristics</b></p> <p>Transmittal move (obligatory): Use of imperative. Absence of personal involvement.</p>

**Table 6: Comparison of Spanish and English memos - Differences**

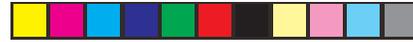


SPANISH TRANSMITTAL LETTERS	ENGLISH TRANSMITTAL LETTERS
<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ One obligatory move (transmittal move).</li> <li>➤ Optional moves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ request move (most frequent)</li> <li>➤ offering as a closure move (2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent)</li> <li>➤ information (3<sup>rd</sup> most frequent)</li> <li>➤ different types of optional moves.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>2. Purpose</b> To send documents.</p> <p><b>3. Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) obligatory move: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement of the documents being sent.</li> <li>• Enumeration</li> <li>• Description</li> <li>• Use of conventionalized expressions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>b) request move: Use of polite expressions.</li> <li>c) Offering as a closure: Use of polite expressions</li> <li>d) Information: Use of description</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ One obligatory move (transmittal move).</li> <li>➤ Optional moves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ request move (most frequent)</li> <li>➤ offering as a closure move (2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent)</li> <li>➤ information (3<sup>rd</sup> most frequent)</li> <li>➤ different types of optional moves.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>2. Purpose</b> To send documents.</p> <p><b>3. Characteristics</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) obligatory move: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Announcement of the documents being sent.</li> <li>• Enumeration</li> <li>• Description</li> <li>• Use of conventionalized expressions.</li> </ul> </li> <li>b) request move: Use of polite expressions.</li> <li>c) Offering as a closure: Use of polite expressions</li> <li>d) Information</li> </ul>

**Table 7: Comparison of Spanish and English transmittal letters - Similarities**

SPANISH TRANSMITTAL LETTERS	ENGLISH TRANSMITTAL LETTERS
<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Number of moves range from 1 to 5</li> <li>➤ 36.8% of the letters have only one move (transmittal)</li> <li>➤ 42.1% of the letters have 2 moves.</li> </ul> <p><b>2. Characteristics Transmittal move</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Sender's personal involvement.</li> <li>➤ Use of 1<sup>st</sup> person singular and plural.</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. Generic structure</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Number of moves range from 1 to 6</li> <li>➤ 18.7% of the letters have only one move (transmittal)</li> <li>➤ 31.3% of the letters have 2 moves.</li> </ul> <p><b>2. Characteristics Transmittal move</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Absence of sender's personal involvement.</li> <li>➤ Use of imperative forms.</li> </ul>

**Table 8: Comparison of Spanish and English transmittal letters - Differences**



## 6. Conclusions

It was found that all letters and memos examined (109) both in Spanish and English presented a common and constant move in their generic structure: the transmittal move which constituted the obligatory move. It was also found that the request move was the most frequent optional one. Although in not large percentages, it appeared in English letters (43.7%), in English memos (31.%), in Spanish letters (24.2%) and in Spanish memos (21%). Memos in both English and Spanish presented a very low percentage of optional moves. These moves were information, instruction and thankfulness. The sample was widely dispersed. Thus, it was difficult to obtain a definite pattern regarding optional moves. Similarly, letters in both languages had the same problem. The optional moves that presented a low percentage of frequency in Spanish and English letters were commitment, instruction, justification, clarification and description. The author of this article considers this result as tentative due to the size of the sample. So further research should be necessary.

Although the generic structure used to achieve the same purpose is similar in both languages, the characteristics of language devices vary in the transmittal moves (Tables 6 & 8). While in Spanish memos and letters the writer involves himself, in English, this does not occur. In Spanish transmittal documents, the writer uses the first person singular or plural when announcing the sending of a document. For example: “Me *permito* enviar ...” or “*Estamos* anexando...” In English, the writer frequently uses the imperative which becomes an instruction. For example: “Please *find* attached...”. We can also observe that this instruction is accompanied by a courteous expression.

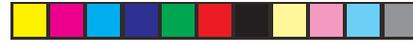
It was not possible to find a definite pattern in these genres, since the maximum and the minimum number of moves varied. But the analysis of the generic structure of transmittal letters and the comparison between English and Spanish has assumed considerable importance because of its pedagogic implications: it might permit us to find an appropriate method to help people from the industry sector organize their ideas and show them effective rhetorical strategies that would enable them to achieve communicative purposes in both languages.

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