

**WHO'S"AFRAID OF LITERATURE?
RHETORICAL ROUTINES IN LITERARY RESEARCH
ARTICLES***
**Quem Tem Medo da Literatura? Rotinas Retóricas em Artigos
Acadêmicos na Área da Pesquisa Literária em Inglês**

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Abstract

This article is broadly concerned with disciplinary variation in written academic discourse. It takes as its object of study the genre specialized academic article in the area of literary research in English, an area which has been relatively neglected in current linguistic research. Aspects of rhetorical routines in literary research articles are dealt with, on the basis of an investigation of a corpus of 20 published articles, in genre-analytic terms. The research findings allow us to make the following claims. There seems to be less epistemic accounting in literary research than in other disciplinary areas, which might be accounted for in terms of its characteristics as a "rural" domain (Becher, 1989). This lends support to a previous claim by McDonald (1994), based on analyses of a small corpus of 4 articles in one sub-field of literary research. Where there is epistemically-focused work, however, the moves proposed by Swales (1990) in his CARS model proved to be effective analytical categories to account for rhetorical routines in literary research.

Key words: *academic written texts; rhetorical routines; literary research in English.*

Resumo

Este artigo ocupa-se da variação disciplinar no discurso acadêmico escrito. Sua atenção recai sobre o gênero artigo acadêmico especializado na área da pesquisa literária em inglês, uma área relativamente ne-

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glicenciada nos estudos sobre as convenções do discurso acadêmico. Abordam-se alguns aspectos das rotinas retóricas na pesquisa literária, com base na análise de um corpus de 20 artigos publicados em periódicos conceituados naquela área. Os resultados da pesquisa permitem fazer as seguintes proposições: há menos trabalho epistêmico na pesquisa literária, se comparada a outras áreas disciplinares, em função de suas características como um domínio disciplinar “rural” (Becher, 1989). Nesse sentido, a pesquisa aqui relatada confirma proposição de McDonald (1994), baseada na análise de um pequeno corpus de 4 artigos em uma sub-área da pesquisa literária. Quando há trabalho epistêmico, no entanto, observa-se que os movimentos retóricos propostos por Swales (1990) em seu modelo CARS são categorias valiosas no estudo das rotinas retóricas na pesquisa literária.

Palavras-chave: *discurso acadêmico escrito; rotinas retóricas; pesquisa literária em inglês.*

1. Introduction

The focus of studies on L2 writing in the 80's and 90's has shifted from the linguistic features of the text produced by the learner and the cognitive processes involved in text production (as in Flower & Hayes' model, 1981) to sociocultural variables affecting written production, or circumstances surrounding text construction. Such perspective has often meant going beyond the text to concentrate on the social dynamics of the classroom; however, the study of texts and how actual textual practices relate to the social context seems to be an equally valid dimension of the so-called 'social' focus.

A broad conception of *social context* is adopted in this research, one that includes a disciplinary component, as proposed by Miller (1994), Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995), and Bazerman (1989), among others. These authors argue that the concept of *genre*, which has been influential in studies of the conventions of academic discourse, should be situated in disciplinary and professional cultures, as different disciplines use rhetorical routines in ways that are characteristic of their field.



However, a cursory examination of research on the conventions of written academic discourse reveals that it has tended to focus predominantly on scientific discourse, or on the discourse of technology. In this respect, Bazerman & Paradis (1991:10) argue that “the world cannot be reduced to the rhetorical domination of a monolithic and powerful discourse of science and technology”.

This article is concerned with the academic article published in scholarly journals in the area of literary research in English¹, an area which has been relatively neglected in linguistic studies. Swales & Feak (1994), for example, exclude from their treatment of academic discourse conventions the area of literary research, which, according to the authors, follows an “essayist tradition”. Although we take heed of the authors’ cautionary note about the problems posed by literary research, we nevertheless believe that the pedagogical motivation for this research justifies taking the risk of presenting a reduced, or limited, picture of a domain characterized by its plurality of perspectives and enormous wealth of discursive practices. As Paré & Smart (1994) point out, quoting Moffet, “whenever we create categories for analysis ‘we trade a loss of reality for a gain in control’ ”.

The next section describes the methodology adopted in this study. Next, analyses of the data are introduced, with a view to exploring the grounds for a description of literary research in genre-analytic terms. In the final section, the pedagogical implications of research on disciplinary variation in written discourse are briefly outlined.

2. Methodology

The *corpus* for the study consists of 20 journal articles published in the 90’s in periodicals of high repute. The criteria adopted in the

¹ The term *literary research* (to my knowledge, first used by Jacoby, 1987) is adopted here, rather than *literary-critical discourse*, to avoid association with the textual production of renowned literary critics, whose prose is characterized by its virtuosity. Here, the term is meant to be interpreted as referring to the textual production of a university professor whose research is published in a scholarly journal.

constitution of the sample of articles are described in Balocco². It suffices to say here that the articles come from periodicals listed on the *1994 Arts & Humanities Citation Index* (Garfield, 1994), on the *Master List of Periodicals of the MLA International Bibliography* (1995), and on *A directory of scholarly journals in English language and literature* (Lee & Johnson, 1990). This should be described as a canonical or *mainstream corpus*, characterized by traditional patterns of logical organization of ideas and a positivist evidentiary practice, based on the “facts” of the text. No occurrence of articles featuring patterns of narrativity, juxtaposition of ideas, and an evidentiary practice based on personal or anecdotal experience was observed. Such patterns would seem to characterize so-called *new-historicist* criticism, with no representation in this *corpus*.

Both extra-linguistic and linguistic criteria were adopted in the identification of moves. The former refer to the content of moves (Hasan, 1989), and the latter include grammatical features such as tense/aspect, explicit lexemes, among other possibilities (Swales, 1990). The method of analysis will be demonstrated by means of one article, whose introductory section is reprinted as an appendix at the end of this paper³. Whenever necessary, references will be made to certain identified features present in other articles. The text selected for analysis is an article by James Berger (1996) on Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987). The rhetorical structure of the text may be roughly described as containing three parts. First, the author introduces his thesis (§ 1), followed by the historical context for discussion of the novel, presented in a nutshell (§ 2). While introducing the material, the writer already presents a definition of terms and concepts relevant to the argument (§ 3), and an indication of the structure of the article (§4). Having thus situated the reader, in the second part of the article the author introduces the novel (§ 5-11); brings in an extensive discussion of the historical context surrounding the novel (§ 12-26); and, finally, singles out a key element for interpretation (§ 27). Still in the second part of the article,

² BALOCCO, A.E. (Ongoing doctoral dissertation) Padrões de avaliação e de organização textual no artigo acadêmico na área da pesquisa literária em inglês. UFRJ.

³ Given space limitations, only the introduction is reprinted, as the article features 35 extended paragraphs.



the author reviews previous research (§§ 29-31), as a starting point for the introduction of his own reading (§§ 32-33). In his conclusion, the author restates the main line of argument earlier proposed (§§ 34-35).

3. Rhetorical routines in literary research

Introductions in literary research may be epistemic or nonepistemic (MacDonald, 1994). An epistemic introduction is characterized by an attempt to situate a particular research question in the context of research done in the discipline, such as is the case in most areas of the academy. The rhetorical moves exhaustively described by Swales (1990) in his CARS model (Claiming centrality, Indicating a gap in knowledge, Counter-claiming, Reviewing previous research) may be said to codify such epistemic practices.

In nonepistemic introductions, by contrast, there is no such attempt to focus on prior disciplinary discussion of the problem. In such cases, focus is on the phenomenon studied, as in paragraph 1 of Berger's article on Morrison (cf. Appendix 2). In this paragraph, the author introduces his thesis immediately – both white racism *and* African-American self-destruction are the twin themes of Morrison's novels – and treats it straightforwardly in the remainder of the article.

The nature of literary research as a “rural” field (Becher, 1989) might be said to account for this occurrence of nonepistemic introductions. By contrast with “urban” fields, in which there is a small number of problems, and a lot of researchers working on them, in rural fields there is a diversity or variety of problems, and very few researchers working on each one of them⁴. Thus, there seems to be less need to establish territory in rural fields, as the occurrence of nonepistemic introductions in literary research indicates. Berger's article, for example, features a nonepistemic introduction on account of its focus on a contemporary American writer, whose work has only just recently attracted the attention of critics, after she was awarded a Nobel Prize.

⁴ Cf. also Toulmin (1972), who proposes a distinction between “compact” and “diffuse” disciplinary domains.

Another article in the *corpus* which features a nonepistemic introduction is an article by Cullingford on the Irish playwrights Heaney, Friel, and McGuinness (Text 4). In this article, the author starts by immediately presenting her thesis – the oppositional identity for the colonized Irish implicit in the Rome-Carthage motif in the authors' plays. The nonepistemic introduction here might be accounted for in the same terms as above, considering that these are three contemporary Irish playwrights, on whom very little seems to have been written⁵. Compare the authors just mentioned (Morrison on the American scene, and McGuinness, Heaney, and North, on the Irish scene) to those in the other articles in the sample: Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Evelyn Waugh, D.H. Lawrence, Faulkner, Raymond Carver, and Willa Cather, among others. These are all renowned writers, on whom a huge body of critical interpretation has been produced.

Apart from accounting for the occurrence of nonepistemic introductions, the nature of literary research as a rural field might also be said to account for the nonlinear distribution of moves in the academic research article. Moves postulated by Swales (1990) to occur in the introduction may be found scattered throughout the article: in the body of the article or even towards its conclusion.

Reviewing previous research, for example, which has been described by Swales (1990) as an obligatory step in Move 1, Establishing a Territory, does not feature obligatorily in the introduction of literary research. The former occurs more frequently in the body of the article, where it functions as a rhetorical device to support the author's localized or lower-level claims, rather than as an epistemic move in the introduction, as in paragraph 29 from Berger's article:

(S1) Some readings [of Beloved] render not only the exorcism but even the infanticide [in the novel] unproblematic. (S2) Bernard Bell describes Beloved as a "retelling of the chilling historical account of a compassionate yet resolute self-

⁵ The suggestion that lack of an established body of critical work on the playwrights might account for the nonepistemic introduction in this article was made by Dr. Swales in an intervention at ENPULI, 1997.



emancipated mother's tough love". (S3) This bizarre formulation relates Sethe's acts to "the historical rape of black American women and [to] the resilient spirit of blacks in surviving as a people"; (S4) both connections are correct, but Bell's interpretation evades what Morrison takes pains not to evade: the traumatic violence within African American communities and the damage to the resilient spirit Bell speaks of. (3:29)⁶.

In this particular stretch of text, Berger introduces a Review of previous research to highlight how his own reading of Morrison's *Beloved* differs from influential interpretations which neglected Morrison's portrayal of violence *within* the African-American family. Reviewing previous research is here identified by the source of information (*some readings* in S1, *Bernard Bell* in S2, *this bizarre formulation* in S3; *Bell's interpretation* in S4). The unit of analysis here is the non-rank-shifted grammatical clause⁷ and not the proposition, considering that a clause may contain different propositions, which would make the analysis of a complete text, as the case in point, problematic or unmanageable (for more on this, please see Hunston, 1994). S4 above, for example, contains at least three propositions: a) the connections pointed out by Bell are correct; b) Bell's interpretation evades traumatic violence within African American families; c) Morrison takes pains not to evade this violence. With respect to the argument being constructed here, however, b) above is more salient, and is thus considered the core proposition.

Returning to the issue of the rhetorical function of Review of previous research, which is used for reference to codified knowledge in experimental research articles, in literary research, by contrast, this move is used to highlight critical disagreement. As Jacoby (1987) puts it, literary research "needs to be put forward more as a corrective replacement or gap-filler than as an extension of previous research".

⁶ The first number in parentheses identifies the number of the article in the sample and the second one identifies the paragraph within which the rhetorical move is located.

⁷ In systemic-functional grammar, a rank-shifted clause is an embedded clause within the structure of a noun phrase, such as in *the man who came to dinner* (Halliday, 1985:219).

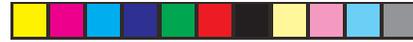
Where there is epistemic accounting in literary research, the author goes on, it tends to be more oppositional, with emphasis on fracture or rupture.

However, Continuing a tradition is not an infrequent move in literary research, although not an epistemic move in the introduction. In the following paragraph, Berger introduces one such move within the bounds of an extended Review of previous criticism:

...(S3) Henderson rightly regards Sethe's attack on Bodwin during the exorcism as a repetition of the apocalyptic (...) scene of infanticide. (S4) However, Henderson sees Sethe's violence against the white abolitionist as part of a successful working through of the trauma of the infanticide, since Sethe, taking Bodwin for Schoolteacher, believes that she attacks the slave owner and not her daughter (...)(¶ 30)

*(S1) Bodwin, however, contrary to Henderson's suggestion, is not Schoolteacher. Bodwin is a lifelong and active abolitionist, not an owner of slaves. (...) (S4) Henderson's argument raises the question whether there is in fact a hidden connection, recognized by Sethe, between the white abolitionist and the white slave owner. (S5) **Placing Beloved in the context of racial discourses of the 1980s extends the question.** (S6) Is Sethe's attack on Bodwin an attack also on white liberals? (S7) Does Morrison's presentation of Bodwin suggest that, as Kenneth Clark argued in 1964, the white-liberal position on race is a "more insidious" form of racism? (¶ 31)*

Continuing a tradition is here identified by writer activity codified in the explicit lexeme *doing X extends the question* in S5 of paragraph 31. However, the rhetorical function of the move, which has been described by Swales (1990) as an epistemic move in the introduction, is twofold here. On the one hand, the writer occupies a niche, indicating to his readers how his reading relates to previous criticism and thus performing an epistemic move. On the other hand, the writer signals to his audience how his reading of a particular key element in the novel departs from established criticism. From a structural



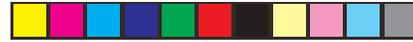
perspective, however, the predominant function of the move is not epistemic: given its realization within an extended interpretive move towards the end of the article, its function is to highlight critical disagreement, as a backdrop against which the writer's own interpretation stands out.

Let us now round off our argument about the distribution of moves in literary research, by saying that only Centrality claims obligatorily occur text-initially. At this point we have to bring in examples from other texts to illustrate this, considering that Berger's article features a nonepistemic introduction:

- (1) In recent years, *largely due to the work of feminist critics and queer theorists, the dynamics of gender in the early modern period* have been subjected to a thorough reevaluation (5:1).
- (2) *The issue of private consciousness* has enjoyed considerable critical attention when criticis discuss the representation of thought in Virginia Woolf's novels in terms of stream-of-consciousness narrative. (...) (2:1).
- (3) *The tracing of changes in Raymond Carver's short story style* is one of the most persistent topics of Carver criticism (12:1).

The linguistic signals in the identification of centrality claims in the examples above are: the present perfect and the explicit lexemes *in recent years* and *considerable critical attention* in (1) and (2) to signal continued discussion of the topic; the explicit lexemes in italics to single out an aspect of the author's work which has merited continued discussion in (3).

The nature of literary research as a "rural" field might be said to account not only for the nonlinear distribution of moves and the occurrence of nonepistemic moves but also for the heterogeneity of epistemic moves themselves. Centrality claims, for example, may take different forms in literary research. A claim that an issue has already been addressed at least once before is not a *centrality claim* proper, but may also be said to function as a rhetorical move for establishing territory:



- (4) It has taken the passage of another quarter century since *Life Against Death* for a writer like Doris Lessing to expose unabashedly our continuing desire to hide shit behind aesthetical and political ideals (11:3).

In the example above, the author introduces the issue of *kitsch* in *The Good Terrorist* by drawing an analogy between its main character, Alice Mellings, and Swift's Gulliver. In doing this, the author not only establishes a territory but also creates a conceptual space (the existence of *kitsch* or the *scatological* in literature) around which he will develop his argument.⁸

The recurrence of a particular topic (*the creole*) not in criticism, but among a group of writers (*white southern American writers*) may also function as a move for establishing territory:

- (5) After the Civil War (...), mixed-blood characters [*creoles*] began to appear with some frequency in the work of white southern writers like (15.3)

In literary research, not only topics or conceptual issues may be claimed to have attracted interest, but also literary texts themselves or even elements considered to play a key role in a particular text, as the following examples demonstrate:

- (6) *Persuasion* has always enjoyed a place of special fondness in the estimate of Jane Austen's readers. (9:1)
- (7) For two centuries, scholars have disputed the provenance and interpretation of Cassius's only soliloquy in *Julius Caesar*. (14.1)

The conclusions to be drawn from the analyses introduced in this article are the following: there seems to be less epistemic accounting in literary research than in other disciplinary areas, confirming

⁸ Cf. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1996:131) on "figures of presence", rhetorical devices for making certain key elements of an argument present in the reader's consciousness so as to foreground them.



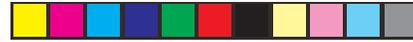
McDonald's argument about the heterogeneity of epistemic practices in literary research. Where such epistemic accounting occurs, however, the *moves* proposed by Swales (1990) in his CARS model proved to be effective analytical categories in organizing our discussion of the articles. Nevertheless, two aspects brought about by this discussion need to be singled out. First, the configuration of moves in literary research is not linear⁹. Second, we should not be misled into thinking that there is an automatic or one-to-one relationship between realizational type of move and rhetorical function. The discussion of genre conventions in academic discourse, then, should include a disciplinary dimension, once the rhetorical function of moves seems to be firmly embedded in the traditions of particular disciplinary areas.

4. Conclusion

This study has provided support for the claim that epistemic practices in literary research are heterogeneous, and it might thus be viewed as indirectly contributing to arguments against systematic textual treatment of literary criticism. However, one of our main aims here has been to demonstrate that, contrary to such arguments, discussion of rhetorical routines in literary research articles may contribute to our understanding of how genre conventions are embedded in disciplinary culture and of how conventions of genre *and* discipline influence academic writers' linguistic choices.

The academic article examined in this paper makes use of two analytical tools of literary interpretation: close textual reading and historical contextualization. It is important to call learners' attention to the fact that other modes of criticism and other analytical tools might yield different discourse conventions. This might encourage learners to see discourse conventions as influenced by (and influencing) particular reading traditions which, in turn, are affected by sociohistorical factors. Thus, certain conventions are considered "natural", or inherent in literary

⁹ Swales himself hints at this when he suggests that there may be a cyclic configuration of moves where there is *branching* rather than *linear* or *cumulative* research development (1990:158).



criticism, disguising the association of conventions to a specific knowledge production paradigm, in its turn associated with a particular reading tradition.

With highly sophisticated genres, written academic discourse is constrained by specific norms, which vary in accordance with the particular epistemological characteristics of different disciplinary areas. For the student whose first contact with a specialized discourse is established through a foreign language, this may be a daunting experience indeed. Analyses of academic prose in the area of literary research may thus offer an important contribution to the pedagogy of academic discourse production. Such analyses, however, need to be complemented by information on how students of a foreign literature appropriate such discourse conventions and incorporate them into an existing repertoire of conventions in their mother tongue.

If attention is directed to conventions of genre and discipline, and to the ways in which learners appropriate discourse conventions foreign to their own culture, writing about literature will not be viewed as the result of a cognitive capacity only – i.e. as the ability to recognize traditional literary devices in texts, or to appropriately contextualize texts of a certain kind. Instead, writing about literature will be viewed as a discursive performance¹⁰, oriented toward an epistemological, cultural, and social practice.

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¹⁰ The term “discursive performance” is used by Halliday (Halliday & Martin, 1993).



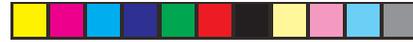
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APPENDIX 1: Texts discussed or referred to

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APPENDIX 2:

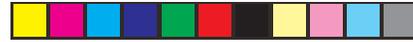
- BERGER, J. 1996 Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report. *PMLA*, **111.3**.

¶1 This essay places Toni Morrison's 1989 novel *Beloved* in particular discursive contexts of the 1980s, reading the text as an intervention in two ongoing debates about American race relations. *Beloved* opposes neoconservative and Reaganist denials of race as a continuing, traumatic, and structural problem in contemporary America but also questions positions on the left that tend to deny the traumatic effect of violence within African American communities. In emphasizing the African American family as a site of violence – emanating both from a racist society and from within the family – *Beloved* takes up debates that emerged and then were stifled in the wake of the Moynihan report of 1965.

¶2 Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, the last major statement of liberal ideology and policy on race and, in effect, the close of the first phase of the civil rights movement, was a pivotal moment in American racial discourse. The report was vehemently criticized by black nationalists and the New Left when it was published. Later, in the 1980s, some of its more emotionally charged arguments regarding African American family structures were appropriated (or misappropriated) by neoconservatives. After the report's disastrous reception, discussion of race became less open, giving way to evasions and euphemisms – to talk of “crime” and “welfare” on one side of the political spectrum and to overly broad

characterizations of racism on the other. In my reading, *Beloved* returns to an essentially liberal concern with the traumatic effects of institutional racism and thus revives the tradition of liberal sociology that culminated in the Moynihan report. But Morrison, by emphasizing African American and feminist perspectives, corrects the most damaging liberal errors – the denial of African American culture and agency and the slighting of African American women that characterized liberal thought from E. Franklin Frazier to Moynihan.

¶3 The political terms I use in this essay – *liberal, conservative, Reaganist, New Left, black nationalist* – have mobile and fluid meanings that represent conjunctures of complementary and contradictory discursive traditions. Gary Gerstle writes of “the protean character” of twentieth-century liberalism and describes how it coalesced out of certain elements of Progressivism and shifted emphases as a result of the two world wars, the depression, and the social crises of the 1960s. The “liberal” has been sometimes a populist, moralist, or technocrat, sometimes a cold warrior, civil rights activist, or labor activist who deemphasized racial issues. Likewise, conservatism, and its renaissance as Reganism, is a convergence of disparate movements. Reagan, as Thomas Byrne Edsall observes, was able to “bridge divisions between the country club and the fundamentalist church, between the executives of the Fortune 500 and the membership of the National Rifle Association”. In this essay, however, I am concerned with the consensus of attitudes and policies toward race among liberals from the 1930s through the early 1960s that Walter Jackson calls a “liberal orthodoxy”. This consensus regarded African American culture as damaged by the legacies of slavery but believed that government interventions in employment, education, housing, and health care could integrate African Americans into mainstream (that is, for these liberals, white) American culture. While the liberal consensus on race was never a national consensus or even a consensus within the Democratic party (and perhaps exists more concretely in the writings of sociologists than in legislative agendas), it exerted significant influence on public policy, particularly on Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs. In the mid-1960s, however, under the pressures of the Vietnam War, of the white backlash that followed urban rioting, and of activists’ resentment of the slowness and



ambivalence with which the federal government fulfilled civil rights commitments, the consensus shattered. This essay tells part of the story of the growth and disintegration of the liberal discourses on race, especially those on the African American family.

¶4 In reading *Beloved* as an intervention in these discourses, I begin by viewing Sethe's infanticide as an act that is traumatic in the lasting, symptomatic effects of its overwhelming horror and revelatory in its demonstration that the source of the trauma lies in both institutional and familial violence. I then trace the convergence of the liberal consensus on race from the 1930s through the 1960s, describing the importance of theories of the African American family, and show how the fragmentation of the consensus in the mid-1960s, in part because of the Moynihan report, helped produce the discursive context in which Morrison wrote *Beloved*. Finally, I discuss several influential interpretations of *Beloved* that neglect or misinterpret Morrison's portrayal of family violence, particularly the infanticide and the reenactment of it in Sethe's attack on the abolitionist Bodwin.

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