

An intercultural approach to “bad news” reporting as an embedded part-genre: The “local” rhetoric of *Limitations* in research articles

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Abstract

Acknowledging the limitations of one’s own research in empirical research article Discussion and/or other closing sections is rhetorically challenging, and especially for those aiming to publish in a foreign language. This paper hypothesizes that a part of the challenge may be due to cross-cultural differences in the rhetorical strategies used for presenting these potentially self-damaging statements. Adopting an intercultural rhetoric approach, two sub-samples of *Limitations* were drawn from two English/Spanish comparable corpora of this type of sections in the social sciences. Then, the rhetorical purposes of their surrounding segments were compared from the lens of the “bad news” message. The results showed that most authors prepared the reader for the *Limitations*, although the preferred stylistic strategies for doing so varied across the two languages. Authors also tended to exploit a similar set of rhetorical purposes, but in different ways, to persuade readers about the acceptability of their own study limitations. Specifically, in English it was conventional to sandwich the *Limitations* with “good news”, including implications for future practice, to mitigate their possible negative effect. In contrast, in Spanish it was conventional to surround them with explications to display the authors’ expertise, while the only salient mitigating strategy was their attribution to an external factor. These divergent rhetorical practices may be understood in terms of different cultural writing styles and authors’ understandings of impression management that were uncovered through email interviews. I advocate for a critical intercultural awareness approach to training scholars in writing skills necessary for research publication purposes in different languages and contexts.

Keywords: limitations, discussion and/or conclusion section, research article, bad news genre, intercultural rhetoric.

Resumen

Aproximación intercultural a la comunicación de “malas noticias” como subestructura genérica incrustada: la retórica “local” de las Limitaciones en artículos de investigación

El reconocimiento de las limitaciones de la propia investigación en la Discusión y/u otros apartados finales de los artículos de investigación empírica es un desafío retórico, especialmente para aquellos autores que aspiran a publicar en una lengua extranjera. Este artículo plantea la hipótesis de que una parte del reto puede deberse a diferencias culturales en las estrategias retóricas utilizadas para presentar estos enunciados potencialmente autolesivos. Desde un enfoque de retórica intercultural, se extrajeron dos submuestras de *Limitaciones* de dos corpus comparables en inglés y en español de este tipo de apartados en artículos de investigación de ciencias sociales y se compararon los propósitos retóricos de los segmentos circundantes desde la perspectiva del mensaje con “malas noticias”. Los resultados mostraron que la mayoría de los autores prepararon al lector para las *Limitaciones*, aunque las estrategias estilísticas preferidas para hacerlo variaron entre las dos lenguas. Además, tendieron a explotar un conjunto similar de propósitos retóricos, pero de diferentes maneras, para persuadir a los lectores sobre la aceptabilidad de las limitaciones de su propio estudio. En concreto, en inglés tendieron más a intercalar las *Limitaciones* con “buenas noticias”, incluidas las implicaciones para la práctica futura, para mitigar su posible efecto negativo. Por el contrario, en español mostraron una tendencia mayor a rodearlas de explicaciones para mostrar su pericia, mientras que la única estrategia atenuante destacada fue la atribución de la limitación a un factor externo. Estas prácticas retóricas divergentes pueden deberse a diferentes estilos culturales de escritura y modos de entender cómo causar una buena impresión que se descubrieron mediante entrevistas a los autores por correo electrónico. Se aboga por un enfoque crítico de concienciación intercultural necesario para redactar la investigación para fines de publicación en diferentes lenguas y contextos.

Palabras clave: limitaciones, apartado de la discusión y/o conclusión, artículo de investigación, comunicación de malas noticias, retórica intercultural.

Though it be honest, it is never good to bring bad news.
William Shakespeare *“Antony and Cleopatra”* (1606-7) act 2, sc. 5, l. 85

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, researchers from all over the world have increasingly published their research in English-medium scientific journals,

giving rise to a growing number of intercultural academic written communication situations. However, writing a research article (RA) in English for publication is not an easy task, especially for those for whom English is not their first language (EFL) (e.g., Flowerdew, 1999; Hanauer & Englander, 2011; Moreno et al., 2012; Pérez-Llantada, 2012). It has been suggested that some of the EFL researchers’ writing difficulties could be related to cross-cultural differences in rhetorical conventions and understandings about appropriate content and style (e.g., Moreno et al., 2012; Pérez-Llantada, 2012). Like other people using a particular language and belonging to a particular speech community, researchers have preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organizing thoughts in their first language (L1) (Kecskes, 2013). In the absence of a core common ground of shared writing conventions and understandings, EFL researchers need to negotiate this with the journal gatekeepers during the publication process (Lillis & Curry, 2010).

Of all RA sections, the Discussion and/or closing (DC) section is the most challenging for Spanish social scientists (Gea-Valor et al., 2014), and is the major concern of the present paper. One type of intercultural communication problem for many of them is the acknowledgment of the limitations of their own study (henceforth, *Limitations*) in English. *Limitations* have been defined as segments that “acknowledge some weakness of the authors’ own research” (Moreno, 2022), indirectly enhancing their credibility (Lindeberg, 2004), e.g., “Another limitation of this paper is that *we focus on only one period.*” (SSC08ENG, 55; see Appendix 1). These claims are typically located in DC sections (Yang & Allison, 2003), but their frequency of occurrence is subject to significant cross-disciplinary variation (Peacock, 2002; Cotos et al., 2016), being especially relevant in social science (henceforth, SSC) fields (Cotos et al., 2016) other than applied linguistics (AL) (cf. Yang & Allison, 2003).

The problem with acknowledging own-study limitations for publication in English was uncovered in a course in RA writing for publication in English taught to 17 Spanish scholars at the University of León (Spain) (Moreno & Sachdev, 2019) (see also Pérez-Llantada, 2012). Most junior participants questioned the need for mentioning them, as this might adversely affect their reputation as researchers and the acceptability of their manuscript. Even the senior participants found it challenging mainly due to their uncertainty about how to effectively manage the possible negative impression created by these claims in English. One possible way for Spanish authors to achieve this in English is, of course, by mitigating their meaning. Indeed, previous

English/Spanish cross-cultural research has suggested that authors of RAs in English mitigate their claims more than in Spanish by means of modality devices and approximators (Martín-Martín, 2008). However, like Lin (2020), I argue that a focus on the rhetorical purposes of the segments around them will better capture some of the more subtle aspects of impression management. As Bhatia (1993, p. 13) remarked, genre conventions can be exploited by experts “to achieve private effects or intentions” without deviating from the socially recognised set of generic purposes. Furthermore, comparing how these effects are achieved across English and Spanish DC sections will be even more revealing.

Despite the growing body of research that has had as its focus the generic structure of SSC DC sections in English (e.g., Holmes, 1997; Lewin, Fine, & Young, 2001; Peacock, 2002; Lindeberg, 2004; Cotos et al., 2016; Moreno & Swales, 2018), the sequences of segments into which *Limitations* are integrated (*Limitation sequences*) are still unclear and their effects unexplored. Although researchers have found *Limitation-Suggestion for future research* (e.g., Lindeberg, 2004) and *Limitation-Contribution* cycles (e.g., Peacock, 2002) in SSC texts (see also Joseph & Miin-Hwa Lim, 2019, in forestry), the increasing promotional nature of DC sections in the SSC in English (Moreno, 2021) is likely to have affected the composition of these cycles. There is also research suggesting that *Limitations* are surrounded by segments mitigating the meaning of these claims with rhetorical, or persuasive, purposes. For instance, Kwan and Chan (2014) found segments in behavioural psychology RAs whose purpose was to *alleviate the limitations*. Given that the RAs analysed were published, it can be assumed that the purpose of the alleviation was to persuade the reader that the own-study limitations were acceptable. For these reasons, here *Limitations* are conceptualized as claims of caution in published RAs acknowledging some weakness of the authors’ own research, i.e., providing bad news about it, without detracting from its value.

Drawing on literature about other professional genres in English, such as studies of disclosures in corporate reporting (Lin, 2020), this study aims to explore the way in which the *Limitations*, or the “bad news” about a study, are rhetorically framed as acceptable. This is what I will refer to as the “local” rhetoric of *Limitations*. Studies of the rhetorical construction of specific communicative purposes in the DC section are very recent (e.g., Cheng, 2020 on *Theoretical implications*). To the best of my knowledge, no research has yet focused on the rhetorical construction of *Limitations* in English or across languages. Thus, the major contribution of this paper is the design of an

analytical approach to compare the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations* and their patterns of organisation in the DC section across languages. This analytical approach supplements move-analytical frameworks that seek to reveal the generic structure deployed by authors to achieve the overall purpose(s) of (part-)genres, following Swales (1981/2011, 1990, 2004). By offering preliminary contrastive results across English and Spanish DC sections and socio-cultural explanations for the differences found, this study is framed within intercultural rhetoric (IR) (Connor, 2011).

2. Intercultural rhetoric

Intercultural rhetoric (IR) research can be considered a branch of *intercultural pragmatics* (Kecskes, 2013, 2016). It is especially concerned with those rhetorical features of texts produced by speakers for whom English is not an L1 that need to be changed to communicate successfully in English, despite the corresponding text fragments being lexico-grammatically accurate in English and/or [their absence] conventional in the authors' L1 (Moreno, 2013). IR offers a framework for explaining the need for such changes (e.g., an unconvincing overuse of *Contribution* statements by Spanish social scientists, Mur Dueñas, 2014) by virtue of the Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) hypothesis (e.g., Connor, 2004; Moreno, 2010). According to this hypothesis, there are observable differences in the preferred rhetorical patterns and stylistic features of similar texts across English as an L1 and languages other than English. The pedagogical orientation of IR makes it more interested in capturing recurrent tendencies in rhetoric and style across relevant writing cultures (Moreno, 2013), while recognising individual rhetorical and stylistic preferences (Connor, 2011).

Due to the developments experienced by CR research in the last few decades, Connor (2004) suggested using the term IR. Adopting applied IR perspectives (e.g., Moreno, 2021), the present study aims to offer insights to understand Spanish SSC RA authors' uncertainties about how to rhetorically manage *Limitations* effectively in 21st century DC sections in English. Although nowadays a connection can no longer be assumed between the rhetorical preferences of researchers and a national culture (Baker, 2016), I argue that such a relation is still perceptible in RAs by Spanish researchers (see, e.g., Pérez-Llantada, 2012). Furthermore, due to Spanish SSC researchers' later

participation in intercultural scientific interactions (compared, say, with Spanish researchers in hard science fields), the impact of this connection is likely to be more noticeable, and hence worth exploring (Baker, 2018).

To achieve its aim, this study compares the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations* and their patterns of organisation in SSC RA DC sections across two contexts: 1) English-medium journals (henceforth, English), where English is used as a lingua franca (ELF) (excluding that by Spanish scholars) and representing a complex hybrid culture of academic writing practices and values (Holliday, 2022), into which multilingual-cultural scholars who read and publish in English are assumed to have been socialised; and 2) Spanish-medium journals edited in Spain (henceforth, Spanish), representing the culture of academic writing practices and values into which Spanish social scientists are assumed to have been socialized until recently. More innovatively, the study examines the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations* through the lens of the “bad news” message.

3. The “bad news” message

Previous scholars have explored how bad news is effectively communicated in English to diverse audiences through specific genres (e.g., Lehman & DuFrene, 2010; Swales & Feak, 2012; Lin, 2020). Specifically, Lehman and DuFrene (2010, p. 272) suggest the following five parts to organise an effective bad-news message: 1) introductory paragraph; 2) explanation; 3) bad-news statement; 4) counterproposal or “silver lining idea”; and 5) closing paragraph. For their part, Swales and Feak (2012) suggest that the provision of bad news in the “bad-news letter” is often preceded by some preparatory “buffer” statement and is followed by a close trying to “make amends” (Swales & Feak, 2012, p. 9-10). Guided by genre-based theories, Lin (2020) found similar rhetorical components in negative corporate social responsibility disclosures. The author identified a four-part structure: 1) preparing the reader; 2) conveying the bad news; 3) mitigating the bad news; and 4) reassuring the reader.

All this literature suggests that bad-news disclosures in general academic and business professional contexts share broadly similar components to present the bad news as acceptable: preparation, explication, mitigation, and offer of repair and/or reassurance. The present paper conjectures that the limitations

of empirical studies in SSC RA DC sections are disclosed by a broadly similar set of rhetorical purposes and patterns of rhetorical organisation. However, drawing on Bhatia (1993) and Connor (2011), it hypothesises that significant variation may occur in how authors exploit them in these sections across English and Spanish to appropriately frame the limitations as acceptable in their respective contexts. To test this hypothesis, the study compares the following rhetorical variables across the two contexts:

- (1) The rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitation* claims.
- (2) The rhetorical sequences created around *Limitation* claims.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. The sample

To collect a sample of *Limitations* representing the population described above, the study used a sample of 20 SSC (other than AL, henceforth SSC) DC sections, 10 in English and 10 in Spanish, drawn from RAs in the exemplary empirical research articles in English and Spanish (EXEMPRAES) Corpus (Moreno, 2013). Published between 2004-2012, one advantage of these RAs is that they are independent articles in English and Spanish paired according to overall topic, study type (e.g., experimental, survey, qualitative), audience and persuasive capacity, as perceived by the expert informants that recommended each RA pair. Five of these pairs belong to Business, and Economics and five to Pedagogy, Psychology, Sociology (see reference details in Appendix 1). Table 1 displays the sizes of the RAs and DC sections in each sub-sample.

Size of 10 text pairs	Eng. RAs	Sp. RAs	Eng. DCs	Sp. DCs
Total number of words	71914	69982	10919	12409
<i>M</i>	7191	6998	1092	1241
<i>SD</i>	2773	3433	586	497

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Table 1. Size of the sample of social science empirical research article (RA) Discussion and/or closing (DC) sections in English (Eng.) and Spanish (Sp.).

As can be seen, the DC sections in both sub-samples are on average lengthy texts of over 1000 words. Another advantage of this sample is that the 20

DC sections are fully annotated in Excel for their communicative functions, both general and specific, according to Moreno and Swales's (2018) modified move analytical methods (Moreno, 2021) (see coding scheme in Supplementary material 1). This not only facilitated the reliable identification of all *Limitations*, both explicit and implicit (27 in English and 18 in Spanish), but also the observation of the communicative functions of the segments around them.

4.2. Methods of analysis

To explore cross-cultural variation in the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations* and in their sequence of appearance in this sample, the relevant segments were analysed and annotated in separate Excel columns, as explained below.

4.2.1. The rhetorical purposes

All segments acknowledging a limitation were annotated as “LIM”, as they were the focal statements. After analysing all the relevant segments around *Limitations* through the lens of the “bad news” message, their rhetorical purposes were reduced to four major categories, which resulted in the coding scheme shown in Table 2:

Code	Rhetorical purposes of the segments around <i>Limitations</i>
PRE	Preparing the reader for the limitation(s)
MIT	Mitigating the negative impression caused by the limitation
EXP	Explicating the limitation to display expertise
REA	Reassuring readers about the value of the authors' own study

Table 2. Coding scheme for the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations*.

To increase reliability, all relevant segments were reannotated in a new column, masking previous analyses, one month after the first annotation. The level of agreement achieved between the two sets of coding was 95.5%, after which the few coding discrepancies were resolved. Following the same methods, all relevant segments were annotated for the sub-functions and/or sub-strategies of each rhetorical purpose (see results section) in separate columns to identify where possible differences might lie.

4.2.2. The *Limitation sequences*

A *Limitation sequence* in this study was defined as a combination of segments whose rhetorical purposes were orchestrated by RA authors to persuade the readers that the limitation acknowledged was acceptable in their field. Using the results of the annotations described above, each *Limitation* was then annotated for the sequence of segments into which it was integrated. Here various methodological decisions were made: 1) if the reader had been prepared for the LIM, the annotation of the sequence begun with “PRE” (e.g., PRE-LIM-EXP), irrespective of whether the preparation occurred immediately before or in some preceding segment; 2) when two or more consecutive segments had the same purpose, the relevant sequence reflected that purpose only once (e.g., PRE-MIT-LIM, rather than PRE-MIT-MIT-MIT-LIM); and 3) elaborations of functions other than LIM were coded with the same value as the functions they elaborated on. To increase reliability, the *Limitation* segments were annotated in this way twice with a two-week gap between the two sessions. The level of agreement achieved was 93.35%. After resolving the coding discrepancies, all the segments in the same sequence were annotated with the same sequence of codes.

Table 3 below shows an excerpt from the Excel sheet illustrating these types of annotations on a DC section in English (SSC08ENG, see column D). Column F displays the units of analysis, or meaningful RA segments, where <p> signals a paragraph break. The number in column E indicates the position of the segment in the text. Columns J and K show the code indicating their specific and general communicative function (SF and GF, respectively) of each segment. The meaning of the codes can be checked in Supplementary material 1. The last two columns display the new annotations.

	D	E	F	J	K	Z	AD	
1	TEXT	N	RESEARCH ARTICLE SEGMENT	SF	GF	CODE PURPOSE	RHETORICAL SEQUENCE	
411	SSCOBENG	44	<p> This study has some limitations.	MSP	AF	PRE	PRE	
412	SSCOBENG	45	We focus on the positive net effects of social capital.	LIM	EV	LIM	PRE-LIM-EXP	
413	SSCOBENG	46	However, social capital can also have negative consequences	POC	BGI	EXP	PRE-LIM-EXP	
414	SSCOBENG	47	Prominent social capital theorists, such as Coleman (1988), st	RWC	BGI	EXP	PRE-LIM-EXP	
415	SSCOBENG	48	However, dense networks may incur penalties, e.g., the exclu	RWC	BGI	EXP	PRE-LIM-EXP	
416	SSCOBENG	49	see Porter 1998, p. 15, for a detailed discussion of these effe	EXT	AF	EXP	PRE-LIM-EXP	
417	SSCOBENG	50	Although our measure of social capital can be considered a m	POS	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM-MIT	
418	SSCOBENG	51	we acknowledge that it is not possible to identify these two	LIM	EV	LIM	PRE-MIT-LIM-MIT	
419	SSCOBENG	52	Although research that could separate these ties would be of	POS	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM-MIT	
420	SSCOBENG	53	not least to enable further examination of the downsides of	JUST	ELF	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM-MIT	
421	SSCOBENG	54	such an analysis would be extremely difficult at the relative	GAP	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM-MIT	
422	SSCOBENG	55	<p> Another limitation of this paper is that we focus on only	LIM	EV	LIM	PRE-LIM	
423	SSCOBENG	56	Although we have corrected for endogeneity problems,	POS	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM	
424	SSCOBENG	57	controlled for the large number of firm- and region-specific	fa	POS	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM
425	SSCOBENG	58	and have a large sample of firms,	POS	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM	
426	SSCOBENG	59	the results of this study are based on cross-sectional data.	LIM	EV	LIM	PRE-MIT-LIM	
427	SSCOBENG	60	Also, although we rely on two data sources, collected at the	fi	POS	EV	MIT	PRE-MIT-LIM-EXP-REA
428	SSCOBENG	61	we do not know whether the externally acquired R&D was pu	LIM	EV	LIM	PRE-MIT-LIM-EXP-REA	
429	SSCOBENG	62	Accordingly, the positive moderating effect of the regional	so	EXPL	COMM	EXP	PRE-MIT-LIM-EXP-REA
430	SSCOBENG	63	Future research should collect data on the geographic origins	REC	IMP	REA	PRE MIT LIM EXP REA	

Table 3. Annotations of the segments around *Limitations* for their rhetorical purposes and sequences in English.

As can be seen in Table 3, after the announcement of limitations, the first paragraph includes two *Limitation sequences* (PRE-LIM-EXP: segments 45-49; and PRE-MIT-LIM-MIT: 50-54), partly satisfying the announcement that the study has some limitations. In the first sequence, segment 45 is an implicit *Limitation*, interpreted as such in the context of the previous announcement (hence “LIM”). In the second sequence, segment 51 is an explicit *Limitation* by virtue of its wording: *it is not possible to* (hence “LIM”). This is preceded by a positive feature of the study (50) oriented to mitigating the possible negative effect of the limitation (hence, “MIT”). The rest of the segments in this sequence (52-54) are orchestrated to make the argumentative point that the limitation was almost inevitable, achieving a mitigating effect too (hence, “MIT”).

The second paragraph in Table 3 contains three related *Limitation sequences* (PRE-LIM: 55; PRE-MIT-LIM: 56-59; and PRE-MIT-LIM-EXP-REA: 60-63). While the first sequence includes one undiscussed *Limitation*, in the next two sequences, the *Limitations* are preceded by statements about positive features of the study, mitigating their possible negative effect (hence, “MIT”). In the last sequence, the *Limitation* is followed by a segment (62) that explicates the *Limitation*, displaying the authors’ expertise (hence “EXP”). Finally, segment 63 draws an implication for future research reassuring readers that the limitation can be amended in a useful way (hence “REA”). All in all, the two paragraphs contain five cycles of *Limitation sequences*. Appendix 2 shows a similar analysis of an excerpt from a DC in Spanish, SSC07SP.

4.3. The email interviews

Following the IR tradition, the study tapped into the socio-cultural contexts underpinning the rhetorical preferences observed. This was done through a three-part interview conducted among a sample of 10 RA authors (see relevant items in Appendix 3). The first section dealt with their preferences about managing *Limitations* in RA DC sections. The second section elicited personal and professional information about the authors and the third one asked them about their experiences writing and learning to write RAs. Responses were obtained from 50% of the sample. Of the five authors, two were in English (one, whose L1 was Danish and one, German; both of whom had received most of their post-graduate training in English) and three in Spanish. All of them were main authors, and none had received explicit training in RA writing or journal instructions about the inclusion of

Limitations in the DC section. The sample was fairly evenly balanced in terms of knowledge areas, difficulty writing the DC section, publication experience, and strategies learning to write RAS.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. The rhetorical purposes of the segments in *Limitation sequences*

This section first offers the quantitative comparison carried out in Excel of the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations* through the lens of the “bad news” message. The status of each purpose (i.e., the percentage of texts in each sub-sample that included it) was considered obligatory if it occurred at least once in 90-100% of the texts; conventional (if in 60-89%); optional (if in 30-59%); and non-salient (if in less than 30%). Due to space limitations, the various purposes are illustrated with schematic examples in English in square brackets, with their signals highlighted in italics, where the subscript number after each segment indicates its position in the corresponding DC section (see Appendix 4 for full examples in both languages). The quantitative results obtained are discussed in the light of the interview findings.

5.1.1. Preparing the reader for the bad news

Limitations were presented in the DC section in the ways shown in Table 4.

Introductory strategy	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
Without preparing the reader	2	7.4%	20%	1	5.6%	10%
Preparing the reader by a(n) ...	25	92.6%	70%	17	94.4%	70%
Announcement	24	96.0%	70%	17	100.0%	70%
Challenge in the field	1	4.0%	10%	0	0.0%	0%
Total	27	100.0%	80%	18	100.0%	70%

Table 4. Strategies for introducing *Limitations* in RA DC sections by language.

As can be seen in Table 4, most authors in both sub-samples prepared readers for the *Limitation(s)* with brief neutral announcements, suggesting that the *Limitations* were expected and there was no need for further preparation. These announcements signify a clear intention in both contexts

not to let the limitations go unnoticed, as acknowledged by most of the interviewees in both languages. They could be realized by five types of grammatical construction: 1) a subheading; 2) a sentence; 3) a text stage announcing phrase; or 4) a segment announcing phrase; and/or 5) some combination of these. Examples follow:

1) A subheading

(E1) [<p> Strengths and *Limitations* </p>]₃₂ (PRE) (SSC06ENG)

2) A text stage announcing sentence

(E2) [<p> *There are several limitations of this research...*]₄₃ (PRE) (SSC07ENG)

3) A text stage announcing phrase

(E3) Note: No example found in the English sub-sample.

(S3) [<p> *Con respecto a las limitaciones del trabajo, cabe notar...*]₄₁ (PRE) (SSC09SP) [Trans.: As far as the paper limitations are concerned, it should be noted...]

4) A segment announcing phrase

(E4) [<p> *Another limitation of this paper is...*]₅₅ (PRE) (SSC08ENG)

5) A combination of the previous types (e.g., a subheading and a text stage announcing sentence)

(E5) [<p> *Research limitations and future research* </p>]₄₂ (PRE)

[<p> *There are several limitations of this research...*]₄₃ (PRE) (SSC07ENG)

The distribution of announcing strategies is shown in Table 5.

Announcing strategy	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
Single strategy	18	75.0%	50%	12	70.6%	60%
Subheading	6	33.3%	10%	0	0.0%	0%
Stage announcing sentence	9	50.0%	20%	2	16.7%	10%
Stage announcing phrase	0	0.0%	0%	9	75.0%	30%
Segment announcing phrase	3	16.7%	20%	1	8.3%	10%
Combined strategy	6	25.0%	30%	5	29.4%	10%
Total	24	100.0%	60%	17	100.0%	70%

Table 5. Strategies for announcing *Limitations* by language.

As Table 5 shows, in both subsamples authors mainly chose to announce *Limitations* with a single strategy. However, while in English they preferred text stage announcing sentences to indicate a topic shift (i.e., topic sentences), in Spanish they preferred text stage announcing phrases (i.e., transition markers, e.g., *En cuanto a* [As far as], *Con respecto a* [With regard to], *Antes de presentar* [Before presenting]), which were never employed in the English sub-sample. This stylistic choice supports Pérez-Llantada’s (2012) finding about Spanish writers’ preference for “phraseological units explicitly indicating transition from one topic to another”, possibly explaining why this is their preference also in their EFL texts over the “well-known Anglophone use of a topic sentence in paragraph construction” (Pérez-Llantada, 2012, p. 99).

5.1.2. Giving the bad news

To give the bad news about their study, authors pointed out its limitation(s) in terms of two possible types of lack of validity (e.g., Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007): 1) external (i.e., the extent to which the results of a study could be generalised); and 2) internal (i.e., the degree to which the results were attributable to the independent variable and not to some other rival explanation). Examples follow:

1) External validity

(E6) [*<p> Another limitation of this paper is that we focus on only...]*⁵⁵
(SSC08ENG)

2) Internal validity

(E7) [*It is possible that those who responded to the survey were more likely to [...] than those who did not respond.*]⁴² (SSC11ENG)

The distribution of these types by language is shown in Table 6 below.

Validity type	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
External	9	33.33%	50%	8	44.44%	30%
Internal	18	66.67%	70%	10	55.56%	70%
Total	27	100.0%	80%	18	100.0%	70%

Table 6. Types of validity addressed by *Limitation* statements by language.

As shown in Table 6, while in both languages it was optional to comment on the external validity of the findings, commenting on the internal validity of the study was conventional. According to the interviewees, the latter was crucial so that the results could be interpreted. As one author in Spanish explained: “The basis of causality consists in isolating the effect of other possible potential variables [...] For that reason, if authors are aware of possible uncontrolled variables in their design, they should note them” [Trans.]. External validity was not so frequently addressed if it was evident. In the words of an author in English: “...sometimes it is quite evident how generalizable the focal study might be”. Neither was it addressed if the population was rather homogenous, as when “the [...] profiles are very similar in all the countries in the region” [Trans.], according to one author in Spanish.

5.1.3. Mitigating the bad news

To soften the negative effect of the “bad news”, *Limitations* were strategically surrounded by three major types of mitigating segments: 1) a positive feature of the methodology; 2) a contribution of the study; and/or 3) a justification, attributing the limitation to some external factor. The first two types could occur before or after the *Limitation*. Schematic examples follow with signals of the *Limitations* highlighted in bold:

- 1) A positive feature of the methodology

Before

(E8) [Although *our measure of social capital can be considered a mix of...*]₅₀

(MIT) [we acknowledge that **it is not possible to** identify these two types empirically.]₅₁ (LIM) (SSC08ENG)

After

(E9) [Also the **participants** [...] **are self-selected**]₄₇ (LIM) [and a **greater proportion had** [...] **than reported in...** (citation)]₄₈ (LIM) [and a **slightly greater proportion...**]₄₉ (LIM) [In spite of this higher level of [...] *we do have a good distribution of...*]₅₀ (MIT) (SSC6ENG)

2) A contribution of the study

Before

(E10) [<p> Although *we demonstrated that...*]₂₉ (MIT) [**the study design did not allow us to examine...**]₃₀ (LIM) (SSC03ENG)

After

(E11) [Another limitation is that **the study looked at ...**]₄₃ (LIM) [Further research on [...] could be undertaken in the future.]₄₄ (REA) [Despite **these limitations**, *this study provides interesting evidence of ...* </p>]₄₅ (MIT) (SSC11ENG)

3) Justification, attributing the limitation to an external factor

(E12) [Firstly, **we did not research...**]₄₅ (LIM) [*due to time and complexity...*]₄₆ (MIT) (SSC07ENG)

The distribution of these three mitigating strategies is shown in Table 7.

Mitigation strategy	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
Unmitigated	12	44.4%	60%	10	55.6%	40%
Mitigated by	15	55.6%	60%	8	44.4%	60%
Positive feature of the study	7	46.7%	30%	4	50.0%	20%
Contribution of the study	6	40.0%	30%	1	12.5%	10%
Attribution to an external factor	2	13.3%	20%	3	37.5%	30%
Total	27	100.0%	80%	18	100.0%	70%

Table 7. Strategies for mitigating Limitations by language.

As Table 7 shows, while in English both positive features of the study and contribution statements were salient, in Spanish the only salient mitigating

strategy was the attribution of the limitation to an external factor. This suggests different conventions for mitigating the negative impression possibly caused by the *Limitation*. While in English the juxtaposition of “good news” about the study seemed to be a successful strategy, in Spanish it seemed more appropriate to justify the researchers’ failure to have done a better job. The location of such mitigating segments relative to the *Limitation* was distributed by language as shown in Table 8.

Location of mitigation	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
After	7	46.7%	40%	6	75.0%	40%
Before	8	53.3%	30%	2	25.0%	20%
Total	15	100.0%	60%	8	100.0%	60%

Table 8. Location of the mitigating segments relative to Limitations by language.

As Table 8 indicates, mitigation before the *Limitation* was only salient in English. In both languages, more authors preferred to locate the optional mitigation after the *Limitation*. These findings are overall supported by the interview responses. Although the authors in Spanish also considered it conventional to follow positive features or contributions with *Limitations*, the reason for doing so was to display their expertise. Furthermore, while one author in English viewed the placement of a positive feature or a contribution, either before or after, as a mitigating strategy, none of the authors in Spanish did. This is consistent with Spanish authors’ preference to be modest in these sections (Moreno, 2021) and, perhaps with their reliance on the reader “to draw the pertinent conclusions about the value of their contribution” (Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014, p. 35).

5.1.4. Explaining the bad news

The authors explicated a limitation in three possible ways: 1) clarifying its nature; 2) explaining its cause; and 3) explaining its effect. This was achieved by means of segments providing elaborations and/or background information:

1) Clarifying its nature

(E13) [The retrospective design of the study introduces bias in...]₁₉ (LIM) [For example, [...] may be more inclined to...]₂₀ (EXP) (SSC03ENG)

2) Explaining its cause

(E14) [*<p> Fourthly, [...] were integrated into...]*⁵² (LIM) [However, some studies have shown that [...] *can have different effects on different...*]⁵³ (EXP) (SSC07ENG)

3) Explaining its effect

(E15) [In addition, **our findings are based on** an [...] sample]²⁷ (LIM) [*and we do not know how well the findings would hold in a sample of...* *</p>.*]²⁸ (EXP) (SSC03ENG)

These strategies were distributed by language as shown in Table 9.

Explicating strategy	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
Unexplicated	20	74.1%	80%	5	27.8%	40%
Explicated	7	25.9%	30%	13	72.2%	60%
Clarifying its nature	3	42.8%	20%	1	7.7%	10%
Explaining its cause	2	28.6%	20%	11	84.6%	50%
Explaining its effect	2	28.6%	20%	1	7.7%	10%
Total	27	100.0%	80%	18	100.0%	70%

Table 9. Strategies for explicating Limitations.

As Table 9 shows, while explicating *Limitations* was optional in English, in Spanish it was conventional, mainly by explaining its cause. This difference may be due to the greater concern of the Spanish authors to display their awareness of the ideal conditions for having conducted their research, as deduced from their responses to related questions in the interviews, and/or perhaps to help readers understand and accept the limitation as valid. This finding is also consistent with previous research on Spanish-English academic discourse revealing Spanish researchers' cultural preference for providing specialised background knowledge as opposed to evaluating the quality of the work presented (e.g., Moreno & Suárez, 2008; Gil-Salom & Soler-Monreal, 2014).

5.1.5. Offering reassurance

To reassure readers that their research was valuable, authors drew three types of implications from a limitation: 1) an implication for future research; 2) a warning against an incorrect interpretation of the results; and/or 3) an implication for future practice, as illustrated below:

1) Implication for future research

(E16) [**The analysis here has obviously been rather rudimentary**]₂₄ (LIM) [and *more thorough analysis is needed.*]₂₅ (REA) (SSC09ENG)

2) Warning against incorrect interpretation of results

(E17) [**Finally, [...], this study considers [...] in general**]₅₆ (LIM) [and does not focus on any particular type of...]₅₇ (EXP) [*Any generalisation must be undertaken with extreme caution and...*]₅₈ (REA) (SSC07ENG)

3) Implication for future practice

(E18) [**The framework presented within this article sets the goal to contribute to [...] by providing a comprehensive model,**]₂₃ (MIT) [**although it consists of a limited number of...**]₂₄ (LIM) [*This instrument allows to support both [...] managers as...*]₂₅ (REA) (SSC05ENG)

The distribution of implications from *Limitations* by language is shown in Table 10.

Implication strategy	English			Spanish		
	N.	%	Status	N.	%	Status
With no implications	17	63,0%	40%	12	66,7%	40%
With implications	10	37,0%	70%	6	33,3%	40%
For future practice	3	30,0%	30%	0	0,0%	0%
For future research	6	60,0%	40%	5	83,3%	30%
For the interpretation of results + future research	1	10,0%	10%	1	16,7%	10%
Total	27	100,0%	80%	18	100,0%	70%

Table 10. Implication strategies after *Limitations* by language.

Table 10 indicates that, while in English it was conventional to draw implications from *Limitations*, in Spanish this strategy was only optional. This difference is mainly caused by the absence of implications for future practice in Spanish. As suggested in Moreno (2021), this was probably associated with the lack of a national science assessment policy that emphasised the social impact of research outcomes at the time the manuscripts in the sample were published (2004-2012). Furthermore, although recommendations for future research were optional, presenting a study limitation as a springboard for the development of their field seemed to seek a different intent in each context. While in Spanish authors reported drawing them to announce their “own future research plans and implicitly mark the territory”, in English they did so to “suggest to other researchers how they could overcome the limitation” or to “encourage future research based on the focal paper”.

Table 11 summarises the previous contrastive results about the rhetorical purposes of the segments around *Limitations* and the (sub-)functions/strategies associated to each in SSC DC sections, including only strategies that were salient in at least one language. These are presented in parallel to the moves around the “bad news” message.

The “local” rhetoric of <i>Limitations</i>		English	Spanish
Move around the “bad news” message	Rhetorical purpose: Sub-function/strategy	Status	Status
<i>Preparing the reader</i>	<i>Announcing the Limitation</i>	Conventional	Conventional
	Stage announcing phrase	Unfound	Optional
	Combined announcing strategy	Optional	Non-salient
<i>Giving the bad news</i>	<i>Acknowledging the limitation</i>	Conventional	Conventional
	Lack of internal validity	Conventional	Conventional
	Lack of external validity	Optional	Optional
<i>Mitigating the bad news</i>	<i>Evaluating positively, justifying</i>	Conventional	Conventional
	Positive feature of the study	Optional	Non-salient
	Contribution of the study	Optional	Non-salient
<i>Explaining the bad news</i>	Attribution to external factor	Non-salient	Optional
	<i>Explicating the Limitation</i>	Optional	Conventional
	Explaining its cause	Non-salient	Optional
<i>Offering Reassurance</i>	<i>Drawing an implication</i>	Conventional	Optional
	For future research	Conventional	Optional
	For future practice	Optional	Unfound

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Table 11. The “local” rhetoric of *Limitations* in RA Discussion and/or closing sections by language.

5.2. *Limitation* sequences

Table 12 offers a list of the rhetorical patterns of *Limitation sequences* in the two sub-samples, examples of which were provided in Table 3. The strings of codes in capital letters indicate sequences that were common to all the N cases in each category, and those in subscript indicate other possible continuations.

English			Spanish		
Pattern	N	Status	Pattern	N	Status
PRE-LIM-REA _{-MIT-MIT-REA}	4	40%	PRE-LIM-EXP _{-REA-REA-MIT-REA-MIT-REA}	10	50%
PRE-MIT-LIM _{-EXP-EXP-REA-MIT}	7	30%	PRE-EXP-LIM _{-MIT}	2	30%
PRE-LIM-MIT _{-REA}	4	30%	PRE-LIM _{-REA-MIT}	2	20%
PRE-LIM-EXP _{-REA-MIT-MIT-REA}	5	30%	PRE-LIM	2	20%
PRE-LIM	5	20%	PRE-MIT-LIM-EXP	1	10%
LIM-MIT	1	10%	MIT-REA-LIM-REA	1	10%
MIT-LIM-REA	1	10%			
Total	27	80%	Total	18	70%

Table 12. Patterns of *Limitation* sequences in social science Discussion and/or closing sections by language.

As shown in Table 12, remarkable differences were observed in the immediate rhetorical context of the *Limitations*. Specifically, more authors in Spanish chose to surround the *Limitation* with an *Explication*, possibly to create a positive image of themselves by displaying their expertise. In contrast, more authors in English drew direct implications to highlight usefulness and reassure the reader about the value of their study. They also mitigated the possible negative impact of the *Limitation* by creating more “good-bad (or the reverse) news” patterns. These were probably face-saving mechanisms used, given their greater tendency to include *Limitation sequences* to ward off the anticipated criticism (Moreno, 2022). Moreno (2015) expressed this balance and inclusion of practical implications in the following stanzas of “The Discussion Section in Essence” Poem (see Supplementary material 2, inc. its Spanish translation).

Remember this was our plan
 In view of what others have done^(D)
 [...]
 Our study has some limitations
 But, please, note its many innovations

It makes a great contribution
As it offers the desired solution

We now show a few implications
We can make some recommendations
Our results could well be applied
But some things need to be clarified
(Moreno, 2015, October)

6. Conclusion

Acknowledging the limitations of one’s own research has been perceived as challenging by many Spanish social scientists when writing RAS in English. This study is, to the best of my knowledge, a first systematic attempt to explore the relationship between social scientists’ rhetorical management of *Limitations* in RA DC sections and the context of publication: Spanish vs. English.

Despite the similarities observed, significant variation has been uncovered in the rhetorical management of these purposes across the two writing cultures to appropriately frame the limitations as acceptable, in support of my initial hypothesis. The Spanish authors’ preferred use of transition markers, as opposed to topic sentences, for announcing a text stage about *Limitations* is a recurrent stylistic feature of academic writing in Spanish (Pérez-Llantada, 2012). Their lower mention of positive self-evaluations for mitigating the bad news may be explained by their extreme observation of the modesty principle (Moreno, 2021). Their preference for explicating the *Limitations* might result from their desire to offer an image of expertise. Their fewer suggestions for future practice to reassure the reader might be related to a lack of policy assessment schemes and calls for research funding that gave emphasis to the transfer of results to society at the time their manuscripts were written (Moreno, 2021). Their recommendations for future research seemed to imply their intention to “amend” the limitations themselves.

Variation was also uncovered in the purposes immediately surrounding the *Limitation*. While in English it was conventional to “sandwich” the bad news with good news, including implications for future practice, in Spanish it was more conventional to surround them with explications, and the only salient

mitigating strategy was their attribution to an external factor. In conclusion, the common communicative purpose of persuading readers that the limitations acknowledged were acceptable was achieved in each writing culture by combining similar rhetorical purposes to the extent and in ways that were considered appropriate and effective in the corresponding contexts.

This exploration has revealed a generic structure to achieve the purpose of *Acknowledging a study limitation without detracting from the study value* that is similar to that created around the “bad news” message in other expert genres (e.g., in academic rejection letters, Swales & Feak, 2012; or in corporate social responsibility reports, Lin, 2020). This allows me to propose the *Acknowledgement of the study limitation(s)* as a rhetorically complex “embedded” part-genre, i.e., “a [part] genre that is included within the framework of another [part] genre” (Auken, 2021, p. 164), both in English and in Spanish. In the present study, the “embedding” part-genre was the RA DC section, which was, in turn, a part-genre of the RA, while the “embedded” part-genre consisted in the generic substructure created around the acknowledgement of, at least, one limitation. Future research could explore variation in authors’ preferences for integrating this part-genre into other purposes (e.g., the restatement or summary of results) at various places in the DC section, or as a separate text stage consisting of cycles of *Limitation sequences* (as in Table 3), an aim which was beyond the scope of this study.

The representativeness of this research and generalizability of its findings is to be empirically verified in the future, especially given its small scale and possible disciplinary variation within the SSCs. Future studies should also add inter-reliability tests to the intra-reliability tests performed here. Despite these limitations, this study offers further support, however preliminary, to the CR hypothesis about English and Spanish academic writing (Moreno, 2010). It has also contributed to a better understanding of the rhetorical management of the “bad news” message (Lehman & DuFrene, 2010) by exploring it in a new context, i.e., academic, and in a complex part-genre, the DC section of an empirical RA, across two languages. It is hoped this study will serve as a model in future research that explores the “local” rhetoric of this and other relevant purposes in other knowledge areas, languages, and genres, while engaging a larger number of authors.

In view of the differences identified across English and Spanish, it is perhaps not surprising that many Spanish social scientists feel uncertain when

acknowledging the limitations of their research in English DC sections. An adaptation of these results could be used in providing critical intercultural awareness training (Baker, 2016) to Spanish social scientists in *Acknowledging limitations* to share their research through English with better chances of success. This training could take the form of a workshop in writing for publication purposes in English including a cross-cultural component that offers a comparative view of the “local” rhetoric of *Limitations* in the DC section (e.g., Moreno & Sachdev, 2019). Drawing on the current findings, this type of participants could be trained in writing topic sentences announcing *Limitations* and in sandwiching the *Limitations* with positive evaluations of their research. They could also be encouraged to identify these rhetorical patterns in two small comparable samples of RA DC sections in English and Spanish in their own fields. Their own confirmation of how these patterns vary according to the type of audience could help them understand the need to accommodate to a different way of *Acknowledging limitations*.

Future studies in intercultural rhetoric research could also use this type of comparative results to explore the negative transfer (Moreno, 2010; Connor, 2011) of Spanish SSC authors’ preferences to frame their own study limitations when writing RA DC sections for publication in English-medium journals. Nevertheless, far from accepting the superiority of Anglo-American rhetorical conventions for framing *Limitations* in RA DC sections, this study recognises the legitimate rhetorical preferences of Spanish social scientists for doing so in Spanish. This language was a well-established vehicle for scientific communication in the SSCs by the time the RAs in this sample were published (2004-2012) (Instituto Cervantes, 2015), so the rhetorical choices made in them must be judged effective for a Spanish-reading audience. As Bhatia noted: “Genre, after all, is a socio-culturally dependent communicative event and is judged effective to the extent that it can ensure pragmatic success in the [...] context in which it is used” (Bhatia, 1993, p. 39).

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Appendices and supplementary material

Appendix 1: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10612/15195>>

Appendix 2: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10612/15194>>

Appendix 3: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10612/15193>>

Appendix 4: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10612/15191>>

Supplementary material 1: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10612/14681>>

Supplementary material 2: <<http://hdl.handle.net/10612/15192>>