

ULLA CONNOR

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**From contrastive to intercultural rhetoric ...
and the benefits of cross-cultural collaboration
in teaching and research**



Introduction

I met Ulla Connor in 2001 when she came to the University of León as one of the plenary speakers of the AESLA Conference. However, it seemed as if I had known her for a long time through her work on *Contrastive Rhetoric*, which had had a tremendous influence on my PhD thesis. When the opportunity came to organize the AESLA conference on the general topic of *Recent Perspectives on Discourse*, her name rapidly came to my mind, since she is one of the best text analysts that could provide applied linguists with a cross-cultural perspective on discourse phenomena. The title of her talk was “Changing Currents in Contrastive Rhetoric: An Argument for a New Research Paradigm”, and her contribution was an immense success. I am really indebted to John Swales for having encouraged her to accept this invitation. No sooner had the conference finished than we realized how close we were in many of our views on how to push the discipline of *Contrastive Rhetoric* forward. It was just a fortunate coincidence that my department had just scheduled me to coordinate a course in “Research Methods for Spanish-English Cross-cultural Studies” within the Quality Doctoral Programme in *Interculturalidad y Traducción (Intercultural studies and Translation)*, which we were running. I needed to invite a prestigious professor in the field and Ulla Connor was just the right person. The moment she accepted my invitation to participate in this course was the beginning of a long collaboration that continues to date, for which I feel really privileged.

The following interview was conducted at the Department of Modern Languages of The University of León in May, 2005, during Ulla Connor’s visit as a participant in our doctoral programme. Actually, it was done in order to be published in the first issue of a Newsletter intended for our postgraduate students. However, I found Ulla Connor’s recent views on *Intercultural Rhetoric* and the other issues she talks about so

interesting that I thought it would be a good idea to share them with a wider audience. Who better than *IBÉRICA* readers, many of whom will have also met her in conferences and/or read her work? I am really grateful both to the President of AELFE, Santiago Posteguillo, and the editor of *Ibérica*, Jordi Piqué, for their support and encouragement to submit this interview to the journal.

Ulla Connor's academic and professional profile

Ulla Connor has been a Professor of English since 1993. She has also been the Director of the Indiana Center for Intercultural Communication since 1997. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, Madison (in Education and English linguistics) in 1978. She now holds a Chair (Barbara E. and Karl R. Zimmer) in Intercultural Communication at Indiana University in Indianapolis, where she has taught since 2003. She is on the editorial board of six refereed scientific journals. She has published seven books and around one hundred journal articles and book chapters. In 1996, her book *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross Cultural Aspects of Second Language Writing* was published. She has been invited as a plenary speaker in to over ninety conferences around the globe. Her major fields of specialization are Second Language Teaching, Contrastive Rhetoric, Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis of Texts, Business Writing, Intercultural Communication, Language of Fund Raising.

Ana Moreno

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The interview

AM: Ulla, you are probably one of the most, if not the most, prestigious and influential researchers in Contrastive and Intercultural Rhetoric, who is helping enormously to make this discipline an academic discipline in its own right. Could you tell us how you became interested in Contrastive Rhetoric?

UC: I became interested in Contrastive Rhetoric when I was an international student getting a PhD in English literature and linguistics at the university in the United States. I found it difficult to write papers in English even though I had written papers in Finnish when I was a graduate student in Finland, and I realised that there were different expectations about writing style, writing patterns and conventions between English and Finnish, things that I

had to learn as an L2 writer; and then I learnt about the interesting work that linguists were doing on Contrastive Rhetoric in the United States, helping international students like myself to be better writers in English through looking at differences and similarities between our first languages and the second language we were learning.

AM: What are the most important questions that this discipline attempts to answer?

UC: The discipline of Contrastive and Intercultural Rhetoric examines similarities and differences in texts and writing, and how writing is taught in different languages and cultures, and then tries to predict issues and problems that writers in second languages, especially in English as a second language, have, based on some of their experiences and understanding that they have about writing.

AM: In what sense can the scientific knowledge contributed by this discipline help society at large?

UC: In today's world, English is spoken all around the world, writing in English is expected of academics all around the world internationally and the motto "publish in English or perish" is really true. I feel that Contrastive Rhetoric has contributed to our understanding about scientific and academic writing across disciplines and across cultures, and has helped numerous academics in Spain, in Germany, in Japan, in Hong Kong, in Finland, all around the world, to write academic papers most successfully in English and get published. Also, in today's global English, in business environment, Contrastive Rhetoric has helped us understand how people communicate, how they correspond, how non-native speakers and native speakers interact to get business done, how they accommodate to each other's speaking styles, etc.

AM: How have your research concerns evolved since you did your first study in this field?

UC: My first studies, as many of the first studies in Contrastive Rhetoric, studied student essay writing or essay examinations, etc. Today, Contrastive Rhetoric –and my own work- looks at academic writing, looks at professional writing, and more and more we are also looking at how writing is produced, not just as actual essays and papers, but we are also looking at how writers go about the writing and how readers

consume texts. Two of the most exciting studies that I have been involved in were: one, when I got started, was an international 14 country study about writing achievement. We collected and analyzed essays written by students in various countries, which was really very exciting. Another more recent study was a study of international business communication in which a Finnish fish broker was analyzed buying and selling fish in tons, communicating in English with buyers and sellers from Germany, Japan, UK, Estonia, etc. It was fascinating to find out how all the non-native speaking interactants negotiated in English and accommodated their writing and speaking styles in order to be understood and get what they wanted.

AM: Who have been the most influential linguists, rhetoricians and researchers from other disciplinary areas in your own conception of the discipline and its object of study?

UC: My own work has been very much influenced by a Finnish text linguist and stylistics Professor, Nils Enkvist, who helped build text linguistics 30-40 years ago into such a respectable discipline. Text linguistics, like discourse analysis, is fairly new in the discipline of linguistics. Looking at discourses rather than words and sentences was a big leap for linguists, and N. R. Enkvist and some other text linguists like T. van Dijk were very influential, encouraging us in linguistics to go beyond words and sentences. We cannot examine and discuss texts if we do not have tools for those analyses. So the work of linguistics such as Enkvist, and van Dijk, has been extremely influential. Then, later on when text linguistics had grown, developed, there have been others such as the linguist John Swales, whose work on genre analysis has been extremely influential. More recently, the text analyses that we are doing in Contrastive Rhetoric have been very much enhanced by the work in Corpus Linguistics. Corpus linguists such as John Sinclair and Douglas Biber have given us powerful tools to design large scale studies with large numbers of texts and, through computerized analyses, have made it possible for us to compare, to develop baselines for writing in Spanish, writing in English, writing academic research papers across disciplines. They have made it possible for us to make generalisations.

AM: You are the director of the ICIC in Indianapolis (USA); how did this centre get started and what are its current research and teaching projects?

UC: ICIC got started as an English for Specific Purposes centre of research and connections of research and practice in teaching English for Specific Purposes at my

institution in the United States and at many United States universities and around the world. English for Specific Purposes teaching has become very relevant. We don't teach English for general purposes. We shouldn't be teaching English for no obvious purposes. We teach English for Specific Purposes. Our centre studies how language is used in the medical field, how language is used in business offices, etc., and then the research findings are translated into language teaching practice. So there is a research-practice connection that is specific for English for Specific Purposes and intercultural communication, and we have research projects ongoing in areas of fundraising and teaching of fundraising, and also in health discourse, studying how doctors and patients talk, studying how doctors write prescriptions or research articles, and in teaching, we help especially international doctors and nurses in the United States to write and communicate more clearly in English, with both native English speaking patients and with patients from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. As you know, the US is inhabited by large numbers of new immigrants with often limited English language skills and different cultural expectations about health practice.

The other component of the ICIC, then, is intercultural communication and training for Americans, not just English for internationals. For communication internationally to go smoothly, both parties need to understand each other, and I am talking about native speakers and internationals. Often it is a burden on internationals or non-native speakers of English to have to try to learn and speak like a native speaker. But more and more we understand that for true intercultural communication to take place, both parties need to accommodate. So my centre also gives workshops for international businesses in town to better communicate with their international partners or clients. So that's the big part of it, not just teaching English to internationals, but also teaching Americans to communicate more effectively with internationals.

AM: Tell us about the conference that you are organizing for this summer. Who might be interested?

UC: It is a conference for researchers and teachers involved in intercultural rhetoric, contrastive rhetoric, intercultural communication, etc. Last year we had participants from all around the world, maybe from some ten different countries talking about their work in intercultural writing and intercultural communication. We expect an

international set of participants again this year. There will be papers dealing with English writing for academic purposes and for professional purposes. Out of 30 accepted proposals, five presentations will be given by researchers from Spain, who will be speaking about their research on academic writing in English and Spanish.

AM: You will be giving a plenary talk about your proposed change from the term Contrastive Rhetoric to Intercultural Rhetoric. Could you summarize the major arguments that you will be putting forward?

UC: Contrastive Rhetoric often forced us to talk about, to examine differences, instead of encouraging us to look at similarities. Often, contrasting potentially makes one language look inferior to another language. Intercultural, on the other hand, underscores the point that communication, whether it is writing or speaking, internationally, requires both parties to be actively involved, where the accommodation to each other's styles goes both ways. Intercultural rhetoric is a good term because it takes us away from pure contrast and possible stereotyping and possible essentializing cultures and languages. It also encourages us to be able to examine communication in action. When we study writing and texts, we also need to understand how those texts are created and how they are consumed. In intercultural rhetoric studies we are also looking at speaking and communication, not just writing. So, studying international business communication in action, for example, fits under intercultural rhetoric.

AM: You have been participating in our doctoral programme for four years now and you have accepted the invitation to come back next year, too. What made you get interested in this collaboration and what has kept you interested?

UC: I was invited to the AESLA conference in 2001. That was organized by Ana Moreno and others from here, and it was an excellent discourse conference, well attended, with a wonderful array of speakers. There I was able to meet with the teachers of the English department, and was honoured to be invited as a teacher of this PhD programme. This is my fourth year teaching here. The students are interested in the subject of research methods in cross-cultural and intercultural studies and are well-trained in Linguistics before they take the course. It has been a pleasure to work with the students and help them identify researchable topics in cross-cultural communication and develop a proposal for a project with all the aspects of a major

study. Students have been excited. It has been a pleasure to meet with so many of the faculty. I have enjoyed the hospitality that has been extended to me, and every year I take up a little bit of Spanish. The most attractive thing about this has been to be able to develop collaborative projects together with Professor Moreno and the students. We had Lorena Suárez as a visitor at my University. Ana Moreno was a visiting researcher in Indianapolis, and Ana and I published a research paper together. Ana Moreno is also an invited speaker at the Conference on Intercultural Rhetoric this summer at my centre's conference in Indianapolis. Ana and I have been able to teach together and collaborate in research. It has been perfect cross-cultural communication. For me, it has been an opportunity to teach intercultural rhetoric and research methods to an audience of excited and knowledgeable doctoral students. It has been rewarding to talk about the issues in the field and take the field forward together with them. That has been a marvellous opportunity because you here in León take cross-cultural studies seriously. And your program of translation, cross-cultural text analysis, English for Specific Purposes, intercultural communication, and corpus linguistics, it has been a perfect place to visit. My own vision for Applied Linguistics concurs with yours. People need to communicate across cultures daily in today's world. When cross-cultural communication happens, there is a potential for misunderstandings. In Intercultural Studies of Communication and Language, our goal is to help people communicate more successfully.

AM: In what sense have both the ICIC in Indianapolis and the Department of Modern Languages in León benefited from this collaboration?

UC: Truly, a very beneficial thing for the ICIC, with Dr. Moreno's visits, with Lorena's visits, and with the encouragements and the interest to view the issue as a hot topic, it is exciting.

AM: Since you started, you have already taught over twenty doctoral students, what is your impression of the progress they made in this module?

UC: Oh, my goodness! Yours students are such hardworking students. It's amazing for me to imagine how diligent they are and how much they learn in forty hours. It's amazing to think that in this course they not only master the material but that they have been able to come up with original researchable projects, which is great. I don't know what other courses are offered in the program, but I think this particular course

is rather innovative because students learn research methods while actually doing research. Also, I have seen as years go past that the English language proficiency level of the students improves and improves, and I don't know why that has happened, whether students go overseas more, or it is that they have more English speaking instructors, friends or they are travelling more.

LS: Do you think that it is helpful for PhD students to work on a smaller project before doing the PhD dissertation?

UC: Personally, here I am relying a lot on experiences in our graduate programme in Indianapolis. I encourage students to find a topic that they are interested in as early as possible in their graduate programme, do a term paper and focus on that project as early as possible and then improve it and work it into a thesis. That has worked for many students, but of course I cannot tell that the same would work for all of them. In our course in León we model for our students a process of empirical research projects. We teach them to find a researchable topic first. That is the most difficult stage, to find an interesting and researchable topic, and we help them to find the right questions to ask; we help them to focus, design the data and methodology to answer those questions. Having experienced once a research project from start to finish – even with a small data set and a limited focus – students can transfer this process to other more ambitious projects, such as dissertations.

LS: To which extent should the PhD student work in isolation or share work with others (supervisors, other PhD students, researchers at conferences, etc.)?

UC: I emphasize the importance of working with others and not working in isolation. To me, research is a collaborative process, as is writing. I encourage students in our courses to comment on each other's ideas, research topics, drafts, revisions, etc. And that same kind of process should be part of the PhD programming of doctoral students. Giving presentations at conferences, getting feedback from others, sharing your writing with others, if you are going to have writing groups with other graduate students, that could be helpful too, and really sharing your work, really going out and talking about your ideas, writing your ideas down and sharing them.

Regarding the relationship between supervisor and student, it varies. But from my personal experiences as an MA thesis mentor for countless students, I need to have

close contact with the students. We need to come up with good models of mentoring. There must be trust, there must be respect and close contact. One thing that I do with my MA students is to set up a rigorous schedule of meetings and deadlines with the students.

LS: So you think deadlines are good when working on a PhD thesis...

UC: Yeah, absolutely!

AM: Is León, and its university, a place you would recommend to other students around the world?

UC: Well, of course!! The city is a fun place, too, with many beautiful historic sites and convenient public transportation. The professors seem very approachable.

AM: Finally, a personal question: How do you manage to attend to so many different domains of university life (teaching, research, service, social events...) and still be such a productive researcher?

UC: Well, I love my work. And in my field of applied linguistics, teaching, research, and service go hand in hand. It's exciting to be able to teach students and share with them my own work and research and try to be a model for my students as a researcher, teacher and program administrator. And I love my friends, good colleagues around the world, including my friends in León. Finally, my family – husband John and son Timo – are extremely supportive of my professional life. In fact, they sometimes even travel with me, including visits to Spain, of course, too.

We would like to express our gratitude to Prof. Ulla Connor for agreeing to be interviewed in the middle of her tight schedule in León, for sharing a bit more of her views and time with us, and for agreeing to submit the interview also to IBÉRICA.