

Intersubjective positioning and thematisation in English and Spanish: a contrastive analysis of letters to the editor

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Abstract

This paper examines how writers of Letters to the editor exploit thematisation to project themselves into their discourse and to engage their audience in the English and the Spanish discourse communities. Using a bilingual comparable corpus of a total of eighty letters (forty English and forty Spanish) for analysis and a bilingual corpus of fifty newspaper reports and fifty editorials from British and Spanish newspapers for cross-genre comparison, we analyse the distribution of Stance and Engagement expressions in thematic position and the preferred thematic types conflating with these expressions in both languages. The analysis reveals a number of specific preferences in the use of those expressions, which sheds light on the features of Letters to the editor in English and Spanish. It also reveals that despite the broadly similar audience and sources of the three newspaper genres, authors structure their interactions very differently, contributing to their rhetorical distinctiveness.

1. Introduction

The genre of Letters to the editor (Letters from now on) has not received the same attention as other journalistic genres by discourse analysts and genre researchers. This is probably due to the fact that the variation in styles, linguistic features and purposes makes the study of Letters as a genre difficult. The existing literature has mainly focused on the argumentative structure of Letters in English (see Ghadessy 1983), or on the argumentative and the specific attitudinal meanings associated with the various components of such structure in two languages (see Pounds 2005). To date, however, there are no studies that examine how the interplay between thematisation and intersubjective positioning in English and Spanish Letters contributes to their generic characterisation.

As part of a larger project aimed at the multidimensional annotation of discourse features in English and Spanish (Lavid 2012), and of current work by the authors of this paper on the characterisation of newspaper genres through the analysis of their thematic selection and progression choices (Lavid et al. 2013; Moratón et al. 2012), in this paper we analyse how writers of English and Spanish Letters exploit thematisation to project themselves into their discourse and to engage their audience in

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the English and the Spanish discourse communities. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a fruitful line of research on contrastive aspects of newspaper discourse, in general, and to the linguistic characterization of the genre of Letters to the editor across languages and cultures, in particular.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 outlines the research questions motivating our work; section 3 outlines the theoretical background and the tools used for the contrastive analysis carried out in this study; section 4 describes the bilingual corpus used for this study; section 5 presents the analysis methodology, and section 6 explains and discusses the results. Finally, section 7 provides a summary and some concluding remarks.

2. Research questions

The research questions investigated in this study are the following:

- (1) Is the genre of Letters to the editor characterized by a similar use of expressions of Stance and Engagement to other newspaper genres, such as news reports or editorials? Or are there genre-specific preferences in this use?
- (2) Is there any language-specific difference in the use of expressions of Stance and Engagement selected as Themes in clause complexes between the English and the Spanish Letters?
- (3) What are the types of Themes (i.e. Interpersonal, Textual, PreHead) conflating with these expressions in the English and the Spanish Letters? Are there any language-specific preferences in these thematic choices?

These research questions were investigated using the theoretical categories presented in section 3 and by means of a qualitative and a quantitative analysis of a bilingual (English-Spanish) comparable corpus of newspaper texts, as described in section 4 below.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical categories used in this study are, on the one hand, the interactional macrofunctions that Hyland classifies under the labels of

Stance and Engagement in his framework for analysing the linguistic resources of intersubjective positioning (Hyland 2005), and, on the other, the model of Theme proposed by J. Lavid in chapter 5 of *Systemic Functional Grammar of Spanish* (see Lavid et al. 2010: 294-370). In the following subsections we will outline the main features of these two models.

3.1. Hyland's model of intersubjective positioning

Hyland's model of intersubjective positioning (Hyland 2005) is one of the best and most comprehensive frameworks for examining the means by which interaction is achieved in written communication. For this reason we have selected it as a useful tool for the analysis of the newspaper genres studied in this paper. This scholar provides an overall typology of the resources that writers employ to express their positions and to connect with readers attending to two main interactional macrofunctions: Stance and Engagement.

Stance is the way writers express a textual 'voice' or a community recognised personality. It basically refers to the ways writers present themselves and convey their judgements, opinions, and commitments, stamping their personal authority onto their arguments or stepping back and disguising their involvement. Stance concerns writer-oriented features of interaction and is comprised of four main elements: *hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mentions*.

Hedges are devices that indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, presenting information as an opinion rather than accredited fact and conveying deference, modesty, or respect for the reader's views. Examples (1a) and (1b) are hedges extracted from the English and the Spanish Letters:

- (1) a. Hedge: [Let us hope that, for once, lessons] really have been learnt by officialdom. (How PCC electors were kept in the dark. Clause 31)
- b. Hedge: [Ojalá se equivoquen], pero mucho me temo que no va a ser así. (Otras políticas sí son posibles. Clause 4)
[I hope/wish they were wrong, but I am afraid this is not going to be the case]

Boosters, on the other hand, are expressions which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience. They function “to stress shared information, group membership, and engagement with readers” (Hyland, 1999). This is illustrated by examples (2a) a and (2b):

- (2) a. Booster: [The key question] is what protocols were in place to ensure that all inquiries were handled with skill and discretion. (How did prankst get through?)
b. Booster: [Hay que estar ciego para no darse cuenta de que] esto nos conduce al abismo y a un punto sin retorno. (Otras políticas sí son posibles. Clause 12)
[One must be blind not to realize that this only lead us to an abyss and a point of no return]

Attitude markers refer to the writer’s affective attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment:

- (3) a. Attitude marker: [A lame effort] has been made by Downing Street to lay responsibility at the door of the media, but then what is ever the fault of politicians? (How PCC electors were kept in the dark. Clause 5)
b. Attitude marker: [El actor, que parece pertenecer a una especie que sufre si está más de 48 horas sin manifestarse o firmar un manifiesto,] no debía soportar saber que toda la sociedad estaba esperando su sentencia sobre el caso Zapata. (Willy Toledo y la muerte de Zapata. Clause 3)
[The actor, who seems to suffer if he spends more than 48 without signing a manifest of rallying, would not stand knowing that the society was waiting for his statement on Zapata case]

Self-mentions refer to the use of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives to present propositional, affective and interpersonal information (Hyland, 2001).

- (4) a. Self-mention: [As I will have worked for 12 straight days by Friday, I] do hope that no one will begrudge me a weekend off.

(Hospital consultants already carry our work commitments at weekends. Clause 3)

b. Self-mention: [Pero mi pregunta] es la siguiente, ¿quiénes son los “morosos”? (¿Quiénes son los morosos. Clause 2)

[But my question is the following: “who are ‘debtors’?”]

Engagement is the way writers relate to their readers with respect to the positions advanced in the text. For Hyland, engagement is “an alignment dimension where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognizing the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations.” (Hyland 2005: 176). Engagement is typically realised by the linguistic features illustrated by the contrastive examples below, and include: *questions*, both real and rhetorical, realised by interrogatives (examples 5a and 5b); *inclusive first person plural, indefinite, and second person pronouns* and items referring to readers (examples 6a and 6b); *directives*, realised by imperatives –as shown in example (7a)– or obligation modals referring to actions of the reader (*must, ought, should, have to, need to*) – as shown in example (7b)–, and adjectival predicates controlling a complement to-clause, directing readers to a particular action; *references to shared knowledge*, as illustrated by examples 8a and 8b; and *asides addressed to the reader*, marked off from the ongoing flow of text, as illustrated by examples (9a) and (9b) below. (In all the examples below, the thematised Engagement or the Stance expression is underlined and the whole Thematic field containing the expression is enclosed in brackets.)

Questions can be both real and rhetorical, and are usually realised by interrogative clauses, as (5a) and (5b) below:

(5) a. Question: [Are we] to believe that he was unaware of such clauses before Gary Walker, the former chief executive of United Lincolnshire Hospitals Trust, spoke out? (The Government must have known about the damaging culture in the National Health Service. Clause 2)

b. Question: [¿Cuántas historias personales de gente sin hogar] escucha esta gente famosa a la semana? (Explotar la desgracia en television. Clause 2)

[How many personal stories of homeless people does this famous people listen to each week?]

- (6) a. Inclusive Pronoun: [But we should] applaud Lord McAlpine for taking action to discourage thoughtless and irresponsible tweeting. (Peer brings twitter to hell. Clause 2)
b. Inclusive Pronoun: [Hasta en estos momentos nos] ha hecho sonreír, con ese extraño don que tenía para ello. (¿Cómo están usteedes?. Clause 5)
[Even now, with his outstanding sense of humor he made us laugh.]
- (7) a. Directive: [Tell] that to my parents as they huddled in the kitchen of their cramped council flat in north London in the 1950s and 1960s. (BBC inspires all classes. Clause 3)
b. Directive: [En lugar de perder el tiempo participando o viendo programas como éste, convendría] emprender acciones de verdadero voluntariado. (Explotar la desgracia en television. Clause 7)
[Instead of wasting your time watching or participating in such programs you'd better start truly volunteering]
- (8) a. Shared Knowledge: [As it is now, we] have a prime example of the law of unintended consequences, which is already resulting in the deterioration of a fine native species and making its long-term survival doubtful. (The ban on hunting is leading to an increase in weak and deased foxes. Clause 6) 1)
b. Shared Knowledge: [Construyen] AVE minoritarios, aeropuertos sin pasajeros, falsifican empresas, muchos ayuntamientos son nidos prevaricadores. (Deberían sentir miedo. Clause 7)
[They build high velocity train for few people; airports without passengers, fake companies, many town halls are transgressors nests.]
- (9) a. Asides: [Insofar as Mahmoud Abbas has embraced the concept of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and went so far in September 2010 as to sit down at

the same table with Israel's prime minister and talk peace] - the Palestinian authority has placed itself beyond the pale in Hamas's eyes. (Terrible cycle attacks in Israel, retaliation and recruitment to Hamas. Clause 10)

b. Asides: [La muerte de Miliki, más que la de una persona — eso también, por supuesto—,] ha significado para mí, y supongo que para millones de jóvenes adultos de mi generación, la muerte de un pedazo de nuestra infancia.

(¿Cómo están usteedes? Clause 2)

[Miliki's death, more than the death of a person -that too, of course- meant to me, and I suppose that to millions of young adults of my generation, the death of a part of our childhood.]

Stance and Engagement, according to Hyland, are “two sides of the same coin” (2005: 176) and there are overlaps between them, since they both contribute to the interpersonal dimension of discourse. However, as Hyland himself acknowledges, “it is possible to identify predominant meanings to compare the rhetorical patterns in different discourse communities” (2005: 177).

3.2. Lavid's model of thematisation

The reason for using Lavid's model of Theme in this study is due to the problems that arise when applying the standard definition of Theme used in the Systemic-Functional literature to the Spanish clause. As explained in Arús, Lavid and Moratón (2012), the standard definition of Theme as “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context” (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:64) makes it impossible to decide which clausal element is the Theme in examples such as (10) or (2) below.

(10) Aterrizó a las siete
[it] landed at seven

(11) Han aterrizado a las siete
[they] have landed at seven

In example (10) is the Process ‘*atterrizó*’ the clausal Theme or is this a clause with unrealized Subject Theme (i.e. “it”)? Since Spanish is a pro-drop language where clause-initial pronominal Subjects can be left out in unmarked processes, one could hypothesize that the unrealized Subject is the Theme, ‘the element which serves as point of departure’, as stated in the standard definition. However, since this element is not actually present, it is quite paradoxical to consider it as the point of departure of the message. If we consider the Process ‘*atterrizó*’ as the Theme, the verbal suffix indicating 3rd person singular and past (-ó-) which is part of the Process suggests that we are in fact including the Subject in the Theme. This would be possible in (10), but it causes problems when applied to examples such as (11), where the 3rd person plural inflectional morpheme (-an) is part of the Finite, and the Finite -in standard SF theory- is not supposed to have thematic status by itself. So, what would be the Theme in (11): only the Finite that carries the inflection referring to the Subject, or should the Theme be extended to the Predicator ‘*atterrizado*’ as well?

In order to deal properly with cases like (10) and (11) above, and also in an attempt to study Theme from a discourse point of view, Lavid et al (2010) proposed to: a) create several layers of analysis; and b) break up the Theme. The most general level of analysis is the Thematic Field, which is defined as the “complex functional zone in clause-initial position serving a variety of clausal and discourse functions.” (Lavid et al., 2010a: 299). The Thematic Field consists of two main components: the Inner Thematic Field (ITF) and the Outer Thematic Field (OTF).

The ITF consists of elements selected from the experiential structure of the clause, and can include two components: the *Thematic Head* and the *PreHead*. The *Thematic Head* is the nuclear part of the Inner Thematic Field with both discourse and clausal functions, and is defined as “the first element with a function in the experiential configuration of the clause which is more central to the unfolding of the text by allowing the tracking of the discourse participants.” (Lavid et al. 2010: 299).

The Thematic Head in Spanish may be explicit or implicit, depending on factors such as the informational status of its referent, its definiteness, etc. An explicit Thematic Head is encoded through independent lexical and grammatical forms, such as Nominal Groups or nominal clauses, as in (12) below:

- (12) Luis envió una carta a Elsa
 ‘Luis sent a letter to Elsa’

Luis	envió una carta a Elsa
Thematic Head	Rhematic field

An implicit Thematic Head is encoded through verbal prefixes or suffixes, depending on the function of the Head in the interpersonal structure of the clause. If the implicit Thematic Head functions as Subject, the realisation is a verbal suffix indicating the person and number of the participant, as in (13) below, where the verbal suffix ‘-ó-’ of the verb form ‘*comprendió*’ encodes the Thematic Head of the clause (underlined in the example):

- (13) Pronto comprendió la verdad
 Soon UNDERSTAND- 3psg Past the truth
 ‘Soon she understood the truth’

Pronto <u>comprendi-</u>	<u>ó</u>	la verdad
PreHead	Thematic Head	
Thematic field		Rhematic field

The *PreHead* refers to those elements preceding the Head, such as Circumstantial elements which do not exhaust the thematic potential of the clause, and which can be encoded as groups, but also as adverbial clauses, as shown in (14) below:

- (14) Además de estas actividades, y con el propósito de fomentar el intercambio científico, el Instituto ha financiado la realización de cursos interuniversitarios.
 ‘Besides these activities and with the purpose of promoting the scientific interchange, the Institute has financed the realisation of interuniversity courses.’

Además de estas actividades	y con el propósito de fomentar el intercambio científico	el Instituto	ha financiado la realización de cursos interuniversitarios
Circumstantial	Circumstantial	Participant	
PreHead		Head	
Inner Thematic Field			Rhematic Field

The PreHead may also be realized by the ‘*se*’ marker (when pronominal), and the non-inflectional part of the verbal form whenever the Subject is implicit, as shown in (15) below:

- (15) *se* halla ahora ante un nuevo ataque cibernético
 ‘it is now facing a new cybernetic attack’

<i>se</i>	hall-	-a	ahora ante un nuevo ataque cibernético
Pron. ‘ <i>se</i> ’	FIND	3psg. Pres. Ind.	
Pre-head		Head	
Thematic field			Rhematic field

The Outer Thematic Field (OTF) is configured by elements which surround and complete the Inner Thematic field. The range of elements which can be selected for the Outer Thematic field is varied, and may consist of textual linkers, binders, and other textual markers, interpersonal elements which express the attitude and the evaluation of the speaker with respect to his/her message, including those expressing modality and polarity, and constructions which are not integrated in the main predication and usually appear separated by a pause, or a comma, from the main clause.

Therefore, the Thematic Field in Lavid’s model allows us to consider “all sort of textual and interpersonal meanings, as well as Circumstances, preceding the first experiential element of nuclear transitivity, as well as

to defer the identification of the thematic climax, and therefore its end, to a lower stage of analysis” (see Arús, Lavid and Moratón 2012: 176). In an unproblematic example such as (16) below, the Thematic Field would be ‘*in spite of the miserable weather, everybody*’:

(16) In spite of the miserable weather, everybody seemed happy.

In spite of the miserable weather,	everybody	seemed happy
PreHead	Head	
Thematic Field		Rhematic field

But in an example starting with textual and interpersonal elements (such as ‘but’ and ‘surprisingly’), in (17), the Thematic Field is longer, as shown in the analysis below:

(17) But, surprisingly, in spite of the miserable weather, everybody seemed happy

But,	surprisingly,	in spite of the miserable weather,	everybody	seemed happy
Textual	Interpersonal	PreHead	Head	
Outer Thematic Field		Inner Thematic Field		
Thematic field				Rhematic Field

4. Corpus data

The data used for this study consists of a bilingual comparable corpus consisting of three subcorpora:

- a) a bilingual corpus of news reports, consisting of fifty texts, evenly divided between English and Spanish;
- b) a bilingual corpus of fifty editorials (twenty-five in English and twenty-five in Spanish);

- c) a bilingual corpus of Letters to the editor (forty English and forty Spanish), compiled from a variety of British and Spanish newspapers. This appears to be a sufficient number to allow for some patterns to emerge. Table 1 below shows the total number of texts and sentences of each subcorpus.

Table 1: Our bilingual corpus of newspaper genres: reports, editorials and letters to the editor

		English	Spanish
News reports	# Words	7725	10540
	# Texts	25	25
	# Sentences	338	354
Editorials	# Words	11522	12518
	# Texts	25	25
	# Sentences	559	449
Letters to the Editor	# Words	6933	7284
	# Texts	40	40
	# Sentences	304	284

All newspapers and editorials were collected from three well-known British and Spanish high-circulation newspapers between 2009 and 2013. English texts were extracted from three online newspapers: *Times online*, *The Independent* and *The Telegraph*. Spanish texts were gathered from the online versions of three high-circulation newspapers such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, and *La Vanguardia*. (see Sources of data at the end of the paper).

The Letters were selected from a variety of British and Spanish newspapers, trying, where possible, to include whole selections from the same issue for the sake of objectivity. The Letters were all written in 2012 and cover a wide range of topics related to events taking place in Britain and Spain at the particular time of writing. The Letters we selected were those in which the writer's main intention was to make complaints or to show their views on various issues (Bronia, 2005).

For the Spanish letters we chose a total of forty from three high circulation dailies: twenty-one from *El País online*, ten from *El Mundo online* and nine from *La Vanguardia online*. For the English letters we also chose forty from three high circulation dailies: twenty from *The Telegraph* and twenty from *The Independent*.

5. Data analysis

In order to address the research questions described in section 2 above, we carried out two main types of analyses:

- (1) Our first analysis was a cross-genre comparison of the types of thematised expressions of intersubjective positioning (Stance or Engagement) used in the genre of Letters to the editor versus those used in the bilingual corpora of News Reports and Editorials. The purpose of this analysis was to discover genre-specific preferences in the selection of these expressions in the three newspaper genres.
- (2) Our second analysis was focused on the bilingual corpus of Letters and was carried out in two main phases:

In the first phase, we carried out a contrastive analysis of the expressions of intersubjective positioning (Stance or Engagement) selected as Themes in clause complexes in the British and the Spanish Letters to discover the language-specific preferences in the choice of these expressions.

In the second phase we analysed the types of Themes (i.e. *Interpersonal, Textual, PreHead, Thematic Head, Predicated Theme and Thematic Equative*) conflating with the expressions of Stance or Engagement in both languages. The purpose of this analysis was to discover which Theme types are preferred by English and by Spanish writers of Letters when expressing Stance or Engagement.

6. Results

In this section we will present the results of the two types of analyses outlined in section 5 above. We will begin with the cross-genre comparison of the thematised expressions of Stance and Engagement in the three subcorpora, i.e., News Reports, Editorials and Letters (section 6.1). Sections 6.2 and 6.3 will focus on the results of the two types of thematic analysis mentioned above.

6.1. Cross-genre comparison: News reports, editorials and letters

Our first finding was that thematised expressions of Stance and Engagement, both in the English and in the Spanish language, clearly

predominate in the genre of Letters when compared with News Reports and Editorials, as shown by the quantitative results in table 2 below:

Table 2: Thematised expressions Stance and Engagement in three newspaper genres

		News Reports		Editorials		Letters to the Editor	
		#	%	#	%	#	%
Eng-lish	Stance	12/338	3.55	128/559	22.90	129/304	42.43
	Engagement	4/338	1.18	98/559	17.53	67/304	22.03
Span-ish	Stance	2/354	0.56	92/449	20.49	138/284	48.59
	Engagement	1/354	0.28	38/449	8.46	83/284	29.22

The frequencies in table 2 above were subject to a statistical analysis with the Chi-square test and the result showed a statistically significant difference with respect to the frequency of use of thematised expressions of Stance and Engagement in the three genres in both languages. This result is not surprising, given the different communicative purposes of each journalistic genre. As explained in a previous study by the authors of this paper on thematisation patterns in the newspaper genres of News Reports and Editorials in English and Spanish, the former “should strive to remain objective and use neutral language while presenting a diversity of opinions, voices, and perspectives of the event, incident, or issue under discussion” (Lavid et al. 2013: 263). News reporters must be ‘impartial’ and ‘objective’ and avoid – or at least minimize – showing their interpersonal involvement in the text’s construction. Thus, for example, they “avoid including explicit value judgments about the participants and the events in the news reports or confine contentious claims about causes and effects to the quotations of external sources”. The low frequency of expressions of Stance and Engagement in News Reports reflects the communicative purpose of this genre. News reporters do not seek to engage with their readers explicitly and avoid any trace of interpersonal involvement and author’s presence in their reports.

Editorials, by contrast, are opinion articles with the important communicative function of contributing to the formulation of certain ‘preferred’ viewpoints about the world. Their function is “to offer newspaper readers a distinctive and sometimes authoritative voice that speaks to the public directly about matters of public importance” (Wang

2008: 170). The higher proportion of expressions of Stance revealed by our analysis is a linguistic reflection of this generic feature in both languages (22.90% in English and 20.49 % in Spanish), in comparison with the much lower one found in News reports (3.55% in English and 0.56% in Spanish).

Letters to the editor, and more specifically, those written by individual readers, are subjective and often passionate, carrying a personal tone and generally used for expressing personal views on certain issues, making complaints, making suggestions and recommendations, and calling for a change or remedial actions. As their communicative purpose is mainly to evaluate and to recommend action, expressions of Stance and Engagement predominate in this newspaper genre, as reflected by the high proportion found both in the English and in the Spanish Letters. (42.43 % for Stance and 22.03 % for Engagement in the English letters and 48.59 % and 29.22% in the Spanish ones, respectively).

6.2. Crosslinguistic comparison: Stance and engagement in English and Spanish letters

With respect to the analysis of expressions of intersubjective positioning (Stance and Engagement) selected as Themes in clause complexes in English and Spanish Letters, it was found that these expressions are more frequent in the Spanish letters than in the English ones, with a statistically significant difference between both languages ($P > 0.0001$), as shown in table 3 below.

Table 3: Thematised expressions of S& E in English and Spanish Letters

	English	Spanish
S&E expressions in thematic position	196	219
Total # cl. complexes	304	284

This result suggests that Spanish writers use thematisation as a preferred textual strategy for expressing intersubjective positioning, while English writers do not use this strategy so often. This finding confirms the tendency discovered by Biber and Finegan (1989: 103-118) in a corpus

of spoken and written registers of English, where they came to the conclusion that “the expression of stance [affective or evidential] is a ‘marked’ choice in English and that the prevailing norm is to leave stance lexically and grammatically unmarked, thus putting the burden on the addressees to infer a speaker’s stance” (1989: 103-118). In addition, they suggest that, in English, “stance” may be more often “integrated into text rather than overtly marked” and that there may be “a variety of secondary stance markers” that “might show that stance is marked in some fashion and to some extent in many texts...labelled ‘faceless’”, that is devoid of attitudinal meaning.

6.2.1. Contrastive analysis of stance

When looking at the frequencies and proportions of the different types of Stance and Engagement in the English and the Spanish letters, the analysis revealed that English writers use a variety of expressions of Stance in their Letters, but with a statistically significant predominance of first person pronouns and possessive adjectives, i.e., those classified as *self-mention* by Hyland (2005), as shown in table 4 below:

Table 4: Stance expressions in English and Spanish Letters to the Editor in Thematic Position

Stance	English		Spanish	
Hedges	22	17.05%	23	16.91%
Boosters	27	21.01%	43	31.62%
Attitude markers	31	24.03%	30	22.06%
Self-mention	49	37.98%	40	29.41%
Total Stance	129	100%	137	100%

This selection indicates a strong desire on the part of the English writers to both strongly identify themselves with a particular argument and to

gain credit for their perspective. Some illustrative examples are provided below:

- (18) Self-mention: [I] could not disagree more with Pete Barrett (letter, 17 November), who states that the BBC exists to cater for “middle-class culture” and keeps the “chattering classes” informed. (BBC inspires all classes. Clause 1)
- (19) Self-mention: [We] believe that the Government does not have a mandate to redefine marriage.
(The Government has no mandate to redefine the meaning of marriage. Clause 8)
- (20) Self-mention: [My research] has shown that 148 of the Department for Work and Pensions' helplines – or 87 per cent – are 0845. (Poor penalised for phoning HMRC. Clause 3)

In the Spanish Letters, *boosters* (31.62%) and *self-mention* expressions (29.41%) predominate as thematic choices over the other two types, indicating that the Spanish writers feel a strong involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience. Some illustrative examples of *boosters* are provided below:

- (21) Booster: [Hay que estar ciego para no darse cuenta de que] esto nos conduce al abismo y a un punto sin retorno. (Otras políticas sí son posibles. Clause 12)
[One must be blind not to realize that this only lead us to an abyss and a point of no return]
- (22) Booster: [Lo importante ahora] es sacar el país adelante, no dejar que el talento joven se vaya, conseguir crear puestos de trabajo. (La preocupación del ciudadano catalán. Clause 3)
[The important thing now is to push the country forward, not letting young talent go and create jobs]

6.2.2. *Contrastive analysis of engagement*

The preferred thematised expression of Engagement in the English letters is *shared knowledge* (38.81%), followed by ‘inclusive pronouns’ (29.85%). The use of *shared knowledge* is a strategy through which writers move the focus of the discourse away from the writer to shape the role of the reader, as shown in table 5 below:

Table 5: Engagement expressions in English and Spanish Letters to the Editor

Engagement	English		Spanish	
Questions	10	14.93%	16	19.28%
Inclusive pronouns	20	29.85%	24	28.92%
Directives	11	16.42%	18	21.69%
Shared knowledge	26	38.81%	23	27.71%
Asides	0	0.00%	2	2.41%%
Total Engagement	67	100%	83	100%

Some illustrative examples are provided in (23) and (24) below:

(23) Shared knowledge: [What distinguishes mankind now from what we were then, for good or ill,] is science and technology. (Intellectual vacuum. Clause 3)

(24) Shared knowledge: [The media and general public’s reaction to the death of nurse Jacintha Saldanha] is predictable and equally deplorable. (Bullies and victims in the hoax call row. Clause 2)

In the Spanish letters, by contrast, *inclusive pronouns* predominate, indicating a stronger emphasis on binding writer and reader together, as shown in Table 5 above and illustrated by examples (25) and (26) below:

- (25) Inclusive Pronoun: [¿Dónde iremos, los pacientes,] para encontrar la misma atención, la misma relación de confianza — tan importante como la medicación para nuestra salud—, la misma competencia y trato cariñoso de sus enfermeras y enfermeros y de todo el personal, aunque muchos estén en situación precaria? (Un cierre incomprensible. Clause 4)
 [Where are we, the patients, going to go now to find the same attention, the same relationship of trust,- as important as medicine for our health – the same competence and warmth of the nurses and the rest of staff even when some are in a very difficult economic situation?]
- (26) Inclusive pronouns: [Porque no olvidemos] que también hay escuelas de tortura. (El frustrado puede matar. Clause 3)
 [Because, we do not have to forget that there are also schools of torture.]

6.3. Thematic comparison

As explained above, the purpose of this analysis was to discover which Themes are preferred by English and by Spanish writers of Letters when expressing Stance (S) or Engagement (E). This is interesting from the thematic point of view since it reveals the language-specific preferences in the choice of different types of Themes, which in the model of thematisation used in this study can be subdivided into: *Interpersonal Themes* (IT), *Textual Themes* (TT), *PreHeads* (PH), *Thematic heads* (TH), *Predicated Themes* (PT), and *Thematic Equatives* (TE), as explained in section 3 above.

When analyzing the confluences of Stance and Engagement expressions and specific theme types together in both languages, a global picture emerges. First, when looking at the overall frequencies of confluences between thematic types and expressions of Stance and Engagement, the Thematic Head (TH) stands out as the predominant one, as shown in table 6 in the Appendix.

In English, Stance and Engagement expressions conflate in 64.28% of the cases with the Thematic Head, whereas they only conflate with PreHead in 25% of the cases and with Interpersonal Themes in 9.7% of the cases, with only 1.02% of the cases conflating with Thematic

Equatives (TE) and no occurrence conflating with Predicated Themes (PT). These differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), and reflect the fact that Thematic Heads are central thematic types within the structure of the Thematic Field in English, and, therefore, they attract a high number of realizations of Stance and Engagement.

In Spanish a similar tendency can be observed: Thematic Heads attract 50.67% of the expressions of Stance and Engagement, while the other types attract smaller numbers: PreHeads (32.58%), Interpersonal Themes (16.74%), and no occurrences as TE and PTs.

However, when looking at the proportion of the confluences between thematic types and expressions of Stance and Engagement in both languages, a different picture emerges, as shown in table 7 in the Appendix.

First, the preferred Theme type for the expressions of Stance and Engagement in both languages is the Interpersonal Theme, since it always conflates with expressions of intersubjective positioning (100% of the cases). The second most preferred Theme type is the Pre-Head element in both English (61.52%) and in Spanish (53.73%). In comparison with the other Theme Types, the Thematic Head does not emerge as the preferred type for the expression of Stance and Engagement in either language. In English it takes up 42.42 % of the confluences vs. 57.58% of the cases where Thematic Heads do not express Stance and/or Engagement but are grammatical Subjects with no trace of intersubjective meaning in them. A similar tendency can be observed in the Spanish letters where Stance and Engagement appear only in 41% of the Thematic heads, whereas 58% do not express these meanings. This indicates that even though Thematic Heads are the most frequent types of Themes in our corpus, most of them they do not convey intersubjective positioning.

A more detailed account of these tendencies is provided in the subsections below. For the sake of clarity we will divide the results of Stance and Engagement into two separate subsections:

6.3.1. Stance and thematic types

Table 8 below shows the confluences between different subtypes of Stance and thematic types in English and Spanish. The most frequent subtype of Stance occurring in English is *self-mention* (49 out of 129 in

English), and both *boosters* (43 out of 137) and *self-mention* (40 out of 137) in Spanish.

Table 8: Types of Stance in Thematic Elements in English and Spanish (raw frequencies)

Stance types	English				Spanish			
	Interp Theme	Pre-Head	Head	Total	Interp Theme	Pre-Head	Head	Total
Hedges	1	19	2	22	7	15	1	23
Boosters	8	9	10	27	15	18	10	43
Attitude markers	4	2	25	31	6	10	14	30
Self mention	0	9	40	49	0	5	35	40
Total Stance	13	39	77	129	28	48	60	137

The most typical confluents are the following:

- *Self-mention* expressions typically conflate with Thematic Head in both languages (40 out of 77 in English and 35 out of 60 in Spanish), with a statistically significant difference with respect to the other types ($p < 0.001$). Stance expressions of *self-mention* include first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives, as illustrated by the English (27a) and Spanish (27b) examples below:

- (27)a. TH/Self-mention: [I] was a poll clerk at the police commissioner election in Nottinghamshire and witnessed the low turnout; it meant a much easier day for me than some recent elections, but it was a disappointing day for democracy. (A disappointing day for democracy. Clause 1)
- (27)b. TH/Self-mention: [Pero mi pregunta] es la siguiente, ¿quiénes son los “morosos”? (Quiénes son los morosos. Clause 1)
[But my question is the following: who are the debtors?]

This result is not surprising: Stance expressions of *self-mention* are the most direct way in which writers stamp their personal authority onto

their arguments, and it is natural that they choose to do so using Thematic Heads when structuring their messages. As explained by J. Lavid:

The Thematic head is the nuclear part of the Inner Thematic Field with both discourse and clausal functions. We define the Thematic Head as the “first element with a function in the experiential configuration of the clause which is more central to the unfolding of the text by allowing the tracking of the discourse participants.”

(Lavid et al. 2010: 299)

Given the fact that the Thematic Heads allow the tracking of discourse participants, it is a natural slot for expressions of *self-mention*.

- *Boosters* typically conflate with Interpersonal Themes and Pre-Head taken together in both languages (17 out of 27 in English and 33 out of 43 in Spanish). *Boosters* are typically expressed by items such as ‘clearly’, ‘obviously’ and similar adverbs which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience. Their conflation with Interpersonal Themes and PreHead elements is, therefore, quite natural, since they coincide with typical meanings expressed by these Themes, as shown by examples (28a) and (28b) below:

(28) a. IT/Booster: [Surely] canon law does not transcend the law of the land. (Law on women bishop. Clause 5)

(28) b. IT/Booster: [Hay que estar ciego para no darse cuenta de que] esto nos conduce al abismo y a un punto sin retorno. (Otras políticas sí son posibles. Clause 12)
[One must be blind not to realize that this only lead us to an abyss and to a point of no return]

- *Hedges* typically conflate with Pre-Head thematic elements in both languages (19 out of 22 in English, and 15 out of 23 in Spanish). *Hedges* are realised by words like ‘possibly’, ‘might’ and ‘perhaps’, that indicate the writer’s decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition, allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than accredited fact (Hyland 2001). Their more frequent conflation with PreHead thematic elements can be explained by the the fact that they tend to appear in first-initial position in both languages, occupying the slot

which immediately precedes the Thematic Head, as shown by examples (29a) and (29b) below:

- (29) a. PH/Hedge: [Perhaps] James Dyson was a little harsh towards poets; poetry, literature, music and paintings all feed our spirit. (Intellectual vacuum. Clause 1)
- (29) b. PH/Hedge: [Posiblemente] los “morosos” de los que estas noticias hablan sean personas sin empleo debido a que nuestros políticos están más preocupados en hacer frente al déficit que en crear puestos de trabajo. (Quien son los morosos. Clause 4)
[Possibly the “debtors” the news talks about, are jobless because our politicians are more concerned to tackle the deficit than in creating jobs]

6.3.2. Engagement and thematic types

When looking at the subtypes of Engagement conflating with thematic types, the most frequent subtypes in both languages are ‘*shared knowledge*’ and ‘*inclusive pronouns*’, with a statistically-significant difference with respect to the other types ($p < 0.001$). This is shown in table 9 below:

Table 9: Distribution of types of Engagement in Thematic elements in English and Spanish

Engage-ment	English				Spanish			
	Interp Theme	Pre-head	Head	Tot.	Interp theme	Pre-head	Head	Tot.
Questions	0	3	7	10	0	10	6	16
Inclusive pronouns	0	0	20	20	0	3	21	24
Directives	5	1	5	11	4	2	12	18
Shared knowledge	1	6	19	26	2	10	11	23
Asides	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total Engagement	6	10	51	67	6	25	52	83

The most typical confluents are the following:

- *Inclusive pronouns* typically conflate with Thematic Heads in English and Spanish Letters. These include first person plural pronouns, i.e., inclusive *we*, indefinite pronouns, i.e., *one*, and second person pronouns, i.e. *you* and *your*. According to Hyland (2001), the rhetorical purposes of these appeals to the reader are basically two: a) to solicit solidarity from the reader; b) to craft reader agreement. The use of *inclusive pronouns* is the way through which readers are most explicitly brought into the text as discourse participants, and the preferred thematic type selected is the Thematic Head. More specifically, inclusive ‘we’ was found to be the most frequent reader device in our corpus and is widely used to express peer solidarity and membership, as illustrated by examples (2a) for English and (2b) for Spanish above, reproduced here as (30a) and (30b) for convenience:

- (30)a. TH/Inclusive pronoun: [But we] should applaud Lord McAlpine for taking action to discourage thoughtless and irresponsible tweeting. (Peer brings twitter to hell. Clause 1)

- (30)b. TH/Inclusive pronoun: [Sin embargo, nuestro Gobierno] no envía telegramas de condolencia a los países en los que se producen estas muertes, sino que reduce aún más la poca ayuda que se les presta. (Matanza de inocentes. Clause 4)
[However, our government does not send telegrams of condolence to the countries in which these deaths occur, but further reduces the little help they are given.]

- *Shared knowledge* typically conflates with Thematic Head in English (19 out of 26 occurrences) and both with Thematic Head and PreHead in Spanish, as illustrated by examples (31a) and (31b) below. According to Hyland “appeals to shared knowledge seek to position readers within apparently naturalized boundaries of disciplinary understandings ” (2005:184), and they are typically realised by explicit markers where readers are asked to recognize something as familiar or accepted or by explicit calls asking readers to identify with particular views. “In doing so, writers are actually constructing readers by presupposing that they hold such beliefs, assigning to them a role in creating the argument, acknowledging their contribution while moving the focus of the discourse away from the writer to shape the role of the reader” (Hyland 2005: *ibídem*)

- (31)a. TH/Shared knowledge: [There] is a danger of over-treatment, which will be profitable for the pharmaceutical industry, but of no benefit to patients. (Dementia screening. Clause 3)

- (31)b. PH and TH/ Shared knowledge: [Hasta entonces, no se podía] hipotecar un bien si uno no era propietario del mismo. (Contra la amnesia. Clause 2)
[Until then, you could not mortgage a well if you did not own it]

6. Summary and concluding remarks

The analyses carried out to investigate the research questions which motivate this study have shed light on a number of thematic and intersubjective choices made by writers of Letters to the editor in English and Spanish that can contribute to the generic characterization of this newspaper genre in the British and the Spanish discourse communities.

When comparing the frequencies of thematised expressions of Stance and Engagement in the Letters with those occurring in News Reports and Editorials, the analysis revealed a statistically significant preponderance of these expressions in Letters versus the other two newspaper genres. In our view, this preponderance is a reflection of the communicative purpose of the genre of Letters in both discourse communities: Letters tend to be subjective and often passionate and the ones selected for our study were used by their writers to express personal views, make complaints, suggestions and recommendations. It is, therefore, not surprising that intersubjective expressions abound in this genre, independently from the language community where they are published.

However, when inspecting the language-specific choices in the composition of these Letters, we find that the Spanish ones present a statistically significant preponderance of thematised Stance and Engagement expressions versus the English ones ($p < 0.0005$). This result suggests that, in the main, the Spanish Letters display a higher presence and involvement of their writers and more connection to their readers than what is found in the English Letters. In fact, it has been argued that English writers typically favour the 'informative' function (including definition, classification, comparison, contrast, analysis and synthesis) that is commonly associated with scientific discourse and leave less room for self-expression. English Letters seem to reflect this preference for implicit formulations and the strong reliance on factual evidence which characterises the empirical approach to reasoning typical of the English strong scientific tradition.

Spanish Letters, by contrast, are more explicit and personal, with a higher number of expressions of Stance and Engagement, such as *boosters*, which allow writers to express their certainty in what they say and to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience. The frequent use of *inclusive pronouns* in the Spanish Letters also reflects the fact that the Spanish writers place a lot of emphasis on binding writer and reader together, whereas the English writers prefer to use *appeals to shared knowledge* as a strategy through which writers move the focus of the discourse away from the writer to shape the role of the reader.

As to the types of Themes selected for the expression of intersubjective positioning, the analysis revealed that Interpersonal Themes are the preferred type, since in both languages all the

Interpersonal Themes express Stance and Engagement. However, when looking at the overall frequencies, it was found that Thematic Heads attract the highest number of expressions of intersubjective positioning, which can be explained by the fact that they are central thematic types within the structure of the Thematic Field in both languages.

We bring this paper to an end in the belief that the results presented shed new light on the generic characterization of Letters to the editor in the British and the Spanish discourse communities. As we hope to have shown with our analysis, Stance and Engagement are important elements which help shape Letters as a highly intersubjective genre, and thematisation emerges as a useful textual strategy that writers of Letters exploit to position themselves and to engage their audiences. The linguistic differences found between the British and the Spanish Letters emerge as a reflection of the different cultural practices where the Letters are produced, with a more frequent and more explicit presence of the writer and reader involvement in the Spanish discourse community.

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Sources of material

English texts were extracted from three online national newspapers:
Times online (<http://www.timesonline.co.uk>),
The Independent (<http://www.independent.co.uk/>)
The Telegraph (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/>).

Spanish texts were extracted from the online versions of the following national newspapers:

El País (<http://elpais.com/>),

El Mundo (<http://www.elmundo.es/>)

La Vanguardia (<http://www.lavanguardia.com/>).

Appendix

Table 6: Thematic types conflating with S& E in English and Spanish

Types	English						Spanish					
	IT	Pre-Head	Head	TE	PT	Total	IT	Pre-Head	Head	TE	PT	Total
S&E	19	49	126	2	0	196	37	72	112	0	0	221
S&E	9,7%	25%	64,28%	1,02%	0%	100%	16,74%	32,58%	50,67%	0%	0%	100%

Table 7. Proportion of confluences between Theme types and expressions of S & E in English and Spanish

Types	English						Spanish					
	IT	Pre-Head	Head	TE	PT	Total	IT	Pre-Head	Head	TE	PT	Total
% of S&E	100	61.52	42.42	100	0	64.47	100	53.73	41.94	0	0	77.81
% Other	0	38.48	57.58	0	0	35.53	0	46.27	58.06	0	0	22.19