Structural Elements in English and Lithuanian Art Reviews

Jurgita Sriubaitė
Vilnius Gediminas Technical University Engineering Lyceum, Antakalnio St. 120, Vilnius, LT-10200, Lithuania, sriubaite@gmail.com

Abstract. With a growing amount of artworks that reach the audience every day, reviews become a useful instrument in making a choice of what deserves our attention. The review is considered to be a type of discourse that, first and foremost, includes description, information and evaluation of the item under discussion. It is expected to present the reviewed work, to analyze and evaluate it following such criteria as the structure, authenticity, originality, artistic advantages and disadvantages. Different cultures have different traditions of writing reviews, and this paper looks at how English and Lithuanian art reviewers construct their texts, what elements are used in the structure of reviews in these two languages. The corpus of the research data contains art reviews on films and theatre performances of the early 1970s. Qualitative analysis is the key method in this work.

Keywords: English art reviews, Lithuanian art reviews, elements of art reviews, the structure, traditions of writing a review.

Introduction

Supply of art pieces grows every day, and the audience that they are meant for has to decide what to choose according to their own criteria: the field of interests, the quality, the purpose, to mention but a few. Art reviews is a great help in making that choice.

The tradition of writing reviews appears to be different in various cultures. The differences may be related both to linguistic issues and to cultural ones. Cross-cultural issues may also appear due to the field of the object being reviewed. Since the modern society has become as mobile as it has never been before, knowing other cultures and their traditions is a very important point; it is part of intercultural literacy and a useful
competence for any member of the contemporary society. Being aware of similarities, differences and particularities of certain intercultural issues improves comprehension and makes communication more efficient.

There have been not so many contrastive researches of English and Lithuanian reviews done in this field yet. Most of them analyze reviews of literary works, fiction (Keblys & Kuizinienė, 2011; Valienė, 2012, 2016; etc.), some are interested in academic (book) reviews (Marcinkevičienė, 2006; Marcinkevičienė & Petrauskaitė, 2002; Ryvitytė, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2008) or economic book reviews (Piščikienė & Ryvitytė, 2013). Petrikas’ (2006, 2007) analysis seems to be closest in the field that he looks into reviews of theatre performances. However, he focuses only on reviews written in Lithuanian and only from the period between 1904 and 1914, i.e. the beginning of the 20th century. The author of this article is not familiar with any research that deals with English and Lithuanian art reviews on films and theatre performances with the focus on their elements; therefore, this analysis will expand the knowledge on reviews as a separate genre in the two above-mentioned languages.

The article aims to describe various elements of English and Lithuanian art reviews in their structure. The following objectives are set to achieve the aim: (1) to identify elements of English and Lithuanian art reviews and then describe the structure of reviews; (2) to find similarities and differences of art reviews in English and Lithuanian in relation to elements of their structure.

This research is part of a larger study that is a diachronic one and analyzes art reviews from the early 1970s and the late 2000s. The data of this work in particular comprise 24 art reviews in English and Lithuanian in total that were randomly taken from the supplement Review of the English periodical The Observer and from the Lithuanian periodical Literatūra ir menas (Literature and Art) of the years 1970–1975. They discuss such works of art as films and theatre performances.

**The Art Review as a Genre**

In linguistics, “genres are abstract, socially recognized ways of using language” (Hyland, 2002, 114). Bakhtin argues that, although genres show certain regularities and typification, their forms are “much more flexible, plastic and free” as compared to linguistic patterns (Bakhtin, 1986, 79). Valle (1997, 2004) shares the view that genres should be treated as dynamic and socially situated units. Miller (1984) proved that genre analysis should be extended to types of discourse adding that “a rhetorically sound definition of genre must be centred not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish” (Miller, 1984, 151). Following Frow (2006), genre is not a characteristic of the text but rather a category that the text is attributed to and which can change depending on any text. Martin’s (1997) definition of genre
describes it as a staged, goal-oriented social process that comprises purposeful, interactive and sequential characteristics of various genres and stresses the relation between the language and the context. For Swales (1990), genre consists of a group of structured communicative events that are used by certain discourse communities that have broad common communicative purposes. In this paper, genre is treated as an interactive, goal-oriented type of discourse with its regularities and at the same time flexibility depending on the context and the society it is used by.

The term ‘review’ comes from the Latin word *recensio* and means ‘evaluation, assessment’. There are a number of definitions of a review in general. Following Žurnalistikos enciklopedija (1997), a classic review presents the work, analyses and evaluates it paying attention to the structure of the work, its authenticity and originality, artistic advantages and disadvantages. It is particularly characterized by critical or explanatory evaluation of the work being reviewed. Marcinkevičienė (2008) attributes reviews to the group of analytical genres that are supposed to explain, to systemize, to generalize and to evaluate. Ryvityte defined the review as “a discourse type which basically involves description, information and evaluation” (Ryvitytė, 2008, 38). Cuddon (1992) defined a review as a critical genre on fiction, cinema, music or any other form of art. Although Weitz, the late aesthetician, denied the possibility of defining art, he did present a definition of criticism / a review saying that it is “a form of studied discourse about works of art. It is a use of language designed to facilitate and enrich the understanding of art” (Weitz, 1964, vii). His four distinguished categories, namely, description, interpretation, evaluation, and theory, have successfully been tested by time and, in one way or another, can be found in most definitions and / or functions of reviews. Barrett (2000) expanded his definition maintaining that criticism / reviews aim to increase appreciation and understanding of art as well as its role in the society. Kuspit (1991) states that “it’s part of the critic’s task, perhaps his most difficult task, to try to articulate the effects that the work of art induces in us, these very complicated subjective states” (Kuspit, 1991, 19). Overall, reviews aim at evaluating, informing, commenting, interpreting, making statements, giving arguments, drawing conclusions, and producing (or not) recommendations of the works reviewed. These functions ascribed to the review hold good for any reviews no matter what object or work they deal with. However, certain differences seem to appear depending on the subtype of the review as well as the traditions that the relevant society possesses.

This particular research analyzes elements how art reviews in English and Lithuanian are constructed and organized following an adapted model of structural elements of Swales (1990). They may include the introduction and outlining of the work under review, highlighting its certain elements, and providing the final evaluation, to put it broadly. Shifting between them is caused by the reasons outside the text since reviewers are supposed to take the social context into consideration. According to Barrett (1994), all artworks at least partially reflect the world that they emerge in.
Research Methodology

For the research data, two art reviews in English and Lithuanian were randomly taken from the aforementioned newspapers of each year of the period under analysis. The analyzed English reviews were written by 7 authors, whereas the Lithuanian ones were prepared by 8 reviewers. The length of the reviews in words was calculated manually since there are no online versions of the newspapers of the period. The average length of Lithuanian art reviews is 1022 words with the shortest review containing 420 words, whereas the longest one had 1585 words. The situation with English art reviews is similar – the average length of English art reviews is 858 words. The shortest English art review contained 526 words and the longest one was composed of 1172 words. Such a ratio of the average length of the reviews allowed us to compare and contrast them without violating research requirements.

Identification of structural elements of art reviews was the first step of the research. Here structural elements were understood as logical units in terms of reviewing pieces of art following certain criteria. Having identified structural elements, the structures of the reviews in English and Lithuanian were described. The descriptive method was applied to achieve the aim set. However, qualitative analysis prevailed in this work since it was used for identification of elements of English and Lithuanian art reviews in their structure as well as for comparison and contrast of the findings in English and Lithuanian.

Research Findings

First, English art reviews of the early 1970s were analyzed. The qualitative analysis has revealed that English reviewers tend to start either with a citation of the work being reviewed or with some personal details or aspirations as in the first two following extracts below:

(1) “I’m certain there’s a Fanny you seldom get to see...”
   (Fanny by Limelight, 23.03.75)

(2) I told myself it was duty as well as pleasure to see Peter Nicholson’s ‘Forget-Me-Not Lane’ again on its arrival from Greenwich in the West End, at the Apollo. I’d said it needed cutting and cut it had been, by 25 minutes. I must see if I’d been right, mustn’t I? But really I wanted to take a second look not only at the play but at my enjoyment of it.
   (The Making of a Man, 02.05.71)
In Extract (2), the reviewer tells the potential audience his previous experience of watching the theatre performance and his personal feelings as well as expectations for a second try. He even formulates a question that further attracts the readers’ attention to his personal details as if creating a closer connection with them from the very beginning.

Another way of beginning a review in the English tradition is starting from much further, thus creating solid background for the review-analysis (see Extract 3):

(3) An unexpected side effect of Samuel Beckett’s contribution to the modern stage is that he has made most other playwrights seem long-winded. While Beckett’s plays approach closer and closer to the condition of silence, the works of many of his contemporaries seem like violations of that silence, having been filled with noise and chatter on the principle that the less there is to say, the longer it should take to say it. One of the peculiar conditions of modern life is that it stimulates either very long theatrical statements or very short ones (...). I am going to stick my neck out and declare that unless the playwright is motivated by a profound emotional conviction or an original idea, all new plays ought to be brief. (...)

I mention this because the two new fringe offerings under review this week – Tom Gallacher’s ‘Revival’ and Terence Greer’s ‘Ripper’ – though different in every other way, share the common fault of being badly planned and overwritten. (Violations of Silence, 28.01.73)

In Extract (3), the reviewer starts with the playwright’s contribution to the modern theatre and makes a comparison with other playwrights. He then goes on to speak about the length of modern plays saying that they should not be lengthy and emphasizing that this is his personal opinion. The same review is a typical example of English art reviews in the way that, as the last paragraph of Extract (3) demonstrates, it is very common to discuss and evaluate two works of art in the same review even though they are not closely connected, English reviewers find at least one aspect to put them in one piece of writing. Extract (4) is another illustration of such an element:

(4) ‘The Danny La Rue Show’ (Prince of Wales) is a splashier enterprise than ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ (Palladium). Neither show is remarkable for imaginative décor, but Berkeley Sutcliffe’s creations at the Prince of Wales are more solidly lavish than Tod Kingman’s for the Palladium panto. The latter, though, scores valuable points with its all too brief introduction of a large green fire-breathing dragon. (Drag Gag, 23.12.73)
If there is some comparison with other works (not being reviewed there), then it is usually a short one like a possible reference to some previous reviews and a reminder to the audience (see Example (5) below):

(5) Barton, it seems, sees ‘The Tempest’ as Shakespeare’s answer to ‘King Lear’, as ‘The Winter’s Tale’ is his answer to ‘Othello’.

(*Waiting for the Music, 18.10.70*)

English reviewers try to avoid pure retelling of the plot and rather analyze and evaluate characters providing some details of the plot. The readers will not find a synopsis, only certain aspects highlighted and discussed. Usually, English reviewers may describe the setting (either a social or a physical one, or both), and it also comes as one of the points for evaluation. Extract (6) serves as an illustration of this:

(6) ‘A New Kind of Communion – For Freaks, Prophets and Witches’, is certainly a nightmare, and perhaps not entirely in the way Miss Arden intended. It’s set in ward One of a lunatic asylum, over which the director of the company presides as matron and hockey umpire, blowing her whistle to terminate the diverse segments of the production. She introduces a new patient, who has had three abortions, developed hysterical blindness and believes revolutions are exploding in her soul, to the other inmates.

(*Ladies in a Lather, 09.05.71*)

Extract (6) first presents a general evaluation (it is a nightmare, but not in the way it was intended to be) and then the physical setting (a ward in a lunatic asylum) and the characters. In this way the potential audience is provided with general information of the performance and is intrigued for the coming events. Although the general evaluation looks negative, the readers of the review may be made to wait for other elements.

Other points for description and evaluation include the scenography, the performance – the work and talent of the actors, the author’s / director’s decisions on the idea, the atmosphere, the location itself (for the theatre), the interpretation of the work, the final scene, to mention but a few:

(7) Caesar himself appears wearing a top hat and clutching a Blue book, for all the world like the municipal statue of some Victorian educational reformer: only the pigeon seems to be missing. (…)

Again, this achieves considerable balletic beauty. But it is not the beauty of ‘Julius Caesar’.

(*The Latest Brutus, 19.03.72*)
Discussion of the scenography and its evaluation can be seen in Extract (7). Scenography takes an important role in theatre performances, that is why it is typical to find its description and evaluation in art reviews. Another quotation from the same review (see Extract (8) below) serves as an illustration of an interpretation of the work (personalized, again) and the performance of the actors being positively evaluated. A recommendation to see it finalizes the review.

(8) Always intelligent, in many ways ingenious, Jonathan Miller’s production seems to me to start at some distant and private point and coincides only occasionally with the author’s intentions. Whenever it does, the fine speaking of the undergraduate actors, the best delivery of Shakespearean verse I’ve heard in the theatre for a long time, reminds us that no one need feel nervous about letting us see ‘Julius Caesar’.

(The Latest Brutus, 19.03.72)

Extract (9) contains an implication that this is a second performance reviewed. It shows how the idea of the play is implemented and how it is evaluated. Another element in the review here is the scenography (‘the look of a Whitechapel brothel, bar, or music hall’). The review approaches the end when the final scene and the director’s choice for it is questioned providing some argumentation for that. It closes up with the reviewer’s personal impression and final evaluation of the work.

(9) ‘Ripper’ is excessive in a different way, violating silence not so much by its whimsical language as by its boisterous action. (...)
It turned out to be considerably more interesting in conception, though marred in execution by the absence of a formal intelligence or judicious editor. The Half Moon Theatre, where it is playing, has been festooned with hanging laundry and period posters to give it the look of a Whitechapel brothel, bar, or music hall. (...)
After an appetizing concluding scene (...), we are sent away with the impressions that the real villain may be none of the historical suspects but rather that abstraction called Society. Although this conclusion has the advantage of being coherent, it is not very intelligent. If everybody is guilty, then nobody is guilty. (...)
I left the theatre disgruntled that so much careful research had been wasted on such a confused, unformulated project, and so much athletic talent dissipated in the noisy tumult.

(Violations of Silence, 28.01.73)
English reviewers do not avoid subjective, personal impressions like in the review above (Extract (9)). It also illustrates that sometimes they employ the inclusive WE (which is more typical of Lithuanian reviews) that refers to the author of the text and the readers, the potential audience for the performance under review.

The research analysis has revealed that English reviewers seem to feel free to structure the elements in the review the way it looks better for them, with no strict order, though the elements themselves usually remain the same.

As compared to English art reviews, Lithuanian reviews also contain such elements as citations of the work being reviewed (but not at the beginning of the review), description and evaluation of the setting, details of the plot with its analysis (more than in English art reviews), character development, which seems deeper than in the English ones, the scenography, the performance – the work and talent of the actors with their awards, if any; the author's / director's decisions on the idea, the atmosphere, interpretation of the work, the final scene being among elements in the art review. Due to the restricted length of the article, examples of Lithuanian art reviews that are similar to their English counterparts will be omitted here. The focus in this part of the work will be on differences between the English and Lithuanian reviews of works of art.

There is no one clear element for Lithuanian reviewers to start their works. They may start with either analysis of the title or the genre / subgenre aspect (see Extracts (10) and (11) as illustrations for such cases).

(10) Kodėl scenaristai R. Gudaitis ir M. Giedrys, ėmęsi V. Bubnio romano „Po vasaros dangum“ ekranizacijos, pavadino savo filmą „Perskeltas dangus“? Norint suprasti tokios metamorfozės priežastis, reikia gerai pajusti šio savito filmo nuotaiką ir suvokti, jog tai anaiptol nėra ekranizacija iprastine prasme.  
(Šiapus ir anapus horizonto, 26.07.75)

(Svarbios temos metūgiai, 13.03.71)

Extract (10) is the beginning of the review where the reader finds the reviewer’s consideration of the possible reasons why the scriptwriters gave a different title to the
film as compared to the novel that it was based on. The very first sentence is interrogative, the second one gives an answer to that question and at the same time provides an implication that there is a sound reason for this and that the decision was right.

Extract (11) starts another film review and discusses what genre (subgenre) it should be attributed to. Its advertising campaign indicates that it is a detective. Its director describes it as a psychological detective. The reviewer points out that the genre of a detective has no clear boundaries but implicitly approves the film director's choice.

The opening paragraph of a Lithuanian art review can also remind the reader of the author's previous works or compare the work reviewed with some other related works. Extract (12) demonstrates how a Lithuanian reviewer first positively characterizes the playwright and reminds the audience of his previous play which sparked off the “renaissance” of Klaipeda Drama Theatre. He also recalls two other plays but this time with a certain reproof. The work reviewed also comes into the same group of plays as the reviewer expresses some doubts about it and in the following paragraphs provides his argumentation for such evaluation. Therefore, this review illustrates how a Lithuanian reviewer first provides some positive information about the author of the work and then gives some negative comments that are followed by certain argumentation and illustrations.

The same review exemplifies another typical element of Lithuanian art reviews – citations of other art critics. It is not a rare case in Lithuanian but it is not typical of English art reviews where one may find other critics referred to but not quoted. In this particular case the reviewer agrees with his colleague, but in other cases they may start a discussion having different opinions.

What English readers do not find in art reviews is the highlighting of the relevance of the work to the present, and in Lithuanian art reviews it is usually coloured with the ideology of the period. Extract (13) proves that there existed such a civic and ethical programme for the society of the mid 1970s and implies that art was supposed to follow it and help implement it.


(Karas tarp avių ir gėlių?, 01.03.75)

(14) Gal tai būtų visai logiška, nes kovos su klasiniu priešu tema, naujai nuskambėjusi šiame filme, be abejo, pelnytai patraukė žiūrovų dėmesį. (...) „Vyrų vasara“ ir ankstesnė lietuviško kino patirtis parodė, kad dramatiški pokario metų įvykiai gali būti interpretuojami labai įvairiai, kad nesena istorija teikia pakankamai medžiagos labai skirtinėms sprendimams. Norėtųsi, kad jie būtų kuo netikėtesni. Nors būta ir sunkių dienų, bet ir tada nušvisdavo saulė, ir tada žmonės šypsodavosi. Matyti, ir tokia atmosfera galėtų inspiruoti ryškiajį herojinę komediją ar net satyrinį juoką nuspalvintą kūrinį. Tai, žinoma, didelio takto, didelio talento reikalaujantis uždavinys, bet jis logiškai paremtas mūsų optimistiniu žvilgsniu, pagaliau Markso teiginiu, jog „žmonija juokdamasi atsisveikina su savo praeitim“. ...

(Svarbios temos metūgiai, 13.03.71)

Extract (14) also illustrates this element – the topic of fighting with a class enemy is treated positively stating that this topic justly attracted the viewers’ attention. It also contains a quotation of Marx, the ideologist of the political movement of the period, which is so typical of Lithuanian published texts at that time. This last extract demonstrates one more point characteristic of Lithuanian art reviews – the use of inclusive WE (MŪSŲ – in Lithuanian). Lithuanian reviewers of the early 1970s tend to hide themselves behind the inclusive WE or employ other means for that purpose. In general, as compared to English reviews, in Lithuanian art reviews personal details and open impressions are avoided.

(Rūsti poetinė tiesa, 14.09.74)

Extract (15), like Extract (14), exemplifies the final element characteristic of Lithuanian art reviews. At this point Lithuanian reviewers tend to present evaluation of the work (artistic harmony is highlighted in the last piece of the review quoted) but they also extend it with the ideology of the period under analysis (here the performance is treated as the most beautiful, the best monument for the Soviet man who fought for his Homeland).

Analysis of structural elements of English and Lithuanian art reviews shows that although art reviews in English and Lithuanian have both similar and different elements in their structure, their distribution throughout the whole text is not the same, which leads us to an idea that English and Lithuanian reviewers follow different traditions of writing an art review.

Conclusions and Implications

This research analysis shows that there are both similarities and differences between structural elements of English and Lithuanian art reviews.

1. Both groups of reviewers discuss, describe, and evaluate such elements as the director’s work (the idea lying behind, the final scene, certain decisions taken to implement it, etc.), the actors’ performance, the setting and the plot, the scenography, characters’ development, the atmosphere, the interpretation of the work.

2. English reviewers tend
   • to start either with a citation from the work being reviewed, or start with creating solid background for their review, or some personal details or aspirations;
   • to present more personal impressions and aspirations than their Lithuanian colleagues;
   • to review two works at a time and compare them;
   • to include citations from the work;
   • to refer to other previous works in order to create a much wider context;
   • to present the overall evaluation either at the beginning of the review or at the end;
   • to finish with personal impressions and / or final evaluation including a (non-) recommendation.

3. Lithuanian reviewers tend
• to start with either analysis of the title, the reminding of the author’s previous works, comparison with other related works, the genre / subgenre aspect;
• not to begin their reviews with citations from the work but they do not avoid to quote other art critics;
• to disclose more details of the plot with its analysis;
• to provide a deeper analysis of character development;
• to emphasize the relevance of the work to the present colouring that with the ideology of the period;
• to avoid presenting personal impressions and seem to hide behind the inclusive WE or employ other means for that purpose;
• to finish with evaluation of the work including the emphasis on the ideology of the period under discussion.

This research is only part of a diachronic study on English and Lithuanian art reviews. It will further be extended with an identical analysis of art reviews from the period of the late 2000s with the aim of finding out not only similarities and differences of writing art reviews in English and Lithuanian but also revealing how the traditions of writing art reviews change over a period of time.

References


Angliškų ir lietuviškų meninių kūrinių recenzijų struktūriniai elementai

Jurgita Sriubaitė
Vilniaus Gedimino technikos universiteto inžinerijos licėjus, Antakalnio g. 120, LT-10200 Vilnius, Lietuva, sriubaite@gmail.com

Santrauka

Nuolat atsiranda vis naujų meninių kūrinių, jiems svarbu pritraukti savo auditoriją, adresatą. Todėl iš tos gausybės meninių kūrinių visuomenei reikia rinktis, kurie iš jų yra verti dėmesio, o kurie neatitinka keliamų reikalavimų. Meninių kūrinių recenzijos padeda susidaryti nuomonę ir apsispręsti, ar verta tuos kūrinius skaityti. Šiame straipsnyje pristatoma recenzija kaip žanras, apibrėžiamos ir pristatomos svarbiausios šio žanro ypatybės ir funkcijos. Recenzijos skaitėjai tikisi, kad recenzentas ne tik pristatys ir aprašys nagrinėjamą kūrinį, bet ir pateiks jo argumentuotą analizę ir vertinimą. Pastarasis yra būtina bet kurios recenzijos dalis. Labiausiai ištirtos akademinių recenzijos, įvairių sričių knygų recenzijos (akademinių, ekonominių ir kt. knygų), tačiau mažai domimasi meninių kūrinių recenzijomis. Iš pastarųjų daugiausia dėmesio sulaukia grožinių kūrinių recenzijos. Šiam tyrimui buvo surinktos angliškos ir lietuviškos filmų ir spektaklių recenzijos, publikuotos 20 a. aštuntojo dešimtmečio pirmoje pusėje. Šiuo tyrimu siekta išskirti įvairius elementus, būdingus angliškių ir lietuviškių meninių kūrinių recenzijų struktūroms, rasti šių skirtinų kultūrų recenzijų rašymo tradicijų panašumus ir skirtumus.

Esminiai žodžiai: angliškos meninių kūrinių recenzijos, lietuviškos meninių kūrinių recenzijos, meninių kūrinių recenzijų elementai, struktūra, recenzijų rašymo tradicijos.