Extending the argument proposed earlier in Part 2 of this volume that language learning is a social action, this chapter looks at the social-cultural construction of the concept of self in application letters by L2 users. I will argue that while there are specific conventions for genres, writing in all genres is in essence a process of self-presentation. The writers’ social-cultural background will inevitably affect the way that ideas, information and arguments are presented in a piece of writing.

The role of culture

The role of culture in second language writing has long been acknowledged, though opinions differ with regard to the extent to which culture shapes second language writing. Strong support for the role of culture in second language writing comes from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity (Sapir 1921) and Kaplan’s seminal work on contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan 1966, 1988). Since Kaplan’s study, a huge number of studies have emerged investigating culture-specific writing patterns in languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, German, Finnish, Spanish, Czech and so on (for review, see Connor 1998; Silva 1993; and for a more recent one, see the selected bibliography published periodically in the Journal of Second Language Writing). In a recent study, Hinkel (2002) compared 68 syntactic, lexical and rhetorical features in essays written by advanced non-native speakers with those of native speakers enrolled in first-year composition courses. These studies attributed perceived differences between second language writing and native speaker’s writing to differences in cultural conventions and linguistic influence from first language (L1).

Some researchers have argued that the differences in cultural conventions are, directly or indirectly, influenced by a wider social context, in particular, the pedagogical approach dominant in a particular culture. The educational system and strategies of learning and the way children learn to read and write in L1 all play a role in shaping the way people write in L2. Carson (1992), for
example, noted that in countries such as Japan and China, rote-learning is widely used in literacy development and ‘there is a strong belief that the path to lively and creative writing styles lies in internalizing others’ styles’. Nisbett (2003) also argues that there seem to be differences between ‘Easterners’ and ‘Westerners’ in their fundamental assumptions about the inclination to use rules. Different cultures may also have different expectations of writer and reader responsibility. Hinds (1987) found that Japanese writing depends heavily on readers to work out the link between different sections, while English writers are expected to provide transitional statements.

Some researchers attempted to adopt a cognitive model of writing to explain cross-cultural differences in second language writing (Flower and Hayes 1981, Nystand 1989). In this model, writing is not a linear process where a writer starts with ideas and plans and then puts these ideas and plans to paper. Instead, it is seen as consisting of four interactive components: task, environment (i.e., the audience and the context), the writer’s long-term memory (retaining relevant information about the topic, environment and writing plans), and the composing process itself (i.e., a discursive process of generating, organizing and translating ideas into texts). Cross-cultural differences in writing are evident when the composing process in the first language is transferred to or influences the second-language composing process (see Krapels 1990, for a review of L2 composing process research).

While studies of the cultural influence on writing succeed in acknowledging and highlighting differences between second language users’ and native speakers’ writing, some argue that when it comes to genres (i.e., a class of communicative events linked by shared purposes recognized by members of a discourse community, Swales 1990), such as CV, job application cover letter, grant proposal book review, etc), culture has very little role. For example, Bhatia (1993) argued that since genres are highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of intent, positioning, form and functional value, many of the professional and academic genres, particularly in research and science, are of the homogenous type. These writings are universally conventionalized to such an extent that even in their cross-cultural realizations, they rarely show any variations and therefore students are expected to follow these conventions despite the different cultural orientations they may have. While arguing for the conventionalized nature of genre, Bhatia (1993) also noticed that business genres seem to be an exception to the rule in that cross-cultural variations have been found to exist in sales promotion letters and job application letters. In particular, in the case of job application letters, East-Asian applicants seem to favour three strategies: self glorification, adversary-glorification and self-degradation. They tend to put forward unsupported claim of their own superiority, based simply on feelings or desires (self-glorification); sing praises to the organization of the prospective employer (adversary-glorification); or downgrade the current situation they are in either in terms of financial or academic