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WEB GENRES IN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS LANGUAGE RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Genre studies on intercultural aspects of business languages traditionally focus on established genres, such as print advertisements or annual reports. Despite the growing importance of Web-based business communication, only a few publications have engaged in contrastive Web genre analysis. This article develops a methodology for carrying out cross-cultural research on Web genres by giving ideas for designing a corpus and for choosing parameters of analysis. It also discusses the potential benefits of intercultural Web genre approaches for researchers, students, and business professionals.

KEYWORDS: genre studies, Web genres, contrastive analysis, intercultural, Web sites

INTRODUCTION

Genre analysis is an efficient and established methodology for conducting research projects on intercultural aspects of business communication. With a comparison of sample texts that share the same genre, but belong to different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, culture-specific conventions within the same genre can be discovered. Genre analysis is popular not only in research studies (Bowles 2012, 47), but also in classroom projects (Six 2006, 83). In light of an increasingly globalized economy, there is substantial need for intercultural research and education in the field of business languages (Doyle 2012, 109).

In addition to the growing global economy, a second trend exists with significant consequences for business language studies: companies conduct a significant portion of their transactions and communications through targeted Web sites. For business language research, as well as for Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) research in general, extending genre analysis to Web-based genres is therefore appropriate (Arnó-Macià 2012, 90; Huckin 2007, 71). A review of the recent literature from the field, however, reveals that Web genres have received less attention than traditional genres, despite their rise over the past decade. This article develops a methodology for

incorporating emerging Web genres into business language research by using a traditional genre analysis approach.

We begin with general remarks on genre analysis in the field of LSP and business language studies. Afterwards, we examine the concept of Web-based genres and compare their qualities to those of traditional genres. The main section discusses ways of using Web genres for designing research projects, and it examines how useful the results of such projects are for researchers, instructors, and practitioners. The article concludes with some finishing remarks.

GENRE ANALYSIS IN BUSINESS LANGUAGE STUDIES

According to Bowles (2012), “genre analysis is the analytical approach that has been most influential within LSP over the last 20 years, to the extent that the two [genre analysis and LSP] are often considered indistinguishable” (47). Genre analysis, nonetheless, comprises several different methodologies and approaches, each of them with separate and distinct definitions of the genre concept. A genre can be defined as a group of texts with identical contextual factors and similar formal features (Bussmann 2008, *Textsorte*). Among a genre’s contextual factors are its communicative purpose, its topic, its target audience, and its author, while its formal features comprise the text structure, layout, linguistic features, and pragmatic features. Genres, in other words, are conventionalized entities that help fulfill recurring communicative needs within a discourse community (Sandig 1997, 26). This definition, taken from the German *Textlinguistik* tradition, is close to Swales’s (1990, 58) concept of genres; for the purpose of this article, however, the differences between genre concepts are inconsequential. Examples of genres from the business world are annual reports, glossy brochures, print advertisements, customer mailings, and complaint letters.

Even though the previous remarks imply that the concept of genre is limited to verbal code, it can extend past the verbal code. As Kress and van Leeuwen (1998) point out, “all texts are multimodal” (186). In addition to verbal code, a text can use a variety of other modes, like images and typography, all of which contribute to conveying the text information and fulfilling its communicative purpose (Stöckl 2011, 45). It is therefore plausible to assume that genres are potentially multimodal by their nature, which holds particularly true for genres in online media. Texts belonging to online genres use different modes, like animated images, speech, sounds, and music.

A contrastive analysis of same-genre texts between two different linguistic or cultural areas helps determine culture-specific genre conventions in the formal text structure. Within the verbal code, these genre conventions can

touch macro-level features, like text composition and sequence, but also micro-level features, such as lexis, syntax, distance between author and reader, and persuasive strategy. In multimodal texts, however, culture-specific conventions can be dispersed across all modes. Researchers have therefore argued in favor of a semiotic approach to genre analysis (Eckkrämmer and Held 2006, 2). Semiotic approaches significantly increase the scope of genre analysis by making sure that genre conventions become evident across all textual modes. In intercultural studies, semiotic approaches seem particularly promising, given that they enable researchers to detect intercultural differences on many different layers.

WEB GENRES

The terms *Web genre* or *digital genre* refer to genres whose medium is the Internet (the German *Textlinguistik* tradition uses the term *Hypertextsorte* in this context). To avoid unnecessary complexity, we will focus exclusively on Web genres at Web site level, such as company Web sites, personal home pages, online encyclopedias, or news portals. Following Rehm (2006, 285), a Web site is a set of connected Web pages accessible under the same domain with the root serving as the entry point (for example, sony.com). Each page of a Web site can contain elements like verbal text, hyperlinks, images, graphics, embedded objects, or other content.

Like traditional genres, Web genres are conventionalized entities that respond to the communicative needs of a discourse community; however, there are several factors that differentiate Web genres from traditional genres. While traditional genres typically have one single topic, Web genres can present a multitude of diverse topics (Jakobs 2009, 366). Hence, instead of trying to assign one single topic to a Web genre, it seems more appropriate to identify the Web genre's contextualizing topic frame that integrates all of its subtopics. Moreover, it is important to point out that Web genres can change their form and size, that they have a stronger potential for multimodality, and that they can be interactive (Jakobs 2009, 359–62).

Computational linguists have done extensive research on Web genres (Lindemann and Littig 2010; Rehm 2006; Rosso 2005; and Santini, Mehler, and Sharoff 2010); however, this great extent of research has not been seen in the humanities. While many humanities researchers do incorporate Web-based material into their work (Grosse 2007), very few publications establish a link between Web sites and genre analysis (Huckin 2007; Jakobs 2009). In light of the importance of Web-based genres, and given that the results of Web genre studies seem promising, this field is ripe for further investigation.

One could assume that the potential benefits of a Web genre analysis are outweighed by the perceived complexity of such endeavors: Web data is highly unstable and may change in the middle of the analysis, the structure of Web genres is considerably more complex than the structure of classical genres, and the potential multimodality of Web genres requires a more elaborate, multilayered analytical process.

DESIGNING INTERCULTURAL WEB GENRE ANALYSIS PROJECTS

The following paragraphs introduce a methodology for contrasting Web genres from different cultural backgrounds using a genre analysis approach. In determining a Web genre for analysis, it is essential to select Web sites from similar institutions, or from companies that belong to the same industry and offer similar products and services. The next step is to create a corpus of Web sites belonging to the selected genre, from two or more different cultural and linguistic areas. To ensure the study produces statistically significant results, the corpus should include at least four or five Web sites per area. The corpus creation for a Web genre analysis must also address the dynamic nature of Web sites, which may change their structure and layout. To make sure that the corpus data is available for replay and future analysis, researchers may opt to take screenshots of the Web sites, or to archive the Web sites offline. One such tool to capture and archive Web sites is the extension Scrapbook for the Web browser Firefox, which replicates Web sites and rebuilds an offline copy on the local storage medium. The offline-replicated copy significantly facilitates the project, because it not only converts dynamic data to static data, but also allows for examination of hyperlink structures and an understanding of the Web site architecture.

Once a corpus is established, a contrastive analysis can be conducted. The complex architecture and content structure between Web sites will likely vary significantly between sample texts. Therefore, it is necessary to segment and structure the data, with the objective of creating entities that appear in similar form across all Web sites in the corpus. Failing to structure the Web sites before initiating the analysis can lead to anecdotal results, with limited value for research and education. A clear understanding of the Web site structure is also imperative in decoding the textual features.

A seemingly obvious solution to this problem might be to compare only selected pages from different Web sites with each other. This option, however, turns out to have a diminished practical value and can lead to false conclusions, because content distribution across pages can differ considerably between the

Web sites in the sample. A more structured approach is to ignore the actual page organization of the Web sites and segment the Web sites following abstract criteria instead. One such option is to search the Web sites for elements that share the same topic, such as verbal text, graphics, and images, and to group these elements according to their respective topics. This procedure, which follows the ideas of Rehm (2006, 290), allows for the establishment of an inventory of topic groups that appear on all Web sites. These topic groups serve as a suitable entity for a contrastive analysis.

When dissecting, for instance, supermarket Web sites, one might find topic groups such as weekly specials, coupons, store locator, and grocery delivery. For an intercultural comparison project, it makes sense to choose just a few topic groups for a detailed analysis, because possible intercultural differences are likely to be more prominent on deeper levels of Web site communication than on the surface of Web sites. For example, while the home pages of retail supermarkets such as <http://www.safeway.com> (United States) and <http://www.supercasino.fr> (France) show many similarities in layout and content, the companies' self-presentation strategies hidden on lower levels of the Web sites vary considerably.

The set of parameters for analyzing a topic group is extensive. From a macro perspective, it is worth examining the size of the topic group across different Web sites, in order to estimate the respective importance of that topic group on the Web sites. The size can be measured as the number of pages that predominantly show elements of the respective topic group. Furthermore, it can be pertinent to look at the constituting elements of the topic group and determine the proportions of different communication modes, such as verbal text, images, and typography. These proportions help identify dominant modes on the Web sites, thereby illustrating possible cultural preferences for different modes in certain communication contexts.

Moving to micro-level features of the topic group, it can be helpful to organize the analysis by different modes, in the following order: the verbal text, images and graphics, animated content, and sound and music. Analyzing verbal texts in business contexts offers a variety of important parameters. In the case of company Web sites, it may be of value to examine the extent of typical features present in advertising language, such as nouns and adjectives with positive connotations, superlative forms, metaphors, puns, colloquialisms, and simple syntactical constructions (Dyer 1982, 299–313), and how their usage differs between Web sites from different cultural areas. Further criteria can be drawn from the field of pragmatics, including the frequency of addressing the audience, the use of imperative forms, or strategies of creating

or reducing distance between author and reader. Furthermore, it is worthwhile to describe the level of detail in the text information, as well as the overall tone of the text, which can range from direct and information-oriented to subtle and emotion-oriented (Hall 2000, 36).

Concerning the graphical images belonging to a topic group, several criteria are worth investigating. First, a contrastive study may take into account material aspects of the images, such as whether they are photographs or drawings, or if they are in color or in black and white. A second aspect concerns the content depicted in the image; here it may be possible to group images according to similar content and compare the content distribution across Web sites. In the case of commercial Web sites, recurring content categories may be depictions of the product, customers, company employees, the manufacturing process, or the company headquarters. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 118–21) distinguish between images with people looking straight into the camera, which creates a “demand for interaction” toward the reader, and images without such direct looks, which Kress and van Leeuwen consider an “offer for contemplation.” Another parameter for image analysis is the field size. Kress and van Leeuwen consider long shots to be rather objective (2006, 133), given that such images show everything and do not hide anything from the viewer. Close-up images, according to the authors, imply that the author already has chosen a perspective and forces the viewer to adopt it.

Once all modes involved in a topic group have been described in detail, one should examine how these modes are interrelated with respect to conveying the text information (Stöckl 2011, 58). Web site authors may choose to transmit information through verbal text alone, with images sending emotional signals or subliminal triggers, unrelated to the verbal text. On other Web sites, images play a more prominent role in conveying information, duplicating or reinforcing the same information from the verbal text. In general, there are numerous possible options for the semiotic interconnection between different textual modes (56), offering many promising opportunities for investigation in intercultural Web genre research.

After analyzing two or three topic areas following the suggested methodology, results should be aggregated per Web site, and subsequently aggregated per cultural area. As a final step, the results for each cultural area should be compared, which identify possible intercultural differences. This approach also allows for creating a Web genre profile for each cultural area included in the comparison.

CONCLUSION

This article suggests a methodology for carrying out intercultural genre studies using Web genres. In the light of an increasingly globalized and online economy, contrastive Web genre studies need to be a critical topic of future business language research. The procedure for Web genre analysis introduced here has three key advantages: First, the sample data becomes stable, so that research is not affected by possible Web site changes in the middle of the analysis. Second, intercultural differences can be demonstrated across all different codes used on a Web site. Third, findings about intercultural differences go beyond the anecdotal level, and become tangible and conclusive, which also ensures comparability with similar research on culture-specific genre conventions.

The methodology developed is not only suitable for designing individual research on contrastive Web genre analysis, but also allows for creating classroom projects in business language education. Involving students in Web genre research allows them to discover that the Web sites they use every day actually are not culture-free, but highly culture-bound media (Cheon 2005, 111). At the same time, students can develop an awareness of diverse mentalities, mindsets, and communication preferences. When using such genres in their professional lives, students can communicate more efficiently with customers and colleagues from all around the globe. Additionally, incorporating Web site analysis into the classroom is undoubtedly a great source of motivation, because it enables students to perform research in a medium they know very well and enjoy working with. For practitioners, insights into culture-specific Web genre conventions may be useful as well, in the context of localizing commercial Web sites to properly meet the expectations of culturally heterogeneous target groups.

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