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Report

From print to web 2.0: The changing face of discourse for special purposes

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Abstract

This report addresses the recent changes induced in professional discourse genres as they migrate from traditional print media to the Web 2.0 platform on the Internet. After a brief characterization of the specificities and affordances of the Web 2.0 environment, a selected number of themes that are currently being researched are outlined, namely: the reshaping of existing discourse genres and a rethinking of genre theory; the implications of collaborative authoring; the impact of narrative elements on professional discourse; the personalization and informality of Web-mediated communication. Some of the challenges that these developments pose to discourse for special purposes are highlighted.

1 Introduction

As Marshall McLuhan presciently remarked many years ago, "A new medium is never an addition to an old one, nor does it leave the old one in peace. It never ceases to oppress the older media until it finds new shapes and positions for them" (McLuhan 1964: 158). Over the last decade, the new medium to which specialized discourses have had to adapt is the second-generation web or Web 2.0: while the term itself has been criticized by some (e.g. Tim Berners-Lee 2006), it remains a useful shorthand for the wide-ranging and qualitative changes that have taken place in how the web is now being used. These changes can be briefly characterized - in contrast to earlier forms and uses of the Internet - by user participation and user-generated content, where consumers have become *prosumers* covering both roles of producer and consumer engaged in uploading rather than just downloading material. Recent web developments have also involved: the creation of virtual communities such as social networking sites, blogs, twitters, podcasts or mashups (comprising new ways of indexing

material such as tags and folksonomies); new forms of archiving, data sharing and collaboration which are now possible thanks to the interoperability of the software used; and changes in 'footing' and participation frameworks (Goffman 1981) between the various participants interacting in this new communicative setting. To these more recent changes, one can add the typical technological and semiotic affordances of the Internet such as hyperlinking, the non-linearity of navigation compared to the traditionally linear reading mode, and heightened multimodality, as well as an unprecedented acceleration in the time-frame of interaction.

The implications of these developments have generated a substantial amount of research which has addressed the issue from a variety of perspectives: globalized business practices (dubbed 'the flat world' by Friedman 2007); political accountability (Dutton 2007; Cardon 2010); e-publishing; discourse analysis; communication studies; societal evolution; or the socio-technical infrastructure underpinning these developments, as evidenced by the existence of numerous journals devoted to these topics (e.g. *New Media and Society*; *Studies in Communication Science*; *Media, Culture and Society*; *Language@Internet*; *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*; *Information, Technology & People*, to name but a few). The range and diversity of these approaches preclude any comprehensive review of the field. The much more modest aim of this short report is to attempt to outline, from a discourse analysis perspective, some of the research themes that are currently being investigated in relation to the impact of Web 2.0 on the discourse of specialized communities.

Professional communities – business, academia, journalism… - have over time generated the discourse genres that correspond to their communicative and epistemological needs: company annual reports and press releases, research articles and dissertations, news reports and editorials, etc. These established, though constantly evolving, genres have until recently been expressed mainly via print media. The features of Web 2.0 summarized above, while opening up exciting possibilities for novel ways of accessing, creating, and communicating knowledge and information, pose a number of challenges to existing print media as they attempt to come to terms with the new medium and find their place in a communicative environment that has been, and is still being, profoundly reshaped. Though it is difficult as yet to foresee where some of these developments will lead us, an interim assessment of some of the trends may hopefully provide food for discussion and stimulate further research. The coverage of the topic presented here is, perhaps unavoidably, incomplete, given our own particular research interests, and interested readers are invited to contribute to enriching this ongoing debate (see the final paragraph of the present report).

2 Rethinking genre

A dominant trend in recent discourse analysis research of this topic has been investigations into how the Internet is shaping and (re)defining genre when old genres are transferred to the Web or newly-shaped Internet genres appear (Campagna & Garzone, forthcoming; Giltrow & Stein, 2009; Garzone, Poncini & Catenaccio, 2007; Askehave & Nielsen, 2005a, 2005b). The questions raised about this process of 'genre migration' are the following: What happens when a genre migrates to the Web? Will it retain the same properties it possessed in the older medium (the print format) or will it adapt, and if so, how? Does the Web environment generate new, web-native genres? What are the linguistic/rhetorical features of these emerging or adapted genres? Because of the inherent fluidity of the Internet and the pace at which changes are taking place, there are no clear-cut answers to these questions. As Giltrow & Stein point out (2009: 1-2): "The question of genre, then, is really an old one, but the advent

of new media has highlighted the issue with new full force. Seemingly, there are new genres on the Internet, but in some cases it is a matter of contention whether the genre is new, or an old one in new medial garb" - an uncertainty anticipated a decade earlier by Crowston & Williams (2000).

Ongoing research seems to point, however, to the existence of a cline, going from the replication of existing genres at one pole to the emergence of novel genres at the other, along which Internet genres can be (provisionally) placed: at one extreme are genres that have moved intact to the web, as pdf downloads of existing documents, for example. The process of recuperating genres is somehow to be expected since, as Orlikowski & Yates (1994) suggested, when faced with a new communicative situation, individuals will typically draw on their existing genre repertoire, reproducing genres they are already familiar with as members of other communities. Further along the cline one finds other document types which, although they have not undergone major changes in this migration process, have nevertheless accrued considerable 'added-value' (Luzón 2007), or new Internet-enabled features and functions, in the process. The academic research article is a good illustration of this trend: online journal articles now include many interactive tools (e.g. hyperlinks to citations, supplementary material, social networking sites), a large amount of visual and multimodal material (e.g. color photos, video clips, audio summaries), a blog, a space for readers' comments, even online polls to vote on the most favorite article. Yet further along are many genres formed from new combinations, that can be considered either as hybrids or as new web-native genres: blogs (Herring et al., 2005; McNeill 2005), e-zines, homepages, FAQs, hotlists etc. (Crowston 2010). Beyond this are the unclassifiable combinations, leading Santini to argue that "Web pages need a zero-to-multi-genre classification scheme, i.e. a scheme that allows zero genre or multi-genre classification, in addition to the traditional single-genre classification" (Santini 2007:71).

This fast-paced proliferation generated by the communicative needs of new Internet communities entails as yet unresolved implications for genre theory itself. The question that arises is whether traditional genre theory can handle these evolving and novel genres, or whether a 're-purposing' (Askehave & Swales 2001) of genre theory is necessary, that takes the characteristics of the medium into account (Miller & Shepherd 2009). Askehave & Nielsen (2005a), for example, propose an 'up-grade' of the traditional genre model to incorporate media features that cannot be accounted for in existing theory, arguing that the medium itself should form part of a revised genre model, since "the medium adds unique properties to the web genre in terms of production, function and reception which cannot be ignored in the genre characterisation" (2005a: 125).

In addition to this rich debate on genre, other trends that impact on professional discourses as they migrate from print to the web have come to the fore, and are briefly discussed below.

3 Collaborative authoring

Ever since the launch of wiki software by Ward Cunningham in 1994 which enabled the collaborative writing of documents by using a simple markup language, the traditional concept of 'authorship' has been challenged by web-enabled texts. Web users can now upload rather than only download, which means that they can express their opinions, exchange ideas, and produce materials that bypass hierarchical institutions or organizations. A significant repercussion linked to this new medium affordance is that the role of single expert-in-the-field which was in the past clearly assigned to an authority figure/body, is now blurred by several

'experts in the field' taking the floor. The most prominent examples of this trend are participatory journalism (Domingo et al., 2008; Howe 2006), open-source business platforms, online encyclopedias such as Wikipedia (Emigh & Herring 2005), and open science. Open science data, like Wikipedia, are mutable: the documents evolve through a large number of edits made by a worldwide community of scientific contributors. The underlying philosophy of many of these initiatives is to challenge the stranglehold of institutions and corporations on the discourse of the profession: Open Notebook Science (http://usefulchem.wikispaces.com/), for example, provides other researchers with access to failed experiments ('dark data') which are almost never published in academic journals; the Synaptic Leap is a collaborative research project into tropical diseases that are neglected by major pharmaceutical companies because not economically profitable (http://www.thesynapticleap.org). From a discourse analysis angle, however, collaborative authoring raises some thorny questions: how is textual coherence constructed in these multi-authored texts? How do the opposing centrifugal and centripetal forces of discourse (Bakhtin, 1986; Gatto, forthcoming) balance out? Can one talk of an authorial 'voice' anymore? As Yates & Sumner (1997) point out, "the distinction between producers and consumers of digital documents is being blurred and we are seeing the democratization of genre production".

4 Narrativity

Another prominent theme in the analysis of Internet genres is narrativity: not the grand narratives of classical literature but the 'small stories' of private individuals. This is particularly evident in blogs, of course, which abound in stories of daily life (Myers 2010), but is also a pervasive feature of citizen journalism, readers' and users' comments on websites of various kinds, or the Talk pages of wiki sites. This development can be related to the recent shift, in narrative studies, from viewing "narrative as text (i.e., defined on the basis of textual criteria and primarily studied for its textual make-up) to narrative as practice within social interaction" (de Fina & Georgakopoulou 2008: 275). Narrative fulfills this social function on the Internet by helping to create a sense of community between individuals who are geographically far-flung and culturally diverse but who, by recounting and sharing stories, can nevertheless make contact and recognize themselves in one another's stories.

This is a particularly interesting development as far as LSP is concerned: many professional genres are expository, argumentative or informational, rather than narrative; anecdotal evidence and individual stories have little epistemic or institutional weight in these discourse genres. In science, for instance, though narrative may surface in oral genres such as conference presentations (Thompson 2002) or laboratory talk (Lynch 1984), written genres such as the research article construct conceptual arguments rather than give a chronological account of the research process. As demonstrated by Myers (1990), the 'story' told by the research article is a far cry from the 'narrative of nature' recounted in popular science articles. The Web 2.0 platform, however, has given rise to new forms of scholarly exchange such as academic blogs (Kjellberg 2009; Kouper 2010; Bukvova, Kalb & Schoop, 2010), social-cum-scientific networking sites (some hosted by mainstream journals such as the Nature Network by *Nature*, at http://network.nature.com/), forums on open access journals, or wiki sites of user-generated scientific resources (e.g. laboratory protocols on http://openwetware.org/): narrative elements feature prominently in all of these initiatives. It will be interesting to see whether narrative will remain confined to these newer forms of exchange or whether a gradual hybridization of the longer-established genres will take place, and what this will imply for the construction of knowledge itself.

Likewise, blogs on corporate websites and bloggers' contributions to the websites of newspapers or TV channels often have a narrative component. A potential conflict may arise, however, between these unsolicited, individual stories, and the editorial line of the journal or the marketing image a company wishes to project: the centrifugal forces of participatory media may threaten the centripetal forces of institutions and corporations, possibly leading, as in the case documented by Puschmann (2009) to a *fake blog* (or flog) of fabricated narratives on the corporate website as the company seeks to maintain control.

5 Personalization of discourse

Closely related to the theme of narrative is that of the individualization or personalization of discourse on the Internet. Many professional discourses have traditionally been filtered or vetted before publication by gatekeepers of various kinds: the editorial boards of scholarly journals, the company management, or the chief editor of a newspaper, for example. This institutional control fostered the now discredited illusion that such discourses were objective, impersonal representations of reality. While this discourse control by one (or by a selected few) of the many no doubt contributed to the stability of many genres, and potentially also to the disciplinary reliability or validity of the texts, from a critical discourse analysis perspective it appears hegemonic and a negation of empowerment. Computer-mediated communication has changed the rules of the game by complementing one-to-many channels of communication with 'new combinations of N-to-N' (Giltrow & Stein 2009: 9) - many-to-many, some-to-some – opening up spaces for the expression of individual voices. As Borgman (2007) makes clear in the domain of scientific research, however, this development means that material whose quality and legitimacy is difficult to ascertain is now circulating. Another problem generated by these less constrained modes of communication concerns the potential challenge to scholarly and professional norms through more personalized forms of discourse. Self-portrayal and self-expression are recognized features of blogs, which position themselves at different places on the cline between the private and the public (Mortensen & Walker 2002). Many professionals such as journalists or academics (Dennen, 2009; Kirkup, 2010), in addition to their 'professional' voice expressed in news reports or research publications, are increasingly taking advantage of the Web 2.0 platform to express a more private voice in their blogs. What impact will this increased personalization eventually have on the professional discourse of these same authors?

6 Informality of language

As is probably clear from the above, much of the research has approached the field of Internet discourse from a socio-constructivist perspective, foregrounding the contextual features which have engendered these radical changes and privileging discursive practices and function rather than formal, or formalist, aspects (Devitt 2009). In the wake of earlier work on the language of emails, however (Gains, 1999; Lan, 2000), which highlighted the increasing 'conversationalization' of discourse (Fairclough 1995), and the blurring of the writing/speech distinction, some researchers have focused on more specifically linguistic features. A study of the language of blogging, netspeak, chat groups and virtual worlds can be found in Crystal (2006), for example, and that of blogs and wikis in Myers (2010), while Santini (2005), *inter alia*, engages with more technical issues of web language analysis. This remains for the moment, however, a relatively under-researched area.

7 Concluding remark

This short report has left many interesting facets uncovered - issues of identity and reflexivity for example, or multimodality. A forum for further discussion and the presentation of ongoing

research will be provided in Seminar n°1 "From Print to Web 2.0: What future for professional discourses?" to be held at the 11th ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) Conference which will take place at Boğaziçi University, Istanbul, Turkey, from 4th to 8th September 2012. Interested scholars are cordially invited to submit proposals to the convenors, Elizabeth Rowley-Jolivet and Sandra Campagna, before January 31st 2012. Details about the seminar itself, the submission process, and the conference can be found on the ESSE website at http://www.esse2012.org.

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