



**Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici
Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes**

**Stefania M. Maci
& Michele Sala (eds.)**

**REPRESENTING AND
REDEFINING SPECIALISED
KNOWLEDGE: VARIETY IN LSP**

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CERLIS Series
Volume 8

Stefania M. Maci & Michele Sala (eds.)

Representing and Redefining Specialised
Knowledge: Variety in LSP

2019
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

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CERLIS SERIES Vol. 8

CERLIS

Centro di Ricerca sui Linguaggi Specialistici

Research Centre on Languages for Specific Purposes

University of Bergamo

www.unibg.it/cerlis

REPRESENTING AND REDEFINING SPECIALISED KNOWLEDGE:

VARIETY IN LSP

Editors: Stefania M. Maci, Michele Sala

ISBN 978-88-97253-03-7

ISSN 2532-2559 – CERLIS series [Online]

Url: <http://hdl.handle.net/10446/155776>

Doi: 10.6092/10446_978-88-97253-03-7

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GIULIANA DIANI, ANNALISA SEZZI¹

The EU for Children: A Case of Web-mediated Knowledge Dissemination²

1. Introduction

The advent of the Internet has had a significant impact on the transmission of specialized communication between experts and non-experts (e.g. Garzone 2007; Caliendo 2014; Scotto di Carlo 2014; Anesa/Fage-Butler 2015; Bondi 2015). Blogs, articles in online newspapers, e-magazines, e-journals “provide an open space for specialized communication, where a diverse audience (with different degrees of expertise) may have access to information intended both for non-specialist readers and for experts” (Luzón 2013: 428).

The present study focuses on knowledge dissemination as a process of ‘mediation’ between experts and non-experts having a different stage of cognitive development, that is to say children. Within this approach, the aim of the present article is to analyse from a qualitative point of view the popularizing features associated with scientific communication (i.e. in this case, concerning the concept of European Union) in two official websites on EU addressed to children (namely, Kids’ Corner and Euro Kids’ Corner). If knowledge dissemination is a form of ‘mediation’, texts targeting children can be

¹ Sections 1, 3, and 5.2 are written by Giuliana Diani; sections 2; 4 and 5.1 by Annalisa Sezzi, while the conclusions were jointly written by both authors of the present essay.

² This study is part of a National research project financed by the Italian Ministry of University and Research: “Knowledge Dissemination across media in English: continuity and change in discourse strategies, ideologies, and epistemologies (PRIN 2015TJ8ZAS).

seen as an example of multi-layered mediation, in that in these cases the intended lay audience have limited cognitive skills and encyclopaedic knowledge.

The choice of children's websites is due to their specific status in the field of popularization discourse (Mallet 2004; Cristini 2014; Sezzi 2017). In these contexts, information is presented appealingly through multimodal strategies (e.g. Kress/van Leeuwen 2006; Unsworth 2007), to encourage involvement through entertainment, which can be regarded as an effective popularization strategy (Maci 2014; Cappelli/Masi 2019).

The choice of analysing the dissemination of the concept of the European Union targeted at children derives from a general and increasing interest in exploring the way children develop their understanding of the EU, its history and its countries.

Attention to knowledge dissemination addressing children remains, as far as we know, an under-explored area of inquiry in connection with popularization. From a linguistic perspective, only a few studies have focused on the dissemination of specialized knowledge targeted at children (Engberg/Luttermann 2014; Sorrentino 2014; Diani 2015, 2018) and even fewer are those dealing with knowledge dissemination intended for children from a pedagogic perspective (Ribovich 1979; Heisey/Kucan 2010; Fang/Pace 2013; Hoffman/Collins/Schickedanz 2015) and translational perspective (Reiss 1982; Puurtinen 1995; Sezzi 2017).

The next section provides an overview of recent literature on educational websites for children (Section 2). This is followed by a description of the theoretical framework adopted (Section 3) and the corpora used for the study (Section 4). The analysis will be presented in Section 5, followed by some concluding remarks in Section 6.

2. Children's edutainment websites

Websites expressly aimed at children can be described as “‘edutainment’ or ‘infotainment’ texts as they aim to both educate or

inform and entertain their overt audience – children” (Djonov 2008: 217).

In particular, as Aksakal underlines (2015: 1232), it was a documentarian from American National Geographic Union, Bob Heyman, who first talked about “edutainment” to indicate a form of “marriage” between entertainment and education (Colace/De Santo/Pietrosanto 2006) devised to educate and amuse the audience. This expression “came into common use in the 1990s with the appearance of ‘multimedia’ personal computers” (Michael/Chen 2006: 24). Mainly associated with video games pursuing educational goals (Susi/Johannesson/Backlund 2007: 2), edutainment embraces nonetheless a plethora of products, from television programs, films, music, computer and video games, to websites and multimedia software (Colace/De Santo/Pietrosanto 2006), all hinging upon the exploitation of the visual code, of narratives and games, and of an informal language (Buckingham/Scanlon 2001, 2005).

Another common feature that characterizes these forms of entertainment and education for youngsters, like the other traditional informative and literary forms dedicated to this specific audience, is their dual addressee (Djonov 2008). Adults, be they teachers, parents, or educators, are their covert target audience. Indeed, they provide personal computers to their children or pupils for educational purposes, which is also the reason why they utilize the Internet and visit websites (see Buckingham/Scanlon 2004). Websites for children are in fact believed – by parents and educators – to develop children’s competences in different disciplines leading to successful educational achievements (Okan 2003, 2011; Buckingham/Scanlon 2004).

Children’s access to knowledge is then no longer limited to the classroom and to course or information books. It is disseminated through complex hypertexts to the new generations, who live in a pervasively digital and electronic world, “the multimodal hypertext environment” (Maier/Kampf/Kastberg 2007: 456), and who already have a multimodal and multimedial communicative competence, in that:

[t]he multiliterate children can simultaneously process and monitor multiple displays of specialized knowledge on the computer screen. They can search

for, retrieve and store specialized knowledge across several semiotic modes and media in a matter of seconds. (Maier/Kampf/Kastberg 2007: 455)

This new (home-based) way of disseminating knowledge among young people entails a more personalized, “constructivist” approach to learning (Okan 2003, 2011; Buckingham/Scanlon 2004).

As a matter of fact, according to Infante (1999), educational hypermedia for children subsume a new cognitive paradigm. They recreate the dynamics of the human brain, whereby different navigation paths can be taken and where the child obtains responses from the digital environment, hence triggering a primary way of learning, that is, learning through experiences (Infante 1999), in that experiential learning is therein put into place (Okan 2011). In particular, a one-to-one and active relationship between the medium and the user is established: it is a personalized, self-paced relationship where contents are presented in different modes in a motivating learning *milieu* (Okan 2011: 1081). Even though the many choices and the non-linear organization might be problematic for some children, another alleged advantage of hypermedia for children is motivation, especially intrinsic motivation, which is boosted by the use of games and the involvement of different senses (Okan 2011).

Educational websites for 21st century multiliterate children should be analysed considering different characteristics (Buckingham/Scanlon 2004). The first issue to be taken into account is multimodality (Kress/van Leeuwen 2001), a characteristic shared, to different degrees, with more traditional educational tools. Specifically, these websites simultaneously exploit different “forms of media, such as pictures, sound, animation, and video” (Turner/Handler 1997: 25). In some websites, for example, there can be speaking characters using a recorded voice or characters who use speech bubbles with no sounds (Buckingham/Scanlon 2004). Navigation is also fundamental: users face “multiple reading paths” (Kress/van Leeuwen 2006: 204) and choose according to their motivation or to the structure of the website (see also Lemke 2002; Baldry/Thibault 2006; Maier/Kampf/Kastberg 2007; Djonov 2008; Maier 2008; Stenglin/Djonov 2010). Interactivity is the third essential aspect to be considered: it can refer to “drill-and-practice” activities whose feedback is merely given by test scores or

by more complex problem-solving and simulation activities (Buckingham/Scanlon 2004). Buckingham and Scanlon (2004: 272) point out, however, that “[a] great deal of the material available is unsuitable for younger children because of its linguistic difficulty and its level of specialist information”. Consequently, this study will mainly focus on selected examples of the verbal popularization strategies adopted in the two official websites for children of the European Union³ in order to determine if the specialized knowledge conveyed by the verbal text is *de facto* made accessible to children.

3. Theoretical framework

The primary theoretical framework of this study is Discourse analysis. To identify popularization strategies – that is those discursive practices that are used to facilitate layman’s access to specialized scientific knowledge – we used Calsamiglia and van Dijk’s (2004: 372) classification of the following five forms of “explanation”, since such a classification can be effectively applied to different types of popularizing discourse (scientific, political, etc.).

- The first form of explanation is *denomination* or *designation*, which consists in introducing new terms to point to specific meanings.
- Closely linked to denomination is *definition*, which involves the explanation of unknown terms by listing some general and specific properties of the referent.
- Another procedure is *reformulation* or *paraphrase*, which can be realised by rephrasing a given meaning through a relative clause or an apposition or, alternatively, by replicating a given meaning in parentheses or between dashes, or by reformulating

³ For an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the verbal and the visual see Silletti 2017.

it in the form of a quote or a metalinguistic expression (e.g., *are called*).

- A fourth procedure is *generalization*, which draws general conclusions from specific examples or cases.
- The last category is *exemplification*, which provides specific instantiations of general phenomena.

These discursive resources work on the lexical and syntactic level. There are other resources that, on the contrary, work on a cognitive level. They are classified under the label of *analogy* or *association* (Calsamiglia/van Dijk 2004: 376), and include linguistic similes and metaphors. In Lakoff and Johnson's words, "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (1980: 5). The 'other' element is usually cognitively familiar to the reader, being part of his/her background knowledge. A simile, on the other hand, is a type of metaphor which is easily identifiable as it is accompanied by specific indicators such as *like*, *as*, *similar to*, *the same as*.

In addition to these resources, knowledge dissemination strategies also involve other elements associated with popularization. This is the case of forms of reader engagement (Hyland 2005), i.e. elements that selectively direct the reader's attention such as personal pronouns (*you*, *your*) or questions. As discussed in the literature (Sezzi 2015, 2017; Diani 2015, 2018), recourse to reader pronouns and questions is typical of information books and educational materials for children. This is also a recurrent strategy in the educational websites under examination.

In this study we will examine comparatively the popularizing strategies in two websites – namely, Kids' Corner and Euro Kids' Corner – in order to support the procedures established by Casamiglia and van Dijk and presented above.

4. The corpora

The educational websites under analysis, Kids' Corner and Euro Kids' Corner,⁴ were both launched by the European Commission in 2011 as part of their educational communication. As explicitly stated in the websites, they are addressed to children aged from about six to sixteen years old. Specifically, Kids' Corner can be accessed from a link on the European Union portal while Euro Kids' Corner can be accessed from the EU website of economy and finance. They are available in all the other EU languages, but only their English versions are analysed in the present paper.

In general, both websites are very straightforward in their multimodal and hypertextual organization; they do employ limited animation, limited or no sound and have a merely "drill-and-practice" organization (Buckingham/Scanlon 2004). As Silletti (2017: 173) points out for Kids' Corner, the structure of the website is very simple, intuitive, with repetitive mechanisms so that children can easily use it. This can also be said for Euro Kids' Corner.

With regard to Kids' Corner, the informative section "The EU: what's it all about?" is introduced by a series of questions it aims at answering, thus stirring the audience's curiosity (see Silletti 2017). The access is granted by the links "Click here to find more about EU!" and by "Go" within a picture with a rocket sent into orbit and flying over Europe, stressing the idea of learning as a journey. When clicking on "Go", a map of Europe appears, which is a sort of clickable "grande légende" (Silletti 2017: 167), a big legend, with an introductory text on the left inserted in a sort of drop-down map or curtain. By moving the cursor on the nation that the child wants to have information about, a box appears explaining when the nation joined the European Union and other details on the relationship between the nation and the EU. By clicking on each nation, on the

⁴ <http://europa.eu/kids-corner/> (last accessed December 2018);
http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/netstartsearch/kids/ (last accessed December 2018)

other hand, a big magnifying glass appears, a visual metaphor for the process of discovery implied in the navigation of the website, together with the flag of the nation and an accompanying box telling when the nation joined the EU, its capital city and few geographical and political information. Simultaneously, a bigger box is visible on the left detailing cultural information as well as fun facts about the EU member state the user has chosen to read about. At the top of the box, there are two pictures representing two symbols (food and monuments) of the country.

The section “Learn more about the euro” of Euro Kids’ Corner, instead, features a map of Europe at the top of the screen, a central panel with an introduction to the theme of the website with further links to three subsections together with a dialog box and an internal link to go back to the games. The three subsections deal with three different topics connected to the European currency: “All about euro”, “The euro and you”, “Life of a euro”. They are all three characterized by different colours to favour children’s comprehension.

The corresponding web pages are subsequently divided into paragraphs that the user can directly access through the links in the previous page and that deepen some aspects of the European currency. Pictures, but mainly photographs, are used in a symmetrical relationship with the verbal text. They do represent what is described by words.

In the following section, we will analyse the verbal text of the informative and more educational parts constituting the websites under examination in order to see which popularizing strategies are adopted.

5. Analysis: Focus on the popularizing strategies

5.1 Kids’ Corner

The analysis of the popularizing strategies focuses on the section “The EU: what’s it all about”. The verbal texts examined are the introduction to the European Union and the texts centred on each

member state. As Silletti (2017) notes, these texts have the same tripartite structure: the pictures with their respective captions introducing the nation, a second longer and exclusively verbal part divided into paragraphs describing the nation from various points of view, and the third part entitled “Five interesting facts” in which five curious facts or traditions of each country are presented with questions or exclamative sentences.

Moving on to the popularizing strategies, it can be observed that *definition* is the first strategy to be detected both in the English and in the Italian version (64 instances). It is mainly related to specific concepts such as the explanation of the “Single Market”, in the introductory text “The EU: what’s it all about?”, and of the “Democracy” in the text on Greece:

- (1) The Single market *means* people, products and services move freely between EU countries.⁵
- (2) Did you know that Greece is the birthplace of ‘democracy’, *which means* ‘government by the people’?

Another recurrent strategy is *denomination* (27 instances) used, for example, for giving children the name of some traditional food or national dishes, or for more complex notions (such as the Baltic countries in example (4)).

- (3) There are many French cheeses, such as Brie and Camembert, which can be eaten with the famous traditional food *called* baguette.
- (4) It borders the Baltic Sea and is one of a group of countries *called* the Baltic States.

Also *exemplification* (26 instances) is often found, usually introduced by the expression “such as”:

⁵ In all examples, emphasis is added.

- (5) Italy also has active volcanoes, *such as* Mount Vesuvius near Naples, and Mount Etna on the island of Sicily.
- (6) There are many Italian artists, *such as* Michelangelo and Botticelli.

Similes (5 instances) are introduced by “like”, often anchoring specific concepts to children’s lives and experiences. Yet, they are not as frequent as the other popularizing strategies:

- (7) *It’s a bit like in a school class.* As in a good community, the stronger ones help the weaker ones. And as in a class where some children like maths and other prefer music, some EU countries have interests that are different to others.

Another frequent strategy is the use of questions, a characteristic also identified in information books for children (Sezzi 2015, 2017) and other educational materials for children (Diani 2015, 2018). In the website, there are two different types of questions with different purposes (Silletti 2017: 171). There are questions (107 instances) whose aim is to grasp children’s attention. In particular, they do so by referring to children’s background knowledge, culture and life, directly addressing them through the use of second-person pronoun and typically aimed at engaging the reader:

- (8) *Have you heard* of the artists Salvador Dalí and Pablo Picasso? You should look up their work on the Internet.
- (9) *Have you ever tried* Belgian chocolates? They are said to be the best in the world!

Similarly, there are also questions (79 instances) that, besides having an engaging function, already contain their answer. Consequently, they are vehicles of knowledge, being the information to be disseminated the heart of the question itself, and at the same time they involve the readers through their game-like structure similar to the fun-fact questions related to trivia and curious facts, as shown in the examples below. They all begin with the opening formula “Did you know...?”:

- (10) *Did you know* that the Pyrénées mark the border with France?
- (11) *Did you know* that the Eurotunnel connects England and France?
- (12) *Did you know* that, apart from Malta, it has the smallest population in the EU, with some 0,5 million?
- (13) *Did you know* that Finland has nearly 190 000 lakes and 180 000 islands?

The website, therefore, takes advantage of four main popularizing strategies – namely, *definition*, *denomination*, *exemplification* and *analogy/simile* – and of the use of questions, trying to convey difficult or possibly unfamiliar concepts or facts to children.

5.2 Euro Kids' Corner

Some similarities in terms of popularization can be observed in the use of specialized terminology on both the websites under scrutiny here. Like in Kids' Corner, in Euro Kids' Corner, when specific terms are introduced, they are followed by a *definition* (11 instances), as illustrated in (14) or by a *denomination* (7 instances), which indicates the specialized name of new terms, as shown in (15), in which the new word is introduced by the expression “known as”:

- (14) What is money?
it is a medium of exchange for trade because it has a clear value that is trusted by everyone.
- (15) [...] the countries that decided to adopt the euro spent the following years preparing their economies – these preparations are *known as* ‘economic convergence’.

Possible problematic terms or concepts are sometimes followed by a *paraphrase* (2 instances), aiming at explaining the meaning of the term/concept through simpler language, as exemplified in the following extract:

- (16) [...] the rules of EMU ensure that a country has a sustainable economy – *in other words*, it can pay its debts, and its pensions, in the future.

Other similarities can be observed in the use of second-person pronoun *you* in both websites. Like in Kids' Corner, in Euro Kids' Corner, directly addressing children as readers is a recurrent strategy (5 instances). This is illustrated in the following examples:

- (17) As *you* will see [...]
 (18) If *you* look at the design, *you* can see [...]

Both websites highlight the tendency to introduce children to new concepts through questions. Euro Kids' Corner tends to use *wh*- and *how*-questions (8 instances), as illustrated in the following extracts:

- (19) *What* is money?
 (20) What types of euro coins and banknotes exist, and what makes them?
 (21) *How* was the euro introduced?
 (22) *How* does the euro help us?

Recourse to *wh*- and *how*-questions, as shown above, suggests a didactic function reflecting the purpose the website is designed for, i.e. for children who need to learn the basic notions concerning the topic discussed. By using these types of question, the writer also tries to focus children's attention on the issue in order to arouse their interest and curiosity (Webber 1994). We may speculate about this strategy on the basis of the function *wh*-questions express: "an imbalance of knowledge between participants" (Hyland 2002: 530), which helps "to construct readers as learners, and learning as a one-way transfer of knowledge" (2002: 535) from expert to non-expert.

6. Conclusions

The analysis has shown that popularization aimed at a young audience involves recontextualisation of expert discourse for the lay audience, in the same way as popularization targeting adults (e.g. Garzone 2014; Gotti 2014; Mattiello 2014). However, given that its specific addressees have limited background knowledge and cognitive abilities, concepts need to be more simplified in popularization for children than in popularization for adults, but not to be dumbed down to trivialisation or banality (De Marchi 2007), as the frequent recourse to popularizing exemplification strategies resulting from our findings has revealed.

The results emerging from the study indicate that the websites under examination use similar strategies to communicate and recontextualise knowledge to children. In particular, as far as the content is concerned, the strategies identified involve adjusting information to children's knowledge through definitions, denominations, similes, and exemplification (Calsamiglia/van Dijk 2004): the accuracy of information (or avoidance of trivialization) and comprehensibility are thus granted.

Another level of similarity can be observed in the use of linguistic features typical of dialogic interaction (i.e. *you*). This finding echoes Webber's (1994) and Hyland's (2005) views, according to which appeal to the reader is a strategy aiming at engaging the reader in the text and drawing him/her into the discourse. This strategy foregrounds the highly interactive, reader-oriented nature of the website for children, whose main purpose is both to include the readership and to create a rhetorical effect of "closeness and involvement", as described by Breeze (2015: 39), who suggests that "the level of familiarity associated with the second person serves to involve the reader in the story". The use of second-person pronoun *you* is often found (or implied) in questions as another form of reader engagement: this applies to the case of both *wh*- and *how*-questions, used to possibly simulate a classroom context, quiz-like questions, or questions on children's lives and experiences.

Interestingly, the data also indicate how the use of illustrations supports the popularization strategies identified. The images used help interpret the information transmitted. In both websites, they are exclusively cartoon-like drawings, often representing stereotypical elements of the nation they refer to. These clichéd representations are meant to mirror the verbal text (Silletti 2017), thus facilitating its interpretation. This aspect, associated with the popularizing strategies underlined, makes the websites particularly accessible and simple. Given its more specific content, focused on euro rather than more general issues, Euro Kids' Corner in addition to drawings also displays realistic photographs on specific details.

In conclusion, it can be observed that in these two official websites on EU, the necessity of popularizing knowledge is paralleled by the need to involve the addressees and this explains the interactive nature of these websites and the popularizing strategies adopted.

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