CERLIS Series

Series Editor: Maurizio Gotti

Each volume of the series is subjected to a double peer-reviewing process.

CERLIS Series
Volume 1

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Genre Variation
in Academic Communication
Emerging Disciplinary Trends

CELSB
Bergamo

Contents

Variation within genres and communicative practices

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Introduction

This volume, which opens the CERLIS series, is welcome for at least two reasons: on the one hand, it focuses on research trends and perspectives in the area of genre analysis; on the other, it reveals how content and choice of linguistic variants are employed to meet the communicative needs of diverse professional and academic audiences, whose identities are adapted to a common globalised framework of values and shared behaviours.

The increasing globalisation of communicative practices aided by information technology has determined an evolution of English professional and disciplinary discourses, in terms of communicative purposes characterizing genres, where the socialisation of knowledge plays a crucial cohesive role. This process is most evident in such domains as academic, technical, scientific and legal communication, whose textualisation mirrors the professional world at work within a set of cultural values shared by the members of the discourse community under consideration. This volume, therefore, while confirming that language use is seldom if ever culturally neutral (Kuper 1999), investigates genres in Academia and in their diachronic development as a source of valuable evidence regarding the language-culture interface, a relationship addressed by several ethnographic and sociolinguistic studies (Swales 1990, 1998, 2004; Bhatia 1993, 2004; Berkenkotter / Huckin 1995; Bondi 1999; Cortese / Hymes 2001; Gillaerts / Gotti 2005), both at the textual level and in the development of interpretative schemata that shape the semantic-pragmatic traits of the professional community involved.

At a time when genre analysis is being challenged by various authors (Askehave 1999; Askehave / Swales 2001; Candlin 2006) because of its allegedly simplistic interpretations and applications, this volume contributes to offering an in-depth understanding of academic

and professional genres (and their ongoing change in response to the evolving cultural-economic context), as employed internationally, between native and non-native speakers, within various specialised domains such as science, business and economics, politics, European institutions and the law.

To achieve this, research has been carried out on authentic texts, retrieved according to the principles of modern corpus analysis (Stubbs 1996; Biber *et al*. 1998; Tognini-Bonelli 2001; Hunston 2002; Baker 2006; Bondi / Scott 2010), from public-domain sources as well as from private organisations contacted by the authors, in view of a quantitative and qualitative investigation incorporating background research conducted by our team on various aspects of textual instability in academic and multimodal communication (Campagna 2004; Gotti / Giannoni 2006; Giannoni 2006; Fairclough *et al*. 2007; Garzone *et al*. 2007; Garzone / Sarangi 2008.)

The exploration of the points of tension within genre sets in the targeted domains can determine which textual features (whether on the sociorhetorical, discoursal, semantic or pragmatic level), have been most affected by the impact of such changes. In addition, it suggests whether generic changes within a discourse community are manifestations of a common trend shared by various types of specialised discourse or limited to the domain concerned. Furthermore, such investigation may determine the extent to which genre fluctuation is perceived and textualised as a productive phenomenon by the community members or rather as a dysfunctional aspect and a source of rhetorical insecurity, especially in intercultural settings. This could account for a greater awareness of the multifunctionality of genres, their structures and communicative purposes which are becoming increasingly elusive and difficult to pinpoint.

Special attention has also been given to the reinterpretation of existing genres in online communication, which reflects the phenomenon of 'genre migration' and in a few cases the emergence of totally new genres in response to the particular needs of an online environment (Kress / van Leeuwen 2001, 2006; O'Halloran 2004; LeVine / Scollon 2004; Scollon / Wong Scollon 2004; Ventola *et al*. 2004). While traditional models and categories of linguistic/textual analysis are not in themselves inadequate for this purpose, their use

calls for a multimodal conceptual framework incorporating analytical categories that include not only text, but also non-linguistic, non-linear elements (i.e. visual, iconic and functional content).

In the light of such data, a theorisation can be offered of what academic, professional and sociocultural variables permit discourse communities to exploit generic norms which are widely shared by their variously positioned members. The complex interaction that opposes or reconciles local/global needs, values and standards is conductive to the increasing textual hybridity and instability of domain-specific communities.

Contents of this issue

The contributions to this volume investigate the ways in which disciplinary genres in professional and academic English exhibit conventionality or variation in terms of such variables as rhetorical strategy, writer stance, interpersonal engagement, and argumentation. Clearly, the different ways in which social comunicative practices influence linguistic choices vary within disciplines and this is reflected in the microlinguistic analysis of the discourses offered here.

The first part of the volume deals with variations across genres and context and opens with an examination of cross-linguistic variation in the genre of business research articles (RAs) offered by Malavasi. The comparative perspective of the investigation is based on the assumption that rhetoric, hence rhetorical variation, is a crucial aspect in academic communication since, on the one hand, language is meant to reflect discipline-specific epistemological conventions, thus exerting a normalizing function upon discourse and content-representation practices. On the other hand, specific national cultures, the associated language-related constraints or even very localized academic traditions represent a potential source of linguistic idiosyncrasies even within the boundaries of the same research domain. As evidenced in this chapter, the variation in language use found in the closing sections of business RAs written in English

(Discussion) and in Italian (*Conclusioni*) is symptomatic of the way the different cultures present content material, assess its relevance and establish authorial ethos by differently resorting to metadiscursive elements, discourse connectors, evaluation and relevance markers.

Fazio investigates sports science discourse in the genre of MA theses (for a European Master Degree in Health and Physical Activity), with a specific focus on the contamination of 'formal' academic discourse produced by native speakers onto non-native 'informal' textualizations in didactic contexts. The comparison between standard academic sports science RAs and non-native MA theses is carried out through a corpus-based analysis by which the conceptual variation between the two contiguous genres is measured both according to quantitative parameters (i.e. occurrence and collocation) and qualitative ones (i.e. keyness), which offer a basis to place the genre of sports science MA theses at the crossroads between general disciplinary standards and linguistic practices, on the one hand, and didactic, thus local, requirements and constraints, on the other.

The contamination between contiguous oral genres in scholarly communication, namely research conference presentations and English-taught lectures in internationalisation programmes, is examined by Mariotti. This generic contiguity may be pre-theoretically assumed on the basis of the fact that non-native academics are likely or expected to resort to their familiarity with the conference presentation template in order to organize their material for didactic settings. However, beyond this generalization, the two genres have very distinctive and hardly overlapping purposes and audiences, the presentation being an instance of expert-to-expert communication, with a marked informative and persuasive pragmatic function and an overt argumentative character, whereas lectures, typically targeted to novices, have a pedagogical function, limited to and only functional within asymmetrical teaching contexts. On these grounds, Mariotti offers a contrastive analysis of the two genres in a systemic-functional perspective, assessing both cross-generic regularities and genre-specific peculiarities in terms of Field (the discipline related conventions), Mode (the contamination between spoken and written or monological and interactional dimensions, and the degree of redundancy and explicitness), and Tenor (the author's

stance and engagement).

A different and yet important viewpoint is offered by Banks, whose diachronic perspective of scientific discourse analysis is carried out by investigating the editorial moves and operational choices adopted in the first two academic periodicals, namely the (French) *Journal des Sçavans* and the *Philosophical Transactions*, which both first appeared in 1665. The author evidences that language and genre-related choices were not (only) necessitated by knowledge dissemination purposes, on the basis of cognitive criteria (i.e. transparence, intelligibility, coherence, etc.), but rather strongly biased by the historical and ideological surrounding context. Even lexico-semantic features such as the expression of process types (i.e. the degree of variation between the representation of knowledge-as-discourse vs. knowledge-as-experimentation), theme semantics (i.e., the topicalization of intertextuality and mention vs. knowledge-object focalization) and modality (i.e. the resorting to epistemic vs. deontic markers) are the result of contextually bound and ideologically biased operation, namely, encyclopedic orientation (the desire to cover the whole human knowledge) and the need of knowledge-framing and control, on the one hand, and a more circumscribed scientific focus yet reflecting the interests of the community of reference, on the other.

The second part of the volume, which is devoted to the analysis of variation within genres and communicative practices, starts with a very appealing examination by Cesiri who examines generic features of research articles in the field of Cultural Heritage (CH) studies, an extended (and yet under-investigated) interdisciplinary research domain consisting of different focus areas ranging from history to the arts (history and criticism) and archaeology, and including also sub-domains specifically dealing with techniques of art preservation and restoration. The purpose of this chapter is to define and describe CH research artefacts on the basis of their dominant linguistic features. In consideration of the complexity of the domain, Cesiri distinguishes CH RAs into three thematic macro-categories – namely, Archaeology (A), Art History and Criticism (AHC), Cultural Heritage Preservation and Restoration (CH Pres/Rest) – and offers a quantitative analysis of the texts primarily on the basis of the use of epistemic modality markers (hedges and boosters) which are indicative of the type of voice, the stance and the style which are recognized as appropriate and

effective to represent given content material. This provides sound criteria to measure CH RAs generic hybridization (since they resort to both representation practices typical of the humanities and hard sciences) and their generic specificity.

A fairly recent genre in scholarly communication, the PowerPoint-aided conference presentation, is the topic deat with by Degano, who shows how such a generic hybrid combining slides and speech elements is realised as a coherent communicative event. This contribution fills an evident research gap since existing literature merely focuses on PowerPoint (PPT) textualizations and highlights the associated problematic aspects, such as content-fragmentation, schematization and (over-)simplification, often neglecting contextual evidence concerning the fact that PPT presentations – unlike RAs – are hardly self-standing, self-sufficient and autonomous, but are most likely part of an articulated performance where speech is meant to compensate for the inadequacies of the PPT format, conferring to what is primarily a visual construct the sense of texture, the coherence and cohesion which are crucial features in scholarly communication. The corpus-based analysis provided in this chapter posits as a generic salient feature for effective visually-supported presentations the synergy between text and talk, where the former provides a scaffolding frame for global coherence and the latter elaborates on specific points and clarifies meaning relations between notions, ideas and, ultimately, slides.

Ardizzone and Pennisi's contribution discusses the genre of law RAs, a particular area of legal research dealing with constitutional and public law and administration, which is particularly crucial in the context of the European Community and the associated interplay between law-related matters and politics. Especially in consideration of the need to reinforce the basis for EU legitimation, consolidate the Community's constitutional identity and establish or corroborate the idea of the European common core, the authors investigate the use of epistemic modality markers in Community law journal in terms of frequency as well as typology, collocation and rhetorical function. The analysis provides interesting insights into the strategies which are exploited to balance confidence and caution by means of varyingly resorting to overt argumentation, polemic stance or depersonalization in response to changing community norms and ideologies.

Interesting insights into a relatively novel academic sub-genre, i.e. the meta analysis (MA), is offered by Agostini and Santulli. The MA is a special type of research paper aimed to synthesize and discuss existing literature in a given research domain, assessing a large number of studies on a very specific topic on the basis of statistical methods with the purpose of tracing the progress over a given issue and possibly anticipating research directions. Although used in various scientific domains, the MA holds a specific status and pragmatic role in the case of biomedicine. As a matter of fact, whereas in social sciences this sub-genre is solely relevant within the boundaries of the discipline, biomedical MAs have a marked impact also on the lay community and the larger media context. On this basis the authors investigate whether this factor bears consequences on MA textualizations, especially in terms of text-organization, rhetorical choices and linguistic features. Focussing on a specific case ignited by a paper reporting results of a MA on the supposed uneffectiveness of homeopathy, equated to placebo treatments, Agostini and Santulli examine the language used in the original MA-related paper and editorial and compare it with the ensuing counterclaiming papers rejecting that view. The results indicate that generic traits are crucially affected and varyingly interpreted according to the authorial attitude as well as the ideological positioning of the reading public.

Abbamonte and Cavaliere examine the much under-investigated part-genre of academic book chapters (BCs), and focus on the way in which BC authors choose to (re)present and support their research methods among existing alternative but competing models. The justification of methods is indeed the arena where the argumentative skills of researchers play an essential role. Such discursive effort (not limited to the method sections) gradually unfolds in BCs both through reference to shared knowledge or mentions of disciplinary accepted practices, and, also, by disclosing authorial stance, engagement and attitude towards the content as well as by construing authoritativeness towards their audience. Based on a corpus of academic volumes in cognitive and medical sciences, the authors measure linguistic variation in discourse-analytical terms, focussing on such knowledge resources as conditional reasoning patterns (Hypothetical-deductive vs. Probabilistic) and personalization, devising a spectrum of variation ranging from an interactional and negotiatory use of the language in

cognitive sciences BCs to a more data-driven and depersonalized style in medical BCs.

Finally, the study by Polese and D'Avanzo investigates the academic discourse 'put into action' by the European Union (EU) as a supranational institution through the hybridisation of discourses, i.e. academic, institutional and promotional. To this purpose, a corpus has been built which comprises Erasmus brochures published in a time-span from 2007 to 2010. Such texts, which are meant to popularise the Erasmus programme on the Web, have been examined with particular reference to the social dimension in the EU academic programme. A quantitative-qualitative analysis has been carried out with a special focus on students as EU social actors and the construction of social inclusion, a gateway to identity, through consensus building which relies on students' involvement and participation in academic actions promoted by the institution. The analysis has revealed the impact of hybridisation on legitimation, self-promotion and self-representation of the institution which is made possible because students as European social actors feel at one with the EU on its actions and values.

The various methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks offered by the contributions to the present volume clearly represent the complexity deriving from any interpretation about linguistic phenomena within and across genres in professional and academic English. As a whole, they show that generic conventionality or variation are shaped not only by the disciplinary object but, more importantly, by such variables as rhetorical strategy, writer stance, interpersonal engagement, and argumentation that enable authors to fully participate in their community of practice.

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