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CERLIS Series
Volume 1

Stefania M. Maci & Michele Sala (eds)

Genre Variation
in Academic Communication
Emerging Disciplinary Trends

CELSB
Bergamo

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CERLIS SERIES Vol. 1

CERLIS

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GENRE VARIATION IN ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION.
EMERGING DISCIPLINARY TRENDS

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CHIARA DEGANO

Texture Beyond the Text: Slides and Talk in Conference Presentations

1. Introduction

Despite their pervasiveness in institutional communication, Power Point (PPT) presentations are still an under-investigated area of academic discourse, even less so from a linguistic perspective. While a flourishing practical literature exists, which enthusiastically extols the virtues of this technology, promising to teach how to deliver stunning presentations, scholarly contributions have generally expressed concern for the negative effects that slides risk having on the transmission of knowledge. Namely, what critics of PPT criticize is a reduction of the complexity of thought, fragmentation of reasoning and an excessive concentration of information (Tufte 2003). On the other hand, defenders of the technology contend that these allegations are not supported by an appropriate analysis of the speech situation. From this perspective PPT presentations are multimodal performances made up of slides and speech together, as well as body language. A performance in which the flow and richness of speech compensates for the impoverishment and fragmentation of information that slides alone would entail (Knoblauch 2008).

This chapter sets out to analyse visually supported conference presentations as a genre of its own, with a view to describing how slides and speech contribute, respectively, to the communicative event as a whole, with special regard to the construction of global coherence, which is here assumed to compensate for the fragmentation of reasoning. The focus will be on the linguistic and discursive strategies used to enhance the sense of 'texture' which was traditionally central for the definition of texts (de Beaugrande /

Dressler 1981) and is here extended to a hybrid genre, the PPT presentation, involving ‘immediate interaction’ and a ‘technologically mediated’ element (Knoblauch 2008). In particular, this chapter aims to answer the following research questions: How do slides and speech respectively contribute to the communicative event as a whole? How can global coherence be enhanced?

The qualitative analysis, reported here is carried out on a sample of papers presented at an international conference, collected by the group of English linguists at the University of Milan, which includes audio recordings with the respective PPT presentations.

2. Literature review

Slideware presentations have been the object of research from different perspectives, ranging from information design (Tufte 2003), to cultural sociology (Knoblauch 2008), from genre analysis (Yates/Orlikowsky 2008) to LSP (Garcia Negroni / Ramirez Gelbes 2008). While the authors of some studies of PPT take strong positions against it (Tufte being its most famous detractor), others simply consider its diffusion as an irreversible process, which is worth investigating for the impact it has on communicative practices. Tufte’s well-known criticism of PPT rests on the risk of a segmentation of thought produced by the slides, which arbitrarily chop reasoning into slides, generating the false impression that “each elaborate architecture of thought always fits on one slide” (2003). Within slides multi-level hierarchies of bullet points form overcomplicated chains of meaning, in which important explanations can be ‘filtered out’ if they do not fit the bullet-list frame.

It is to be noted, though, that Tufte’s argument was directed particularly against cases of technical reports (e.g. NASA engineering reports) circulated exclusively in PPT format, without the live performance that this technology was originally designed to support. This point is clearly made by Knoblauch (2008), who, far from taking

position for or against it, acknowledges that PPT is one of the ‘paradigmatic genres of knowledge society’, and stresses the importance of considering presentations in their entirety, i.e. as a complex hybrid genre made up of slideware, speech and body language (especially pointing). If it is true that existing design options are quite standardized (bullet points, diagrams, etc) – a reflection of the corporate culture from which PPT originated – it is talk and body performance that have to compensate for design constraints. PPT presentations should more accurately be conceived then as “hybrid performances that link a text and visual deck prepared in advance with fresh talk that is enacted situationally by performative means” (Knoblauch 2008: 90). On a similar footing, Campagna (2009) focuses on interactivity as a possible strategy to obviate the problem of the standardization of thought made likely by PPT design constraints.

Other scholars, assuming that PPT is simply here to stay, have started to investigate how viewers’ cognitive processing of the information may be enhanced through PPT slides. Alley / Robertshaw (2004) and D’Angelo (2010) suggest, for example, that using an assertion-evidence structure, with complete sentences instead of phrases in the headline, reduces the risk of fragmentation of thought, revealing more immediately how the current slide fits in the presentation’s more general flow of reasoning. This latter approach is more in line, and offers greater possibilities of integration, with studies of spoken academic genres, which consider conference presentations from the point of view of the peculiarities of ‘information packaging’, in speech, as opposed to writing. Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005), for example, drawing on previous research on speech vs written characteristics (Chafe / Danielewics 1987, Halliday 1985), focus on strategies of information flow and the ensuing syntactic choices, with a view to assessing the rhetorical appropriateness and effectiveness of conference presentations.

3. Methodological framework

The existing literature on PPT presentations does not as yet provide all the necessary tools to answer the research questions asked in this chapter, as researchers are still pretty much in the stage of raising issues, (and analysing data) rather than providing solutions. Therefore this study will rely on a methodological framework that includes tools borrowed from different disciplines, namely cognitive linguistics, text linguistics and functional grammar. The former provides theories of text comprehension geared to account for the inferences generated by readers in the process of constructing a situational model of what a text is about,⁸ a fundamental contribution in this sense coming from the constructionist theory of text comprehension (Kintsch/van Dijk 1978). This orientation is based on the *search-after-meaning* principle, according to which readers attempt to construct a meaningful referential situation model that addresses the reader's goals (i.e. the motives which triggered interest in the text at issue), that is coherent and that explains why actions, events and states are mentioned in the text. Such a search for meaning is "bidirectional", on account of the prospective and retrospective nature of texts, respectively prompting the reader to look forward to the end while at the same time looking back to information previously provided in the text and to his/her general background knowledge. Scholarly attention for these aspects started in the seventies, with a specific interest for written texts, but the debate around them is still going on (Graesser *et al.* 1994, Chuy / Rondelli, 2010).

Text linguistics (TL), on the other hand, provides insights into the standards of textuality (de Beaugrande / Dressler 1981), some of

1 This strand of research is mainly concerned with reading, but the assumption here is that some of the tools employed by cognitive psychologists can in fact be put to use also for the analysis of hybrid genres in which reading combines with the listening modality. In actual fact, a similar approach has already been applied to mixed communicative events, such as consecutive translation, which entails listening, summarising (in written form) the content of the original input and rendering it in the target language (Garzone *et al.* 1990).

which are text-internal (cohesion and coherence), others text-external, concerning variables like the participants (intentionality and acceptability), the context (situationality and informativity) and background knowledge (intertextuality). Also relying on a cognitivist component, text linguistics can help account for the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors on which the generation of inferences depends, thus profitably complementing cognitive theories of text comprehension with more in-depth language awareness. When engaging in processes of text de-codification, whether in written or oral communication, the *search-after-meaning* quest is assisted by linguistic cues that signal mutual relations among smaller units of meaning, relations forming that ‘texture’ which underpins the distinction between texts and non-texts. Drawing on the text linguistics tradition the main constitutive elements of texture are mechanisms of cohesion and coherence, (de Beaugrande / Dressler 1981: 3-4, but cf. also Halliday / Hasan 1976) where the former refers to “the way in which the components of the surface text, i.e. the actual words we hear or see, are *mutually connected within a sequence*” while the latter “concerns the way in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text, are *mutually accessible and relevant*”. While de Beaugrande and Dressler’s approach considers standards of textuality per se, not in relation to specific textual realizations, other strands of research focus on structures of meaning from the point of view of identifiable cognitive ‘formats’/matrixes. Werlich’s (1983) text grammar, for example, identifies five text forms – description, narration, exposition, argumentation and instruction – which originate from different cognitive processes. On the other hand, research on textual patterns (cf. among others Hoey 1994, 2001 and McCarthy / Carter 1994) identifies three broad categories of cognitive structures which are pervasively used across text types: *problem-solution*, *claim-counterclaim* and *general-specific*. Once the reader has identified one of the patterns he is familiar with, his background knowledge will help him to draw inference on how the single components of the message should be put into a relation of mutual relevance.

If these observations, originally referred to written texts, are brought to bear on PPT presentations, it results that the receiver must

be able to make sense of each slide in terms of local coherence (i.e. among the elements within the slide) and global coherence, i.e. with regard to the slides coming before it in the linear sequence imposed by PPT technology/design, but also at the superordinate level of textual macrostructure. The following section will analyse how global coherence is created in two PPT presentations, both belonging to the realm of academic spoken discourse, though representing different genres. The first one was devised as a support to a lecture delivered to graduate students, on the topic of medical communication. The second one is a conference presentation on institutional discourse. While the differences between the two cases have been taken in due consideration, they will not be discussed at length, as genre specificities do not fall within the scope of the present analysis.

4. Analysis

The analysis will consider first the classroom presentation, and then the conference presentation, focusing on mechanisms which, in each case, enhance or hinder coherence.

4.1. The classroom presentation (Case 1)

The title of the first presentation,⁹ ‘The role of communication across the continuum of cancer care’, envisages a typically expository pattern, even though the unfolding of the presenter’s speech reveals also a vaguely argumentative drive, meant to convince the audience of the relevance of communication in cancer care. The initial sequence of slides is represented in Figure 1.

2 The lecture was addressed to students of the BA Degree course in Language and Cultural Mediation at Milan University as part of a course on LSP with a focus on scientific English.

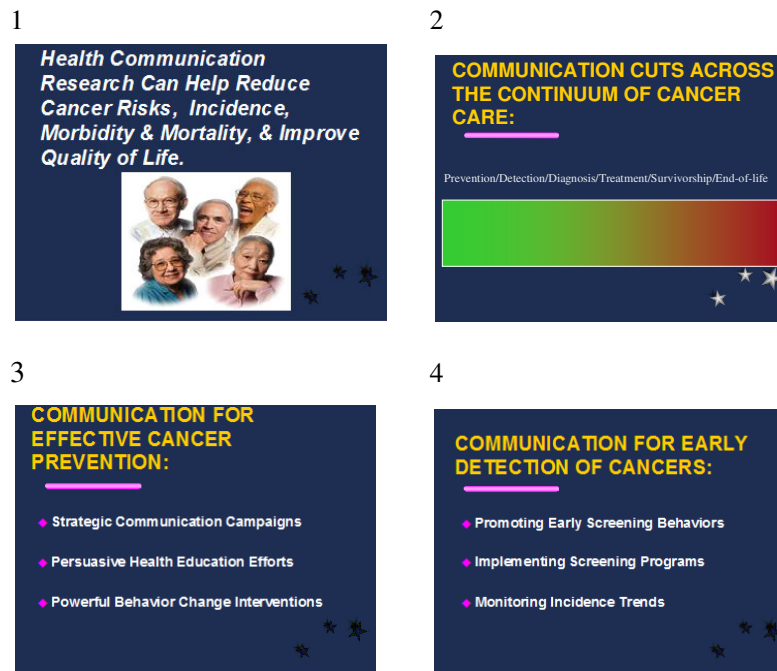


Figure 1. Sequence of slides from Case 1.

In slide 1 the verbal content, which occupies the title position, comes in the form of a full sentence (“Health communication research can help reduce cancer risks, incidence, morbidity and mortality, & improve quality of life”), thus activating the frame of ‘a statement + supporting evidence’ macrostructure. This induces the audience to expect that what follows will explain how it is the case that health communication research can impact cancer care. Slide 2 establishes a lower level of structure for the presentation, namely analytic, by which the concept of cancer-care communication is analyzed into its different components (prevention, detection, diagnosis, treatment,

survivorship, end of life). Incidentally, it must also be noted that the sequence is organized in chronological order, with prevention coming before detection, which in turn precedes diagnosis and so on. Both the analytic and the chronological structures are easily recognized by the audience, who then has a threefold scaffolding (statement/supporting evidence, analytic and chronological) which provides global coherence to the presentation. Once the superordinate textual macrostructure has been attended to, coherence within the sequence of slides is created through lexical cohesion, and more specifically through repetition of the exact words used in the continuum care (slide 2) within the headlines of the successive slides. Slide 3 features the title ‘Communication for effective cancer *prevention*’, while the slide 4 headline revolves around the word *detection* (“Communication for early *detection* of cancers”), coming next in the care continuum.

A comment is in order also on the information structure (Halliday / Matthiessen 2004). Comparing slides to clauses, headlines 3 and 4 – both exploiting a repetition with variation pattern¹⁰ – come in the theme position and contain given information, as the audience, thanks to the care-continuum slide, knows that the speaker is going to be talking about prevention first, and detection afterwards. In this way the headline provides anchorage to the global design, while the body of the slide features only a streamlined list of the topics that will be dealt with orally, without further expanding on them in writing.

4.2. *The conference presentation (Case 2)*

Coming to the second example taken into account, the presentation – delivered at a conference in Applied Linguistics – concerns an analysis of a particular genre of institutional discourse, i.e. NGOs’ annual reports. The presentation starts with a general definition of the genre, which will not be discussed here, and then moves on to illustrating the methodological approach, extending over a sequence

3 In this chapter the term ‘pattern’ is not limited to the highly common textual patterns identified among others by Hoey (cf. §3), but refers to all sorts of structural regularities imposed by the author on the slides.

of slides, which will now be considered in details. Attention will first be drawn to the slides' headlines (listed below), with a view to highlighting the presentation's macrostructure.

- Slide 5. Methodological approach
- Slide 6. Context and genre
- Slide 7. Context and genre
- Slide 8. Communicative purposes
- Slide 9. Genre mixing and embedding
- Slide 10. S. reports – Philanthropic fundraising discourse
- Slide 11. Text analysis

Differently from Case 1, the presentation reflects in part the structure of the written genre from which it originates, i.e. the research article. However only some of the headlines fit in the traditional IMRD structure (or its variations), as is the case for 'methodological approach' and 'analysis'. The other headlines, which make perfectly sense at a local level (within the slide), are not so easily accommodated within the IMRD mental model which the audience is induced to expect on the basis of the background knowledge of the genre.

This list of extrapolated headlines also leads to another consideration concerning the relation between presentations' design constraints and their logical organization. The headlines' graphics, i.e. position in the slide, colour and size, associated with the sequentiality of PPT, which makes each slide a self-contained unit juxtaposed to others on an ideal horizontal line, suggests that all the slides stay in a sort of paratactic relation with each other, with no evident hierarchical structure. In actual fact, this is not the case, as revealed by the speech that accompanies the slides, which is displayed below in correspondence with the relevant slide (Figure 2).

As suggested by the script featured next to the slides, the problem does not seem to be that the presentation lacks global coherence. The talk accompanying the slideware is in fact highly cohesive and coherent, with relations between key concepts featured in the slide made explicit by a number of discursive and metadiscursive devices (in italics), meant to help the audience follow the flow of speech. Among them are textual metadiscourse (*As*

regards), discourse markers expressing causality (*because, on the basis of*), numerical introductions (Werlich 1983: 55) with related sequence forms (*There are two.... One..., the other....*). The problem seems rather that the slides fail to highlight global coherence, or are even deceptive in this respect, suggesting, as mentioned before, linear sequentiality among them, rather than a complex hierarchical architecture.

Methodological approach

- ❖ *Genre analysis* (Bhatia 1993, 2004; Swales 1990)
- ❖ *Text analysis* (Werlich 1976)

The methodological approach adopted rests on Bhatia's works, on Swales' work on genre analysis, and also on the text grammar published by Werlich in 1976 for text analysis [no slide]. *First of all* I consider context, *because* that is fundamental for the definition of genre. *So* I focused on authorship, and readership and *then* fundamentally on the communicative purpose of these reports.

Context and genre

- Authorship: FAO in collaboration with IAWG (Inter-Agency Working Group).
Choralization of authorship:
widening of IAWG membership;
Foreword to 2009 SOFI: jointly signed by Jacques Diouf, FAO Director-General, and Josette Sheeran, WFP Executive Director.

As regards authorship, X actually worked in collaboration with Y and the membership of this group increased over the years, *so that* I noticed a choralization of authorship, till the authorship really turned to a global voice, and *indeed* the last edition is signed by the X's Director General and Y's Executive director, *showing how* authors are no longer one organization or group, rather the world community

Context and genre

- Reading public: double level, consisting in
 - a community of practice made up of policy makers and philanthropists
 - the international community (free dissemination of information in *SOFIs* starting from 2000 edition).

And also the reading public is ideally the world community. *There is a double level of reading public. One is the community of practice which originated the report itself, therefore politicians, philanthropists, all human beings concerned with this cause, but also the international community at large is implied as the readers of these reports. And indeed there was an interesting shift from the first edition, in 1999 and the subsequent ones [...].*

Communicative purposes of *SOFI*

- Circulation of statistically updated information about the number, prevalence and location of hungry people as well as the depth of their hunger.
- Calling the international community to arms in the battle against undernutrition and starvation

Then I focussed on the communicative purposes of S. There are two communicative purposes underlying these reports: One is the circulation of data [...] and the other is calling the world to arms in the battle against under-nutrition and starvation.

Genre mixing and embedding

- *State of Food Insecurity*: artful combination of two genres within the vast area of institutional communication:
 - Parallel with the domain of corporate communication: similarities with corporate annual reports.
 - Parallel with philanthropic fundraising discourse.

On the basis of the set two aims, these communicative purposes, I drew two parallels, one with the domain of corporate communication, because I think there are similarities with corporate annual reports, basically because they tell about the results of the past year. And I drew another parallel with philanthropic fundraising discourse, in that both S-reports and fundraising letters are aimed at soliciting a response in the readers.

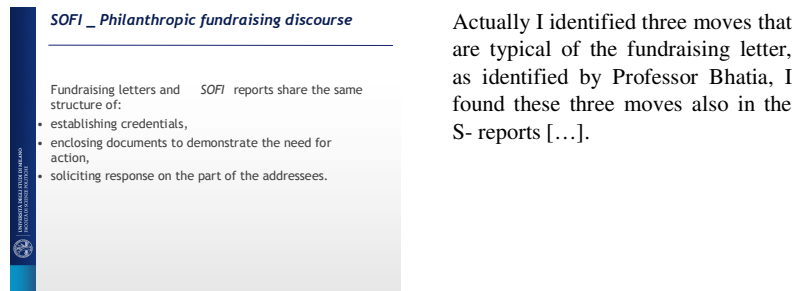


Figure. 2. Sequence of slides from Case 2 explaining the methodological framework.

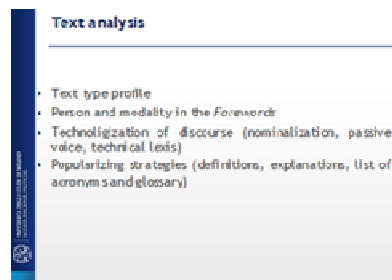
In light of the spoken comment the structure of the presenter's reasoning can be more faithfully represented as follows:

1. Methodological approach
 - 1.1 Context and genre (*As regards authorship...*)
 - 1.2 Context and genre (*and also the reading public...*)
 - 1.3 Communicative purposes (*Then I focussed on the communicative purposes...*)
 - 1.3.1. Genre mixing and embedding (*On the basis of these two purposes I drew two parallels: one with corporate annual reports, the other with philanthropic fundraising discourse.*)
 - 1.3.1.1. S. reports - Philanthropic fundraising discourse
2. Text analysis

Such a representation of the relations between the different discourse components signals at a glance that the reasoning is organized on a complex multilayered structure, with the first point, i.e. *Methodology*, being on the same footing as point 2, *Analysis*, while the headlines in between represent subpoints of the former. More specifically, the methodological approach, which in this case is grounded in genre theory, sets the scope and direction of reasoning: starting from the context, an almost mandatory starting point in genre analysis, the speaker first considers the participants involved in the communicative exchange (orally referred to as 'authorship' and 'reading public'), devoting to each of them a single slide, headed *Genre and context*.

Then she addresses another fundamental category for genre analysis, i.e. the communicative purpose, which is in this case multiple, as signalled by the plural in the headline (*Communicative purposes*), and made explicit by talk, with the speaker mentioning two communicative purposes. The oral comment also reveals that the slide titled '*Genre mixing and embedding*' is a sub-point of the slide '*Communicative purposes*', as pointed out by the anaphoric reference 'these two purposes'. On the basis of the two communicative purposes, the speaker establishes a relation between the object of her analysis and two consolidated genres, belonging respectively to corporate and philanthropic discourse. The latter is then referred to through lexical repetition in the subsequent slide '*Philanthropic fundraising discourse*', which thus in turn qualifies as a sub-point of the slide '*communicative genre and embedding*'. Such a complexity in the presentation's structural organization is completely levelled out in the slides, which thus provide the audience with a streamlined script of what is being said at any moment, but offer hardly any help in the generation of inferences which is crucial for reconstructing global coherence.

The discussion of Case 2, has so far concentrated on the exposition of the methodological approach, where, despite the levelling of structural complexity determined by PPT's design constraints, coherence is partly granted by shared knowledge between the speaker and the audience about the categories of genre analysis, and further enhanced by talk. In the presentation's subsequent section, i.e. textual analysis proper, the picture is quite different. The new section is introduced by an 'agenda' slide, a great favourite in 'How-to' tutorials on PPT, whereby the presenter illustrates the contents coming next in the form of a bullet-point list.



I started with text analysis, after this determination of context, first of all by considering the text-type profile, the text types which are found in the reports [...]. Then I analysed through the categories of person and modality some linguistic features in the Forewords. [...] Then I considered the variety of the English used in the reports, and I noticed that there is a progression towards technologisation of discourse, coupled with the adoption of popularizing strategies.

Figure 3. Sequence of slides from Case 2 introducing the analysis.

In line of principle this feed-forward should favour cognitive processing of the message on the part of the audience, who in this way can prospectively formulate expectations, as well as retrospectively collocate the pieces of information in a broader frame as the presentation proceeds. But in actual fact, is it certain that the receiver is able to recall the agenda after the slide has gone? The literature on inference generation holds that recognizable patterns are those which require the least effort on the part of the receiver, as pointed out by Graesser *et al.* (1994: 374):

Background knowledge structures are activated through pattern-recognition processes by explicit content words, combination of content words, and interpreted text constituents. When a background knowledge structure is very familiar and therefore overlearned, much of its content is automatically activated in working memory (WM) at very little cost to the processing resources in WM.

On this ground, it is here suggested that for an agenda slide to provide effective anchorage, it must be easily recognized and recalled by the audience. In spite of an unusual layout for an agenda slide, the cancer care continuum discussed with regard to Case 1 is an example of this point, being structured on a chronological sequence which is already familiar to the audience, and therefore retrievable without excessive

effort during the process of online inference generation. The agenda slide in Case 2, reported above, on the other hand, cannot be associated with any familiar pattern, containing all new information, whose storage in WM and subsequent activation at any change of slide is not an effortless process. Therefore, if in the case of the cancer care continuum the presenter can move on to the new slide simply saying “for what concerns the role of communication in prevention”, taking for granted that the audience will be able to grasp the rationale behind this logical shift/passage, this is not the case with the agenda slide shown in Figure 3. Here, if the speaker comments on the transition to a new point in the agenda with the analogous expression “as for the categories of person and modality”, he treats it as fitting in a pre-set scheme, which is already familiar to the audience, while in fact this may not be the case. The list of points introduced in the agenda slide do not activate any recognizable pattern in the audience’s working memory, and consequently require an excessive effort for online processing, which can disrupt the attempt to create a meaningful mental model at the highest level of representation. If this happens, the receiver will only be able to construe a coherent representation of what the speaker says at a local level, missing the relation with the global design.

5. Conclusions

Vis-à-vis the criticism often levelled at PPT of fragmenting and impoverishing reasoning, this chapter has focused on the impact of PPT’s affordances on the construction of ‘textual’ coherence, and eventually on comprehension. In order to do so, insights have been borrowed from models of written text comprehension developed within the field of cognitive linguistics, as well as functional grammar and text linguistics. After a preliminary examination of a larger sample, in-depth analysis of two PPT presentations has led to the formulation of some observations, which far from claiming exhaustiveness, are meant to frame the issue of PPT processing in a

linguistics-based perspective. The analysis has confirmed that fragmentation of reasoning is a likely effect of slide-assisted presentations, due to concurring factors, among which there is the impression of linearity created by PPT design constraints and information density. The former risks flattening out logical relations which are in fact hierarchically structured, creating an illusion of simplicity where reasoning is in actual fact complex, as is often the case in academic discourse, while the latter, favoured by PPT affordances, may result in an overload of information which the audience cannot process at the fast pace imposed by the presenter, especially if the content is not organized on the basis of a familiar mental model. Adding to this, the analysis has revealed a risk of circularity, owing to the very fact that when new content is introduced by a new slide, the presenter feels entitled to start talking about it, without making the logical connections with the previous slide explicit. If such an implicit transition can be justified with easily recognisable mental models, this might not be the case with uncommon textual patterns.

These risks can be limited by strategic synergy between text and talk. The analysis carried out here suggests that presentations can be followed more easily if the slides function as a scaffolding frame aimed at providing global coherence, rather than as a written version of the presenter's speech, which would end up contending the attention of the audience. In this respect headlines play a crucial role, as they have the chance of tying the upcoming slide to the foregoing discourse as well as to the macrostructural design of the presentation, allowing the receiver to form a mental model at the highest level of meaning. It is then for talk to provide the 'flesh', elaborating on the streamlined points featured in the body of the slide, while at the same time reinforcing the nexus of inferences prompted by the slides.

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