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The rhetorical structure of technical brochures: A proposal for technical writing

Noelia Ramón[a]*, Belén Labrador[b]

[a]*University of Leon, Campus de Vegazana s/n, Leon 24071, Spain*
[b]*University of Leon, Campus de Vegazana s/n, Leon 24071, Spain*

Abstract

Nowadays, in many professional contexts native-speakers of Spanish are required to write technical texts in English. Texts belonging to the same genre follow certain rhetorical and phraseological conventions. The aim of this paper is to assist in the technical writing of this particular text type through a discourse analysis of their rhetorical structure. A corpus of technical brochures has been compiled and analyzed into moves and steps. Next, the most typical lexico-grammatical structures in each move and step have been extracted. The linguistic information obtained has been used to build specific software to generate technical brochures in English (GITEC).

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Keywords: rhetoric, corpus, technical brochures.

1. Introduction

This paper presents an analysis of the rhetorical structure of technical brochures in English based on corpus data. Texts used in the context of professional environments tend to be written following certain conventions that make them recognizable as belonging to a particular genre. Bhatia defines genre as referring essentially to "language use

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34987291078; fax: +34987291099.
E-mail address: noelia.ramon@unileon.es

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in a conventionalized communicative setting in order to give expression to a specific set of communicative goals of a disciplinary or social institution which gives rise to stable structural forms by imposing constrains on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discoursal resources." (Bhatia 2004: 23). These conventions share an overall structure where all the texts contain a similar arrangement of purposeful communicative units determined by the context of use. Several authors have proposed ways of describing the different functional units within texts that identify them as belonging to a particular genre, including the typical linguistic features associated to each unit (Bhatia 1993, 2004; Swales 1990, 2004; Biber et al. 2007).

It is becoming increasingly common that non-native speakers of English who work in various professional environments and have an intermediate level of English are required to produce texts for specific purposes in their own fields of interest in English; among others, this includes brochures for promoting and selling specific technical products and/or services. This study is prompted by the need to assist these professionals in writing techniques. The ACTRES project currently in progress at the University of León, Spain (http://actres.unileon.es), aims at building software for professional writing in a number of different fields, including medical abstracts, meeting minutes, online advertisements (Labrador et al. forthcoming), and others, since "the participation of individuals in disciplinary cultures demands an informed pragmatic understanding of how to construct and interpret key genres." (Hyland 1998, p. 453).

A corpus of 38 brochures representing a wide range of technical products and/or services has been compiled. The texts were obtained in the form of pdf documents downloaded from the corporate websites available on the Internet. The corpus contains all in all 45,732 words, with an average number of approximately 1.200 words per text. A preliminary analysis of a small number of texts provided a tentative list of rhetorical tags to be used in the process. Swales' move-step method (1990, 2004) was used to tag the texts with rhetorical labels using specific *ad hoc* software. This software enables us to extract concordances in particular moves and steps. According to Biber et al., a move "refers to a section of a text that performs a specific communicative function. Each move not only has its own purpose but also contributes to the overall communicative purpose of the genre" (Biber et al., 2007, p. 23). A move can be further divided into steps to give an account of more detailed rhetorical structures. All these purposes together contribute to shaping the lexical content and style of texts in a particular genre so that all the texts exhibit "various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience" (Swales 1990, p. 58).

The specific phraseology typical of a particular move or step is thus easily retrieved. A total of 8 different moves were identified in technical brochures in English and analyzed in detail to obtain the most relevant lexico-grammatical elements contained in each of them to produce a number of 'model lines' for the writing of brochures.

The aim of this study is to provide a detailed account of the various moves and steps that conform the sub-genre of technical brochures in English, as well as their prototypical linguistic structure, to help professionals in various technical fields in the writing of this specific text type.

2. Data and method

This study is a corpus-based analysis. Our corpus contains 38 technical brochures from a number of different companies comprising 45,732 words. These brochures were all downloaded from official websites freely available on the Internet. All the texts were collected between 2010 and 2011 and dealt with products from different industries including electronics, mechanical engineering, chemistry, information technologies, etc.

The corpus was tagged for rhetorical moves to determine the internal structure of this text type. The identified rhetorical structure was fed into a specifically designed computer program (ACTRES Text Tagger) which enabled us to tag all our texts with the corresponding rhetorical moves. Next, an *ad hoc* browser was built for extracting in each move and step concordances and statistical information that enabled us to gather an inventory of the most recurrent patterns observed. We extrapolated these patterns so that they could be used with other products, designing what we call 'model lines'. These model lines are writing suggestions with the prototypical lexico-grammatical