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A multimodal approach to product presentations

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Abstract

Multimodality approaches discourse focusing on the analysis of the semiotic modes that help fulfil the communicative purpose of a particular genre, which in the case of product presentations is to persuade of the excellence of the product. We argue that a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach is especially suitable for the study of product presentations since persuasion in this genre implies the use of different semiotic modes (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976; Poggi & Pelachaud, 2008). The aim of this paper is to present a methodological approach to the study of product presentations from a MDA perspective along with potential pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Product presentations are one of the most important genres in business. These presentations can vary depending on the communicative situation in which they occur, but they share one main purpose: to persuade the addressee of the excellence of the product.

The aim of this paper is to present a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach that can shed light on the variety of available semiotic modes (i.e. meaning-making resources) that contribute to the communicative purpose of this particular genre (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, Muntigl, 2004). Among these modes three of them are particularly salient in oral genres: gestures and head movements (both kinesic features) (McNeill, 1992; McClave,

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2000; Kendon, 2002, 2004; Querol-Julián, 2011) and intonation (paralinguistic) (Brazil, 1997; Poyatos, 2002). They are virtually unavoidable in any instantiation of oral discourse and they deeply affect the way the message is perceived. This is even more noticeable in the case of persuasive genres, since a lot of persuasion is nonverbal (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976; Woodwall & Burgoon, 1981; Sparks et al., 1998; Poggi & Pelachaud, 2008).

Indeed, previous studies focus on the role of intonation and kinesics on the communicative effect of the message. For example, intonation can be used to present parts of the message as already agreed upon as opposed to open to discussion (Brazil, 1997). In the same way, gestures and head shakes can be used to discourage potential counterclaims (Kendon, 2004). Results of these studies suggest that more attention should be paid to the role of kinesics and paralinguistic features as key elements in the defining traits of the genre of product presentations.

The example of product presentation selected for this paper is the presentation of the iPhone. The presenter, Steve Jobs, has been described as an example to be imitated for effective presentations (Gallo, 2008). The present research springs from the hypothesis that the effectiveness of this presentation resides in the skillful integration of kinesic, paralinguistic and linguistic features in the expression of persuasion.

2. From traditional approaches to genre to MDA

Probably one of the most widely accepted definitions of genre is the one provided by Swales (1990, p. 34)

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.

Swales (1990) perceives genres as a communicative event with a recognizable communicative purpose. This definition has proved very influential and many authors (Paré and Smart, 1994; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Paltridge, 1995; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002; Virtanen & Halmari, 2005 among others) have developed and expanded on the concepts introduced by Swales. Figure 1 summarises some of the aspects that most frequently recur in the literature about genre:

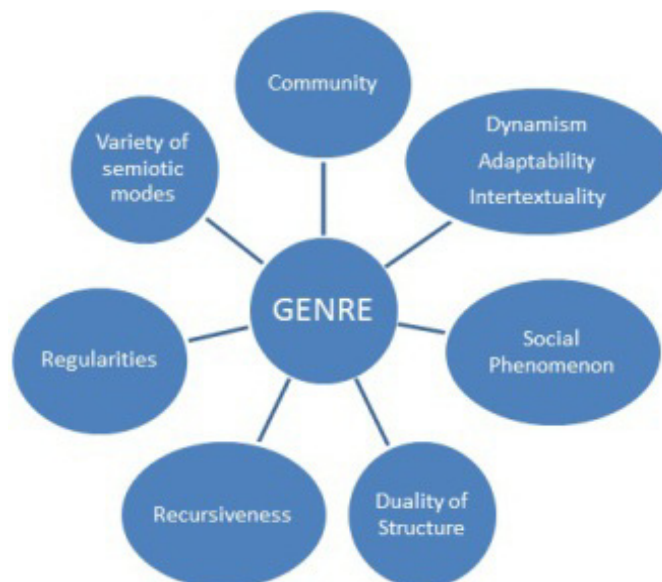


Figure 1. Relevant aspects in the concept of genre

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