



A multi-level contrastive analysis of promotional strategies in specialised discourse

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ABSTRACT

As a consequence of globalisation, small to medium-sized companies are increasingly seeking to promote their products further afield than their home markets. This entails cross-linguistic communication needs, and results in the emergence of text types not thus far addressed in the literature. One such case is that of the herbal tea promotional text (HTPT), in which a herbal tea is described and evaluated with persuasive purposes in mind. This article aims to assist Spanish professionals in writing such texts in English, and to this end will conduct a cross-linguistic multi-level analysis to identify the rhetorical macrostructure and informational-persuasive linguistic features of HTPTs, characterising the promotional strategies that serve to convince a customer to try the product. We carried out two English-Spanish contrastive analyses using ACTEaS_Promo, a purpose-built comparable corpus. Adopting a move-analysis method, the rhetorical analysis reveals a six-move macrostructure, with further steps within. Focusing on the step 'marketing statement', we identify pervasive language resources with a primarily persuasive function. Our interpretation of such features reveals six underlying promotional strategies, some of which show statistically different behaviour across the two languages involved, English and Spanish. Whereas English HTPTs seem to favour emotion-laden strategies, Spanish tends to rely on reason-based strategies.

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1. Introduction

Promotion is bound up with a broad concept of advertising, whereby “mere information about a product is not sufficient to trigger a consumer reaction” (Janoschka, 2004: 88). In other words, promotional genres are associated with descriptive text types whose goal is to persuade. As such, promotional genres might be classified as representative of the informational-persuasive register (Biber & Zhang, 2018). Within the promotional realm we find core genres, like advertisements or book/DVD blurbs, which have received considerable scholarly attention (Bednarek, 2014; Cook, 2001; Gea Valor, 2005), but also more recent ones, such as web-based genres, which have seen far less linguistic exploration, promoting a specific call (Anthony, 2016) for academia to meet the industry's needs for specialised communication in English. The present study sets out to meet these needs, and the text type under study, the Herbal Tea Promotional Text (HTPT), can be understood as an instance of “descriptions with an intent to sell” (Biber & Zhang, 2018, p. 102). In that their ultimate purpose is selling, such

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promotional genres resort mainly to a positive evaluation of a given product, which would thus be described with an intended perlocutionary effect of persuading the customer to purchase such a product.

The role of English for promotional purposes in a globalised world can hardly be overstated (Nickerson, 2005). In fact, the present study is framed within a larger project that aims to meet the communication needs of Spanish professionals who are seeking to promote their products through the English language. As identified by the ACTRES research team,¹ more and more local manufacturers in the food and drink industry in the region of Castile and León (Spain) are trying to enter the global market (Labrador & Ramón, 2015; Rabadán, Colwell, & Sanjurjo-González, 2016). Consequently, there is “a growing need for linguistic services, not only direct translation and/or interpreting services, but also services involving assistance in professional writing for various purposes” (Labrador & Ramón, 2015, p. 226). Echoing Anthony’s call for academia to meet the needs of industry (Anthony, 2016), ACTRES researchers have embarked on various analyses of specialised sub-genres to develop corpus-based tools that assist Spanish professionals in the writing of food promotional texts, including HTPTs.

Drawing on Bhatia’s Multiperspective Model (Bhatia, 2004), discourse can be approached as ‘text’, ‘genre’, ‘professional discourse’ and ‘social practice’. Far from being mutually exclusive, these four dimensions are complementary and even overlap to a certain extent (Bhatia, 2008).

Accordingly, the text type under scrutiny in the current study, HTPT as ‘text’ represents a promotional register, which is here understood as containing those pervasive linguistic features (Biber & Conrad, 2009) that are frequently used to describe a product in such a way that the customer is persuaded to buy it. Here, this informational-persuasive register will be analysed as it appears in online food descriptions.

As ‘genre’, HTPT displays a (multimodal) macrostructure divided into moves and steps, where persuasive and descriptive functions are served through a variety of resources (cf. 3.1). HTPT would fit within a colony (Bhatia, 2008) of promotional genres where persuasion, together with description, informs the customer about a given product, in this case herbal teas. Within this colony, we find traditional promotional genres such as advertisements, but also modern-day, online, multimodal genres that have arisen in the technological era to satisfy new and emerging professional needs (Bhatia, 2005). In this regard, attempts by small and medium-sized Spanish companies to promote their products internationally, as mentioned above, have stimulated interest in online product descriptions. Thus, if we had to visualize a taxonomy within such a colony of promotional genres, we would find a primary branch of ‘sister’ genres that range from traditional ones, like ‘ads’, to modern-day ones, like ‘online product description’. This latter genre, in turn, may serve as a parent genre, classifiable into different sub-genres that promote various types of products, such as ‘food’. At a lower level of text specificity, the HTPT would be a promotional subgenre where a specific food is promoted through the description of different attributes, such as origin, taste, appearance, and ingredients, amongst others. In sum, as regards its communicative purpose, the HTPT is a modern-day promotional subgenre which is itself a member of the online food description subgenre.

To the best of our knowledge, no study has thus far accounted for the ‘online product description’ as a parent genre, although previous research has examined related sub-genres, such as wine tasting notes (López-Arroyo & Roberts, 2014), online cheese descriptions (Labrador & Ramón, 2015), and biscuit descriptions (Pizarro, 2018). These studies attest to the fact that linguistic commonalities found across all these different text types reflect a food promotional register. In this sense, descriptive and persuasive resources merge to describe the food-product as well as to motivate the consumer to sample it. Notwithstanding similarities in communicative purposes, topic-specific register features may emerge. As acknowledged by Biber and Conrad (2009, p. 46): “topic is the most important situational factor influencing vocabulary choice; the words used in a text are to a large extent determined by the topic of the text [...] both at the level of general topic domains [...] and very specific topical domains”, just as ‘food’ and ‘herbal tea’ can be seen to exemplify, respectively. On the other hand, differences seem to occur at the rhetorical level, in that the macrostructural realisation of the text types noted above is not exactly the same. Nevertheless, equivalent moves are observed (cf. 3.1), which would strengthen the notion that a parent genre exists, this on the assumption that flexibility in genre structure is itself a defining criterion of what a genre is (Bhatia, 2008).

‘Professional discourse’ and ‘social practice’ are closely intertwined; as an instance of the former, the promotional texts described here are produced by a specific ‘professional community’. Moreover, discourse production takes place in accordance with a set of conventions that have previously been established in, and are thus expected within, the ‘social context’ where communication occurs. Exploring the professional community or addressors of the HTPT further, it is, theoretically, the members of the marketing department of a given brand that are expected to produce it, in that they are familiar with advertising strategies and marketing devices that accurately create the desires and satisfy the needs of their potential customers. In practice, however, the degree of expertise and knowledge of these marketers might not always be sufficient to deal with specific text types such as the HTPT, let alone with its purely linguistic aspects.² In such a situation, large companies can often afford to hire professional writers or freelance communication advisors. Whereas this may be a simple, albeit costly, solution, these addressors would nevertheless need to be aware of genre-specific structure and register-specific linguistic features to comply with the abovementioned conventions. The likelihood that these professionals would be fully familiar

¹ Project LE227U13. ACTRES: *Análisis Contrastivo y Traducción English-Spanish/ESpecializada* (English-Spanish/Specialized Contrastive Analysis and Translation).

² Personal communication with L. Martínez, marketing department of Pharmadus Botanicals S.L., a herbal tea manufacturer, with whom the ACTRES Research Team signed a collaborative agreement for the research Project LE227U13.

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