



Rhetorical structure and persuasive language in the subgenre of online advertisements



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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to reveal the rhetorical structure and the linguistic features of persuasive language in online advertisements of electronic products. Nowadays, the bulk of e-commerce is carried out in English, and it is often the case that non-native speakers are required to write different text types for various professional purposes, including promotional texts. This need has prompted the present study and the results have been used to build software to help native speakers of Spanish when writing promotional texts in English. The analysis reveals that these texts typically have two main rhetorical moves: one for identifying the product and another one for describing it. The latter move is further divided into two steps: one including objective features (size, weight, etc.) and the other focusing on persuading the potential customer. This is mainly achieved with the use of a relatively informal style (imperatives, contractions, clipping, subject/auxiliary omissions, etc.) and lexico-grammatical elements conveying positive evaluation (multiple modification, multal quantifying expressions, etc.). The findings show that online advertisements of electronic products may be regarded as a specific subgenre with particular macro- and microlinguistic characteristics, which have been identified in this paper for technical writing assistance.

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1. Introduction

It is a well-known fact that for non-native speakers a good command of English is a must in our globalized world. English has been acting as a *lingua franca* for several decades now in all areas of intercultural communication, not only in the fields of science and technology or in academic research, but also in everyday activities such as trade, education, tourism, personal exchanges between individuals with different mother tongues, and so on. Furthermore, many of these activities are carried out on the internet, for instance, e-learning, online shopping or social networks, with technological progress providing users with more and more sophisticated devices which enable them to engage in these types of communicative acts anywhere and at any time.

It is also becoming increasingly common that native speakers of Spanish 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. The present study is prompted by this specific need: to assist these professionals in writing techniques. The ACTRES project (<http://actres.unileon.es>) currently in progress at the University of León, Spain, aims at building software for professional writing in a number of fields, including medical abstracts, meeting minutes and online advertisements, among others,

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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).

The writing of online advertisements requires knowledge of the typical rhetorical structure of this text type as well as of the linguistic resources available in English to persuade the reader to buy certain products online. An adequate selection of lexical items and a proper combination and distribution of objective and persuasive information are crucial for directing the reader towards taking the decision to purchase a particular item. This paper deals with the rhetorical structure and the expression of persuasion in English as found in online advertisements of visual electronic devices that are used in leisure activities: digital cameras, video-cameras, television sets, e-book readers and digital frames. These products share one characteristic: they all possess a display screen and therefore have a number of terms and specifications in common, making them more easily comparable.

A corpus-based methodology is adopted in this study: an ad hoc English–Spanish comparable corpus of 100 advertisements of small electronic devices was compiled to study the persuasive language found. The working procedure included several stages. First, the texts included in the corpus were tagged for their rhetorical moves following Swales' move-step model (Swales, 1990, 2004) to enable cross-linguistic comparison. Secondly, a specially designed browser was used to extract lexical data by move, step or substep. Finally, the persuasive phraseology in English in the step called ‘persuasion’ was analyzed.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The concepts of genre and move-step rhetorical analysis

As Mauranen states, “culture influences writing habits in an important way. This is because writing clearly is a cultural object, existing only in the social world of humans, as a product of social activities.” (Mauranen, 1993, p. 4). 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. These conventions share an overall structure where all the texts contain the same rhetorical elements with similar purposes in the same, or nearly the same, order. This means that each discourse community develops a particular internal structure for each text type. For example, all the online advertisements in our corpus share a similar arrangement of purposeful communicative units determined by the context of use.

Within the field of discourse analysis, the study of different genres has been approached from a number of linguistic perspectives, and we will follow a functional view in this paper for the study of the subgenre of online advertisements. Functional approaches to language have a long-standing tradition in British scholarship (Firth, 1957; Halliday, 2004). The importance of the context, the participants in the communicative event, and the field of discourse are all aspects of language variation which highlight the social function of language as the dominant feature of human communication. Within this framework, John Swales set the foundations of the study of discourse genres with his seminal work on the introduction of research articles (1990), establishing the communicative purpose as the main feature shared by all the texts belonging to the same genre. More recently Bhatia has defined genre as referring essentially to “language use 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 constraints on the use of lexico-grammatical as well as discursive resources” (Bhatia, 2004, p. 23).

A number of approaches have attempted to describe the communicative units in particular genres and to provide a framework for studying rhetorical structures in different text types. One of these approaches is Swales' move-step rhetorical analysis, which proposes a hierarchical classification involving *moves* and *steps*, which other authors have further developed or adapted for their own purposes, studying different sections of research papers (Brett, 1994; Dudley-Evans, 1994; Salager-Meyer, 1990) or other genres like business letters (Bhatia, 1993; Hiranburana, 1996; Vergaro, 2004; Zhu, 2001), grant proposals (Connor & Mauranen, 1999), application letters (Upton & Connor, 2001) and letters of recommendation (Precht, 2000). Many of these rhetorical studies have been carried out from a cross-linguistic perspective involving English and Spanish and focusing on different genres, such as scientific abstracts (López-Arroyo, Fernández-Antolín, & de-Felipe-Boto, 2007; Martín-Martín, 2003, 2005), academic book reviews (Suárez & Moreno, 2008), medical research papers (Williams, 2012), football match reports (Díez-Fernández, 2009) and so on.

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, Connor, & Upton, 2007, p. 23). A move can be further divided into steps and substeps 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). In this paper we have followed Swales' move-step model for the rhetorical analysis of online advertisements in English.

2.2. The subgenre of online advertisements

Within the genre of advertisements, we may consider online advertisements as a particular discourse subgenre, along with other subgenres including print, TV and radio advertisements. Additionally, Janoschka points out less common carriers

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