



Adaptability in online consumer reviews: Exploring genre dynamics and interactional choices

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Available online 6 April 2017

Abstract

This paper explores 'adaptability' (Verschuieren, 1999) as manifest in online consumer reviews, an increasingly popular and non-trivial mode of computer-mediated communication which has so far attracted little interest among linguists of various orientations (but see Vásquez, 2014). The focus is on genre dynamics in reviews of linguistics textbooks, which lie at the nexus of academic and promotional genres. As writers of reviews will have to grapple with some degree of 'context collapse' (Marwick and Boyd, 2010), the article includes an investigation of audience design and efforts to socially authenticate reviewer personae. Findings indicate a major divide in the data between topic-oriented and author-oriented reviews. In contrast, audience-oriented reviews are practically missing; rather, imagined audiences tend to appear in the texts implicitly as similar to the reviewer, suggesting conceptions of a mass audience as well as specific groupings of general audiences. On top of the technological and communicative affordances of the retail site, I propose a notion of 'pragmatic' affordances, tied to the ingredients of Verschuieren's pragmatic theory of adaptability, i.e., its locus, processes and status. The study increases the understanding of language as an adaptive tool in self-commodifying online environments.
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Keywords: Adaptability; Online consumer review; Genre; Writer visibility; Audience design

1. Introduction

Online consumer reviews constitute an important mode of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) advertising for companies and users (Dwesar and Rao, 2014; Gretzel and Yoo, 2008; Moe and Schweidel, 2014; Vásquez, 2014). Large samples of written eWOM discourse have been submitted to study to explore their impact on marketing practices. It has been shown, for instance, that consumer rating metrics fail to provide reliable information (e.g. Kozinets, 2016; Wulff and Hardt, 2014). Further, studies of user appreciation have indicated that the longer the review, the more interesting it will be to its readers (Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006; Filieri, 2015; Lin et al., 2005). These findings suggest a focus on the written review itself, a linguistic nexus of the genres employed through which users are 'channelled' (Myers, 2000:188) to share information, attitude and opinion on a public site. Few studies, however, exist of the use of language as an adaptive tool in commodifying digital environments where readers are invited to turn into writers (but see Vásquez, 2014). Large-scale quantitative studies have, for instance, explored the expression of emotion and attitude towards particular brands (e.g. Constant et al., 2009; Liu, 2012). Yet, posters of reviews make situated choices, conscious or not, thus constantly re-engaging with genres in drawing from linguistic resources to facilitate text structuring in the particular context. Users rely on an open-ended repertoire of genres, familiar to them from offline or other online environments, adapted to fit the technological affordances of a given eWOM site, or brand-new genres displaying affordances of their own (Herring, 2013; Virtanen, 2010). Writers of

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online reviews will have to grapple with some degree of ‘context collapse’ (Marwick and boyd, 2010) in relation to audience design and efforts to provide ‘social authentication’ for reviewer personae (Gill, 2013; Vásquez, 2014). The increasingly popular eWOM discourse displays many facets of ‘adaptability’ (Verschuieren, 1999; Verschuieren and Brisard, 2002) in relation to the affordances of various modes of computer-mediated communication (CMC; see Herring et al., 2013).

Verschuieren (1999: 61) defines adaptability as

“the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs.”

The ingredients of a pragmatic perspective, for Verschuieren (1999: 65–69), lie in the (i) locus (i.e. context/structure), (ii) processes (i.e. dynamics) and (iii) status (i.e. salience) of meaningful functioning of language. To investigate language as an adaptable phenomenon, it is thus necessary to (i) identify the contextual correlates of adaptability and situate them in relation to various structural objects of adaptability, including principles of structuring; (ii) account for the unfolding of adaptation processes in interaction, their development over time; and (iii) consider the salience of adaptation processes. In the present study, the locus is found with users, virtual communities, commodifying environments, technological mediation, CMC modes, languages, genres, styles, text structuring and other aspects of language use. The dynamics of adaptability arises from users communicating through offline discourses on a one-to-many basis. And its salience is manifest in reflexivity made explicit as users leave linguistic traces of metapragmatic awareness of adaptability in these contexts.

The present concern is with adaptability at a nexus of promotional and academic genres, with the aim of accounting for the text-structuring and interactional decisions, conscious or not, displayed in written user/consumer-generated reviews on a major retail website, *Amazon*, of textbooks in linguistics. Vásquez (2014: 4) characterizes writers of online consumer reviews as ‘prosumers’ (a term coined in the 1980s by futurist Alvin Toffler); in other words, these users are both consumers and producers of online content, typically without remuneration (whether they have received a product is indicated automatically on the site under investigation). Users tend to be readers of reviews before starting to write them, and more users read than write reviews.

After a discussion of key notions in Section 2 and the presentation of the aim, scope and data in Section 3, findings are approached from the perspectives of genre dynamics and the text-structuring patterns identified in a corpus of online consumer reviews, in Sections 4–6. Section 7 pays special attention to the tricky issues of writer visibility and audience design, and traces linguistic cues to reviewers’ metapragmatic awareness of technological affordances as well as the communicative affordances suggested in the retailer’s guidelines for ‘great reviews’. Section 8 provides a concluding discussion, starting with a summarizing figure of the dimensions investigated. The focus is on the pragmatic affordances emerging from the nexus of genres that prosumers put to use and through which they are channelled to share information, attitude and opinion in this commercial environment. The discussion of adaptability highlights the impact of some degree of context collapse as prosumers will be observed to adopt one of two opposite strategies of self-branding for the social authentication of reviewer reliability and to include in the review implicit or explicit information concerning their audience conceptions.

2. Key notions

In addition to adaptability, another key notion is ‘affordances’, which may be technological, communicative, or, as will be suggested shortly, pragmatic in nature. The term was coined by psychologist James J. Gibson for a theory of affordances.

“The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, whether for good or ill. . . . I mean by [affordance] something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.” (Gibson, 1979: 127)

The term has been subsequently appropriated for use in the study and design of the human–computer interface as well as investigations of mediated communication, followed by many other fields of enquiry. In the present context it is interpreted as referring to a combination of the possibilities and constraints that technological environments offer their users, i.e. ‘technological affordances’, and what users make of these communication situations, i.e. ‘communicative affordances’ (Hutchby, 2001, 2014). On top of this distinction, I propose a notion of ‘pragmatic affordances’, connected to the ingredients of the pragmatic theory of adaptability, to refer to the possibilities and constraints related to its locus, processes and status as these enable users to “approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs” (Verschuieren, 1999: 61).

The written consumer reviews appearing on the retail site represent a particular mode of CMC. To what extent they may also be understood as constituting a reconfigured genre, independently of, or jointly with, other kinds of (consumer) reviews (written, audio and video), is an issue that lies beyond the scope of this article. It is, however, notable that the traditional genre label ‘review’ is here put to new use by the site owners, prosumers and their multiple audiences, who may be argued to form a discourse community (see Swales, 1990). For the written consumer review to be considered a genre, it should constitute a class of communicative events sharing some communicative purposes, medium, audience design, and to an

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