Disseminating and constructing academic knowledge in online scholarly journals: An analysis of virtual special issue introductions

Pilar Mur-Dueñas *

Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Digital media are promoting the appearance of new genres and practices which contribute to the construction and dissemination of academic knowledge in English, which is used as a vehicle for global communication. International online scholarly journals in some areas are collecting previously published articles in that same journal on a particular topic as a Virtual Special Issue (VSI), presented by an Introduction by its editors. It is the aim of this paper to explore this new academic digital genre by analysing the communicative purpose and the rhetorical macrostructure of a corpus of VSI Introductions in the field of Business Management and Marketing. Interpersonality features will be explored to unveil how they help VSI Introduction authors to portray themselves as knowledgeable members of the discipline to a potentially heterogeneous audience as well as to create a positive image of the journal, making it a prominent site of publication in the field. The digital medium allows journals in general and editors and authors of the published texts in particular to gain e-visibility allowing for the dissemination of academic knowledge in a global context through new academic genres.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The way we currently interact is affected and effected by technologies, not only in the personal, but also in the professional sphere, including the academic one. Computer-Mediated Discourse (CMD) has an increasingly important role in scholars' professional and discursive practices. Scholars can now make the most of the Internet, in which a great deal of professional communication takes places in English, which is often used as a lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2011; Mauranen, 2012) to render their research visible and accessible. The digital medium broadens the context of academic interaction among scholars internationally, between academics and other professionals, and between academics and society more broadly. As Puschmann (2015: 26) underlines, online scholarly communication can "blur the boundary between different, previously seemingly neatly divided modes of scholarly discourse and between different, previously clearly delineated stakeholder roles". Strategies to promote scholars' e-visibility of their research are, therefore, necessary and worth analysing. In this context, online scholarly journals are evolving and new genres are being hosted in their homepages, which can contribute to increasing their

impact and reputation, and the research published therein. The focus of the research presented here is on one of these digital genres, the Virtual Special Issue (VSI), and more specifically, the Introduction that accompanies it. Digital academic practices need to be further explored as they are increasingly relevant within academics' professional practices allowing them to communicate and interact globally with the international discourse community and with other stakeholders. CMD research has mostly focused on the personal sphere. There is a need to further analyse professional, and more specifically scholarly, online discourse. As such, this study will contribute to the analysis of academic online discourse to gain an insight into the use scholars are making of digital genres and platforms to promote and disseminate their research.

Academic journals have now long been accessed electronically. Online scholarly journals have not only incorporated technological affordances to varying degrees but have also triggered the adaptation and evolution of the research article as a genre (Pérez-Llantada, 2016; Yang, 2016, 2017), including hyperlinks, interactive tables and figures, or the addition of highlights, visual or graphical abstracts, audioslides, and author videos, among others. This shift from print to digital, web-mediated communication has no doubt influenced how journal issues and articles are read and "consumed". When accessing academic online journals, scholars can take varied and complex reading paths, along which

* Address: Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Facultad de Educación, Campus Universitario, C/ Pedro Cerbuna 12, 50009 Zaragoza, Spain.
   E-mail address: pmur@unizar.es

they apply different modes and cognitive capacities, moving from a navigating mode (Askehave and Nielsen, 2005) prompted by generic and specific links to a reading mode when locating information or texts of their interest.

VSIs can only be accessed on-line. No offline equivalent exists, although they bear resemblance to more traditional or long-standing, originally offline scholarly genres, such as the journal editorial. As such, they can be considered an adapted genre of communication on the web (Crowston and Williams, 2000) or reconfigured (Herring, 2013) from other traditional academic genres. The communicative purpose and function of VSIs is explicitly indicated on the journal websites from which the dataset on which the study draws has been compiled[1]:

> "Virtual Special Issues (VSIs) aggregate papers on a common topic from across the SMS [Strategic Management Society] journals, typically with an introductory framing by the editors of each VSI. As such, VSIs help summarize and integrate research themes from SMS scholarship, while highlighting potential paths for ongoing research".
> [*Strategic Management Journal* website: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/(ISSN)1097-0266/homepage/VirtualIssuesPage.html]

> "The intention of these collections is to bring together a selection of choice papers from across the journal's archive, centred around key themes and important debates in the field".
> [*Marketing Theory* journal website (http://mtq.sagepub.com/site/virtual_special_issues/v_special_issues_index.xhtml)]

The aim of this paper is to explore digital academic discourse and to examine how scholars are making an increasing use of the technology to promote themselves and their work and gain visibility, by focusing on VSI Introductions in the field of Business Management and Marketing. The study seeks to analyse the purpose of these digital texts, their rhetorical organisation and the characteristic lexico-grammatical and discursive features, especially of an interpersonal nature. It seeks to address the following research questions:

- What are the communicative purpose and rhetorical organisation of the VSI introductions?
- What are the most characteristic interpersonality features in the VSI introductions which contribute to fulfilling that purpose?
- How can the rhetorical organisation and interpersonality features be interpreted in connection to the context of interaction and the digital medium employed?

To provide answers to these research questions, a combination of theoretical frameworks will be applied, namely, Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), Genre Analysis and Interpersonality.

2. Theoretical framework

Herring's (2004) language-focused approach to the analysis of CMDA comprises four domains or levels of language, namely, structure, meaning, interaction and social behaviour, which will be considered in the ensuing analysis. These domains or levels range from smaller to larger units of analysis that Herring proposes for the study of computer-mediated texts; they include syntactic (structural) and semantic phenomena. This approach

has been applied, for instance, to the analysis of two learning environments (the Linguist List and the Inquiry Learning Forum) in search of evidence for the existence of virtual communities (Herring, 2004). As Herring stresses, it is necessary to operationalise the concepts so that rigor is established. In this study, the VSI Introduction will be analysed in terms of its structure (genre characteristics: rhetorical organisation), meaning (communicative purpose), interaction (having a potentially global audience in mind), and social behaviour (specific authors' choices of rhetorical strategies, especially interpersonality features). Herring's approach will be applied to digital discourse in the professional sphere, and more specifically to the analysis of academic digital genres. In so doing, other frameworks, concepts or models are to be considered. The relationship between these is illustrated in Table 1.

Also, the analysis will draw on Herring's (2007) situation factors, which condition variation in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). These situation factors are: participation structure, participant characteristics, purpose, topic or theme, tone, activity, norms, and code. They will be applied to the specific analysis of the digital genre and considered for the interpretation of the findings obtained when analysing the dataset.

CMDA applied to academic digital practices will draw on Genre Analysis (Swales, 1990, 2004; Bhatia, 2004), which focuses on the study of texts with a specific set of communicative purposes, as being recognized by a given discourse community and as situated in a particular socio-cultural context. Applying Genre Analysis can be enlightening to analyse digital discourse in general and academic digital discourse in particular. As Heyd (2016: 88) outlines, "Genre analysis – that is, a systematic assessment of how textual artefacts group together – provides an essential and useful way to make meaningful abstractions about online discourse, and to uncover and describe its structural features and their communicative purposes and effects".

With the advent of CMC and digital media, Genre Analysis has necessarily evolved (Crowston and Williams, 2000; Giltrow and Stein, 2009) to take into account the affordances they bring with them. As such, VSI Introductions will be analysed bearing in mind that the digital medium allows users to apply a navigating and a reading mode (Askehave and Nielsen, 2005). When taking a navigating mode, attention is paid to the links included in the journal that readers can click on to take them into and out of the VSI Introductions (through a process of hypertext reading). When taking a reading mode, on the other hand, a zoom in lens is applied to the digital genre in particular looking at its specific rhetorical structure, unveiling the different sections and communicative purposes, as well as the rhetorical strategies used and discursive choices made to achieve those purposes.

Further, this digital genre will be studied taking an Interpersonality Analysis. Interpersonality is understood as an "umbrella concept that encompasses diverse linguistic phenomena contributing to the rhetorical dimension of academic texts" (Mur-Dueñas et al., 2010: 83). It will be shown how interpersonality features are deployed in this digital genre as a result of specific social phenomena, especially in relation to the projection of a competent, professional voice in a particular expert disciplinary field and at the same time establishing an appropriate relationship with the potential readers in a context of global communication. The use of interpersonality features also contributes to creating a positive image of the scholarly journal itself. The publication of such VSIs may ultimately aim at e-marketing not only academic knowledge and the protagonists of their construction (i.e. the scholars), but also the scholarly journal.

---

[1] No definition of the particular communicative purpose of the genre is included in the third journal *Management Learning* website (see Section 2 for further information of the compilation of texts).