

PROMOTIONAL GENRES OF ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: The globalization of tertiary education has accelerated in the past two decades and the changing political context in academic life notices the pressures arising from the conflict between traditional academic work and contemporary demands also in the changing Europe. The purpose of this paper is to show some tendencies in selected genres of academic discourse that have been identified as signals of the reflection of promotional culture and marketization strategies in higher education institutions. The main focus is on institutional promotional strategies and self-promotion of academics in all aspects of the university environment, or rather on promotional genres at various levels of university practice. Some cross-cultural differences resulting from different academic and cultural traditions and conventions have also been observed.

Key words: academic discourse, tertiary education, marketization of academia, promotional genres, self-promotion

Introduction

The mission of higher education institutions has been formed worldwide by hundreds of years of tradition, and supported by the institutions' respective national legal systems. The generally recognized priority tasks and activities performed at higher education institutions are education and research and organization of respective activities, including one's own professional academic career. The changing political context in academic life notices the pressures arising from the conflict between traditional academic work and contemporary demands also in the changing Europe. In the light of the Lisbon strategy the European Universities are aware of the need to be ready to reform their own strategies so as to attract students and survive increasing competition.

The present paper will address the question of marketization of universities and observe how respective promotional elements permeate written genres of academic discourse. The main focus will be on institutional promotional strategies and self-promotion of academics in all aspects of university environment, or rather on promotional genres at various levels of university practice.

1. Marketization of academia

The globalization of tertiary education has affected European higher education systems with a consequent impact on introducing new degree structures in order to harmonize education systems and make them more transparent and homogeneous. As Julia Kwong points out that "[n]ot only has the distinctiveness of national educational curricula become blurred; educational policies, priorities, and administrative styles of different nations look increasingly alike" (2000: 43). The growing tendency towards marketization has been noticed by many researchers who try to find out its impact on individual genres of academic discourse (eg. Fairclough 1993, Bhatia 2004, Askehave 2007).

Norman Fairclough in his most cited study describes the marketization of discursive practices in British universities of the '90s. What he means is "the restructuring of the order of discourses on the model of more central market organizations" and that "the genre of consumer advertising has been colonizing professional and public service orders of discourse" (*Critical Discourse Analysis and the Marketization of Public Discourse: the Universities, 1993, 143*).

After major reforms of higher education and cutbacks in the funding in early 1990s, this was a new situation and the universities were expected and encouraged to be more business-like, raise more funds from private sources and as a result of that see students as their customers "buying" their products and services. This only reflected the general reconstruction of social life on a market basis, and did not apply only to the countries that had been used to free market practices, but also to the countries with centrally planned economies not so long ago who gradually accepted the free market economy, including Slovakia.

Financial restrictions of educational funding slowly change the nature of education, "schools of all levels have abandoned the traditional view that advertising is inappropriate and unbecoming to education. Instead, like business firms, they package and advertise their offerings in both the printed and electronic media to attract clients" (Kwong 2000: 89-90). As a result of this, new discursive practices can be observed in the contemporary culture that has been characterised as "promotional" or "consumer" generating a number of "new hybrid partly promotional genres" (cf. Fairclough 1993).

2. Genres of written academic discourse

The study of academic discourse in English has a relatively short history. By now, there is no doubt that English is recognized as the universal language of science and international communication in the world of globalization. Critics of the globalization of English see this phenomenon as culturally intrusive and hegemonic, but whether one likes it or not English has unquestionably achieved global status as the world's lingua franca. It is the leading language for the dissemination of scientific, technological, and academic information and is without doubt the universal language of the academic world.

Academic discourse is represented by a wide range of text-types that are used by members of academic communities in their daily routine, when fulfilling their educational, research and administrative tasks. It is characteristic for a university that it is a place where people read, write, exchange information and respond to a variety of texts in the context of their disciplines or other aspects of their academic life. It is really a myriad of genres of communication that universities create and use to organize their work.

Studies of academic discourse have focused mainly on research genres and less attention has been paid to other areas of academic work such as teaching and administration. My previous studies (Stašková 2005, 2006) attempted to identify the genres of academic and organizational discourse written in English that are used in all areas of academic communication in Slovak academic settings, the main focus being on graduate students, and academic and administrative staff. A brief overview is presented below.

Written genres of academic discourse

Education:

- *Teaching process (textbooks, teaching materials, handouts)*
- *Learning process (student writing – essays, reports, term papers, projects, theses, dissertations)*

Research Process – proper

- *Abstracts, Introductions (research articles, dissertations, conferences, grant proposals);*

- *Research articles proper, reports, discussions, short communications, monographs;*
- *Conference presentations, conference posters, PPT presentations*
- *Reviews/Book blurbs*

Research support – (semi) occluded genres

- *Grant proposals*
- *Reviews*
- *CV*
- *Letter of recommendation*
- *Letter of endorsement*
- *Applications (job, study period)*
- *Reports*
- *Professional (e-mail/fax) communication*
- *Academic memos*

Organization

- *University mission statements*
- *European/Erasmus policy statements*
- *University course catalogues*
- *Information packages*
- *Course descriptions*
- *Syllabi*

The list does not claim to be comprehensive and, as can be noticed, due to a considerable overlap, some of the genres could fall within more than one category, for example theses and dissertations are similar to research articles and other written research genres. The texts are often published (adapted or not) as research articles, textbooks or monographs. On the other hand, in the case of compilation theses the procedure is opposite. The texts are first published as research articles and later a collection is submitted as a thesis or dissertation.

3. Promotional genres of academic discourse

The genres of academic discourse identified above illustrate the traditional concept of genre within a genre-analytic approach. Genre theory helps us to understand how academic discourse is used in university settings.

The most cited and still most comprehensive working definition of genre was elaborated by Swales (1990: 58).

A genre comprises a class of communicative events the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.

Communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and one that operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action. In addition to purpose, exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content and intended audience. If all high probability expectations are realized, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community. The genre names inherited and produced by discourse communities and imported by others constitute valuable ethnographic communication, but typically need further validation.

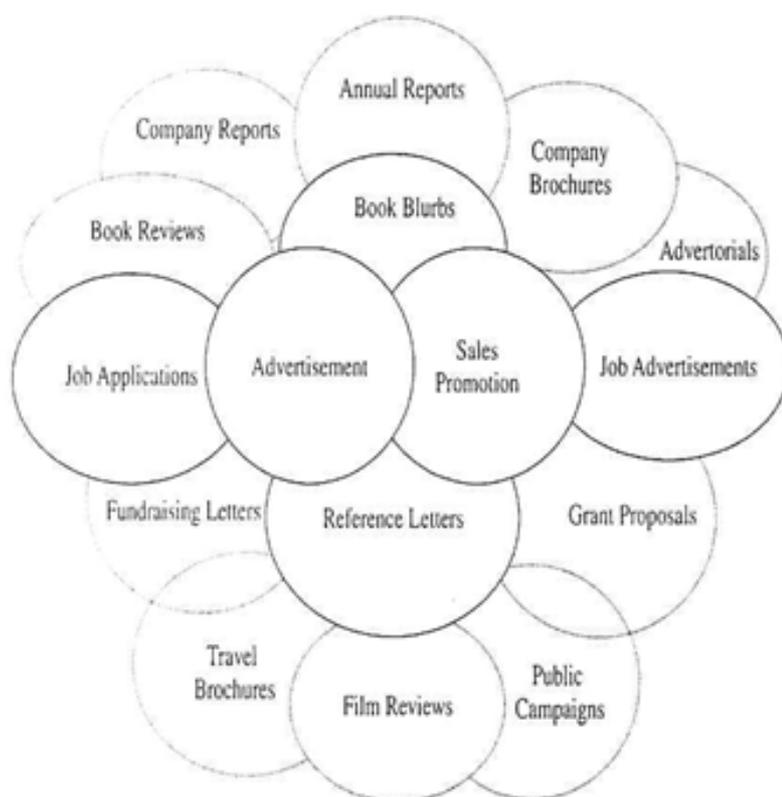
The concept of communicative purpose was further developed and extended by Bhatia (1993) and Orlikowski and Yates, who defined a genre of organizational communication as "a typified communicative act having a *socially defined and recognized communicative purpose*" (1994: 43-44).

Genre analysis as presented in the last two decades very often focuses on pure genres characterised by their typical model structures. However, genres are often dynamic and complex instances of a complex reality of rapidly changing contemporary academic culture and it is not easy or even possible to draw a clear line between them.

Bhatia emphasizes the role of the concept of „genre colony" serving a number of functions in the process of genre identification. It enables us to identify genres at various levels of generalization. They "represent groupings of closely related genres serving broadly similar communicative purposes in cases when they serve more than one" (Bhatia, 2004: 59).

The colony of promotional genres as presented by Bhatia (2004) includes, along with core promotional genres, such as advertisements and sales promotion, a number of genres of academic discourse. The most promotional genre is that of book blurbs, but a number of (semi)occluded genres are also included, for example reference letters, fundraising letters, grant proposals, job applications, job advertisements, company brochures and book reviews.

The concept of genre colony also covers the process of colonization (Fairclough uses the term "commodification") that "involves invasion of the integrity of one genre by another genre convention, often leading to the creation of a hybrid form, which eventually shares some of its genre characteristics with the one that influenced it in the first place" (Bhatia, 2004: 58).



Colony of promotional genres (Bhatia, 2004, 62)

Promotional culture "can be understood in discursive terms as the generalization of promotion as a communicative function" and "discourse as a vehicle for „selling“ goods, services, organizations, ideas or people across orders of discourse" (Fairclough 1993).

The most traditional form of promotional activity is advertising. Its main purpose is to inform and promote products, services ideas in order to sell them. The goods offered are described as good, positive, favourable etc.

(Global) marketization of higher education was discussed in the first section. As a result of the new competitive environment universities have to try hard and think of the ways to attract more (local and international) students, how to be successful in fundraising, in getting research grants and attracting potential sponsors. A shift in the nature and objectives of public information about universities could be observed in the early 1990s. The shift started by the changing character of discourse of university management, i.e. at the top level of *organizational discourse*.

The changes of communicative purposes of originally primarily informative genres of organizational discourse have been the subject of detailed examination of many linguists who attempted to find out the new institutional strategies and promotional elements in academic discourse in the area of organization of academic life.

Fairclough pointed to this historical shift after he compared extracts from university prospectuses from two different periods when he concluded that "advertising and promotional discourse have colonized many new domains of life in contemporary societies", and shows that undergraduate prospectus is "an interdiscursively hybrid quasi-advertising genre" because:

the 1966–67 entry gives information about what is provided on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. In the 1993 prospectus by contrast the promotional function is primary; it is designed to 'sell' the university and its courses to potential applicants in the context of a competitive market where the capacity of a university to attract good applicant is seen as one indicator of its success (Fairclough, 1993: 156).

Askehave and Swales (2001) looked into the problem of genre identification and communicative purpose on an example of *company brochures* (together with shopping lists and response letters to recommendations and research into *International Student Prospectuses* was at the centre of interest of Askehave (2009). Osman's study (2008) describes 'rebranding academic institutions with corporate advertising' and analyses *university brochures* in Malaysia that are informative in nature, but use promotional elements, which tend to be dominant.

Promotional culture is even more noticeable with the existence of the World Wide Web that makes the information about the higher education institutions, their study programmes and courses accessible within several mouse clicks from all over the world.

Academic Mission Statements represent a new organizational genre that has its origin in corporate culture. As carriers of institutional ideologies they provide the framework within which the long term strategies are formulated. They were introduced into English tertiary educational system for the institutions to prove that they can use public funds in a responsible way, having a clear vision of their future strategic activities. They were expected to redesign their curriculum to meet the needs of their students or 'customers' to expand the numbers of students and be more 'business like' in fulfilling this requirement (cf. Connell and Galasinski 1998). Publishing missions or strategic plans of higher education institutions have become a global phenomenon, they also serve as a general basis for *European policy statements* that are one of the conditions for international cooperation within European programmes and that encourage institutions to present themselves as good quality and reliable partners.

As already mentioned, the assessment of the quality of institutions is mainly based on research outcomes. The research process can be a very long process, but ultimately we are all interested in the outcome. Research is an attempt to produce objective knowledge and to disseminate the information to a wider public or to a smaller discourse community. Berkenkotter and Huckin observed already in 1995 "[t]oday's scientists seem to be promoting their work to a degree never seen before" (1995: 43) and it was at the time when the promotionalism of both institutional and personal research success was probably only beginning.

Swales, in his seminal book on *Genre Analysis* (1990), identified the *research article* as a key genre and developed his original theory on the (IMRD) structure of contemporary research articles and their introductions. The promotional and persuasive communicative purpose of research article was most intensively present in research article abstracts and introductions. The *introductions* represent a specific promotional genre that has also received a lot of attention in Swales' work (e.g. 1990: 141). He presented what is now known as the CARS model of research article introductions (CARS: create a research space), a model that is recommended and used also for introductory parts of other genres of academic discourse.

Abstracts represent a prominent genre in present academic culture. They are placed at the beginning of most important written genres, such as research articles and dissertations as a form of invitation to read the whole text, and they can also open the door to conferences providing valuable help to the reviewers in deciding whether the writers will be invited at all. In communities where abstracts have a long tradition, they have developed into a genre which displays textual excellence. And in this time of 'journal explosion', both in paper and electronic format, they may be a useful resource for obtaining information in a short time. Their promotional character has attracted the attention of many researchers of particular importance are the works of Hyland, who, for example emphasizes the suitability of abstracts for highlighting the promotion and credibility in abstracts (2000) or 'hooking the reader' using evaluative structures in abstracts (Hyland – Tse, 2005) etc.

Proposals that request grants in order to organize research or educational activities have become a new and inevitable phenomenon at all levels of higher educational institutions (international, national, regional, institutional and individual). Preparing project proposals have not only become part of the new reality, but Slovak academics have to be prepared to submit them both in the Slovak and English languages, or in English (or some other EU language) only. Proposals represent a persuasive genre. They share a similar communicative purpose with application letters and sales letters, the two promotional genres in that they promote the idea proposed in the project, justify the need by showing the gap with the aim to persuade the reviewing committee and the grant agency that their proposal is worth funding.

Thinking of promotionalism in research genres it is important to mention the use of self-promotional elements that are present in contemporary academic writing, the most frequent being the use of personal pronouns (*I* and *we*) and self-citation (cf. Harwood, 2005).

The presence of self-promotional strategies is obvious in genres that are occluded or rather semi-occluded supporting individual research activities or activities supporting one's academic career, such as *CVs*, *applications*, although cross-cultural differences can be noticed in the ability to use (self)promotional language coming from different language and cultural background and present the required information in English as non-natives.

A number of studies of non-native academic writing styles have examined the differences between English and Slovak/Czech academic writing styles (Čmejrková and Daneš 1997, Chamonikolasová 2005, Stašková, 2005, Dontcheva-Navratilova 2012; Povolná 2010, 2012)

identifying a variety of crosscultural differences. Similar findings are presented by Duszak (1997) for Polish, Yakhtonova (2002) for Ukrainian and Russian and Vassileva (2000) for Bulgarian. Another important feature that seems to be common to all Slavic texts is the lack of promotional and persuasive elements. Slavic texts “appeal to their addressees by ‘telling’, while the promotional English texts do their ‘selling job’” (Yakhontova 2002, Swales and Feak, 2004: 214).

Conclusion

The article has presented an attempt to provide a brief survey of promotional genres of written academic discourse as identified in the context of a Slovak university in the era of globalization and marketization of higher education. The complex nature of academic work and the academic profession has been examined, and three areas of main activities resulting from the mission of higher education institutions have been identified. Some cross-cultural differences resulting from different academic and cultural traditions and conventions have also been noted.

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