

# Disseminating knowledge: the effects of digitalised academic discourse on language, genre and identity

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INTRODUCTION



## Disseminating knowledge: the effects of digitalised academic discourse on language, genre and identity

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### ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the special issue *Disseminating knowledge: The effects of digitalised academic discourse in language, genre and identity*, the authors discuss the impact that digital technologies and the Web have had on academia. They show how this attests to interrelations between new digital platforms of knowledge creation and dissemination and their use within discourse communities as elements of innovation and change in the shaping and reshaping of existing academic practices. The introduction also discusses the various methodological approaches that have been adopted with a view to investigating digital academic discourse. Exploring some current academic discursive practices and their specific textual manifestations in the form of digitally-mediated genres, the authors highlight the complexities of the study of digital academic communication.

### KEYWORDS

Digital discourse; knowledge dissemination; academic discourse; genre; identity

## Introduction

### *Disseminating knowledge: the effects of digitalised academic discourse on language, genre and identity*

In the last few decades a substantial evolution in professional and discursive practices has taken place, particularly in those associated with institutions, science and the economy. This state of affairs has been greatly enhanced by the appearance of digital platforms which have clearly promoted new ways of working and collaborating in innovative spaces of interaction. Academia has, of course, not been exempt from the impact of this rapid development of information and communication technologies, especially since the emergence of web 2.0, a “social web” which fosters “a more active, participatory and collaborative” Internet usership (Heyd 2016, 90). Thus, the appearance of new discursive practices and the adaptation or repurposing of others already in existence are

the expression of new forms of knowledge creation and dissemination which exploit and take advantage of the affordances that our increasingly digitalised world offers us (Herring 2004, 2013).

Modern digital communication, characterised by its hypertextuality, multimodality and affective interactivity (Petroni 2011), has had an enormous impact on the way scholars project their identities and interact with others, procuring a degree of immediacy, visibility, and connectedness (Luzón 2018) never seen before. It has also changed the way we approach texts as objects of analysis. For almost three decades now, linguistic, textual and discursive phenomena which are either supported or shaped by digital media have flourished and have become an important focus of study for linguistic disciplines with a social bias, such as discourse analysis, pragmatics and sociolinguistics (e.g. Campagna, Garzone, and Ilie 2012; Jones, Chik, and Hafner 2015; Georgakopoulou and Spilioti 2016; Lupton, Mewburn, and Thomson 2017; Kuteeva and Mauranen 2018; Luzón and Pérez-Llantada 2019; Lorés-Sanz and Herrando-Rodrigo 2020). In light of these approaches, the exploration of how new technologies interact and the use discourse communities make of them is essential in order to assess the impact of digital platforms as elements of innovation and change in the shaping and reshaping of existing academic practices (Lorés-Sanz 2018).

Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), an analytical perspective which has emerged from the combination of approaches mentioned above, basically consists in adapting existing methods, mainly from linguistics but also from any relevant discipline that analyses discourse, to the properties of digital communication media (Herring 2004). It is a model organised at four levels: structure, meaning, interaction management and social phenomena, thus covering from the micro-linguistic to the macro-contextual social level.

More recently, however, critical voices have stressed the need to approach the study of digital discourse from the vantage point of the socio-cultural context (Androutsopoulos 2011; Thurlow and Mroczek 2011). Another major critical strand has focused on the primarily textual approach of CMDA, which somewhat neglects the multimodal character of the digital texts (i.e. the combination of various semiotic modes to make meaning) (Herring 2019). From a multimodal perspective, the combination of different modes – verbal, visual and audiovisual – needs to be explored as a meaning-making ensemble (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010; Jewitt 2016). Although multimodality has always accompanied language use and is not exclusively associated with technological changes, it is evident that it has been given a boost due to the spread of new technologies within academia.

One methodological framework which is currently being applied to the exploration of digital communication in combination with some of the analytical perspectives mentioned above is corpus studies. The study of digital practices through the compilation of corpora allows both quantitative and

qualitative analyses at various levels (rhetorical, pragmatic and linguistic). The decontextualisation of texts and their features, which is a frequently criticised methodological aspect in corpus-based studies, can be overcome by the compilation of specialised ready-made corpora (Pascual, et al. 2020), as is the case in some of the studies included in the present volume.

In all, the various, sometimes complementary, sometimes divergent, perspectives adopted to explore digital communication are to some extent a reflection of the complexities and heterogeneity of this object of study. Georgakopoulou and Spilioti (2016, 4) see the identity of this field as “being shaped between drawing on well-established methods in other fields and fine-tuning, creatively adapting or even radically redefining them to suit the needs and complexities of digital environments”, thus giving way to a tension between, on the one hand, the development of an autonomous disciplinary identity and, on the other, cross-fertilisations with established fields in linguistics and related disciplines such as communication, semiotics, media and cultural studies. The problematised nature of a single analytical framework to study digital discourse is acknowledged thus by Jones, Chik, and Hafner (2015, 2):

Although there have been numerous attempts in discourse analysis (see for example Herring 2007), and sociolinguistics more broadly (see for example Androutsopoulos 2011), to formulate new analytical frameworks especially designed for the study of digital communication, the range of social practices associated with digitally mediated discourse, and the rapid pace at which new technologies are being introduced, make it difficult for any single framework to meet the challenge of understanding all of the complex relationships between discourse and digital practices.

This burgeoning discussion (2007) about the convergence and divergence of theoretical and analytical perspectives is fostering interesting debates in which core concepts such as identity, genre, context and disciplinary community are being problematised and redefined. Issues of interdiscursivity and genre hybridity (Mauranen 2013; Kuteeva 2016; Kuteeva and Mauranen 2018; Luzón and Pérez-Llantada 2019), as well as the remediation and repurposing of existing genres (Crowston and Williams 2000; Bawarshi and Reiff 2010; Petroni 2011) have become central to the exploration of digital academic discourse.

The contributions to the present volume explore some current academic discursual practices and their specific textual manifestations in the form of digitally-mediated genres, which constitute a changing “generic repertoire” (Sancho-Guinda 2015). As such, genre analysis plays an important part in the study of digital academic discourse and is widely present in the contributions to this issue. In the academic context, as in so many others, digital media not only act as dissemination bases for information but also shape communication and interaction among members of the various disciplinary communities. In this sense, they may also have an impact on the genres which enable members of such communities to interact. The wide use of the Internet and digital platforms

has given rise to two major issues in the study of genres, the first being how to reconcile stability and change; the second, how genres can be structured, controlled or determined in a digital, and therefore far from stable, scenario (Lorés 2020). Moreover, what in fact constitutes a digital genre remains an unresolved issue.

For some scholars (Mauranen 2013; Kuteeva 2016; Kuteeva and Mauranen 2018) the “hybrid nature” of digital genres can only be ascribed to those instances of academic writing which are produced online and disseminated with the support of digital media. This view includes genres such as academic blogs, tweets, wiki pages and social networking sites in general. However, it leaves aside other genres which digitalise their analogue printed form in as much as they are written with the support of computers and distributed through online platforms. In this sense, then, academic genres such as the online research article, editorial or abstract would not be truly considered digital academic genres. Other views, though, do consider the latter examples to be instances of digital genres in the sense that there is a greater diversity of relationships between online texts than between print texts, and “genres that rarely interacted in printed media find themselves suddenly thrown together in the new digital world” (Casper 2016, 77), becoming “dynamic and decentralized players within the larger genre ecosystem” (Casper 2016, 94). This greater interaction among genres is the result of digital affordances being incorporated into the traditional academic genre, now produced online: the inclusion of hyperlinks, visual and graphic abstracts, audioslides, video abstracts and interactive tables and figures, among other digital and multimodal affordances. The shift from print to digital has necessarily affected the shaping of the text, and has no doubt influenced “how journal issues and articles are read and ‘consumed’” (Mur-Dueñas 2018, 43), allowing reading paths that are certainly not possible in “flat” texts (Askehave, Nielsen, and Kwaśnik 2005). In our view, both academic genres that only exist online and those that also have an analogous form in the printed world are part of a digital generic ecosystem in academia which enables new forms of interaction among scholars and interrelations among generic forms that give way to a myriad of hybrid practices that are “sufficiently open-ended to assist the new communicative demands of the disciplinary communities” (Pérez-Llantada 2016, 36).

The call for papers to set up this special issue of the *European Journal of English Studies* included several research questions which contributions could address in some way. Our interests revolved around the origin of digital academic genres (are they new? are they modelled on traditional genres in paper format?), issues of academic identity in digital discourse (how is it constructed and represented?), and the impact of disciplinary factors on academic web-mediated discourse. The interaction between verbal and visual modes in academic digital contexts was, naturally, a major focus of attention.

The articles brought together in this issue provide evidence of the diversity of objects of study within the multifaceted world of digital academic discourse and contribute to partially answering the questions posed in this volume, exploring various issues of interest for current studies on digital academic discourse. To this end, this volume incorporates studies of a variety of what we consider to be digitally-mediated academic genres, ranging from those which clearly derive from previous printed avatars (i.e. research articles) to those whose existence can only be conceived within the Internet (i.e. homepages and blogs). All these are part of a constellation (Swales 2004) of generic realisations which exemplify what academic discourse looks like nowadays, some of them incorporating affordances of the digital mode (i.e. online research articles, online lectures, email signatures), whereas others emerge from a generic (digital) ecosystem (Spinuzzi 2002) or adapt to it (i.e. blogs, video abstracts, webpages).

The eight articles included in this special issue are organised attending to two criteria. First of all, taking for granted that all the studies deal with digital genres as instances of academic practices, they are ordered by their increasing level of discourse hybridity as a core feature that defines digital genres, starting with those contributions which focus on genres deriving from already existing printed counterparts, in both the written (i.e. online research articles) or spoken (i.e. online lectures) mode, moving on to other generic instantiations that only exist online (i.e. web homepages and blogs). A second criteria for the order of presentation of the contributions, which goes hand in hand with the increasing level of hybridity characterising digital discourse in general, is the equally increasing phenomenon of the blurring of the boundaries that separate the academic/scientific community from their audience or “publics” (Bucchi and Trench 2015), which brings with it the challenges to identifying the audience profile. The lack of a single, identifiable audience profile, also referred to as “context collapse” and initially associated with digital social networks (Marwick and Boyd 2011), is more evident the more “digital” the genre is. Thus, whereas in online research articles there is an expected expert-expert interaction, this is not so clearly the case with blogs, or even medical video abstracts.

To begin with, the focus of the article by **María Luisa Carrió-Pastor** is the construction and representation of the identity of academic writers through multimodal (textual and visual) metadiscourse in academic papers. Based on the study of a corpus of over 250 research articles from various disciplines, the author highlights the affordances that digital platforms offer to scientific journals since they are able to include more visual elements in the research papers published than the offline versions from which they emerge. Focusing on visual metadiscourse in comparison to textual metadiscourse, Carrió-Pastor establishes various categories and subcategories of multimodal metadiscourse ensembles and claims that disciplinary factors play a major role in the choice writers make to construct their identity online and interact with their readers.

Open Access practices are facilitating the “digital delivery” of research articles as dominant academic genres across disciplines. The “open” reading experience over the Internet involves, in **Girolamo Tessuto**’s view, improved access, searchability and navigation of scholarly outputs, promoting, at the same time, the creation of global research communities which enhance scholarly dialogue. In his paper, Tessuto explores contrastively whether and how writer investment in metadiscursive features may vary in the increasingly digitalised genre of academic research articles in Economics and Law. Focusing on interactive metadiscourse (transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses), the study reveals broad similarities and minor differences in the use of interactive metadiscourse between the two disciplines.

The genre of live online lectures is analysed by **Mercedes Querol-Julián** in order to gain some insights into how the interaction between teacher and students unfolds in the context of English-medium instruction (EMI). Through the qualitative multimodal microanalysis of an interaction episode, Querol-Julián reveals the structural and multimodal complexity of the simultaneous interaction that teachers may have to cope with in synchronous online lectures when compared to face-to-face lectures, and identifies several communicative sub-functions within the main functions of organising discourse and interaction, together with the linguistic and non-linguistic communicative modes that realise them.

Among the increasing variety of genres arising thanks to the affordances that electronic platforms provide, **Francesca Coccetta** explores video abstracts as an instance of a digital genre which has emerged from/together with the research article they accompany, as a result of a process of remediation. However, in comparison with research articles, video abstracts are intended to address a wider readership, including not only professionals and experts in the field, as is the case of the research article, but also lay readers, such as non-experts or students. The use of multimodal resources plays an essential part in the reinterpretation of the research under focus, incorporating meaning-making affordances which include the videotrack and the soundtrack. Based on a corpus study of 50 medical video abstracts, Coccetta identifies four subphases, along the lines of the rhetorical analysis of research articles, in terms of move structure. In this sense, her study opens up paths for the exploration of generic conventions in video abstracts.

**Sara Gesuato and Francesca Bianchi**’s contribution focuses on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of 200 automatic email signatures as instances of a part-genre which reflects a scholar’s identity. There are three functions ascribed to automatic email signatures: a textual function, an expressive function, and a representational function. Automatic email signatures are partly related to other self-descriptive academic genres, such as bionotes, profile statements and book blurbs, all of which share a self-representational, an

informational and a promotional goal. The authors identify several components in automatic email signatures which combine in typical clusters and bear a strong resemblance to the moves identified in bionotes, and they conclude that these generic instances conform to the provision of a professional representation of the writer, rather than a personal one.

The exploration of visibility through the vantage point of multimodal affordances leads **Isabel Corona** to study 10 European H2020 research websites as sites where research outreach is put to the fore in response to a demand for the “public disclosure” of knowledge. In combination with Systemic Functional Linguistics, the homepages of the websites are approached from the vantage point of Multimodal Discourse Analysis, which not only studies the semiotic resources deployed in these sections of the website (written text, images, audio, video and hyperlinks), but, and in fact principally, also investigates the way these documents are gathered into meaningful clusters of information, which builds up two territories of visibility: the identification of the actors (research group and/or institutions) and the achievement of public accountability.

Focusing on the genre of scholarly law blogs and based on a corpus of over 100 posts, **Giuliana Diani** investigates how British and American law professors construct their argumentative discourse while communicating with their scholarly legal community and commenting on legal cases related to US and UK court decisions. Diani shows that bloggers’ arguments are constructed through the interplay of “averral” (attribution to the writer) and “attribution” (attribution by the writer to some other person or entity) (Sinclair 1986, 1988). Thus, stemming from the exploration of the pragmatic functions of lexicalisations of argumentative procedures, Diani finds that law scholar bloggers use attribution as a point of departure for giving voice to their own positions while contributing to the construction of disciplinary knowledge.

Finally, departing from Goffman’s concept of identity, **Renáta Tomášková**, explores a corpus of 80 posts from 16 university research blogs as instances of academics’ discursal practices which contribute to the construction of an online picture of the institution they belong to. Focusing on both verbal and non-verbal strategies, and on the interplay between words and images, Tomášková’s study provides evidence of the multiple identities through which bloggers present themselves. These identities are instantiated through the combination of text and image in a meaning-making ensemble. Although various individual identities are recognised, researchers more commonly present themselves through their research and research findings, as well as through their participation in university research groups and in their international disciplinary community at large. Moreover, they contribute to identifying their universities as sites engaged in the dissemination of knowledge to society.

In all, the combination of objects of analysis, methodological perspectives and features that this special issue offers highlights the complexities of the study of digital academic communication. By showing the manifold analytical



angles that can be adopted and the variety of aspects that can be explored, we hope that this special issue contributes to the understanding of the thriving field of digital academic discourse.

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**Giuliana Diani** is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Italy). She holds an MA in Language Studies from the University of Lancaster (UK) and a PhD in English Linguistics from the University of Pisa (Italy). She has worked and published on various aspects of discourse analysis and EAP, with special reference to language variation across academic genres, disciplines and cultures through the analysis of small specialised corpora. Her recent work centres on the analysis of language use in the dissemination of knowledge addressed at children.

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