A multimodal approach to product presentations

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Abstract

Multimodality approaches discourse focusing on the analysis of the semiotic modes that help fulfil the communicative purpose of a particular genre, which in the case of product presentations is to persuade of the excellence of the product. We argue that a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach is especially suitable for the study of product presentations since persuasion in this genre implies the use of different semiotic modes (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976; Poggi & Pelachaud, 2008). The aim of this paper is to present a methodological approach to the study of product presentations from a MDA perspective along with potential pedagogical implications.

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1. Introduction

Product presentations are one of the most important genres in business. These presentations can vary depending on the communicative situation in which they occur, but they share one main purpose: to persuade the addressee of the excellence of the product.

The aim of this paper is to present a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) approach that can shed light on the variety of available semiotic modes (i.e. meaning-making resources) that contribute to the communicative purpose of this particular genre (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, Muntigl, 2004). Among these modes three of them are particularly salient in oral genres: gestures and head movements (both kinesic features) (McNeill, 1992; McClave,
2000; Kendon, 2002, 2004; Querol-Julián, 2011) and intonation (paralinguistic) (Brazil, 1997; Poyatos, 2002). They are virtually unavoidable in any instantiation of oral discourse and they deeply affect the way the message is perceived. This is even more noticeable in the case of persuasive genres, since a lot of persuasion is nonverbal (Chaiken & Eagly, 1976; Woodwall & Burgoon, 1981; Sparks et al., 1998; Poggi & Pelachaud, 2008).

Indeed, previous studies focus on the role of intonation and kinesics on the communicative effect of the message. For example, intonation can be used to present parts of the message as already agreed upon as opposed to open to discussion (Brazil, 1997). In the same way, gestures and head shakes can be used to discourage potential counterclaims (Kendon, 2004). Results of these studies suggest that more attention should be paid to the role of kinesics and paralinguistic features as key elements in the defining traits of the genre of product presentations.

The example of product presentation selected for this paper is the presentation of the iPhone. The presenter, Steve Jobs, has been described as an example to be imitated for effective presentations (Gallo, 2008). The present research springs from the hypothesis that the effectiveness of this presentation resides in the skillful integration of kinesic, paralinguistic and linguistic features in the expression of persuasion.

2. From traditional approaches to genre to MDA

Probably one of the most widely accepted definitions of genre is the one provided by Swales (1990, p. 34)

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.

Swales (1990) perceives genres as a communicative event with a recognizable communicative purpose. This definition has proved very influential and many authors (Paré and Smart, 1994; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Paltridge, 1995; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002; Virtanen & Halmari, 2005 among others) have developed and expanded on the concepts introduced by Swales. Figure 1 summarises some of the aspects that most frequently recur in the literature about genre:

![Figure 1. Relevant aspects in the concept of genre](image-url)
Two crucial aspects in the concept of genre are recursiveness and regularities. A genre is recognizable by its recurrent use in particular situations as well as by regularities in form, content and purpose (Paré & Smart, 1994; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Likewise, acceptance by a community is a requirement for a genre to be considered as such. Through this acceptance, a genre raises expectations in its community (Paré and Smart, 1994; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Yates & Orlikowski, 2002). This connection with a community of use also highlights genre as a social and professional tool that allows users to become competent members of a community (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Furthermore, the genre-society relationship entails a reciprocal influence which Paré & Smart (1994) call Duality of Structure. On the other hand, genres are dynamic entities that change according to users’ needs and also respond to social changes (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).

Indeed, an effective use of a particular genre involves adaptability, which is necessary to obtain specific communicative goals in different communicative situations, as has in fact been extensively discussed in the concept of intertextuality (Paltridge, 1995, Virtanen & Halmari, 2005). As society and the way people communicate evolve, new texts that do not seem to fit into existing genre typologies emerge and a revision of the concept of genre is needed. Also along this line Kress (2003, p. 35-36) emphasizes the need to move from a theory that accounts for language alone to “a theory that can account equally well for gesture, speech, image, writing, 3D object, colour, music and others”, describing genres as dynamic entities which are the result of a creative process (Kress, 2003). This is particularly salient in the case of persuasive genres, as pointed out by Halmari & Virtanen (2005). Since persuasion is more efficient as it is unexpected (O’Keefe, 2002; Perloff, 2003) it also prompts genre dynamism and the integration of new elements (i.e. new semiotic modes) that consequently add to the description of the genre. A multimodal approach to genre is based on the assumption that the genre-creation process is multimodal, because users select among available modes to express their meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2003; Norris, 2004; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

3. A MDA approach: The case of product presentations

Our suggested MDA approach takes into account all the modes and media (Jewitt, 2004) employed to better explain how the communicative purpose of a product presentation (i.e. to persuade the audience) is achieved within a particular communicative situation. In this paper we focus on the presentation of the iPhone. We understand this presentation is inherently persuasive, since it tries to convince the audience of the value of the new phone. In fact, previous studies have dealt with persuasion in this presentation. Kast (2008) provides a rhetorical analysis that shows how Steve Jobs builds a persuasive message through a complex interplay of resources which we argue calls for a multimodal approach.

Previous research also points out at the multimodal nature of persuasion. According to authors such as O’Keefe (2002), Perloff (2003) and Halmari & Virtanen (2005), persuasive messages tend to be more effective when:

- The speaker has credibility and the audience can identify with him or her.
- The text is made memorable.
- The text is innovative and surprising.
- It is perceived as not imposed, but inferred.

Our hypothesis is, therefore, that paraverbal and kinesic features play a crucial role in providing the text with the abovementioned features to make it more persuasive, i.e. speakers construe a persuasive message using different modes. In the specific example of the iPhone presentation we have identified the following semiotic modes (see figure 2):

- Verbal linguistic elements
- Paralanguage
- Kinesics
- Image
Steve Jobs speaks to the public, using verbal linguistic elements as one of his modes. At the same time he is also expressing meaning through paralanguage (Trager, 1958; Poyatos, 2002), exploiting intonation and silences, among others, for communicative effects. Furthermore, Steve Jobs also makes gestures with his hands, directs his gaze to the audience, and moves his head as he speaks. These actions can be enclosed under the generic term kinesics (Trager, 1958; Birdwhistell, 1970). Additionally, the iPhone presentation is supported by written words and images which also contribute meaningfully to the message (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

Among the modes identified in the presentation this paper focuses on one linguistic feature (i.e. verbal linguistic elements), one paralinguistic feature (i.e. intonation) and two kinesic features (i.e. head movements and gestures). These features have been selected due to their conspicuousness in oral discourse, because unlike other semiotic modes that speakers can choose to use, they are virtually unavoidable.

4. Multimodal expression of persuasion: The presentation of the iPhone

In order to determine the relevance of a multimodal approach to the study of product presentations as a persuasive oral genre we have selected the persuasive strategies (i.e. emphasis, evaluation, projection of understanding of situation, anticipation and directing of responses) which are more likely to occur and be enacted through intonation, head movements and gestures as well as with words (Brazil, 1997; Kendon, 2004; Querol-Julián, 2011).

In this sense, when using emphasis parts of the message are highlighted so that they receive more attention. Intonation can contribute to this through the use of prominent syllables. It can also be used in combination with rhetorical devices that make the text more memorable, such as lexical creativity (Lakoff, 1982; Bamford, 2007, 2008). Evaluation can also be very persuasive, because when speakers evaluate something they are implicitly inviting the listener to accept their point of view (Bamford, 2007; Querol-Julián, 2011). Along this line, Pomerantz (1986) notes how extreme case formulations are frequently used to legitimise claims when speakers expect possible counterclaims. Interestingly, these claims are commonly accompanied by head shakes, which seem to deny in advance a potential counter-argument (Kendon, 2002). Projection of understanding of situation allows presenting some parts of the message as shared with the audience and agreed upon as opposed to new and open to discussion. Intonation, for example, plays an important role in this. It can be used in combination with inclusive pronouns that can help create rapport with the audience (Fortanet 2004; Bamford, 2007, 2008) and enhance the sense of shared knowledge. Concerning anticipation and direction of responses, it could be noted that speakers tend to predict reactions and adapt their discourse accordingly to obtain a desirable response. Very frequently we do this with gestures and head movements (e.g. gestures or head shakes to prevent potential counterclaims) and also with intonation (e.g. a final high pitch shows that the speaker expects the listener to be surprised (Brazil, 1997)).
Bearing all this in mind we have selected three examples from the iPhone presentation that illustrate how the verbal elements of the message interact with intonation, head movements and gestures to create a persuasive message.

In Example 1 (Figure 3) Steve Jobs is evaluating positively the effect the iPod. As he pronounces the phrase "it changed the entire music industry" he makes the word “entire” particularly prominent, and simultaneously makes a sweeping gesture with his arm that can be interpreted as a representation of the scope. A simultaneous head shake can be interpreted as preventing any potential counterclaim to this evaluation.

Figure 3: Example 1: the entire music industry

In example 2 (Figure 4), Steve Jobs is drawing attention to a feature of phones (they have buttons) and directing the audience to perceive it as something problematic. The pronunciation of “can’t change” is very prominent, syllables are longer and louder than average. To stress this idea he makes a simultaneous close-fist gesture and extends arms to audience as if presenting the problem.

Figure 4: Example 2: can’t change

Finally, in example 3 (Figure 5) shows an example of lexical creativity (super-smart) whose positive meaning is reinforced by an opening arms gesture that can be interpreted as representing the scope of the positive evaluation.
5. Discussion and conclusions

The previous analysis shows how intonation, gestures, head movements and words interact to create a persuasive product presentation. Intonation frequently guides the audience to a particular interpretation and highlights key information to make it memorable. Gestures and head movements usually reinforce and complement evaluations, making the meaning more explicit and at the same time less intrusive. These results are in line with previous studies such as Querol-Julian (2010); Fortanet and Ruiz-Madrid (in press) and lead us to consider kinesic and paralinguistic elements as integral parts of the concept of genre.

The methodology presented in this paper affords achieving a more comprehensive description of product presentations and helps our understanding of how they achieve their persuasive communicative purpose. Firstly, it studies the oral genre in real use, from a comprehensive perspective that can shed light on the role and potential of semiotic modes that are frequently neglected. Secondly, it approaches the concept of genre as a creative response to a communicative situation, focusing on the variety of available resources to express meaning and on genre flexibility. In addition, it offers a fresh perspective on persuasive language, accounting for how it prompts genre variation and how it is achieved through more than words. This can be of practical value for professionals who use this genre in their everyday tasks, and also for developers of didactic materials who use genres as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes.

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References


