A MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO PRODUCT PRESENTATIONS

The mastery of a genre such as product presentations is a key to success in many professional business contexts. However, mastery of any genre implies not only a deep understanding of the communicative situation and the communicative purpose of each genre, but also awareness of the semiotic resources available. It is frequently overseen that, especially in the case of oral genres such as product presentations, speakers can resort to much more than words to convey their meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001, Muntigl 2004). This is precisely the slot that a multimodal approach to genre tries to fill in.

Multimodality approaches discourse focusing on the variety of available semiotic modes from which users of genres can select and combine to better suit their communicative needs according to the communicative situation. The more acquainted users are with these modes, the more likely they are to convey their meaning in a significant way and use genres effectively. Among these modes three of them are particularly salient in oral genres: gestures and head movements (both kinesic features) and intonation (paralinguistic). They are virtually unavoidable in any instantiation of oral discourse and they deeply affect the way the message is perceived.

Presentations being increasingly multimodal in nature, traditional approaches to genre become unable to account for the complexity of this communicative activity, in which language is only one of different semiotic modes that contribute to the communicative purpose of the genre: persuade the addressee.

In addition research on persuasion draws attention to the fact that there is more than words to persuasion (Chaiken & Eagly 1976, Woodwall & Burgoon 1981, Sparks et al. 1998, O’Keefe 2002, Perloff 2003, Poggi & Pelachaud 2008). This makes a multimodal approach particularly suitable in this area of study. In persuasive oral genres, aspects such as emphasis, evaluation and appraisal (Martin & White 2005), projection of understanding of situation (Brazil 1985, 1997) and anticipation and monitoring of responses are all likely to occur and enacted through intonation, gestures and head movements as much as with words. Some examples that point in this direction are the use of intonation to present some parts of the message as already known and agreed upon as opposed to new and open to discussion (Brazil 1985, 1997) and gestures used to discourage potential counterclaims (Kendon 2004).

The objective of this paper is to suggest a methodological approach to the study of product presentations that considers the communicative purpose as the main defining characteristic of genre, regards genre as a dynamic response to a particular communicative situation and takes into account the variety of modes employed in the expression of meaning. Such approach can contribute to revisit the definition of oral product presentations as a discourse genre. In addition, it is also expected to improve pedagogical proposals in Business English in order to enhance performance among business professionals who will make use of this genre in their professional activity.
References


