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University Websites in English: A Review of Some Research and Case Studies

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the results of recent research into the English-language version of the websites of selected European and non-European universities. University communication has changed considerably in recent years following a series of major events, such as the increased internationalization and the number of competing universities in the market, the advent of the Internet and the spread of English. This explains why universities have had to invest not only in domestic communication, but also and particularly in the international arena in order to become more visible and attract foreign students. Universities have had to adapt to this changed situation by providing an English version of their websites and adopting the use of promotional language in their descriptions of the institution and of the courses. The various English texts that make up the university websites—such as, for example, the section *About us*, greetings from the authorities or university course descriptions, etc.—have been the focus of recent linguistic research. This research reveals relevant differences regarding the use of English in the websites of English native universities and in the websites of the rest of European universities.

Sommaire

Cet article a pour objectif de présenter les résultats d'un certain nombre d'études et de recherches portant sur la version anglaise de sites web appartenant à des universités européennes et non européennes. Durant ces dernières années, la stratégie en communication des universités a énormément évolué suite à l'émergence de réalités nouvelles comme la tendance croissante à l'internationalisation, la présence des universités sur le marché du savoir, l'apparition d'internet et la diffusion accrue de la langue anglaise. Les universités ont par conséquent répondu à la nécessité d'investir dans une communication dont le caractère n'est plus seulement national mais principalement international, afin de gagner en visibilité et d'attirer un nombre majeur d'étudiants étrangers. Les universités ont donc dû adapter leurs sites web à cette situation nouvelle, en proposant une version anglaise de leurs sites 'autochtones' et en privilégiant l'usage d'un langage promotionnel. Les textes en anglais qui composent les sites web des universités – comme, par exemple, la section *About us*, les messages de bienvenue de la part des autorités universitaires ou la description des différents cours proposés, etc. – ont fait l'objet de récentes recherches linguistiques qui approfondissent certains aspects importants de ce phénomène, aussi bien en ce qui concerne l'usage de l'anglais dans les sites universitaires de pays européens anglophones et non-anglophones.

Zusammenfassung

Ziel dieses Beitrags ist es, die Ergebnisse neuerer Forschung zu den englischsprachigen Versionen der Webseiten ausgewählter europäischer und nicht-europäischer Universitäten zu präsentieren. Universitäre Kommunikation hat sich in den letzten Jahren stark gewandelt, in Folge einer Reihe von Ereignissen wie der gestiegenen Internationalisierung, der Zahl der auf dem Markt konkurrierenden Universitäten, dem Aufkommen des Internets und der Verbreitung des Englischen. Dies erklärt, warum Universitäten nicht nur in nationale Kommunikation, sondern insbesondere auch in internationale Kommunikation investieren mussten, um sichtbarer zu werden und ausländischen Studierende anzuziehen. Universitäten mussten sich dieser veränderten Situation dadurch anpassen, indem sie eine englische Version ihrer Webseiten anboten und Werbesprache in den Beschreibungen ihrer Institution und ihrer Kurse anwandten. Die verschiedenen englischen Texte in den Universitätswebseiten – wie etwa die Sektion *About Us*, Grußworte der Hochschulleitung oder Kursbeschreibungen – sind bereits Gegenstand neuerer Forschung geworden. Diese enthüllt relevante Unterschiede bezüglich des Gebrauchs des Englischen auf den Webseiten englischer muttersprachlicher Universitäten und den Webseiten der restlichen europäischen Universitäten.

1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of a number of recent studies dealing with relevant linguistic aspects of the English version of some European university websites. Many authors today agree on the fact that, thanks to a series of factors, namely university autonomy and the advent of the Internet, universities have made radical changes to the way they communicate with the public. As a matter of fact, European academic institutions – just like universities all over the world – have realized that communication, and especially communication via the web, has become of paramount importance for their visibility and credibility to prospective international students, academics, researchers and to the audience at large. The so-called “Bologna process”, held in Bologna in June 1999, which brought together European Education Ministries, led to a European higher education reform process that, among other things, was meant to enhance internationalization. Also, universities had to invest in student and staff mobility in Europe and worldwide. To this end and in order to reach a vast audience, it was crucial that information regarding university curricula and courses could be accessed easily and effectively. Through the Internet it became possible for academic institutions to construct and use their own websites to circulate information in English on a global scale.

It has been observed that the use of English as a secondary language on university websites “fulfills many of the motivations that support its continued global dominance, as identified by Phillipson (1992): it is well established; it confers status and economic advantage; it symbolizes modernity and an international identity; and it is a practical language of cross-cultural communication. Other secondary languages are also used for practical purposes, for example, to attract foreign students. This is the case in countries of the European Union, which are participating increasingly in cooperative international scholarship programs and in Australia and New Zealand, whose universities attract a broad spectrum of students from South and Southeast Asia; these countries’ websites are among the most multilingual” (Callahan/Herring 2012: 345). English then, in the way it is employed by university websites worldwide, basically fulfills two functions. Firstly, the English version of academic websites reaches a vast audience all over the world, thus increasing the possibility of obtaining international student enrollments; secondly, the use of English also conveys a symbolic meaning connected to reliability, prestige and to an international outlook. Just as happens for promotional language and advertising in general, the use of English, thanks to the hegemonic role it holds in the contemporary world, contributes to “foregrounding” the message it wants to convey. In other words, English becomes like a sort of “fetish” or emblem representing dynamic and international aspects of contemporary life (Kelly-Holmes 2005). In this sense, the international versions of today’s university websites do not differ much from those of businesses and companies that decide to advertise their services and products around the world.

The issue concerning the marketization of university discourse has been addressed by Fairclough: “Institutions of higher education come increasingly to operate (under government pressure) as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers” (Fairclough 1993: 143). Fairclough claimed that while in the past universities were in a position to select their students, today that relationship has been reversed: it is the students who now choose the university which best suits their study expectations, career needs and lifelong projects. In other words, students have become customers. Thus, “the universities must differentiate their profiles if they are to achieve an identity on the market. Hence, the great product of the 1980s’ academic planning mind: the mission statement” (Wernick 1991: 157).

This state of affairs greatly contributed to the current profusion of promotional texts that go well beyond the merely informative descriptions previously found in university brochures. Universities had to somehow rebrand themselves by making the right linguistic choices when it came to writing

university descriptions and course prospectuses (Osman 2008); this meant, among other features, the use of a large variety of adjectives and superlatives, the use of pronouns (*we* and *you*) to involve the reader, and the use of modals and semi-modals to direct students in their choices.

2. Research Results

Research and studies concerning the language of the English version of university websites have been flourishing in the past few years. University websites are made up of a variety of texts that include, among others: the *About us* section; the Mission statement; the historical overview of the institution; the course descriptions; staff names; descriptions of the premises and services; the alumni sections. In fact, university websites are not to be viewed as rigidly uniform texts, as they are made up of different texts each with a distinct function, even though the main purpose of such texts is, naturally, to provide information on the institution. As such the texts are very different in style, some of them being more informative and factual, while others display a decidedly more promotional outlook. Most of the research adopted corpus linguistics methodology, while others preferred discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis.

A sizable group of research adopted corpus linguistics. The first essay we will consider is a preliminary study in which the authors compare the use of international English of Italian academic websites to that of the native English used in Irish-UK university websites (Bernardini/Ferraresi/Gaspari 2010). When compared to the UK corpus, the English used in the Italian websites language is less formulaic displaying little use of language bundles, it tends to involve the audience to a lesser degree and focuses mainly on obligations and conditions. In other words, it is much less involving language, displaying scant attention to promotional strategies and portraying a rather authoritative and traditional academic institution.

Bernardini's and Ferraresi's 2013 study compares the international version of the websites to the native English ones, and to this end considers all European universities. The "paper introduces 'acWaC-EU' (an acronym for "academic Web-as-Corpus in Europe"), a corpus of web pages in English crawled from the websites of European universities and annotated with contextual metadata. The corpus contains approximately 40 million words from native English universities and a similar number of words from universities based in all other European countries, in which English is used as a lingua franca" (Bernardini/Ferraresi 2013: 53). It is a comprehensive corpus through which it was possible to carry out a comparison between "native and ELF (English as a lingua franca) varieties of English in the academic domain." (Bernardini/Ferraresi 2013: 55). As expected, the native English university websites display a wider range of modal and semi modal verbs more frequently expressing permission/possibility/ability including prediction and volition through the extensive use of *will* (Bernardini/Ferraresi 2013: 58). The ELF texts mainly use the modal verbs to express obligation and necessity in a rather direct way, with the use of *must* and *have to*. Interestingly, relevant variables may be present even in the ELF websites if one takes into account the different language families on which they are based (Bernardini/Ferraresi 2013: 59). For example, the ELF-Germanic corpus has more modals than the ELF-Romance texts, and the ELF-Slavic group contains fewer modals than the ELF-Romance texts. Thus, the ELF websites do not constitute a cohesive and undifferentiated entity.

The same authors carried out further research (Bernardini/Ferraresi 2015) in which they explore and compare phraseologies between native English university websites and ELF websites by using the "academic Web-as-Corpus" made up of European university websites from all European countries. A comparison of this sort is not easy to carry out as there are many variables to consider, making it difficult to create comparable corpora. One of these variables is that ELF websites, as opposed to

the native English ones, target a different audience – namely international students – thus influencing the content in terms, for example, of information about the educational system. Thus, texts from the corpora had to be carefully selected to ensure a reliable comparison. Also, a general reference corpus of contemporary English was chosen to assess the frequencies of phrases and word collocations. “In the last analysis, focusing on the use of strong collocations [...] revealed a greater use of collocations in the NAT texts, this time at a statistically significant level” (Bernardini/Ferraresi 2015: 238). The results show that ELF texts use phraseological items to a lesser degree. In contrast, ELF texts use original word-combinations, and highly idiomatic collocations to a lesser extent. As the authors write, it would be important to establish whether these “phraseological deviations are actually the result of inferior language proficiency or rather of more or less conscious strategies aimed at facilitating international communication” (Bernardini, Ferraresi 2015: 240).

We now move to consider research that has been carried out into the academic subgenres that one can find on university websites, such as syllabi and course descriptions, but also the *About Us* sections, which are a typical subgenre pertaining to university websites. Afros and Schryer (2009), in particular, compared the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of web-mediated and paper syllabi in higher education, and “the way they are used to promote links between various academic – classroom and research – genres and discourse communities” (Afros/Schryer 2009: 224). The syllabi of linguistic courses offered in a number of US universities were selected. The study underlines the fact that the syllabus is something more than a tool used by university professors to set learning goals for students. Through the syllabus the instructors confirm both their connection to the academic community and acquaint students to the said community. Moreover, syllabi are composite and multifaceted texts that rely on “external” materials, such as textbooks, papers, assignments and videos, and they direct students to a number of “other in-class and out-class learning/teaching activities as much as on the ongoing discussion in the academic field, adult education, university policies, and many other texts and communities” (Afros and Schryer, 2009: 231). In their conclusion, the authors observe that while both paper-based and web-based syllabi use the same structural and discursive elements, the electronic syllabi provide the instructors with more tools and possibilities through the use of hyperlinks that could contribute to a more positive course outcome.

The study by Gesuato (2011) centers on online academic course descriptions from various universities around the world. Interesting common features pertaining to this particular subgenre of university websites are, as expected, outlines of the content of the courses, information about logistics, regulations and, to a lesser degree, the goals of each course. These course descriptions usually come in the form of one paragraph of various lengths. The main subject, as expected, is the course. Even though they are seldom mentioned in the texts, students are represented as playing various roles in them: “They are experiencers of learning goals (i.e. beneficiaries) of what is offered to them, active participants who perform assigned tasks, and passive participants directed by others. As a result, they are accurately represented as experiencers, recipients/beneficiaries, doers and patients [...]” (Gesuato 2011: 236). Interestingly, lecturers are also seldom mentioned in the text which is probably due to the fact that the aim of the course description is that of presenting the course and not of introducing the person responsible for it. Thus, “courses, which metonymically stand for teachers, are represented as agents responsible for course design and policies” (Gesuato 2011: 239), in this way the rules and requirements involved in a given course seem to be coming from an external source, hence not immediately connected to the lecturer, or to an individual at all. Moreover, requirements and future events are presented as facts leaving very little room for possible negotiation with the addressees. To conclude, the very fact that the obligations and rules pertaining to a given course are somewhat toned down contributes to making them more acceptable as they are

not perceived as constraints, but are taken for granted. Despite being short, these course descriptions are, to some extent, strategically conceived and written.

A number of studies focused on another subgenre of the university websites, namely, the *About Us* section. Why is the *About us* section relevant? The *About Us* section is the “first” text of the university website the reader encounters and, as such, it acts as an introduction to the remainder of the website, contributing to the construction of the institution’s identity.

The studies by Caiazzo deal with University websites, focusing in particular on the *About Us* sections. Caiazzo (2009) analyzes the ‘About Us’ sections of 160 Indian and UK university websites and focuses in particular on the evaluative use of the adjectives *national*, *international* and *global* in a comparative perspective. Notably, these adjectives are not evaluative *per se*, but they may acquire an evaluative function depending on how they are used and the cultural background they are related to. By using Corpus Linguistics methodology, the author attempts to detect the “semantic prosody” connected to these adjectives by also considering the context and co-text in which they appear. In this way it would be possible to detect the kind of university identity these adjectives contribute to building. Caiazzo concludes that while there are few instances of *global* in both corpora, the adjectives *national* and *international* are quite widespread, but display a different use and semantic prosody. The “International dimension is much more relevant in the UK subcorpus” (Caiazzo 2009: 56), especially when used by those universities that already have an international reputation that they, logically, want to preserve and enhance, in order to attract more students. *National*, on the other hand, is an adjective largely used to describe Indian universities as they want to be portrayed as an active entity for the national economy and as a crucial factor for the students’ chances of finding work after graduation.

In another essay, Caiazzo (2010) explores the evaluative and promotional language of the *About Us* section of a number of university websites from various countries: 15 are from the UK, 10 from India and 45 from five European countries and from China. Thus, the English varieties delineated by Kachru (1992)—the inner circle, the outer circle and the expanding one—are all represented in the corpus. Corpus Linguistics methodology has been employed as well as Corresponding Analysis. Despite some differences in the organization of the *About Us* sections, ranging from the most widely used narrative/descriptive mode to messages/letters from the university’s authorities, there are important similarities among them, such as the promotional use of language mainly through the use of positive evaluative adjectives (Caiazzo 2010: 55). Interestingly, the findings show that “varieties from the outer and expanding circles seem to be an example of lexical simplification (Mauranen 2005:281) in that adjectives with generic senses are ‘overrepresented’” (Caiazzo 2010: 55). What is also evident from the data is the difference between those well-known universities that can rely on their prestige and those that are still struggling to become more visible and competitive (Caiazzo 2010).

A further contribution by Caiazzo (2011) dealing with the *About Us* sections focuses, in particular, on the use of the pronoun *we* in two corpora. One corpus is made up of British university websites while the other of Indian university websites. The way in which the pronoun *we* is used confirms the mainly promotional outlook in order to advertise a good and reliable product (Bhatia 2004: 64). The *we* occurrences have been analyzed in combination with verbs. The UK university corpus shows a conspicuous use of the pronoun *we*. Interestingly, the use of this pronoun pictures the institution as a “unitary body”, inclusive of all the people who work for it. In this sense, *we* can be viewed as an ‘enticing we’, implicitly inviting the audience—the students—to become part of the institution. As for the Indian universities, *we* could be viewed as a ‘sleeping we’ as “it plays a marginal role in the representation of the university” (Caiazzo 2011: 257). One possible

interpretation of this is that Indian universities, while adopting to some extent a promotional style in their *About us* section, are at the same time trying to adjust to the challenges posed by globalization.

My research (Ferrarotti 2013), like that of Caiazzo's (2011), also deals with the *About us* sections. It focuses on the linguistic aspects of the English version of a number of Italian university websites in a comparative perspective. The analysis focuses on the uses of pronouns *we* and *you* (in the subject position) and of possessive adjectives *our* and *your*. The underlying idea is that the use of these pronouns contributes to the construction of a credible institutional identity. The pronouns and possessive adjectives have been studied by considering whether they are inclusive or exclusive of the audience. As in the research by Caiazzo (2011), the majority of the *we* occurrences refer to the university itself in an effort to 'personalize' the academic institution, almost constructing a corporate identity (Ferrarotti 2013: 124), while only a small percentage of *we* occurrences (17%) is inclusive of the addressees. In particular, the verbs appearing near *we* and *you* were analyzed according to the categories established by Biber et al. (1999). Pronouns are used in 40% of *About Us* sections of the 60 Italian university websites under study. For these sections, the results showed that the use of pronouns, far from being a random and casual choice "follows a promotional stance which closely mirrors corporate strategy" (Ferrarotti 2013: 136) in order to convince international students, and students in general, to enroll at the university. The audience of the websites is encouraged to actively feel part of the institution to the point of contributing to constructing a positive identity of it and by enhancing its reputation by speaking positively about it. Interestingly, as already mentioned, not all the *About Us* sections use this involving approach with the audience. The majority of the websites, in fact, tend to be more detached and dryly informative, adhering to a more traditional kind of text that aims at projecting an authoritative image rather than taking on a promotional stance. It would be desirable for Italian universities—and for universities all over the world—to adopt common guidelines contributing to a more coherent style in these introductory institutional texts.

3. Concluding Remarks

At the end of this brief, and by no means complete, survey concerning university websites and their various subgenres, such as the *About us* sections, it is worth mentioning that further studies are needed to evaluate the pragmatic strength and impact of these various approaches and styles adopted by universities. In particular, it would be interesting to register the number of international students who enroll annually at each university and cross-reference that data with the number of times a given university website, possibly in its English version, is accessed. In terms of personal decisions to enroll at a foreign university, it would be useful to carry out research into foreign students' motivations. Finally, as already mentioned, it would also be useful for universities to rely on common guidelines in writing their websites in order to adopt a more coherent and homogeneous mode of content for presenting themselves.

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