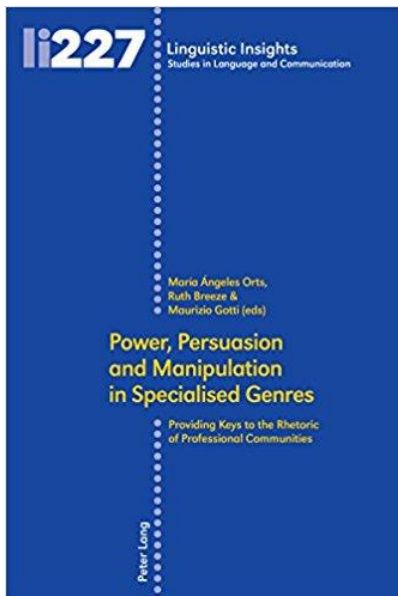


BOOK REVIEW



A HISTORICAL SHIFT TO A NEW POWER IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION AND THE INTERNET

María Ángeles Orts, Ruth Breeze and Maurizio Gotti (Eds.). POWER, PRESUASION AND MANIPULATION IN SPECIALISED GENRES. PROVIDING KEYS TO THE RHETORIC OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES (2017), Bern: Peter Lang. 368 pp., ISBN-978-3-0343-3010-7 (HBK).

130

This 227th volume in the series Linguistic Insights brings forth a collection of articles centered around the concepts of linguistic persuasion and power, as represented in the written texts of professional communication and with the aim of unraveling how they are “constructed, interpreted, used and exploited in the achievement of specific goals” (Sancho Guinda, Gotti, & Breeze, 2014: 18). The stance taken in the studies of the languages of various professions, including law and arbitration, medicine, social work, economics, advertising, to name but a few, is that of genre theory. This theory assumes that specialized communities are rhetorically very sophisticated and are therefore open only to their members. The analysis presented in the chapters of this volume focuses on the communicative devices that serve the need of the various professions to exert power and manipulation and to use persuasion. The professions are thus viewed “as specialized communities aiming to dominate, police and protect their particular area of expertise” (p. 10), linked tightly to both power and language (or to both power in language and language in power).

The introductory chapter (authored by Orts & Breeze) sets the scene by delimiting the scope of the volume and providing a succinct overview of the

intricate interplay of power, persuasion and language in various professional communities. The authors point out that specialized professional communities create their own genres and exert power through language understood as discourse, as meaningful social action. Professional discourse can, however, also be seen as verbal manipulation, as a means for institutions to construct and promote their image, a means of achieving, maintaining and reproducing social power and manipulation through discourse. And yet power may not be administered without consent (at least not in democratic societies, in Orts' [2016: 2] terms), it requires legitimation, explanation, justification, which in turn means that institutions and organizations need to persuade their users to believe in their legitimacy. And it is exactly this, the ways in which specialized communities use persuasion for their genres to be legitimized, the manipulative techniques they use to align readers with specific ways of understanding reality that the reviewed volume places in the focus of its attention.

The thirteen chapters of the book zoom in on how “persuasive or manipulative messages are habitually conveyed through specific professional genres, some of which are socially recognized to be substantially persuasive in nature” (p. 16). And even though persuasion and manipulation are not always clearly discernible, the editors have organized the first six chapters around manipulation, whereas Part Two, containing the remaining seven chapters, brings discussions of more open-ended forms of persuasion pertaining to genres intended for educational or promotional purposes or which represent part of consensual methods of dispute resolution.

The first chapter, V. K. Bhatia & A. Bhatia’s “Interdiscursive manipulation in media reporting: The case of the Panama papers in India”, examines a corpus of Indian media reports on the over eleven million documents disclosing inside information from a law firm in Panama (the “elite’s tax haven”, as reported by the BBC News, 4/4/2016), with the aim of exploring how investigative journalism manipulates the truth and sensationalizes media representations in order to attract a wide readership. Both text-external and text-internal (lexico-grammatical and rhetorical) resources are reported to be employed in the news reports, though the kind of manipulative and sensational reporting analyzed here is deemed to have a relatively brief impact.

In chapter two, A. Bocanegra-Valle focuses on the ways in which institutional dominance is discursively constructed by the International Maritime Organization in 15 of its Secretary-General’s speeches. In the chapter entitled “Empowering the discourse of globalization in international organizations: The International Maritime Organization as a case in point”, the author establishes four recurring themes in the corpus: globalization, leadership, hegemony, and legitimation and argues that public leaders employ institutional discourse to effectively spread the discourse of globalization, to reassert leadership and institutional power and to build a positive frame to legitimate the organization’s actions.

Next, in “Maintaining a dominant voice: A syntactic analysis of the way power is wielded in medical editorials” S. Carter-Thomas and E. Rowley-Jolivet set as their goal to explore how power is deployed through discourse in another powerful specialized community, that of the medical profession. The analysis of the syntactic features of 400 editorials (and 50 research articles) published in the major medical journals extends to deontic modality (as the most overt expression of power asymmetry between discourse participants), pronouns (especially “we” to reduce the directive force of deontic modality), questions and extraposition. These features are recognized as being instrumental in achieving and maintaining the substantial power distance between the editorialist and the readers, typical of this type of texts.

By studying the websites of various commercial surrogacy organizations, the chapter entitled “Persuasive strategies on surrogacy websites: A discourse-analytical and rhetorical study” examines the discursive practices and rhetorical approach of surrogacy organizations to represent themselves as high-level professionals, as well as the strategies they use to attract intending parents. The author, G. E. Garzone, reaches the conclusion that in the choice of modes of persuasion there is a clear preference for the ethical appeal. Subtle techniques and discursive and rhetorical strategies are used to allure potential clients and to convince them that the services offered are viable, that artificial reproductive technologies are ethically acceptable and sound, and that success is warranted by the organization’s professional expertise.

Chapter 5, by E. Monzó-Nebot, examines how face-work strategies are used to rationalize injustice in legal discourse. In “‘Silence will break my bones’: The presentation and representation of victims and perpetrators at the service of just-world views in judicial discourse” the author analyzes the argumentation of a controversial (overly lenient) judgement on a sexual assault case and shows how voice and silence intertwine in discourse to reinterpret the empirical world in which the perpetrator is a member of a dominant social group and the victim is a member of a disprivileged group. The clearly biased discourse of the judge in this case is shown to result in a reinterpretation of the purposes of sentencing and of the meaning of restoration to support just-world views at the expense of the victim.

The last chapter of Part I is P. Pérez-Paredes’ “A keyword analysis of the 2015 UK higher education green paper and the Twitter debate”. In this contribution, corpus-aided discourse analysis methods and social data mining techniques are employed to explore the extent to which the (part of speech) analysis of keywords can aid the understanding of how language use contributes to building the underlying discourses in the 2015 Higher Education Green Paper (HEGP) and the Twitter debate on the new Teaching Excellence Framework. The results reveal that the HEGP constructs higher education in the UK as a competitive market but also that the academic staff in the UK is largely uninterested in taking part in the debate of the HEGP.

Part II of the volume opens with a genre approach to analyzing how a Scottish charity addresses the issue of violence against women (VAW) in materials produced for the media and for education, two important areas in preventing VAW. Using the methodology of critical genre analysis, in “Persuading against gender violence: An interdiscursive genre analysis” A. M. Fage-Butler investigates the discourses that are integrated in two genres for different audiences but produced by the same sender. She shows how representation proves to be both an ethical and political issue and stresses the importance of assuming a discursive approach to public health and the need to further explore the strategic use of discourses for persuasive purposes in various genres.

In the next chapter, titled “Persuasion in promotional banking products: A comparative corpus-based study”, D. Gallego-Hernández compares the textual genre of promotional banking products in French and Spanish, as genres the ultimate goal of which is to manipulate, persuade and convince potential clients or readers to buy their products. The corpus collected from websites is analyzed with respect to the persuasive devices employed in an attempt to identify the devices used in Spanish and French to keep the position of influence in these texts, to establish the similarities between these two languages with respect to the rhetorical resources used to influence customers, and to determine whether the way readers are manipulated has an effect on translation. The results of the research are shown to be relevant not only for business translation but also for teaching business translation.

The world of arbitration in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is discussed in the next two chapters of the volume. In “Rhetorical strategies of persuasion in the reasoning of international investment arbitral awards” D. Giner shows how power and persuasion combine in arbitral awards. Namely, the arbitrators (chosen by the conflicted parties, therefore “owing” them the power they have) use a variety of rhetorical strategies of persuasion to convince the readership of the suitability of their final decision and to present their award as impartial – not only to satisfy both parties but also to promote themselves to future clients. Thus, strategies like hedging, intensification and expressing attitude serve the purpose of modeling the information considered important in the eyes of the authors and of convincing the readers of the suitability of the arbitrators’ decision.

Still within the world of arbitration, M. Gotti focuses on the ways in which arbitration is perceived in various parts of the world. Specifically, based on an analysis of legislative texts, the chapter entitled “Power and persuasion in arbitration: East vs West” highlights the fact that in the Eastern legal culture, settling a dispute in an amicable way (or by combining the process of conciliation/mediation with that of arbitration) is preferred, whereas in the West, the more adversarial mode is generally preferred. The cultural differences, primarily the importance of avoiding threatening or loss of face of either party involved in business relations in the Eastern culture, result in a very different role

played by the arbitrator in these two parts of the world, as well as in the weight given to power and persuasion in the arbitration proceedings adopted.

Power and persuasion are also part and parcel of another genre, as argued by J. C. Palmer-Silveira in “Showing power and persuasion in business communication: The corporate news section in websites and social media”. Namely, by comparing the way in which companies promote themselves in their corporate pages and in their LinkedIn corporate profiles, the author aims to find out whether European companies promoting themselves in English are equally accurate and persuasive as American companies. The findings of the research suggest that all companies use self-references, power words and intensifiers but US corporations tend to display a higher level of intimacy between firm and customers, whereas European companies resort to the use of power words even more frequently than US corporations.

In “Transmitting authority in risk communication: An exploration of U.S. air-accident dockets online”, C. Sancho Guinda researches what strategies technical writers adopt in risk communication, the aim of which is to authoritatively prevent unsafe behaviors by influencing and persuading. The scrutiny of over 1,700 fatal probable-cause docket samples accessible to the public online shows the reader how a governmental agency can exert and build authority by using persuasive strategies based on its discourse on technical and professional issues. Many of the texts analyzed are actually instances of a bent genre, with a deviant rhetorical structure, with hyperlinks, animations, eye-witness accounts and recourse to multimodality, at the same time retaining the primary social communicative purpose of the accident report.

The volume closes with “The role of hedging in balancing power and persuasion in the judicial context: The case of majority and dissenting opinions” by H. Vass, who examines a fairly balanced corpus of majority and dissenting opinions from 39 cases heard before the Supreme court in 2012. The focus is once again on the variety of discourse strategies employed to balance power and persuasion. Hedging (as marked by modal and lexical verbs) is recognized as the primary means by which dissenting justices cast doubt on the majority’s arguments and express a value judgement on their reasoning, with the ultimate goal of reaching the hearts and minds of the general public and influencing future policy makers and legal practitioners.

As the above brief summaries of the individual chapters illustrate, the age of globalization and the Internet may have brought about dramatic changes in professions and professional communication. In a world in which the power of media publishers appears to be taken over by social media users and bloggers, where consumers are taking the lead and power shifts from shareholders to consumers and from multinational companies to start-ups, there is bound to occur a major change in the voices of professional discourse as well. In this sense, the 13 chapters of the present volume resonate well, all of them focusing on the communicative devices that serve the needs of various professions to exert power

and manipulation and to use persuasion. In spite of the occasional typos in the volume (e.g. “device for.” on p. 318, numbering in italics on p. 326) and a few unnecessarily divided tables (e.g. p. 165, p. 328), I find the book a very interesting and valuable addition to genre theory. It will be of interest to anyone who wishes to study the many facets of linguistic manipulation, persuasion and power in professional communication.

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