

## CONVERSATIONAL GENRES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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### ABSTRACT

Certain established practices in foreign language teaching, especially in the development of communicative skills that demand the production of language, are based on the assumption that written and spoken discourse are identical in form, structure and use. Similarly, it follows that the acquisition of one leads to the acquisition of the other. The hypothesis investigated in this paper is that these two versions of discourse are not identical and that they diverge from that suggested by foreign language textbook authors with communicative aims in mind. The investigation of this hypothesis is based on oral and written texts concerning economics, taken from the printed and electronic media of six European countries.

### RESUMEN

Existen una serie de prácticas establecidas en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, sobre todo en cuanto al desarrollo de las destrezas comunicativas que demandan los aspectos productivos del lenguaje, que toman como base la idea de que el discurso oral y el discurso escrito resultan idénticos en cuanto a forma, estructura y uso. De un modo similar, se deriva la idea de que la adquisición del uno conlleva la adquisición del otro. La hipótesis que se investiga en este trabajo es la de que estas dos versiones del discurso no son idénticas sino que, más bien, son divergentes de aquello que tantas veces se ha sugerido por parte de muchos autores de libros de texto con objetivos de tipo comunicativo en mente. La investigación de esta hipótesis se basa en textos de tipo oral y tipo escrito relativos a temas de economía, extraídos de los medios de comunicación impresos y electrónicos de seis países europeos.

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RÉSUMÉ

Certaines pratiques établies dans l'enseignement des langues ayant comme objectif le développement des compétences communicatives semblent partir de l'hypothèse que les formes du discours écrit et oral sont identiques et que, par conséquent, l'acquisition de l'une amène à l'acquisition de l'autre.

Dans cette contribution, l'auteur montre que les deux versions de discours diffèrent visiblement et que toutes les deux s'écartent de celle proposée par les auteurs des méthodes d'enseignement des langues. Cette constatation résulte d'une recherche basée sur un corpus de textes écrits et oraux concernant l'économie et puisés dans les médias de six pays européens.

1. SPOKEN/WRITTEN DISCOURSE AND GENRES

When referring to spoken language, we should imagine a speaker within a specific frame addressing defined interlocutors; the speaker determines, in relation to the time and place in which he is speaking, the time and place to which he is referring. The time and the place are variable, as well as the identity of the speaker, which can vary according to his situational property: he can speak as an individual (professional, father, colleague, passenger, client, etc.) or as a member of a group with common characteristics (party member, delegate, consumer, etc.). Since the speaker's identity is a variable component, even in the same communication event, the organisation of his discourse is correspondingly variable.

In fact, if we approach one of the microcosms of human activity and the discourse produced, we will be led to certain observations, such as those made by our research into six languages –English, French, German, Greek, Spanish and Italian– in the field of international economic exchange (Tocatlidou, 1999). Our research showed, not exclusively, that not all genres of discourse oral and written appear in both versions but that some are only written or only spoken, some do not appear at all in reference to specific issues, while others are favoured<sup>1</sup>.

It is generally accepted that the various genres of discourse are much more variable and flexible as compared to the system. However, it has been observed (Bakhtine, 1984, p. 287) that the norms regulating gen-

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<sup>1</sup> The project, aimed at the development of a multimedia software for language e-learning.

res are not less binding for the speaker than system rules<sup>2</sup>. Their form is given, not created by the speaker. Various types are shaped under specific conditions and according to a social ritual that moulds them in a way similar to the rules regulating the linguistic system. This means that the use of one form rather than another is dictated by norms and rituals valid for one specific socio-cultural context but not, necessarily, for another.

## 2. GENRES, VARIATIONS AND "COMMUNICATIVE VALUE" OF A TEXT

Scholars focusing on text forms and variations have often discussed text types<sup>3</sup>. Of course, a text, as a phenomenon of a communication process, acquires only the meaning assigned to it by the participants according to the setting.

However, when one type is used to transmit a message, the form and structure as well as the communication means the speaker or writer uses vary in order to maintain the meaning. Consequently, during communication, "deviations" from the form of speech initially selected by the speaker could be observed. Nevertheless, regardless of the speaker's ends or attitude towards the receiver or the referent, and independently of the 'conversational implicatures', deviation is related to the channel used and, quite probably, to the domain of reference. The extent of deviation is dictated by the need to achieve the communication aim. This is ultimately the main criterion defining the "communicative value"<sup>4</sup> of the text. For instance, in a linguistic exchange where X wishes to invite certain persons to his/her wedding, the speech act of invitation takes different forms, oral or written: for a number of people the act of inviting will take the form of a formal written "invitation", whereas for others the invitation act could be embedded in another genre of dis-

<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that it becomes all the more acceptable that "continuous and current use keeps altering the rules" and that regulation is not to be found within language itself but in the social environment (Attalah, 1994, p. 282).

<sup>3</sup> This is particularly a view supported by French scholars. Adam, J.-M. (1992), *Les textes: types et prototypes*, Paris, Nathan. See special issue of *Etudes de Linguistique Appliquée*, n° 83, 1991, where only one article (Bouchard, 1991) deviates from this general line of thought.

<sup>4</sup> Participants in a communicative process participate in shaping the meaning of their exchanges; meaning emerges from incorporating communicative phenomena within a context (Mucchielli, 1998, p. 23). However, the communicative value of a text is not absolute but relative. It is a function of the circumstantial identity of the reader. The same person at two different moments might attribute to a text a totally different function and value.

course, such as a letter or note. Deviation phenomena appear particularly when using e-mail, fax or telephone, where 'noise' interferes in the channel (the receiver is hard of hearing, or the telephone connection is bad, etc.). In such cases, both the material means (writing, voice) as well as the organisation of discourse will shift. Particularly in oral exchanges, such shifts dictated by the reactions of the receiver follow the conversation process; indices of such phenomena can be detected in the final text produced. The communicative value of any text depends on the degree to which the speaker's or writer's final goal is achieved.

### 2.1. *The conversational process*

Examining the genres of spoken language produced in everyday contexts the following observations could be made: there are numerous and various types, depending on the norms and the particular circumstances. This variety could be categorised and presented in different ways, such as that proposed by Goffman. According to Goffman's proposal, oral production seems to be based on memorising or reading a text or to be an original text created under the demands of immediate response to a situation –what Goffman calls "fresh production" (Goffman, 1983, p. 226).

Following this taxonomy, the types of conversational discourse, which actually or potentially exist, are shown in the table below<sup>5</sup>.

Types of Conversational Process (indicatively)

| <i>Memorisation</i>                              | <i>Reading a written text</i>                   | <i>"Fresh Production"</i>  |
|--|---|--|
| TV/radio commercial addressing viewers/listeners | Reading a play (by the director and the actors) | Conversation<br>Dialogue   |
| Exchange between screen actors                   | Reading a sermon in church                      | Interview  |
| Exchange between stage actors                    | Reading a contract (by a notary/lawyer)         | Press Conference<br>Panel<br>Talk-show<br>Public discussion or debate<br>Telephone exchange<br>Disagreement, row, argument<br>Reportage (by a journalist)<br>Telephone-TV intervention |

<sup>5</sup> A telephone exchange is recorded as a different genre of conversation because the difference is not limited to the channel. The lack of visual contact dictates a different

It should be noted, however, that not all of the types of oral text included in the table above could be identified in any one field of reference; while some do appear, others do not. Therefore, in our research in the domain of economics, there are few types of spoken discourse, which concern conversational procedure. This finding allows us to assume that norms, processes or rituals vary from microcosm to microcosm, and that the distribution of types is not to be taken for granted nor is self-evident; one type might be favoured in a certain social context, while excluded in another. For that reason, in the case of professional “*jargon*”, the researcher should not focus on terms but on the types of discourse dictated by norms valid in the given context. Terminology is only one of the components of such discourse. The findings of this research are shown below.

Types of Oral Discourse Recorded during the XENIOS Project  
(Bold print indicates a conversational process)

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**Advertisement - Announcement**  
 Biographical Data  
 Comment on written document, diagram, sketch, table or other text  
**Commercial script**  
 Events – News  
**Interview**  
**Journalistic report (including interviews)**  
 Lectures –Speeches  
 Narrative-commentary documentary  
 Press Conference  
 Statements  
**Telephone-TV intervention**  
**TV Debate (with or without telephone or TV intervention)**

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Goffman’s “*fresh production*” of language, in our case, presents all the features already noted by other researchers<sup>6</sup>, with the exception of commercial scripts that presuppose memorisation: phatic function of language, as one component in combination with others, (“*Listen...*” “*Let*

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organisation of discourse and presents, as it has already been mentioned, additional phenomena during the course of conversation.

<sup>6</sup> These features are a point theoreticians seem to agree on. The argument arises only between formalist linguists and non-formalist linguists, on one side, and anthropologists, on the other, concerning the methodology of examining a conversational process and the debate on the quest or lack of it for models or standards the conversation might comply with.

*me...* "Look", etc.), hesitation, self-correction, pauses, rephrasing, etc. The use of other, non-verbal means of communication is also obvious: facial expressions, smiling, nodding/head shaking, gestures, etc. Furthermore, interruptions, overlapping, by both interlocutors, while still listening to what the other is saying and embedding anecdotes or quotations within their discourse. What actually differs is the extent to which these phenomena of orality appear in each of these types. This also distinguishes an interview from a press conference, which is much more formal and ritualistic than an ordinary interview, as there is always a third person co-ordinating the discussion and questions might have been prepared in advance<sup>7</sup>. These two types also differ in the communication network (inter-personal and multi-directional) as well as in the speech acts of the interlocutors concerned, such as reference to the speaker's or a third person's words, reference to an event or situation, request for clarification or expression of an opinion, etc.

## 2.2. *The process of conversation in written discourse*

Parallel research into written texts showed that in the domain of economics and international exchanges, there is a wide variety of written text types. What is interesting, however, is the fact that only two of them concern the conversational process in its written version: cartoons and written interviews.

Types of Written Discourse Recorded by the XENIOS Project  
(Conversational processes appear in bold print).

|                    |                       |                           |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Advertisements     | <b>Cartoons</b>       | Journalists' reports      |
| Agendas            | Certificates          | Lectures – Speeches –     |
| Announcements      | Circulars             | Minutes                   |
| Applications       | Commercial trailers   | Letters                   |
| Articles           | Commercials           | News Items                |
| Balances           | Company documents     | Order forms               |
| Bibliographical    | Contents              | Securities                |
| references         | Contracts             | Signs                     |
| Bibliography       | Diagrams              | Tables                    |
| Biographical Notes | Diaries               | Titles                    |
| Biographies        | Financial transaction | <b>Written Interviews</b> |
| Captions           | documents             | Written signs             |

<sup>7</sup> This production is sometimes not so "fresh" as supported by notes kept by the journalist.

It could be argued that cartoons should not be considered as original production, since in the case of caricature language and icon function in complementarity (Barthes, 1964, p. 44). However, the sketch in a cartoon is the schematic representation of the communication event, i.e., of the conditions under which the discourse acquires its meaning. Thus, the written discourse attributed to the characters in a cartoon should be viewed as the written record of a conversational process that took place at another place and at another time.

In a written interview the discourse might initially be in oral form recorded onto tape, in which case most of the characteristic features of orality, as mentioned above, will be lost. Although some of the basic features of the conversational discourse may remain, the organisation and means will differ from those of the initial oral text. Clarifications and self-correction or interaction phenomena are not direct, but instead, often appear at different, sometimes remote points in the discourse, substituted by other linguistic means, resulting in a drastic change in the organisation of the discourse. In conclusion, what results is a "*modified*" text, a "*hybrid*" of orality and literacy.

In contrast, published interviews are often primarily written discourse, since they are based on a series of written questions which are, in turn, answered in writing by the interviewee, who received the questions and responded to them at an earlier point in time. Therefore, it is debatable whether this is the written version of a conversation or, more likely, a written genre in its own right, simply with echoes of oral speech, such as identity switching by the interviewee. He could, for example, answer the first question from the standpoint of a government minister, the second as a European citizen and the third as a consumer or parent.

The only version of a conversation that may at this moment be taking place in real time through written discourse is electronic (chat)<sup>10</sup>, which, however, did not appear within the field of our study, but which, I feel, should be mentioned here.

### 3. ORAL/WRITTEN DISCOURSE AND SCHOOL PRACTICE

Between the two tables presenting the genres of written and oral discourse detected by our research in the domain of economics there is only limited similarity: 32 of written and 12 genres of oral discourse. Obviously, some genres or types of written discourse have no corre-

sponding version of oral discourse. This is the case of contracts, content tables, bibliography, titles, securities, diagrams, written signs. Interviews, which appear in both forms, were discussed earlier. Furthermore it should be stressed once more that one version is not a mere transcription of the other, as some language tutors or learners seem to believe. On the contrary, oral and written discourse do not coincide, do not have the same features. As it was indicated by Foucault –I am paraphrasing– “*it is not the same syntax nor the same vocabulary that operate in a written text or a conversation (...); indeed, there are word sequences that form phrases fully acceptable when they appear in newspaper headlines, but which would have no meaning in a conversation*” (Foucault, 1969, p. 133).

Nevertheless, in the foreign language classroom all forms of conversational genres are substituted by an imitated conversation, the so-called “*dialogue*”. The aim of this “*dialogue*” is to develop learners’ communicative competence, although it is a specific “*genre*” exclusively appearing in the classroom.

Of course, such “*dialogues*” do not represent either of the two versions, although the external appearance of interlocutors’ changeover, as marked by punctuation, might imply so. Therefore they cannot develop any communicative competence. Of course, taking into account what Peirce names *denotata*, the “*icon*”<sup>8</sup> of a text should not be neglected. However, the “*icon*” of a written text, even if it allows the recognition of the genre, does not, on its own, ensure the communicative value of the text itself. This seems to be ignored by most of the textbooks authors, who consider that the so-called “*dialogue*” acquires a communicative function or value, only by its external features.

Similarly, they simply present the external form of a text –considered “*authentic*” since it is photocopied– and its linguistic components, seeming to forget or ignore its social function and, consequently, its communicative value<sup>9</sup>. This, at least, can be concluded from the type and content of exercises aiming at “*comprehension*”.

<sup>8</sup> The term is used here in the sense Peirce attributes to it (Peirce, 1958).

<sup>9</sup> Two Announcements that appeared in the press, one “announcing” that Firm X “received and supplies its eminent clientele with new car models under excellent, favourable terms” and the other that “it is now possible for certificates to be issued by the Inland Revenue office following a telephone application”; the two are classified as the same and dealt with in the same manner, despite their communicative differences concerning their purpose and final objective.



#### CONVERSATIONAL GENRES AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Language teaching is still trapped in obsolete schemes of the “structural approach” and for that reason teachers and textbooks authors handle the process of communication as a formal pre-made construction. A more systematic observation of communication in social life out of the classroom would allow teaching methodology to plan a new strategy and to achieve communicative objectives.

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