



Product presentations: a multimodal genre to be disclosed

Julia Valeiras Jurado
valeiras@ang.uji.es

I. Abstract

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Although there are many definitions of genre, virtually all of them include the ideas of ownership by a discourse community and social acceptance by this community. Modern genre theory emphasises the role of genres in social interaction. Genre is seen as a multidimensional phenomenon. Paré and Smart believe genres must be defined taking into account not only textual features but also the processes involved in producing and interpreting the texts. Berkenkotter and Huckin note down five basic features in the concept of genre: dynamism, situatedness, form and content, duality of structure, and community ownership. They refer to genres as dynamic rhetorical forms developed by actors' responses to recurrent situations within social communicative activities. All these features are central to understanding the nature and redefinition of existing genres or emergence of new genres. In this sense, Kress 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” (Kress 2003). In addition, since media technology has multiplied text and image capabilities, it is also necessary to analyse the effect of non-linguistic features on how meaning is constructed. The specific purpose of this paper is to make a literature review on the concept of genre to reflect on the innate multimodal nature of product presentations. Further research will aim at presenting a model of analysis of product presentations which will provide insights into the nature and evolution of this genre. Non-linguistic features will be analysed from a multimodal perspective in order to find out to what extent they add meaning to the expression of persuasion and therefore contribute to the description product presentations as a genre.

II. Introduction

Product presentations are probably one of the most important genres in the business world. The effectiveness of these presentations is decisive for many business transactions. Product presentations vary from one another depending on the type of product, the communicative situation in which they occur and the community of use. However, all product presentations share one main purpose: to persuade the addressee of the excellence of the product.

On the other hand, product presentations have evolved responding to social changes and particularly the emergence of new technologies, becoming richer in terms of multimodality (Kress 2003, Yates and Orlikowski forthcoming). Therefore, I suggest that a multimodal approach is particularly useful in the description of product presentations, since it can provide an insight into aspects such as the expression persuasion.

Some of the most famous instances of this genre are the presentations of Apple products, performed by Steve Jobs, former CEO of Apple. In fact, Steve Jobs is regarded as an example to be imitated for effective presentations. His increasing popularity has resulted in guides and online forums where his style is discussed, and hints are offered to improve presentation skills by emulating his practices. An example that illustrates this trend is the on-line article *How to Present like Steve Jobs* by Carmine Gallo, published on www.cbsnews.com on 2 April 2008. In this article, the author describes Steve Jobs as "the most charismatic pitchman in business today" and his presentations as "brilliant demonstrations of visual storytelling that turn customers, employees, and the entire computer industry into evangelists". She quotes the presentation of the iPhone in January 2007 as an example of the "techniques he and other inspiring leaders use to wow their audiences – techniques you can use in your next presentation."¹

The present research springs from the hypothesis that it is a skillful combination of different modes in the expression of meaning that make these presentations so effective, i.e. product presentations are multimodal in nature. In order to reflect on this multimodal nature of product presentations, I will undertake a brief review of previous literature on the concept of genre. Common traits over different definitions of genre will pave the way for arguing in favour of a multimodal approach in the description of genres. I will then focus on multimodality in product presentations in particular. Finally, I will conclude with some references to further research on the multimodal expression of persuasion in product presentations.

III. The concept of genre: an overview

Probably one of the most widely accepted definitions of genre, especially in the context of ESP, is the one provided by Swales (1990: 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 experts members of the parent community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.

Swales perceives genres as a communicative event, i.e. language in action. According to Swales a genre has a recognizable communicative purpose, which is not exclusively the purpose of the individual, but one acknowledged by the community of users.

Swales definition has proved very influential. Many authors have developed and expanded on the concepts introduced by Swales. For example Yates and Orlikowski (1992) refer to genres as communicative

¹ Retrieved November, 24, 2011 from http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505125_162-51194984/how-to-present-like-steve-jobs/

actions. Paré and Smart (1994) call them communicative activities, and Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) talk about rhetorical forms. Despite differences in terminology, all of them agree that genres are language in action, used in a particular situation. Therefore, genres are perceived as processes, and not as final products. Consequently, the description of a genre will need to take production and interpretation processes into account.

Swales' definition also influenced Paré and Smart (1994), who draw on the idea of the parent community to claim that knowledge about genres is not learnt, but rather enculturated as the user becomes member of a community. They also claim that a genre cannot be considered as such until it is accepted by a community. Likewise, Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) argue that genres are linked to particular disciplines and their methodologies. The practices of this parent community –and particularly the changes in them– will therefore deeply affect the way genres change and evolve through time to better suit the needs of this community.

Another influential idea introduced by Swales is that genres have a recognizable communicative purpose. Other authors like Yates and Orlikowski (1992) and Paré and Smart (1994) claim that genres also show patterns in content and form. In fact they argue that genres and the social situation in which they emerge mutually influence each other: the social situation shapes the genre, providing it with patterns, but in turn the genre also influences the social situation by recurrent use. Paré and Smart (1994) refer to this as *Duality of Structure*. However, these patterns in content, form and purpose that can be found in genres do not imply stative-ness. In fact, genres are dynamic, and they change according to users' needs (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995) and responding to social changes (Kress 2003).

To sum up, the concepts of genres as action, the existence of a community of use, the dynamism that characterizes genres and the idea of duality of structure are all revealing aspects that suggest a need to move to a wider description of genre, capable of accounting for non-linguistic aspects which also have an influence on genres and on the way they are used and understood. In this sense, the research undertaken by Kress and Kwasnik and Crowston is of particular interest.

Kress (2003: 103) defines genre as the “shaping of text which reflects and is brought into existence as a result of the social relations of the participants in the making (writing/ speaking) and in the use (reading/ hearing/ interpretation) of a text.” As this definition shows, the most important characteristic of genre for Kress is that they are the result of the social relationships of the participants. He understands genres as extremely dynamic and the result of a creative process. Kress introduces the concept of multimodality in genre studies. Focusing on the production process, he points out how users choose among the most appropriate modes to express their meaning (Kress 2003).

Kwasnik and Crowston (2005) focus their research on the evolution of genres and the emergence of digital genres. The study of digital genres is especially interesting to the present research, since it raises the question of whether it is possible to describe a digital genre in the same way as we do non-digital ones. In other words, printed newspaper articles and online articles differ from one another in remarkable ways (for example in the sequentiality of the text or the amount of image in relation to text), but they show important similarities as well. Whether the same definition would apply to both is an interesting issue for research.

Therefore, as Kress, and Kwasnik and Crowston research suggests, the introduction of new technologies in the production and interpretation process of genres leads to the use of different modes, which in turn have certain affordances and also certain limitations for the participants in the communicative action.

As a conclusion, the most relevant aspects that this review of the concept of genre has revealed are (see Figure 1):

- a) *Recursiveness*: a genre happens more than once, and is characterized by recurrent use.
- b) *Regularity in form, content and purpose*: a genre is recognizable by recurrent patterns of form and purpose, and according to some authors such as Paré, Smart, Yates and Orlikowski, also regularities in content.
- c) *Social phenomenon*: genres are language in use in particular situations.
- d) *Reciprocal influence society-genres*: In Paré and Smart terms, Duality of Structure.
- e) *Dynamism*: genres change according to users' needs and also respond to social changes.
- f) *Acceptance by a community*: this is a requirement for a genre to be considered as such. Through this acceptance, a genre raises expectations in its community, and users can make predictions of what they are likely to encounter.

All this leads us to revisit the concept of genre adopting a multimodal approach in order to achieve more accurate and comprehensive descriptions of genres.



Figure 1. Relevant aspects in the concept of genre

IV. Multimodality in Genre Studies

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In genre studies a shift can be perceived from a focus on the final product to a growing interest in the production and interpretation processes. As the review of previous literature on the concept of genre has revealed, there is a wide acceptance that genres deal with language in use, and therefore they are to be treated as dynamic processes and not as stative products.

For example, according to authors such as Kress (2003), genres are dynamic and the result of a creative process. This means that the production and interpretation processes are relevant in the description of genres. Furthermore, these processes are multimodal, because users select among available modes to express their meaning. In other words, rather than relying exclusively on written language or verbal elements, in most cases users resort to a combination of different ways of expressing their meaning. Nowadays written texts include an increasing amount of images, and oral texts are almost inevitably accompanied by hand gestures, head movements, gaze and facial expressions.

Kress (2003) claims that the production process of a text is closely related to design. Users design the most appropriate way of communicating their meaning in a given situation. Each mode has different affordances and epistemological commitments. That is, they allow users to do certain things, but at the same time they also impose certain restrictions. As an illustration of this idea introduced by Kress we might take the example of a description of a room in writing vs. image. The differences between both modes are clear: representing through image forces the user to accurately locate each element in space and in relation to each other, while in the case of writing, a relation of recipient-content is established instead between the room and the elements inside it (e.g. In the room there are three chairs and a table - no reference to the exact position of the table and the chairs is made).

V. Multimodality in product presentations

As commented above, product presentations have changed with the advances in technology, and as a result of this evolution they have become richer in terms of multimodality. New technologies make it easier to integrate different modes in presentations. Software like PowerPoint and hardware such as projectors, for example, make it possible to combine oral speech with projected images, words and graphs.

However, the incorporation of different modes also imposes restrictions on the expression of meaning. For example, Yates and Orlikowski (forthcoming) suggest that the inherently sequential arrangement of slides in Power Point presentations results in a decreased flexibility in the interaction with the audience.

In this paper I focus on the analysis of an excerpt from the presentation of the iPhone, performed by Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, in 2007.²

I have identified the following modes in this product presentation:

1. Verbal linguistic elements
2. Paralanguage
3. Kinesics
4. Writing
5. Image

Figure 2 is an illustration of these modes at work.

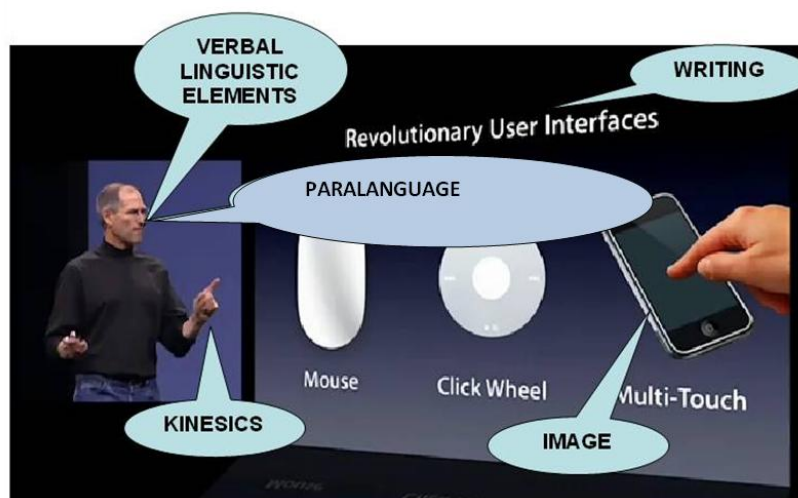


Figure 2. Multimodality in the presentation of the iPhone

Steve Jobs speaks to the public, therefore using **verbal linguistic elements** (spoken words arranged in grammatical structures) as one of his modes. The specific selection of lexis and syntax is used to convey his communicative purposes.

At the same time he is also expressing meaning through **paralanguage** (Poyatos 2002). Three of the main aspects of paralanguage are *pitch*, *intensity* and *duration*. *Pitch* refers to the speed with which the sound wave makes the air vibrate. As we speak, variations in pitch make up a pitch contour, which is usually referred to as intonation. *Intensity* is defined as sound power per unit area, and it is related to loudness. *Duration* refers to the length of sounds, and it is measured in seconds. Through a skillful use of intonation, duration and intensity, the speaker can draw attention to the parts of his message that he is most interested in, and also emphasize the most relevant content.

Furthermore, Steve Jobs also makes gestures with his hands, adopts different facial expressions, directs his gaze to the audience, and moves his head as he speaks. I enclose these actions under the generic term **kinesics**, and they also constitute a mode that transmits meaning (McNeill

² Retrieved September 2011 from <http://www.apple.com/apple-events/>

1992, Kendon 2004). Through the use of hand gestures he can signal when an important point is being made, direct the attention of the audience to a particular aspect (e.g. by pointing), or exemplify aspects of the content of the message (e.g. by indicating an amount with his fingers as he pronounces the number.)

Finally, his presentation is supported by **written words** and **images**. These two modes also play a role in the genre (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), and apart from serving as a guideline for the oral speech, they also convey meaning, for example functioning as visual illustrations of what is being discussed.

VI. Conclusions and further research

In the description of genres, it is necessary to take into account the production and interpretation processes. Genres are the result of a creative process in which users select the modes that better suit their communicative needs in particular situations. Therefore, multimodality plays an important role in the description of genres.

The combination of different modes in a message also raises the question of the exact role that each mode plays in the discourse. Further research in this area would surely yield interesting results concerning questions such as “Do different modes work together to express the same meaning?”, “Is meaning distributed among different modes?”, “If so, can we talk about specialization of modes?”, “Is a particular mode especially suitable for a specific type of meaning (i.e. show feelings)?”

As already said, product presentations in particular show a combination of writing, image, kinesics, verbal linguistic elements and paralinguage. As the literature reviewed in this paper has shown, all of them express meaning. My hypothesis is that the combination of these modes contributes to make the presentation more effective and persuasive. Continuing this line of research, I will next study to what extent a multimodal approach can enrich the description of product presentations as a genre. By means of a multimodal analysis including verbal linguistic features, paralinguage and kinesics, I expect to gain an insight into the co-expression of persuasion in product presentations.

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