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A sense of place in history - description and the lexis of space representation across genres

The paper aims at providing an overview of variation across specialist and non-specialist genres in the discourse of history. The focus is on “general language” rather than specific terminology. Growing attention has been paid to the tools of discourse organization and their evaluative implications, with a view to their discipline specificity (Hyland & Bondi 2006). Disciplines are often characterized by their argumentative strategies as well as by their content, and phraseology can be a helpful signpost to discourse organization. The basically narrative nature of history is widely recognized and temporal notions are often focused on in the applied linguistics literature on historical discourse (Coffin 2006). Setting the scene for the narrative, however, is often equally important. How do historians represent the places where the action takes place? How are these represented in popularising discourse?

The paper explores the functions of descriptive elements in two corpora: a corpus of academic journal articles and a corpus of popularisations (from History today). The corpus allows a double dimension of comparison: across disciplines and across genres (and tenors). The methodology adopted combines a corpus and a discourse perspective (Baker 2006) while focusing on the lexis of space representation (Gerbig 2008).

A preliminary analysis of frequency data (frequency wordlists and statistical keywords) offers an overview of quantitative variation. Attention is paid both to a range of organizational units, from general connectives to other phraseological units involving a representation of space. The study is based on the analysis of concordances and clusters; the co-text of the nodes is analyzed with a view to their textual patterns, so as to bring out the semantic and pragmatic implications of many organizational units. Special attention is paid to the ways in which the generic and argumentative structure of discourse is represented, highlighting for example convergences and divergences between specialist and non-specialist discourse. Frequencies and patterns are interpreted in the light of factors characterizing academic discourse and specific disciplinary values.

The representation of places is shown to contribute to highlighting the significance of the data or conclusions produced, as well as to mapping the territory of current debate with different degrees of explicitness. They thus also become resources by which the author negotiates the his/her position with the reader according to genre-specific orientations.

·Baker, P. 2006. Using corpora in discourse analysis, London Continuum

·Coffin, C. 2006. Historical discourse. The language of time, cause and evaluation London, Continuum.

·Gerbig, A. 2008. Travelogues in time and space: a diachronic and intercultural genre study. In Language, People, Numbers. Corpus Linguistics and Society. GERBIG, A.& O. MASON (Eds.) Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi.

·Hyland & Bondi 2006. Academic discourse across disciplines. Bern: Peter Lang