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Mapping stance clusters: a diachronic corpus-based study of White House Press Briefings

Literature on genre analysis mainly focuses on the description of language use in the different professional and institutional domains (Bhatia 2004). Despite the different directions of the studies on genre (Bhatia 1993; Martin and Christie 1997; Swales 1990), a common orientation may be seen in their tendency to describe homogeneous concepts, such as communicative situation, register and function.

Nevertheless, genre-specific features are subject to changes due to the ongoing processes of internationalisation and globalisation (Candlin and Gotti 2004; Cortese and Duszak 2005; Crystal 1997). In particular, political and institutional communication genres have been experiencing in-depth transformation in the last few decades, mainly due to evolutions in the media market, fuelled by technological developments and by the economic globalisation (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999).

This paper looks in particular at the stance clusters or, to put it differently, it deals with the speaker-positioning phrases in the discourse structure of White House press briefings. The data come from a monolingual corpus which includes all the Press briefings across three presidencies (January 1993 – October 2010). The addition of XML mark-up to the whole corpus, including information about individual speakers and their role, as well as providing a chronological subdivision within the corpus, allows us to compare different discourse strategies adopted by different speakers in the briefings at different points in time. This leads us to determine the extent of the differences in the patterns found as well as the nature of the variation from one podium to the next one and to establish if these patterns are semantically primed (Hoey 2005).

The perspective of the analysis is phraseological in that, as Hopper argues (1987: 150), linguistic form, often in prefabricated chunks, is shaped by discourse use.

The analysis relies on two pieces of software: Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2007) to retrieve the clusters and Xaira to study their distribution across the years.

What we aim to demonstrate from a methodological point of view is that clusters, which are here categorized according to functional criteria (see Mahlberg 2007), can be revealing for identifying specificity of this particular genre and the changes stance clusters in particular are experiencing from Clinton to Obama.

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