Communicative Functions of a Promotional Genre as a Social Action

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This paper discusses the structural construct of a professional genre, university brochures, with the aim of revealing the dynamic nature of genres as social actions. University brochures are considered as a relatively new genre having been introduced only in the last decade due to a change in the university culture as well as in the culture of the 'university's consumers'. The paper attempts to show how genre analysis can successfully be used to guide readers and writers to understand the structural organization of university brochures and the existence of sociocultural factors that influence the organization. Genre analysis also leads to the identification of the multiple communicative functions of university brochures.

Introduction

In our everyday lives, we encounter a repertoire of genres, be they academic, professional or social, and in both spoken and written forms. Some genres are easily understood, some require specific background knowledge to comprehend while some call for a different frame of mind to grasp. Genres come in different format via different media because they are constructed and controlled by the practices of the various discourse communities and are the media through which members of these communities communicate with each other (Bhatia, 2001). At the same time, genres have the power to innovate through genre-mixing (Bhatia, 1995; 1997a) and embedding. All these are evidence of the dynamic nature of genres (Zhu, 2002) which has prompted investigations conducted on the different types of genres basically with the aim of demonstrating how they are written and how they function. These investigations are necessary because genres "are the most stable and the most solid of communicative events" (Swales, 1986: 14) and they are social actions, "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (Miller, 1994: 31), which have developed as they respond appropriately

to situations that writers encounter repeatedly. Thus, understanding genres requires an understanding of the concepts of context of situation and context of culture.

It is important to understand how genres work as this knowledge helps both readers and writers of texts. This paper focuses on the workings of a written professional genre to exemplify that writing is never genre-free; it is always embedded within a genre (Devitt, 1996) while incorporating a process and an interpretation. Knowledge of a genre is generally accessible only to the members of the discourse community the genre belongs to. Writers strategically deploy genre knowledge as they participate in knowledge-producing activities in their professions because "genre knowledge is very much part of the conceptual tool kit of professional writers linked to their knowledge of how to use other tools of their trade (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1993). Having knowledge of this genre empowers anybody who is not a member of this discourse community to participate effectively in their communicative events and "to use, interpret, exploit and innovate novel generic forms" (Bhatia, 2001: 67). An effective investigation of writing takes into consideration the generic structure and the discursive practices of the genre in question, the specific local circumstances in which writing takes place and the broader institutional and socio-historical contexts which inform these particular occasions of writing (Candlin and Hyland, 1999).

One of the research methods used to investigate genres is genre analysis which is basically the study of how language is used within a particular setting (Swales, 1990) and is concerned with the form of language use in relation to meaning (Bhatia, 1993). Genre analysis describes how a text is organised and is particularly useful in understanding specialist discourse, providing an insightful and "thick description" of the text and has become a powerful and useful research method to arrive at significant form-function correlations which can be utilised for a number of applied linguistic purposes, including the teaching of English for specific purposes (Bhatia, 1993). More importantly, genre analysis provides an avenue for the study of the institutionalised context, including the system or methodology in which the discourse is used and the rules and conventions that are determined by the social, academic and professional conventions that govern the use of language in such settings. In other words, genre analysis can be used to explain why certain genres are written the way they are.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the dynamic nature of a professional genre by examining the structural organisation of this genre and the possible sociocultural factors underlying the construction of the genre in an attempt to provide an explanation of why the genre is written the way it is.

Review of Literature

Earlier investigations of genres mostly focussed on the organisational structure of texts, identifying the rhetorical moves to determine how the texts had been written. Over the years, genre analysis has been increasingly influenced by work in the area of 'sociology of knowledge or science' and that 'it is no longer valid to present a study that focuses on moves that a writer uses without a consideration of the role of the writer in the discourse community and the expectations of the discourse community' (Flowerdew and Dudley-Evans, 2002: 465). Thus, the later research started examining different aspects of texts.

Among the professional genres, investigations have been observed to concentrate only on a few professions which are law, medicine, engineering and business. Badger (2003), for example, examined the structural organisation and the grammatical features as well as the sociocultural features in newspaper law reports. This type of law reports are widely accessible and Badger believes that it is important particularly for law students as well as members of the public to know the construct of this genre in order to understand the content.

Apart from examining the structural organisation of job application letters, Henry and Roseberry (2001) also examined the salient linguistic features in these letters as a guide for novice writers while Nickerson (2002) also examined the cross-cultural elements in email messages sent within a multinational business communication setting. Analyses of how English language has been used in different settings globally have provided insights into how this language functions as a universal medium of communication having undergone a metamorphosis (Bhatia, 1997b) resulting in a language with multiple diversity (Kachru and Nelson, 2001) and multicultural identity (Bhatia, 1997b).

Methodology

The method of analysis in this paper involves 'applied genre analysis' Bhatia (1997c) in an attempt to explore the multi-dimensional perspective of a genre (Hajibah Osman, 2005). The brochure genre was selected for this study because brochures are examples of a promotional professional genre. Further, the brochure format is one of the most frequently used information formats in advertising and public relations but ironically, is the least written about (Bivins, 1996).

This investigation focuses on one of the many sub-genres of brochures, university brochures and the data consists of eleven brochures from the public universities and nine from the private universities in Malaysia, twenty in total. To conform to the requirements of genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993), the brochures selected are general university brochures published between 2001 and 2003 due to the short shelf life of brochures (Newsom and Carrell, 2001).

The investigation includes structural analysis to examine the structural organisation in university brochures and cultural analysis to examine the sociocultural factors. The framework for the structural analysis is based on Bhatia's (1993) model of analysing professional genres and the framework for cultural analysis is based on Miller's (1994) notion of genres as social actions and the fact that the sociocultural factors occupy a central position in organising mind on the foundation of possibilities (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 1994). The results will be discussed in the light of the rationale for the structure of this genre with the influence of the sociocultural factors.

Results

Structural Organisation in University Brochures

The general format of university brochures consists of text and graphic. The organisation of the text is made up of a ten-move structure. The moves are presented and described below (Figure 4.1).

Moves	Description
Identifying the Service (**I**)	Providing the name of the university together with the university crest or logo
Attracting reader attention (**A**)	Stating the university motto and/or slogan
Targetting the market (**T**)	Stating the vision, the mission, the objectives and/or the philosophy of the university
Establishing credentials (**C**)	Describing the university, with the historical background and/or the present status
Locating the service (**L**)	Describing the location of the university including the size of the campus
Describing the service (**D**)	Describing the academic programmes offered in the different faculties in the university
Justifying the service (**J**)	Describing the facilities available in the university to support the academic programmes
Indicating the value of service (**V**)	Describing the entry requirements, duration and fees charged per semester
Endorsing the value of service (**E**)	Describing the career opportunities for graduates, awards and international recognition
Soliciting response (**S**)	Providing contact addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses and websites for further inquiries as well as the personnel in charge

Figure 4.1: Organisational Structure in University Brochures

The moves have been identified on the basis of understanding the expectations of the discourse community in which the text is used (Dudley Evans, 1994) and the copy format of brochures (Bivins, 1996). The headings and sub-headings in the brochures have been used as the move boundary (Henry and Roseberry, 2001) which conveniently serve as the demarcation of the different sections of the text.

The results of an analysis on the frequency of moves show that seven moves (**I, C, L, D, J, E** and **S**) can be considered as obligatory moves. These moves occur in all the bochures although not in similar sequence. The other three moves (**A, T** and **V**) are optional moves as they do not occur in all the brochures but the percentage of occurrence is high, between 67% to 91%.

A certain degree of flexibility has been observed in the sequence of the ten moves in the twenty brochures. This is possible because the universal form of discourse for structuring knowledge allows for variation (Bhatia, 1997b). The flexibility of moves has been observed as in the form of embedding, repetition or total omission (Hajibah Osman, 2005). However, the variation is very minimal. All the brochures start with identifying the service and end with soliciting response. Attracting reader

attention, targetting the market and establishing credentials have occurred in varied sequence but usually stay as the first four moves in the text.

In terms of general format, the university brochures make use of bright colours and pictures. In most brochures, pictures are used to visualise the information in the text. These are related to the universities which include significant buildings or landmarks in the campus, facilities to support academic programmes, student activities and jubilant faces of graduates at convocation ceremonies. The brochures are presented in different format and size: as a two fold single-sheet A4 size, a two-fold three-sheet A4 size or a booklet of six pages.

Sociocultural Elements in University Brochures

Based on the process of producing brochures (Bowles and Borden, 2000), the construction of this genre involves four elements: the discourse community, the institution, the consumer and the communicative function(s). The relationship of the four elements is represented in Figure 4.2 below.
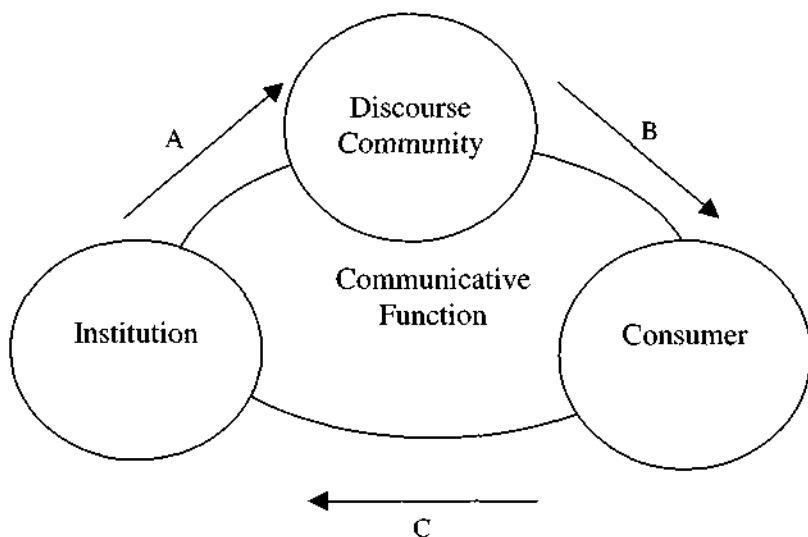

Figure 4.2: Elements in the Production of Brochures

In the specific context of producing university brochures, the four elements can be translated into the context of situation. The discourse community is represented by the public relations practitioners, the institution is the university and the consumers are the potential students and their parents. As indicated by the arrows in Figure 4.2, the university instructs the public relations practitioners to produce brochures with the potential students and their parents as the target audience (A – B). The design of the brochure must attract the students' attention towards the university (C). The communicative functions will be revealed in the discussion section of this paper. As the investigation includes examining the sociocultural factors, the discussion will include the culture of the three elements which are the PR culture, the university culture and the consumer culture, and how the three types of culture influence writing and producing university brochures.

Discussion

This section attempts to explain why university brochures are written and designed the way they are. It has been established that these brochures employ a ten-move structure possibly in the sequence of **I-A-T-C-L-D-J-V-E-S** with possible slight variation. Universities are not business entities and university brochures are categorised as an informative genre. It is common for this type of brochure to provide information about the universities they represent. This is observed in all the moves: As shown in Figure 4.1, Move **C**, for instance, provides information about the present profile and the historical background of the university while Move **J** provides information about the facilities available in the universities to support the academic programmes offered. For example:

1) The establishment of UNIMAS was to fulfill the needs of providing higher education and also to fulfill the increasing manpower needs (historical background).
2) UNISEL assists needy students in securing loans and scholarships from a variety of sources ... (information on facilities).

Apart from providing information, it has been observed that university brochures also promote the university in terms of the quality of the academic programmes (Moves **A**, **C**, and **V**) and the facilities to support these programmes (Moves **J** and **E**). For example:

3) Millenium Education for the Brains of Tomorrow (quality programme)
4) The University ia a catalyst for regional growth in the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia ... (important role)
5) Each faculty is equipped with state-of-the-art computer laboratories and facilities to serve students ... (quality facilities).
6) Our academic programmes have received accreditation from the National accreditation Board Malaysia, engineering Accreditation council, Malaysia (recognition).

This qualifies the brochures to be categorised as a promotional genre. The fact that universities use the medium of brochures with colourful and attractive designs further enhances the promotional element in this genre. At the same time, an element of corporate advertising (Richards *et al.*, 2000) has been observed in university brochures as shown in Move **T**, for example:

7) IIUM aims at becoming an international centre of educational excellence which seeks to restore the dynamic and progressive role of the Muslim ummah in all branches of knowledge
8) UniKL-MIAT aspires and is geared to be the premier aviation training institution.

It can be summarised at this point that university brochures can be categorised as an informative, promotional and corporate genre and the communicative functions of university brochures can be established as the following:

a) to inform the public about the university
b) to promote the academic programmes and the facilities in the university
c) to project a corporate image of the university with quality education

This is a clear case of genre-mixing (Bhatia, 1995; 1997a) and embedding where the three elements of informing, promoting and projecting a corporate image are mixed and embedded within one type of genre.

The paper will now attempt to provide an explanation why university brochures are written to include the three elements. This is what has been referred to earlier as the context of culture, where the three sociocultural factors i.e. the PR culture, the university culture and the consumer culture affect the writing culture. In the process of producing brochures, the PR professionals get the assignment from the client, i.e.

the management of the university with the potential students as the target audience. Effective PR writing requires the professionals to take into consideration the institutional (university) culture and the customer (student) culture in the planning (Treadwell and Treadwell, 2000). A lot also depends on what the university views as the communicative functions of the university brochures.

How the university and the consumer culture affect PR writing is represented in Figure 5.1 below.
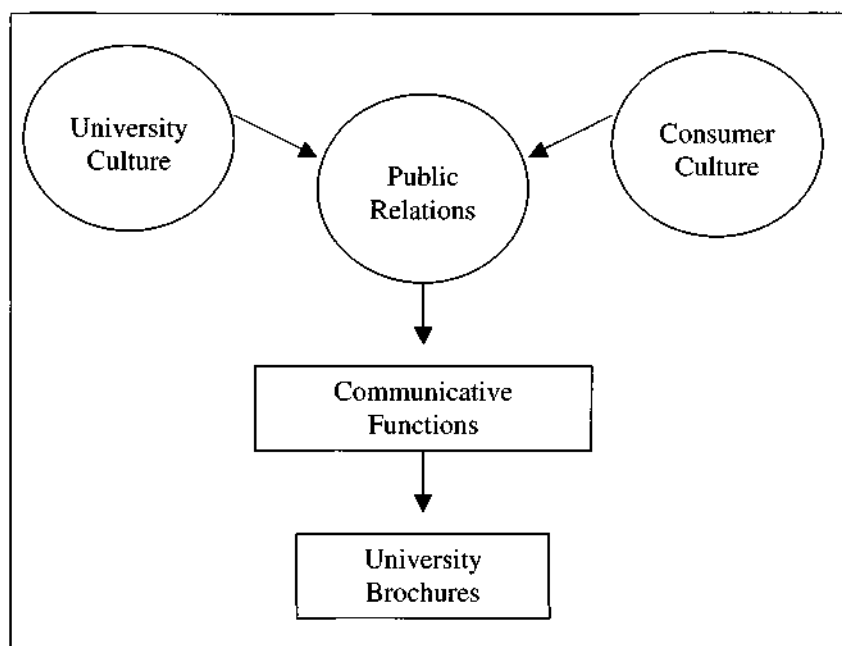

Figure 5.1: Effect of University Culture and Consumer Culture on PR Writing

Role of University and Customer Culture

In the past, public universities in Malaysia used to be the pinnacle of learning, the high protecting power of knowledge and science without any type of encroachment from any parties (Wernick, 1992). These universities were identified by their crests and their prospectus. Recently, however, these universities have started publishing and distributing brochures and other types of promotional literature as an attempt to promote the universities. Similar phenomena have been observed in

universities in other parts of the world, a situation Fairclough (1993) refers to as marketisation of academic discourse. This phenomenon is the result of a tremendous change in the consumer culture.

At the end of the twentieth century, the Malaysian society has become more affluent resulting in an increase in the demand for education especially at tertiary level. The Malaysian government has established more public universities to cater to the increasing number of applicants into universities but vacancies are still limited. This was when the government started allowing the establishment of private universities in the country (Hajibah Osman, 2005). Public universities now face a competition from their private counterparts in terms of student enrolment. Thus, the genre of consumer advertising has been colonising "public service orders of discourse on a massive scale, generating many new hybrid partly promotional genres (Fairclough, 1993: 139) as exemplified by university brochures.

University brochures also play an important role in projecting a positive image of the university. To be effective, the university needs to decide on a medium to project this image which is appropriate for an academic institution and not for hard-sell advertising (Richards et al., 2000). The medium of corporate brochures fulfils this function effectively. As this medium is used, the characteristics such as attracting the attention of readers and promoting the subject need to be conformed to resulting in colourful designs and interesting pictures and other forms of visuals in university brochures.

Conclusion

Brochures have become a common literature among universities in Malaysia, both public and private. The paper has attempted to justify why universities started publishing brochures and how the current university and consumer cultures affect the way university brochures have been constructed. Understanding the concept behind this construction requires an understanding of the sociocultural theory.

The overall presentation of the university brochures conforms to the general characteristics of brochures set by the discourse community or public relations. University brochures are viewed as social actions aiming to inform, promote as well as create a positive image of the universities they represent. Due to the multiple communicative functions, university brochures represent a dynamic promotional professional genre,

an exemplification of genre-mixing and embedding which have become increasingly common in professional genres (Bhatia, 1995). The dynamism of this genre can be observed in the fact that brochures have been adapted to promote an academic discourse, which was once sacred to the academic community and which could only be disseminated by this community. The discourse, including academic programmes anad facilities has been marketed with a promotional genre, a brochure.

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