A GENRE ANALYSIS OF ADS FROM CHARITY INSTITUTIONS

Carmem Teresa do Nascimento ELIAS
(Colégio Pedro II)

ABSTRACT: The work describes research into the genre of ads from charity institutions. The analysis, based primarily on the models suggested by Swales (1990) and Bathia (1993) comprises the study of author Moves and their respective functions and characteristics. Secondly, the research concentrates on the lexico-grammatical choices typically found in each Move and, finally, the work focuses on the study of power relations, illustrating how power is attributed either to the institution or to the reader within the different Moves. This attribution of power aims at achieving the author’s persuasive intentions and at undermining reader resistance.

KEYWORDS: author moves; purpose; lexico-grammatical choices; macromoves.

1. Introduction

In contrast to merely commercial ads, in which readers are induced to acquire a variety of material goods for their personal delight, ads from charity institutions lead to a totally unparalleled type of bargain. The communicative purpose of these ads is to persuade readers to give donations, contributions, money, without an immediate or concrete comeback other than the advertiser’s promise of promoting improved life conditions for fellow human beings. Obviously, the expression of persuasive capacity emerges as the key element of this genre. Writers have to endeavour to make carefully weighed and elaborate discursive and linguistic choices in order to accomplish this purpose with their potential audience.

Ads from charity institutions constitute texts which aim at manipulating readers; the texts have thus proved to be a means for the establishment of relations of power between writers and readers, the institution and the public.

Drawing on Galtung’s work on the analysis of power relations, Phillipson (1992) argues that “for persuasion to work presupposes some kind of submissiveness, bargaining some kind of dependency, and force an element of fear. But underpinning the discourse in which power is negotiated, constituted and affirmed is the structure which supports the actors whose pronouncements we shall analyse”.

Accordingly, authors in this genre have to elaborate specific persuasive arguments and devices in order to communicate their intentions subtly, in accordance with social constraints and, in this way, guarantee reader acceptance.

It is, therefore, fundamental for the formation of good EFL readers that they recognise the mechanisms of persuasion, bargain and force as well as the discourse and linguistic features exploited in the expression of these mechanisms. Only by this means will readers be able to develop a critical position in relation to texts, thus exercising their full potential as readers.

Certain linguistic choices in ads from charity institutions are purposefully intended to arouse readers’ emotional and affective reactions, or even stronger feelings, such as pity or compassion for the sufferers. Unawareness of such lexical and/or grammatical resources may, consequently, lead to responses of submission, dependency or fear. Recognition of linguistic “traps” is essential for the development of conscious and critical readers. It can be argued, therefore, that the analysis of ads from charities may contribute to a better understanding of both the mechanisms which are intended to produce affective responses in readers, as well as the linguistic choices available for writers to accomplish, effectively, the communicative purpose of the texts.
2. Objectives

The main objective of this research is to analyze samples of ads from charity institutions taken from magazines, newspapers and popular periodicals in the English language in order to identify regularities in textual presentation and organization, thus analyzing the mechanisms authors may use to manipulate readers’ will. Accordingly, the work encompasses the analysis of textual Moves as well as the linguistic features which constitute smaller segments. The analysis departs from theoretical principles and research findings in order to elaborate a whole suggestive set for the identification, classification and labelling of Author Moves in the chosen genre as well as the identification of lexico-grammatical choices typically found in each Move. The focus is also to investigate how relations of power between writer and reader are constructed and expressed through the text in order to accomplish the communicative purpose of persuading readers to engage in the advertised campaigns.

The research aims to investigate, therefore, how meaning is created and expressed in order to match the author’s purpose to the desired reactions and expected responses of the target population of readers.

3. Theoretical principles

The theoretical principles have been gleaned from concepts and frameworks of writer Moves suggested by SWALES (1990) and BHATIA (1993):

Just as each genre has a communicative purpose, each move also serves a typical communicative intention which is always subservient to the overall communicative purpose of the genre. (BHATIA, 1993, p. 30)

Swales’ notion of genre incorporates the possibility of identifying a set of highly structured features in the specific communicative events since these features occur in accordance with socio-cultural conventions accepted by the discourse community. Although Swales recognizes the possibility of variations within instances of a same genre, the constraints imposed by the cultural conventions accepted by the community for the fulfillment of the specific communicative purposes delimit the cline of variations making it possible to investigate a standardized structure of each genre.

Although Swales provides the key theoretical foundation in this area of study, Swales’ work does not contain further studies of the structural patterning specifically applied to ads from charity institutions. A set of Moves had, therefore, to be elaborated from the description of this genre. More relevant guidelines, however, have been borrowed from Bhatia’s analysis of sales promotion letters in business settings.

According to BHATIA (1993 p. 46-58), sales promotion letters display the structural description summarized in the seven-move pattern below:

1. Establishing credentials, intended to capture readers’ attention and to convince them of the benefits of the product being offered.
2. Introducing the offer, intended to show how valuable a product can be.
3. Offering incentives, which meets readers’ expectations of making an attractive deal.
4. Enclosing documents. It explicates further details desired by the readers.
5. Soliciting response. It encourages further communication and the establishment of contact between seller and customer.
6. Using pressure tactics is intended to prompt customers to take an immediate decision.
7. Ending politely, intended to strengthen business relations.

It is through the combination of the moves that persuasion can be effectively accomplished, as the desired response is elicited from readers. Thus, the starting point was the hypothesis that certain moves identified by Bhatia would also be found in our chosen genre and, the applicability of Bhatia’s framework was thus considered. Moves 1, 5 and 6 were easily identified in the ads from charities. Nevertheless, a more detailed and closer analysis pointed at the necessity of developing a specific framework of Moves, functions and their prevailing linguistic choices. It is worth noting, however, that neither the number of moves nor the order of their presentation follows fixed or pre-determined rules or conventions. The proposed framework here suggested is aimed at providing guidelines in genre analysis and is by no means to be viewed as a closed preestablished set for textual construction or development.

4. Research findings

The first element that proved to have strong characteristic importance in the construction of the genre texts was the layout, specifically their typographic organization. The analysis revealed the consistent presence of three differently-structured segments, comprising, firstly, the title and subtitle; secondly, the text itself, and third, the institution’s signature or slogan, sometimes followed by a coupon for the readers to respond to the ad. Moreover, since each of these three parts in this schematic sequence proved to perform a specific function within the text, they have been considered separately as three MACROMOVES:

A: Orientation or Invitation to sharing knowledge
B: Fulfillment or Developing argumentation
C: Reinforcement or Providing interactive response

The major function of Macromove A, which comprises the title, subtitle and picture, is to capture reader’s attention from the start. To this end, the Macromove carefully plays with the piece of information provided to draw specific focus upon elements capable of arousing reader curiosity, raising questions and doubts, or even instigating social awareness and concern. This is usually achieved without fully revealing the author’s hidden intentions of asking for contribution or without providing further explanations regarding the problems and situations only superficially depicted and vaguely treated.

Frequently, apparently non-cohesive elements, exophoric references, deitic items, non-explicit referents, ambiguous constructions, lexical choices of non-specific meaning are commonly used: “He got in the way of somebody’s war”, “Help us break the cycle...” “Mummy can we go home now?”

Consequently, Macromove A creates expectations in the reader regarding the information which is to be included in the subsequent part, Macromove B, or the written text itself. Macromove A urges and determines the continuation of the text and ensures the construction of a more detailed textual world, capable of providing answers, solutions, and meeting reader expectations. In Macromove B, the textual world gains continuity of content and sense, coherence and cohesion, fully revealing the author’s intentions and respecting the constraints which guarantee reader acceptability of the text proposal of financial contribution. As these elements are commonly lacking in Macromove A, the writer leaves the reader eager to receive a stronger informational load in Macromove B.
Because of the rather vagueness of Macromove A, the reader is placed in a submissive relation with the writer, who may, in Macromove B, focus more openly and directly on his own interests and purposes, thus manipulating the more passive reader toward the communicative purpose of the genre, that is, persuasion.

Macromove B, which comprises the textual development of the ad, accounts for the elaboration of informativity and argumentation, thus allowing reader access to the construction of a more explicit textual world, as authors are expected to reveal and depict, in detail, the information previously hinted but selected as appropriate for guaranteeing reader acceptability. The textual world, with its values, realities, and ideologies, together with author’s intentions are fully revealed with more transparency and preciseness in Macromove B, which is the focus of the present analysis and for which a whole set of Moves has been identified, classified and labeled, as described in section 5, following below.

Macromove C, typographically distinguishable from Macromove B, is not linearly textual. Instead, it is constituted by the advertising institution’s slogan or by coupons or forms for the reader to complete with personal data. The institution’s slogan functions as a reinforcement of the institution’s credentials, summarizing its central objectives and concerns. It may also provide specific information regarding address, telephone number, registration number, etc, so that the reader may contact the institution directly and personally. In this sense, Macromove C functions as a reinforcement of the request for contribution and plays the interactive role of solicitation.

5. Summary of Moves, functions and prevailing linguistic choices in Macromove B

In order to provide a clear understanding of the set of Moves proposed for the description of Macromove B, the following exemplary texts will be used as reference:

TEXT 1
OXFAM
A RAPID REACTION FORCE FOR BOSNIA.
The people of Srebenica have been run out of town. But they haven’t run out of friends.
Oxfam has been working in nearby Tuzla for over two years. Now we’re reacting quickly, giving the refugees clothing and blankets. We are helping where others have failed.
Please help too. Join Oxfam’s rapid reaction force.
Give a donation today.

TEXT 2
HER FOURTH BIRTHDAY MAY BE HER LAST, BUT SHE ISN’T ILL
SHE’S POOR
In countries like the Gambia, one in four children die before their fifth birthday. The diseases they suffer from may differ. But the cause is almost always the same—Poverty.
ACTIONAID is working in some of the poorest areas of the world to end this cycle of despair. Helping local communities to provide clean water, education, health, nutrition, food production, and a means to generate their own income.
Sponsor a child like Nyana and you’ll be helping her, her family, her whole community. A photograph and regular reports keep you in touch. You will receive messages from the child and can write if you wish.
By becoming a sponsor you’ll make all the difference to the life of a child.
PLEASE SPONSOR A CHILD TODAY.

Original data analysis was carried out with 30 authentic texts found in English periodicals in the late 1990’s and our study pointed to the distinction, classification and labelling of six Moves:
1. Delimiting an area of social difficulty
2. Establishing credentials for the institution concerned
3. Establishing dependence between the effective provision of help and reader’s participation
4. Posing the actual request
5. Using pressure tactics
6. Soliciting response

In Move 1, “Delimiting an area of social difficulty”, the writer explores reader social consciousness in order to evoke compassion and pity by exposing the suffering imposed on a social group. The writer portrays the degradation of the life conditions of the needy and the extent of the suffering imposed on less-privileged social groups. Thus, the writer aims at undermining reader’s emotional resistances by evoking a feeling of social concern in readers.

In Text 2, for instance, it comprises all the segment up to the word poverty.

The negative portrayal of the problem stands as a powerful device for setting up grounds for the subsequent moves, thus opening up a space for the proposal of helping, as well as for the presentation of the institution’s credentials, which are to be introduced subsequently as solutions for the problem. Perhaps for this reason Move 1 tends to come in initial position in the sequence of Moves comprised in Macromove B.

Move 1 has no counterpart on the classification set up by Bhatia and has been labelled by this present analysis. It is present in all texts analysed and it appears to be an obligatory and independent move (not embedded or overlapping with other moves). It tends to comprise long stretches of textual development, generally occupying more than 30 % of textual construction.

As far as linguistic options are employed for the realization of the moves functions, some further specific characteristics may be drawn. In Move 1, authors have shown a general tendency to play the apparently mere role of informants. Personal approaches to the problem described are normally avoided, and authors favour an impersonal approach to the topic. Explicit direct address to the readers or attempts to establish writer-reader interaction are not commonly found. Thus, Move 1 tends to be an initially descriptive, expository and deferential segment within the text, aimed at providing clear evidence regarding the problem, in order to create a tone of relevance, seriousness or gravity. The impersonal approach guarantees limited presence of the writer and reader. In order to achieve this effect, subject position in Move 1 is mainly realised through nominal groups, often preceded by circumstantial items, or third person personal pronouns. Moreover, Indicative Present verb forms prevail, contributing to add a realistic tone to the description of the problem, by emphasizing its present reality. Semantically speaking, choices of vocabulary items concentrate on the construction of strings of emotive words loaded with negative semantic force, which aims at provoking an affective involvement in readers (die-diseases-suffer-poverty). These semantic strings focus on ideas related to human suffering and plight. Thus, reader emotional resistance is undermined as different aspects of suffering are carefully described.

In contrast to the powerlessness of the needed ones portrayed in Move 1, Move 2, “Establishing Credentials for the Institution”, concentrates on the advertising institution’s image building process, offering a favourable, positive and relevant presentation of the advertiser in order to persuade readers of its qualifications and abilities. It is a self-promoting segment, which emphasizes the powerfulness of the institution, attributing to it the concepts of strength, will, capacity, competence, altruism, preciseness of action and the strong social concern, characteristics which are presented as a compelling force to set the advertised institution into action:
“Oxfam has been working. . . We’re reacting. . . We are helping where others have failed.”

“ACTIONAID is working in some of the poorest areas…helping local communities to provide clean water, education, health, nutrition, food production… own income.”

Accordingly, the institution appears to be invested with both social and personal identities, built upon the idealised social objectives and proposal, as well as through reference to the benefits it can provide to the needy. However, as the institution’s accomplishments fall exclusively on its isolated actions, in which only internal staff members seem to participate, the institution is invested with personal identity. Realizations of subject position and pronoun choices corroborate this idea, through the ample use of either first or third person pronouns. “We” forms, for instance, open space for the author to invest himself as an actual representative of the institution, thus playing the role of an expert member of that discourse community, creating the possibility of a more personal relationship with the reader. It can be concluded, therefore, that Move 2 establishes a hierarchical distancing between the institution and the reader, a fact which guarantees a distant and authoritative discourse, disguised in a more personal approach to the still outside reader.

Such a solid image of the institution may lead to the conclusion that it is sovereign in capacity and power to solve social problems relying exclusively on its own resources, an idea which would be totally detrimental to the genre purpose. If a request for donation is to be justifiable and contributions regarded as necessary by readers, authors should make explicit that the institution is vulnerable to financial problems and that readers play vital roles in guaranteeing the continuity of the provision of help. Thus, Move 3, “Establishing dependence between the provision of help and reader participation”, concentrates on the reader, evoking the positive results to be accomplished by reader’s participation in the campaign. Although not present in our exemplary text 1, Move 3, whenever present, lessens the institution’s self-sufficient portray in Move 2. Now the institution assumes a submissive position, whereas the reader, neglected in Moves 1 and 2, is exalted as contributor. (“Sponsor a child and you’ll be helping her, her family, her whole community”, “By becoming a sponsor you’ll make all the difference to the life of a child”). Both the institution and the reader thus become interdependent to each other’s active participation. In Move 3, there is no compromise with the veracity or empirical confirmation of the information, so authors work with expressions of capability, possibility, and expectations. Consequently, verb choices of modality are frequently preferred (“you could provide food”, “you can help…”). Moreover, direct reference to the reader is realized through ample use of “you” pronouns, which have to deal with a multifacetal audience treated as a unique self. “You” characterization does not evoke individual personality, but rather the image of a social self: a socially conscious “you”, representative of a socially responsible and morally concerned citizen. Thus, “you” stands as an idealized character created by the text and projected upon the audience of readers.

Move 4, “Posing the actual request”, finally reveals the genre major concern directly and it may stand as an independent Move or may be overlapping with Moves 3, 5 or 6.

“Please help too. Join Oxfam’s reaction force. Give a donation.”

“Sponsor a child”.

Move 4 is intended to formulate the request explicitly with ample use of Imperative verb forms, rhetorical questions, tag questions, indirect suggestions. In addition, a large number of markers of politeness “please” are used to soften the tone of command. In fact, Moves 3 and 4 favour the establishment of a sense of conversationality, an open space for reader – writer involvement, in a kind of ‘dialogic intention’, thus replacing the monologic
tone prevailing in Moves 1 and 2. Persuasive discourse is often more interactive than merely expository forms. Conversation-like discourse involves two parts: here, a soliciting institution and the reader, who may either refuse or acquiesce with the request. Thus, a basic interactive structure of a ‘request-compliance’ pair is established. In contrast to everyday conversation, however, the strategy found in the ads analysed consists of writers simulating an ongoing conversational tone to involve the reader as a participant without, however, allowing or giving space for reader’s taking of the conversational turn. The second-part turn, that is, the reader’s turn is purposefully delayed through an intense rhythm of repetitive requests which prompt readers to act in favour of the institution as response.

Frequent repetitions of the request for reader contribution overemphasizes its importance in textual construction. The request constitutes the central focus of attention of the genre and therefore reveals the most important piece of information to be accessed and internalised by the readers for the fulfilment of the author’s communicative purpose. Of course, authors must work with the possibilities of either a refusal or acceptance of the proposal, as well as of the indecision on the readers’ part. Accordingly, the intentional repetitions not only provide positive reinforcement of the importance of the request, but also constitute manipulative acts aimed at intruding into the reader’s will and, in this way, attempt to evoke a positive compliance in return.

Accordingly, Move 5, “Using pressure tactics”, functions as an extent of Move 4 and reinforces the request, stimulating reader compliance, either by offering further incentives or by forcing an immediate response:

“Give a donation today”.

Here the whole sentence stands as Move 4, although “today” functions as Move 5, embedded in Move 4. In addition to persuading readers to accept the request, Moves 4 and 5 are essential to establish direct contact between the reader and the institution. Move 5 is especially marked by the presence of circumstantial items of time expressing deadlines.

In Text 2, Move 5 also appears in the word ‘today’ in “Please sponsor a child today” and it also appears as the author proposes a bargain by means of which additional gains are offered to the reader (“A photograph and regular reports keep you in touch. You will receive messages from the child and you can write if you wish”). In this case, promised offers of retributions are presented to make the request more attractive, to avoid doubts regarding the effective destination of the contributions, and to guarantee an emotional reward for reader contribution.

Move 6, “Soliciting response”, is characterized by requests expressed through communicative verbs such as “Telephone us”, “call us”, “write”, “send the coupon”, etc. It is once again realized by Imperative verb forms, which convey the idea of urgency already set up in Moves 4 and 5 and it stimulates direct contact between the reader and the institution, i.e. it establishes the channel for direct act of contributing.

6. Relations of power

Charity ads are built upon two major conflicts: the provision of help to the needy and the duality in the actorship of help.

As the text is constructed and correlations among the diverse steps of textual construction are established, relations of dependence are created. Power is attributed either to the institution or to the reader, on the different moves. Power relations are thus explored as the writer invests the participant readers with economic power, without allowing them to
develop a sense of control over the problem, or a sense of superiority in relation to the institution. In this way, power is carefully balanced between participants.

Move 1 is problem-based and shows the powerlessness of the problem and the powerlessness of the needy. Move 2 is institution-based and shows the powerlessness of the institution in its moral effective deeds. Moves 3, 4, 5 and 6 are reader-based, showing the financial powerlessness of the institution, the financial powerfulness of the reader, and the institution’s emotional and moral control over the reader through the use of commands, pressure and persistence. A balance between the institution and the reader comes from the combined relations established between Move 2 and Moves 3, 4, 5, 6; whereas Moves 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 together emerge to show the combined powerfulness of both reader and the institution together over the problem. Anyway, it is important to point out that lexical choices related to the provision of help occur mainly in the Imperative, in modalised constructions or in dependent constructions. Accordingly, although power is semantically attributed to the reader in Moves 3, 4, 5 and 6, this attribution occurs in grammatically dependent or commanded expressions. In contrast, in Move 2, the institution’s investment of power is realised with grammatically independent status. Consequently, it can be argued that, generally speaking, a secondary role is relegated to the reader by means of grammar choices rather than by lexical meaning. The result is that the co-joining efforts of the institution and the reader are claimed on basis of a really unbalanced scale which, in the end, in a subtle way, highlights the institution as the major agent of help and places the reader in a subjugated role, expected to comply. Is persuasion accomplished?

7. Pedagogical aims

Based on the texts analyzed and on research findings, a series of didactic activities can be developed. The pedagogical aim is to raise awareness to the applicability of the genre texts in didactic activities aimed at the development of reading skills, mainly critical reading, in English as a foreign language students. Exercises can be elaborated to show how different elements in textual construction are intertwined and intentionally chosen. In other words, the purpose of this research is to borrow elements from genre studies to depict and explain why texts are organized in a specific way. Why do texts have a padronized form and what is the intent behind this organization? In short, how is persuasion built textually? If students are capable of answering such questions eliciting points already made clear by genre analysis, then our purpose as researchers and teachers has been fulfilled.

8. Conclusion

Analyzing the genre of ads from charity institutions has proven very profitable. It is our belief that new grounds on genre analysis offer important insights into the practical analysis of texts as well as into the development of new pedagogical materials. It is important, however, to emphasize that our proposed framework is not to be viewed as fixed or complete. On the contrary, it is one possibility of dealing with descriptions on the chosen genre, but special attention has to be taken regarding the difficulty of dealing with embedded and overlapping moves, as well as with new variations in textual construction which, at any time, occurs due to the authors’ search for originality.
References