The Pragmatics of Spoken Academic Discourse in the Framework of TED Talks: A Case Study

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Abstract

The present chapter aims to provide insights into specialized communicative contexts by drawing attention to popularized spoken academic discourse. To this end, consideration is given to the web-mediated genre of TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) talks, lectures for lay audiences delivered by experts in many fields, covering a variety of topics and targeting multiple and varied audiences. More precisely, by comparing a corpus of TED talks delivered by academics with a corpus of university lecture transcripts drawn from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), quantitative and qualitative analysis of linguistic categories such as person deixis (Grundy 2008) and epistemic lexical verbs (Chafe 1985; Hyland 1998) will reveal how academics make use of language on the TED stage to achieve specific communicative purposes, i.e. build up their identity as credible experts and present reliable knowledge. From a theoretical perspective, the present study draws on Critical Genre Analysis (Bhatia 2012) in combination with the theories of Discourse Analysis and the methods of corpus linguistics.

1 Introduction

Over the last thirty years, popularized discourse—commonly defined as “writing [or speaking] that makes new or complex research and ideas accessible to non-specialists” (Luey 2010, 5)—has stimulated the interest of a number of researchers (e.g. Whitley 1985; Hilgartner 1990; Calsamiglia 2003; Myers 2003; Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004; Garzone 2006; Gotti 2013; Bongo and Caliendo 2014). Much work on popularization has focussed on content management, simplification and reformulation (see, e.g. Nwogu 1991; Calsamiglia and López Ferrero 2003; Ciapuscio 2003; Garzone 2006; Bamford 2014; Bondi 2014; Garzone 2014). Light has also been shed on ways in which online forums (e.g. medical forums) favour the co-construction of knowledge by enabling expert/non-expert interactions (Anesa and Fage-Butler 2015), as well as on the negotiation
of expert/non-expert roles (e.g. doctor-patient roles) during face-to-face communicative exchanges (Gülich 2003).

However, less attention has been paid to ways in which experts draw on popularizations to convey their "private intentions" as professionals (Bhatia 2012), rather than to ways in which they communicate a 'simplified' version of science. With this in mind, emphasis in this paper is placed on TED talks, lectures for lay audiences delivered by experts in many fields (e.g. scientists, philosophers, literary men and women, business people), covering a variety of topics and targeting multiple and varied audiences. TED talks are a novel and widespread format which has only recently started to stimulate the interest of discourse analysts (e.g. Caliendo 2014; Caliendo and Compagnone 2014; Compagnone 2014; Partington 2014; Scotto di Carlo 2014; Compagnone, 2015).

Since 2007, when TED.com was launched, TED talks have gradually established themselves as one of the most famous popularizing format all over the world, promoting their informative intent under the motto “ideas worth spreading”. TED talks provide a clear example of the way in which web-mediated popularized discourse has spurred the emergence of new genres, resulting from the contamination of different discursive (i.e. social) practices, e.g. educating and training, promoting research results and findings and entertaining mass audiences. As Caliendo (2014) points out, TED talks are, in fact, a hybrid genre at the intersection of a number of genre types, e.g. university lectures, newspaper articles, conference presentations and TV science programmes, mixing different semiotic modes, i.e. spoken, written, video and audio.

The present chapter aims to offer insights into popularized spoken academic communication. To this end, a discussion is provided of a case study centred on the genre of TED talks. Specifically, by looking at ways in which academics make use of language in two settings, i.e. the university classroom and the TED stage, this study intends to show that the empirical analysis of specific linguistic categories, such as person pronouns and epistemic lexical verbs (Chafe 1986; Hyland 1998; Artiga León 2006), combined with qualitative observation, makes it possible to draw inferences about what kind of communicative purposes academics attempt to achieve on the TED stage.

Indeed, the choice to focus on academics speaking at TED allowed me to compare TED talks with the genre of the university lecture. There is a substantial difference between the two, i.e. while university lectures are inherently pedagogic in their attempt to educate and train students, TED talks are a popularizing genre aimed at a larger and more heterogeneous audience that is expecting to receive some form of ‘smart’ entertainment. Nevertheless, the university lecture is one of the academic genres that shares the highest number of features