Global promotional genre systems in higher education

A longitudinal multimodal analysis

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**Introduction**

As universities compete for students in the increasingly global marketplace of higher education, the recruiting brochures published in English by educational institutions in different countries project different brand images. Further, with constant global changes in higher education and the marketing approaches used to promote universities, the recruiting brochures produces by institutions are altered to reflect these changes. While all these brochures share the same purpose of promoting universities in order to attract students to the institutions, they can be categorized by certain regional characteristics of their rhetorical features. If we analyze the message they send through a combination of visuals and different linguistic strategies, we can see what underlying assumptions exist in society about higher education in different areas of the world and these assumptions change over time as a result of the advances in globalization affecting higher education.

**Critical Discourse Analysis and Genre**

In order to analyze recruiting brochures in different countries and the multimodal ways in which they catch the attention of prospective students, we can draw upon the advances critical discourse analyses has into uncovering how meaning making, or semiosis, is an inherent part of all of our social practices. Critical discourse analysis (CDA), according to Fairclough (2001), is “a theoretical perspective on language and more generally semiosis (including ‘visual language’, ’body language’, and so on) as one element or ‘moment’ of the material social process …, which gives rise to ways of analyzing language or semiosis within broader analyses of the social process” (p 121). This capability of analyzing language within the broader social processes allows CDA to be applied towards the analysis of different genres, such as social media posts, speeches, and larger frameworks in varied fields from communication to education (Bouvier & Machin, 2018; Teo & Ren, 2019; Mullet, 2018).

CDA views language and other symbolic systems that convey meaning as an essential part of society that is not only used to create and enforce social practices and institutions but is the most apparent way in which power relations are manifested in society. Furthermore, CDA not only views language as a place where social relations and identities are constructed, but also as a medium that plays a very important role in constituting the social. Every instance of language use, according to Fairclough (2000a), always contributes to the formation of the social on three different levels: first, it describes systems of knowledge and belief in its ideational function, second, it provides ways to express social relations and identities in its interpersonal function, and third, it creates coherent texts through combining linguistics and visual elements to create a coherent whole in its textual function. These three categories correspond to the categories established in systemic functional linguistics as developed by Halliday (1994) and have been widely used in CDA research (Fairclough 2000a, van Leuween 1993, Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). These categories can be especially useful in a critical discourse analysis of texts and communicative events as they are situated in discourse practices.

According to Fairclough (2000a), the ideational or representation function recontextualizes social practices that can carry particular ideologies. The interpersonal or relation function is constituted by a construction of relationship between writer and reader as, for example, formal or informal and by the representation of identity functions often expressed in what aspects, such as group status or individual, of the participants’ identities are constructed. When analyzing functional categories, we need to take into account not only the presence of certain elements, but also the obvious absence of them. Using these functional categories as the basis for our analysis of university brochures will highlight how higher education is situated in the value system of different countries and will illuminate the different ways in which these documents participate in orders of discourse that contribute to social practices of different regions.

By critically analyzing university recruiting brochures, we are investigating, in general, the social practice of advertising universities. This practice is situated in the broader context of our global economic and social tendencies, particularly in recent tendencies of asserting the relevance of economic principles in social institutions and processes. Fairclough (2003) uses the term *new capitalism* to describe the tendencies that can be observed in contemporary social discourse practices. He claims that as a result of new capitalism, the use of promotional genres has penetrated many different domains of discourse that were traditionally separated from business. One of these areas, education, is definitely showing signs of marketization of discourse to use Fairclough’s terminology (2000b). This is manifested in not only the language and promotional genre use of institutional discourse, but also in the way higher education institutions are represented in the discourse through different genres.

The term genre, as used outside of literature, has many different definitions that are closely connected to a discourse community. Swales (1990), for example, stresses the shared communicative purpose of the members of a discourse community in his definition, and positions this purpose as the most influential factor in the selection of content and style. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) accentuate the importance of an activity-based genre theory, and highlight the dynamic nature of genres that allows the change of form and content over time to reflect changing sociocognitive needs. They also express that genres are created within specific social structures while at the same time they also reinforce those structures. Furthermore, Berkenkotter and Huckin highlight that genres indicate a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, and ideology.

In critical discourse analysis, genres are not restricted to the micro level as connected to a certain discourse community, but more on the macro level, as in their potential to figure into larger social practices. According to Fairclough, “genres are diverse ways of acting, of producing social life in the semiotic mode.”(2001 p.123). Fairclough further explains that genres and discourses combined together create orders of discourse, which are semiotic realizations of social orders made up of social practices. Here, social order can mean the more overarching category of new capitalism, or can be more localized as the social order of education in a particular society. Thus, when we study a particular genre in the framework of CDA, we need to pay attention to how it figures in representing the social order of new capitalism, and more specifically the social order of education and its social practices through finding specific semiotic elements (visual and linguistic) that recreate this social order on the ideational, interpersonal, and textual levels.

When we consider the current social order of new capitalism, where business principles are applied to many different domains of social life, we can see that the use of promotional genres has become widespread as evidenced by the diverse genres that make up the colony of promotional genres (Bhatia 2004). According to Bhatia, varied genres such as job applications, grant proposals, advertisements, and company brochures all display the most salient characteristic of promotional materials: product description and evaluation. In addition, Bhatia (p 65) argues that several of the following rhetorical moves also characterize advertising: headlines, targeting the market, justifying and detailing the product or service, establishing credentials, celebrity or typical user endorsement, offering incentives, using pressure tactics, soliciting response. Although these moves historically have been identified mostly in the *text* of promotional materials, Bhatia points out that it is important to take into account their appearance on the visual level of advertising as well. This fits well with one of the missions of critical discourse analysis that is to uncover the representations of social practices in visuals as articulated by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) in their widely used book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design.*

While a traditional genre analysis of university recruiting brochures may concentrate on which rhetorical moves are present and in what order in a given brochure or on the specific phrases used in these promotional brochures (Casal & Kessler, 2020), the critical discourse analysis that is applied here to our sample of brochures focuses on what the linguistic and visual representation of these moves reveal about social practices which constitute social order and its inherent value system. In order to reconcile the similarities and differences between these documents that share the same communicative purpose, this paper demonstrates that they not only exhibit a trend towards what Fairclough (2000b) calls the globalization and marketization of discursive practices across time, but also show the local reinterpretations of global practices, termed *glocalization* (Robertson 1995, Koller 2007) across space.

**Methods**

In order to understand the connections between societal assumptions about education in different cultures, this study starts with the analysis of six university brochures that were available in 2010 and comparing these analysis results with the findings of analysis of three of the brochures available currently online (in 2021). Of the 2010 brochures, three were published by universities in the United States, and three brochures come from Eastern Europe. The following American university brochures/ viewbooks were chosen for analyses: Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI; Frostburg University, Frostburg, MD; and West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV. In addition, the brochures of the following Eastern European higher education institutions were examined: Bucharest University, Romania; ELTE University, Hungary; and Silesian University of Technology, Poland. Of these six brochures, four have an updated comparable version online available currently (in 2020); these are Frostburg University, West Virginia University, ELTE University, and Bucharest University. The other two universities either have no more brochures published (Salesian University of Technology) or have moved to an online virtual experience format (Grand Valley State University) instead of the traditional print format. An overview of the observable longitudinal changes will be provided about these four recent brochures after the analysis of the older six brochures. The main focus of this paper is to connect ideational and interpersonal functions of the textual and visual elements of our sample brochures with social practices over time.

Although the widespread applicability of the results of this analysis includes some limitations due to the limited number of sample documents, the results still will enable us to draw some conclusions as to what kind of assumptions exist in society about higher education, and what these brochures reveal about power structures in these institutions as they change over time. Also, regional and national differences were not considered between brochures within the two operational categories of the United States and Eastern Europe.

**Results of the analysis of the original six brochures**

To create a baseline for understanding of how the genre of university brochures can be influenced by geographical and cultural differences, the original six brochures (published in 2010) will be analyzed in this section. The analysis is broken into two major sections based on Fairclough’s distinction between the ideational and interpersonal functions that displayed the most apparent genre characteristics regardless of the publication location.

**Ideational Function**

In order to identify the cultural assumptions that are implicit in university brochures, we need to identify those generic features in the text and visuals of the brochures that correspond to the ideational function of these documents. Since, according to Bhatia (2004), all promotional materials include the rhetoric move of product description and evaluation, these statements can serve as structurally similar units on the textual level where representations of the knowledge and belief systems about higher education can be compared. Because the main objective of all recruiting brochures is to attract prospective students to the institution, product evaluation in these brochures focuses on why these universities are outstanding institutions of higher education. To operationalize product evaluation in the sample of brochures, this analysis focuses on the specific sentences that contain such evaluation, calling these sentences *claims of excellence*.

When comparing claims of excellence in the sample brochures published in 2010, we immediately become aware of the different kind of noun phrases these sentences have as their subject. Claims of excellence sentences in the Eastern European brochures have the university itself in the majority of these evaluative sentences as the subject. Claims of excellence sentences in the American brochures, on the other hand, have either words such as “a Grand Valley education” or “you” and “your experience” at the university as their subject.

Based on the different claims of excellence in the sample brochures, a different picture of these universities emerges. When we consider that the ideational function of texts contains representations of knowledge and belief, and look at what is represented in these brochures as excellent, we find that the Eastern European brochures portray these universities legacy as being in the product, in the university and its rich history itself, while the American brochures show these universities’ legacy being in the process of education and “your” (the reader’s) experience while attending the institution. If we take a step further and attempt to connect this difference with assumptions about higher education in the two regions, we can conclude that in Eastern Europe the quality of higher education one receives is directly connected to an impersonal body, the institution and its history, and is removed from one’s subjective experience of it, while in the US it is closely associated with the personal experience one has throughout the educational process at a university.

When we use critical discourse analysis, we should also investigate whether we can identify similar trends in the visuals of the brochures that would substantiate our claims about assumptions. The visuals used in the different brochures in the two regions also indicate a similar distinction of legacy being in the process versus in the product. The Eastern European brochures contain many pictures of old buildings, and seals that look like medieval coat of arms, but have no or very few pictures of individual students. The majority of pictures in the American brochures, on the other hand, are about students undertaking several academic and extracurricular activities while at the university.

Another way in which the legacy in process versus in product approach in the two different regions is apparent in the sample brochures is their structure. The underlying structure and headings of the Eastern European brochures focus on faculties (colleges) of these universities and devote sections to the hierarchical units of organization within the institutions. The authoritative structure of the institutions is further reinforced in the brochures by the fact that they all start with a letter from the rector/president of the university. Accompanying this letter, there is a picture of the rector/president of the university. In these pictures, the vertical angle of the viewer is low, thus, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) the represented person is perceived as having power over the viewer. This type of visual representation is another way in which the authoritative structure of the university is reinforced in the structure of the Eastern European brochures.

In contrast, the American brochures use a completely different approach; sections in these brochures are organized according to an overarching metaphorical theme. The brochure of Frostburg State University, for example, adopts the “life is a journey” metaphor to the process of education. Using this basic metaphor as the major theme, and connecting other metaphors of the same thematic group as headings in the brochure becomes the basic organizing principle of the promotional material. Examples of headings from the Frostburg State University brochure such as “Your journey starts here”, “Charting your course”, “Finding your way”, “Journey off the path”, “On the move” indicate how this university promotes the full experience of being a student. The two other American university brochures also utilize metaphors as their basic organizing principle. West Virginia University structures its brochure around “the view from WVU” and uses metaphors of seeing as headings (i.e. “Picture this”, “See beyond the classroom”) while Grand Valley State University uses financial metaphors as headings such as “Great return on investment”, and “Grand Valley equals grand value” and as its basic organizing metaphor. Because metaphors are *culture-laden,* “particularly salient intersubjectively shared examples of what they stand for” (Quinn 2005 p 49), they are especially relevant in understanding what deep cultural assumptions people hold about certain concepts.

Since all three American brochures include a version of the “investment” metaphor (FSU: “invest in your journey”, WVU: “invest in your future”, and GVSU: “a Grand Valley education is a great investment”) when they address the financial side of acquiring a university diploma, the importance of the connection between investment and a good education becomes apparent. This metaphor, an extension of the business sector into education, is a very good example of the same value system expanding over different domains.

The fact that the Eastern European brochures don’t contain this metaphor, does not mean that there is no money involved, but could be interpreted that education in Eastern Europe is not viewed as simply a service that can be bought with money. In our sample of three brochures, SUT’s brochure does not include costs, the two other brochures address cost in a matter of fact way. Not only is the investment metaphor missing from the Eastern European brochures, they don’t contain any overt metaphors at all. This again leads us back to having the Eastern European university’s legacy in the product, the university’s rich tradition and history itself, which does not necessitate further illustration.

**Interpersonal Function**

The interpersonal function of the text reveals the relationship between participants as well as identities involved in the text. Here, we have to look at what the text reveals about the writer and the reader, how these identities are constructed and what this tells us about societal assumptions regarding higher education. Because the major difference between the two regions seems to be in how the reader is constructed, we have to find a way to quantify this observation.

Since the word “you” is a common word in advertisement (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996), and it is widely used in some of our sample brochures, a keyword analysis of this word can help in understanding how explicitly the addressee of these brochures are named. Figure 1 below shows the number of instances the keyword “you” or “your” has appeared in our sample brochures. The total number of keywords in each brochure is used to calculate an average density of the keywords per page to account for the differing lengths of the sample brochures and thus create comparable results.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **WVU** | | **GVSU** | **FSU** | | **ELTE** | | **BU** | **SUT** | |
|  |  | **United States** | | |  |  | **Eastern Europe** | | |  |
| **Number of pages** | **38** | | **10** | **17** | | **48** | | **33** | **42** | |
| **Number of keyword “you” or “your”** | **115** | | **13** | **111** | | **1** | | **42** | **0** | |
| **Average density of keyword per page** | **3.02** | | **1.3** | **6.5** | | **0.02** | | **1.3** | **0** | |

Figure 1. Instances of the keyword “you”.

As we can see in Figure 1, the distribution of the keyword “you” shows a distinct pattern. In general, the average density of the keyword is much higher in the U.S. brochures than in the Eastern European brochures. The brochure of SUT does not contain this keyword at all; ELTE’s brochure has only one instance of our keyword. The average density of the keyword is much higher in the brochure of the University of Bucharest; however, all but one of these are involved either in the procedural description of how to apply and register for courses or in regards to tourist attractions in the country. While the one sentence in which “you” is used in connection with advertising the university has a prominent place (in the introductory line of the section about the university) the fact that it is only used once in this context makes this brochure more alike the other Eastern European brochures.

Figure 1. also shows that the average density of the keyword “you” is much higher in the American brochures. This indicates that the language of these brochures is much closer to the language of promotional materials than the language of the Eastern European brochures. The stronger interpersonal effect is also visible in the pictures of the brochures. All three American brochures are full of pictures of students and alumni, in fact the majority of pictures are of students looking at the reader. The Eastern European brochures, on the other hand, have a significantly lower number of such pictures. ELTE’s brochure has no picture of students, the University of Bucharest has two picture of students, but they both are looking away from the reader, SUT’s has the largest number of student pictures, but the majority of pictures are of buildings and professors. It is interesting to note that this last one is also the one brochure that does not contain the keyword “you.”

What do the results of the keyword and visual analysis say about the genre of recruiting brochures represented by these samples from 2010 and more generally about the institutional discourse of higher education in these two regions? These results show us that the American brochures in our sample have much more closely adapted the language and visual grammar of advertisement than the three Eastern European brochures we have analyzed and apply a more personal approach to advertising than the Eastern European brochures. This more personal, less hierarchical approach is in connection with how the universities wanted to be perceived in 2010 (when the above discussed six brochures were published) in both regions. While in the U.S. an individualized approach was expected, in Eastern Europe a more traditional, hierarchical power structure of higher education institutions was implied on the side of the universities and presupposed on the side of future students.

**Changes in the ideational and interpersonal functions over time**

In order to compare these results with more recent publications, the first obstacle is the changing format. Due to an even more widespread use of the internet as compared to 2010 and more recently, a move towards virtual experiences for recruiting purposes due to the pandemic, brochures are not available for all six universities online. As a result, two brochures from the US (Frostburg and WVU) and two brochures form Easter Europe are compared to their earlier versions. The two US university brochures are still based on a focus of students as they heavily apply “you” in their text and headings.

WVU brochure’s title is “Find your Path” and includes major headings such as “Find your Pathway,” “Find your Niche,” and “Meet your Network.” This brochure interestingly is built upon the travel metaphors, similar to the 2010 Frostburg brochure. The more recent brochure for Frostburg, on the other hand, is built around “Experience” as it explains the different areas that students will encounter during their studies; headings include: “Experience Attention,” “Experience Technology,” and “Experience the World.” The focus is still on the student in both of these brochures’ interpersonal function, as can also be seen in the visual aspect of these brochure’s emphasis on showing students actively engaged with each other or in learning-related activities. Claims of excellence are still connected for both universities to the enriching experiences and to the financial benefits of enrolling in these institutions described under “Invest in your future” in the WVU brochure and by the “Money - Best Colleges” designation brand on the front page of the Frostburg University brochure.

The newer (2020) brochures of the two universities in Easter Europe are still sharing a similar claim of excellence through history. The University of Bucharest, Romania, and ELTE University in Hungary still appeal to the reader through their rich and long history, impressive buildings and visual signs of prestige. The “you” pronoun is still largely missing from the main brochures of these two universities. However, what is different is that both of these universities now publish a student-focused separate brochure that targets international students. As international student exchange has increased in Europe since the establishment of the Erasmus + program in the EU in 2014, universities must have seen a need for a direct appeal to students in order to attract them to their institutions.

Both of the student brochures at these universities are much more similar to university recruiting brochures in the US as they have a more frequent use of “you” throughout their pages and feature alumni who talk directly to the reader about their positive experiences. Students are pictured together having fun or engaging in educational experiences. Pictures of the surrounding city are included to show the potential for a great study-abroad experience in the country. These visual features of the student brochures show that these two universities have become more aware of students as consumers and pursue the marketing of their universities more directly by using tried and true promotional strategies.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study are in accordance with Fairclough’s claim (1995) that in our current order of new capitalism business and advertisement has a great influence on the institutional discourse of education. This is demonstrated by the 2010 American university brochures in our sample that show a higher degree of personalization of the reader (you) which has been traditionally associated with product promotions in business. This trend was less visible in the Eastern European brochures where universities rely more on their long tradition as their main selling strategy, but has been strengthened by market forces that surround the commodification of education and result in students’ perceiving themselves as consumers of higher education (Tomlinson, 2017). The reasons for the original difference between the two groups of 2010 brochures are twofold. First, since new capitalism, or even capitalism itself was still a relatively new concept in the former Eastern Block in 2010, the orders of discourse associated with the principles of business took much longer time to take hold. Second, long running local traditions and hierarchies of higher education and assumptions about higher education influenced the content and language of recruiting brochures. While the first factor is connected to what Fairclough (2000b) calls the globalization of discursive practices, this second factor is associated with the local reinterpretations of global practices, termed *glocalization* (Robertson 1995, Koller 2007).

According to Robertson (1995) globalization is always glocalization: the global is always realized on a local level. Thus, we cannot say that English language university recruiting brochures as a genre have the following generic characteristics, because we have to consider where these brochures have been written. It would be more accurate to say that the presence or absence or the degree of presence of certain generic characteristics are variable locally. However, we will also need to consider that societal and globalizing forces change over time which results in the changing of genres or in our case, the development of a new subgenre, that emphasizes the interpersonal function of promotional genres in higher education in addition to the general recruiting brochures that still relies on the focus on the product (a historically relevant university).

To take this to a more general level, we can assume that global tendencies can be observed in each sample document that belongs to the same genre, but that these tendencies appear differently in different local contexts. Although we came to this conclusion while analyzing university recruiting brochures, this conclusion can have far reaching consequences on how we view genre in general when we consider the interplay of the global and the local. Because it is in the local where cultural assumptions about higher education can be seen and in the global where the effects of today’s interconnected world on discourse can be observed, both of these forces needed to be taken into account for our critical discourse analysis of university recruiting brochures. It is only this way that a full picture of this specific genre situated in social practices and orders of discourse has emerged.

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*Institutional Description*:

I am a faculty member at a smaller teaching university in the Midwest: Grand Valley State University. I am originally from Hungary, and I am very interested in the development of higher education and its promotional genres in the US as well as in Eastern Europe. I have personal connections to one of the US universities discussed in this paper and one of the Eastern European universities in Hungary

*Key Theorists*:

***Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)***

CDA is a “theoretical perspective on language and more generally semiosis (including ‘visual language’, ’body language’, and so on) as one element or ‘moment’ of the material social process …, which gives rise to ways of analyzing language or semiosis within broader analyses of the social process.” This capability of analyzing language within the broader social processes allows CDA to be applied towards the analysis of different genres, such as social media posts, speeches, and larger frameworks in varied fields from communication to education.

***Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) activity-based genre theory***

This theory highlights the dynamic nature of genres that allows the change of form and content over time to reflect changing sociocognitive needs. Genres are created within specific social structures while at the same time they also reinforce those structures. Genres also indicate a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, and ideology.

*Glossary*:

**Glocalization**: the local reinterpretations of global practices

**Ideational function:** recontextualizes social practices that can carry particular ideologies.

**Interpersonal function:** is constituted by a construction of relationship between writer and reader as, for example, formal or informal and by the representation of identity functions often expressed in what aspects, such as group status or individual, of the participants’ identities are constructed.