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Genre and Register Variation: Academic Conference Presentations in Spanish in the United States

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Chapter 7

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1. Introduction

Conference Presentations (CPs) are instrumental in the academic sphere, since they provide a space in which academics disseminate their ongoing research, interact with their colleagues, and position themselves in their professional community (Swales 2004; Ventola, Shalom & Thompson 2002; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas 2005). Unique to the academic community of Hispanic studies in the United States is the fact that texts can be produced either in English or Spanish, therefore, both languages are promoted as a viable means of academic communication. Additionally, scholars who deliver presentations in Spanish in the United States speak a wide array of Spanish dialects, come from different countries, and have diverse educational backgrounds (Viera Echevarria 2014). Therefore, even though this professional community resembles other Hispanic studies discourse communities in the world, it differentiates itself from them through its active bilingualism and dialectal diversity. In sum, conference presentations in Hispanic studies in the United States are cultural products inserted in a bilingual and multidialectal academic discourse community. Within this diverse community, CPs need to be constructed in a way that are recognized as a particular text type or *genre* by all members of the community, therefore, governed by similar stylistic, lexico-grammatical, and discursive conventions that result in specific language choices. As a consequence, we can reasonably expect linguistic variation in CPs that are delivered in the context of the United States.

Swales (2009: 6) stated that members of the academic community should be aware of the idiosyncratic changes that *genres* suffer depending on the context. This is of particular importance for what he calls "occluded genres, i.e., those that are hidden and out of sight to all but a privileged and expert few." Even though there is vast literature that focuses on the writing mode, variation in oral discourse has been understudied in the field of academic language. Until recently, few studies have focused on understanding the way in which speakers construct their oral texts when presenting at academic conferences (Hood & Forey 2005; Räisänen 1999; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas 2005; Ventola, Shalom & Thompson 2002). In the context of the United States, research on academic oral texts in Spanish is concerned primarily with oral proficiency of students of Spanish (Achugar 2003, 2009; Valdés & Geoffrion-Vinci 1998), whereas there is little information regarding advanced levels of the language.

This chapter discusses the findings of the first comprehensive study of Spanish oral conference presentations in the United States and claims that discourse analysis of such texts, informed by the Genre and Register theoretical framework (Bhatia 2004; Biber & Conrad 2009; Bolívar 2005; Ciapuscio 2005; Eggins 1994; Martin 1994, 1997; Martin & Rose 2008; Moris & Navarro 2007; among others), might expand our understanding of the social interaction of this Spanish-speaking academic community and provide a powerful tool to determine the way in which Hispanists working in the United States adapt their academic texts to this bilingual and multidialectal context. Additionally, this chapter discusses the use of discourse analysis techniques as a suitable methodological approach to better understand variation in oral academic language.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Sociolinguistic studies have long shown that language is a cultural artifact that varies according to social contexts, social interactions, and the ultimate communicative purpose of the message (Firth & Palmer 1968; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014; Hood 2010; Hood & Forey 2005; van Dijk 2008). Among other factors, effective communication is marked by the ability of interlocutors to develop appropriate interpersonal relations through language in a given context. It is precisely because of the crucial role language has in establishing interpersonal relations that it is fundamental in shaping distinctive discourse communities (Swales 1990; Davies 2005). In the academic world, different professional communities have developed linguistic and discourse features that strengthen professional ties

among members, including specific jargons, text organization, and citation conventions (MLA, APA, etc.), as well as even more subtle grammatical and lexical items, such as verb modality and discourse markers (Konzet 2012; Hyland 2000; Ventola, Shalom & Thompson 2002). In this sense, the appropriate use of academic genres within a particular discourse community signals membership in a professional group but also pragmatic knowledge and an advanced level of proficiency in the language.

Research has also shown that the same professional discourse community would differ in the use of language depending on the country involved, and the language used (Robles Garrote 2013; Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas 2005; Swales 2009; Vassileva 2002). Considering the above, it is reasonable to think that academic discourse communities that use Spanish in the United States would have developed a set of language conventions that sets them apart from other academic discourse communities of the Hispanic world. As Achugar (2008: 23) claimed: "[L]anguage has either a constitutive or ancillary character with respect to social activity. As a social practice, language is the activity of meaning construction." Therefore, the users of a language engage in meaningful social practices that shape the structure and discourse characteristics of the texts that are created within a community. In this sense, texts are idiosyncratic of the spaces where they circulate and will vary according to users and contexts. Academic contexts would favor a particular type of text—one that allows abstract operations, generalizations, identifications, the establishment of logical relations, and overall the communication of the scientific and argumentative research practices that are central to the academic professional community. Moreover, academic texts are intended to circulate within the community in order to build up their collective scientific knowledge. Since academic texts are intended for distribution in specific scientific communities, they rely heavily on the interpersonal functions of language (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014) and are strongly influenced by contextual sociocultural factors. Thus, academic texts would also reveal and express the inner discursive features of the community that creates them. Even though we might expect similarities among texts produced by members of the same macro-professional community, geographical and social context variation would be realized. Accordingly, CPs will vary linguistically to fit particular professional discourse community conventions and to conform to contextual prevailing cultural patterns.

According to Swales (1990), a *discourse community* is described as a group of people who is oriented toward a set of agreed public goals. This community has mechanisms of communication that vary according to the community, its members actively participate and provide feedback in regard to these common goals, has a specific technolect (specific lexis), and a set of textual genres, that is, abstract text varieties that can be recognized in a given culture (Biber & Conrad 2009). Textual *genres*, as Swales (1990: 58) pointed out, "are *exemplars* that share similarities in structure, style, content and intended audience" and should be easily recognized within the boundaries of a particular discourse community, however, they might slightly vary in structure and style when a different community is considered. Last, discourse communities have different types of membership ranging from novice to experts, with the latter being the most powerful, active, and knowledgeable participants.

The theoretical construct of the discourse community is applicable to the group of Hispanic studies scholars working in the United States, since they actively produce and exchange academic knowledge in the fields of Hispanic literature, cultural studies, and linguistics through a series of written and oral textual genres in designated spaces. Written and oral texts created within this professional community are characterized by a technical lexicon that serves the purpose of an adequate description of the community's research topics. The production and circulation of these texts is regulated by linguistic and discursive conventions that are the result of members' agreements. Thus, knowledge and appropriate use of these conventions signals membership. The community is organized hierarchically, ranging from experts to novices, with the most prolific producers of knowledge ranked as experts and graduate students ranked as novices (Viera Echevarria 2014: 55). Therefore, if we consider conference presentations as a textual genre, we should expect some degrees of variation depending on the professional community in which the CP is delivered but also depending on the presenter.

In order to study the discourse produced in CPs, and, eventually, the cultural patterns embodied in such discourse, the theory of Genre and Register offers a sound theoretical and methodological research framework for the study of text variation according to context. First, this theory of discourse analysis has been favored by many scholars around the world and has led to a vast array of studies that can be replicated with proven methodological techniques. Second, research findings informed by this theory have been successfully implemented in educational contexts (Martin & Rose 2008), therefore, the applicability rate of the theory is one of its advantages. According to this theory, members of a given community engage in social activities that are mediated and instantiated in language, that is, expressed in the language, thus, susceptible to analysis. Martin and Rose (2007: 8) pointed out: "we learn to recognize and distinguish

the typical genres of our culture, by attending to consistent patterns of meanings as we interact with others in various situations." Therefore, genres have a predictable structure and knowledge of this structure constitutes cultural knowledge in itself. As members of a discourse community, "… we organize our messages in ways that indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them and with the wider contexts in which we are talking or writing" (Thompson 2014: 28). However, heterogeneous communities or emerging discourse communities (Swales 2009) might represent challenges for their members as co-existing, different structures are possible. The way a text is organized around a particular communicative goal is central to the construct of genre. It is for this reason that genres are usually defined as "a staged, goal-oriented social process" (Martin & Rose 2007: 8). Following this definition, genres can be analyzed when it is possible to determine their different structural stages, also called steps or moves. This information is vital for the novice who wants to participate in a discourse community, as only through practice or explicit teaching we are able to grasp the culturally adequate.

However, not only are texts organized in a patterned structure, but they are also created with a specific *register.* As Burns (1996: 6) claimed: "Commonly in second language teaching, register has been described as a feature of language which is linked to the person being addressed, and the choices have ranged between formal and informal." Indeed, *the system of register* implies the different configurations language adopts to serve the purposes of the social activity in which it is deployed, the relationship among participants of this activity, and the medium in which it is used. Every text has lexical, grammatical, and discursive configurations that are dependent on the type of activity that is constructed through language. Thus, in systemic functional linguistics (SFL), one of the discourse analysis schools that works within the genre and register theory and largely informs this study, "discourse analysis interfaces with the analysis of grammar and the analysis of social activity" (Martin & Rose 2007: 4). The analysis of particular features of language reveals the preferred grammatical and discursive options that participants of a certain community make when constructing a text to fit contextual situations, and, once again, knowledge of the way in which text register varies is gained through participation in the discourse community or through explicit teaching only.

In connection with register analysis, it is important to consider that CPs are oral monological texts created to be delivered in formal settings, or at least less conversational settings than a spontaneous dialogue among friends. It has been proposed that text types vary along an orality/literacy continuum, with spontaneous conversational speech on one side and formal scientific writing on the opposite side of such a continuum (Colombi 2006; Halliday 1990; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Although this idea has been contested for those who disfavor descriptions of language based on dichotomist divisions (Tannen 1985; Murray 1988), the general consensus is that the mode in which language is conveyed and the specific context of the situation would be expressed in specific linguistic features (Biber 2006; Chafe 1987; Halliday 1990; Parodi 2007). Determining where in the continuum CPs can be found is an important descriptor and shows the way CPs might vary among different discourse communities. Potentially, CP presenters have a set of linguistic options when creating their texts. They might choose to create formal or informal texts, dense and packed with academic abstract lexicon, or with more or less dialogic features. These linguistic options imprinted in the fabric of the text reveal the *tone* that the presenters instill in their texts, therefore, the way they perceive the relationship with the intended audience and discourse community as a whole. A CP that resembles a spontaneous friendly conversation shows a presenter who prioritizes establishing a strong rapport with the audience as opposed to a speaker who focuses on the academic content of the message.

Table 7.1 summarizes some of the language features that have been found relevant to register analysis when describing spontaneous conversational oral texts versus formal written texts and that were used in this study.

<insert Table 7.1 here>

Table 7.1. Language features by text type.

2. Methodology

The corpus of collected data analyzed in this study comprises thirty-two oral presentations from nine different conferences held in four U.S. states. Each presentation was thirteen to twenty minutes in length and was video recorded and then transcribed. Presentations were given in Spanish by scholars who work or study in the fields of Hispanic literature (18) and linguistics (14) in the United States. Presenters were seventeen professors of Spanish, who were considered *experts* in this study because they presumably have presented at several conferences before and had a better knowledge of possible discourse community conventions. The corpus also includes the presentations given by fifteen

graduate students of Spanish, who were considered *novice* for the purpose of this study. The majority of participants were native speakers of Spanish (28) and four participants spoke Spanish as a foreign language. This disparity was not sought out but it reflects the fact that non-native speakers of Spanish tended to present in English in the conferences where this corpus was collected. Indeed, English was the chosen language among Hispanic scholars of this corpus as well (Viera Echevarria 2014: 106). Only the oral text produced by the presenter was considered for the analysis, that is, written texts in PowerPoint presentations that were not read aloud or oral text included in audio or videos were disregarded. This methodological decision has proved to be erroneous, due to the actual multimedia nature of CPs and relevant discourse information might have been lost in the analysis.

After transcriptions, the text of each individual CP was segmented into structural stages and labeled following a series of steps adapted from Eggins and Slade (1997) and Taboada (2004):

    a.   Determination of main goals of the presentation;

    b.   Determination of recurrent structural stages according to main communicative goals;

    c.   Labeling according to items a) and b);

    d.   Determination of obligatory and optional stages in the genre;

    e.   Devising a structural formula;

    f.   Lexico-grammatical analysis at the clause level to determine recurrent main language features that can be associated with register in each structural stage;

    g.   Computer-assisted analysis that corroborated and provided further evidence to support findings yielded by manual analysis.

The software used with that purpose was *UAM Corpus Tool* version 2.8 (O'Donnell 2008) and AntConc 3.2.4 (Anthony 2013). Two small corpora of written oral presentations were used for comparative purposes. Automatic analysis following corpus linguistics methodology (Baker 2010; McEnery & Wilson 2001) was used to find *frequent words* and *keywords* of the corpus along with the calculation of the number of occurrences of discourse markers and language features present in oral spontaneous speech: errors, pauses, fillers, hedges, and question tags (Biber 2006; Chafe 1987; Halliday 1990; Parodi 2007).

For the determination of obligatory stages in the generic structural formula, the following criteria, which follows Navarro (2011), were used: a) 26% to 50%, *occasional;* c) 51% to 75%, *frequent*; and c) 76% to 100%, *obligatory.* These criteria, however, proved to be methodologically inaccurate because of the inherent variability of the oral text, which most often needs to be modified because of unexpected circumstances. For this reason, I suggest that the percentage of occurrence be lowered in future studies in the following way: a) 26%–46%, *occasional;* b) 47%–70%, *frequent;* and c) 71%–100%, *obligatory.*

3. Results

Manual and automatic analysis together allowed for determining the linguistic and discursive features that are characteristic of the CPs of this study.

3.1. Genre Analysis

The genre analysis showed that literature and linguistics create two different genres. Literature texts are characterized by *argumentative texts* that work around a thesis statement, whereas linguistic texts are usually *reports* of research findings. Therefore, oral presentations from these two fields have different generic structures since they have different purposes. However, both disciplines create texts that follow the same macrostructure, which is shown in the following structural formula that follows Eggins & Alcántara (2002). In this formula "^" represents sequential order, parenthesis represent optional elements, and "{" signal the beginning and end of generic structure elements:

Macro-structural formula: {opening^ introduction^ development^ (conclusion)^ closure}

As shown in the previous formula, CPs differ from written papers in the macro-stages of *opening* and *closing* (Rowley-Jolivet & Carter-Thomas 2005; Hood & Forey 2005; Viera Echevarria 2014). These two macro-stages are distinctive structural elements of this particular genre and have an important interpersonal goal that consists of establishing a connection with the present audience (opening) and with the discourse community as a whole (closing). The genre analysis showed that expert presenters (professors) favored interpersonal stages and when time was limited, they chose to include a *closing* over the *conclusion* stage. *Conclusions,* as opposed to *closings,* are the logical ending of the content information on which the conference focuses. Thus, this discourse community, when delivering CPs, seems to prefer interpersonal structural elements of the presentation to informational content. The most frequent *openings* in this corpus are *greetings, acknowledgment* to the work of the chair and organizers, and *exordium.* The acknowledgment is the preferred genre used for the *opening* macro-stage in this corpus. The *closing* is constructed differently in literature than in linguistics. Literature presenters tend to reserve the most eloquent and poetic type of language for this stage, creating a literary climax for their analysis, one that surely is intended to remain in the memory of the audience. Linguistic presenters resort to a form of epilogue that resembles the *peroratio*: an ending that highlights the importance of the presented study for the professional community or society as a whole.

Two interesting findings were found in the corpus as a whole (both disciplines): a) presenters only occasionally included a functional stage that serves as an outline for the presentation in their introductions, and b) presenters frequently choose not to explicitly state their thesis statement in their introduction but constructed it as they developed their texts. Thus, texts are usually of the inductive-deductive type, that is, a combination of both rhetorical techniques. However, the tendency to reveal the thesis statement in a completed way is greater in linguistics. The way in which texts are constructed in connection with the thesis statement should be explored in future studies to better understand if it reveals a feature of this particular discourse community.

Regarding discipline-specific generic structure, the following generic formulas show the results for the *frequent* and *obligatory* functional stages for literature and linguistics:

Literature: {(acknowledgement) ^ topic presentation ^ social and historical context ^ (literature review) ^ thesis statement ^ analysis ^ (evidence) ^ (conclusion)^ epilogue}

Linguistics: {(semiotic spanning with the panel) ^ topic presentation ^ literature review ^ (niche) ^ research questions ^ (thesis statement [explicit]) ^ (theory) ^ (methodology) ^ research process [narration] ^ results ^conclusion ^ epilogue^ (acknowledgment)}

The analysis also showed that experts tended to create texts with fewer functional stages that correspond with the obligatory stages shown in the previous formulas. Interestingly, when considering the entire corpus, it is evident that experts relied less on citation and the literature review, which is a typical trait of academic writing. However, linguistic scholars did include a *literature review* as an obligatory stage of their presentation.

In conclusion, genre analysis showed the preferred functional stages in which members of the professional discourse community considered in this study organized their texts when giving an individual oral presentation on a panel. It was possible to establish the importance of interpersonal functional stages that imprinted the oral text with the necessary immediacy of the situational context and to determine differences in organization for the two disciplines represented in this corpus.

3.2. Register Analysis

One of the main goals of register analysis was to determine the way in which oral texts vary from written academic texts in this discourse community. Additionally, it was of interest to establish the tenor of the members' relationship as expressed by patterned structures in the language used when presented. Thus, the degree of formality or informality was analyzed as well as the resources that the presenter used to strengthen membership in this professional community. The usage of English is a parameter that, if present, might reveal that scholars of this discourse community construct a bilingual professional identity and insert their texts into a bilingual context. Last, since the texts of this corpus belong to the academic sphere, it was necessary to corroborate if the lexical and grammatical characteristics, normally described for academic texts that confer a greater degree of technicality and abstraction (Banks 2008: Colombi 2006; Cubo de Severino 2002; Halliday 2001; Martin 2001; Schleppegrell 2004), were present in the texts of this corpus. In connection with these goals, this section discusses the major findings of this research.

In this corpus, CP texts vary according to the discipline, with literature CPs tending to be more formal and usually based on a written text that is read aloud, whereas linguistic texts are more prone to being spontaneous texts built on base of a PowerPoint presentation. However, overall, most texts were classified as *formal* and *semiformal* and only seven were classified as *spontaneous-dialogic*. All of the seven were from linguistics and from presenters that completed their university studies mostly in the United States. These spontaneous texts presented all the language features described for conversational dialogue (see chart in introduction), including errors, false starts, and disfluencies that affect the general text cohesion. *Formal* texts (fifteen presenters) are characterized by a presenter who detaches herself from the audience and does not interact in any direct or indirect form with it. Passive voice and impersonal structures are recurrent along with a focus on processes and objects rather than actors. *Semi-formal* texts (ten presenters) are planned, usually written, and that are at moments abandoned and adapted spontaneously to better fit the immediate communicative situation. In most cases, these inserted spontaneous segments are elaborations, the addition of further examples, and the establishment of connections with what was presented in the panel or conference. In all cases, language changed to a more colloquial, interactive, and less abstract type (Viera Echevarria 2014: 342). In this sense, spontaneous speech transforms the text into one that is more cooperative with the process of understanding of the audience and becomes a discursive resource by which the presenter positions her text as part of the collective production of knowledge of her professional community. It is of no surprise, then, that experts were the ones who preferred this type of text. It is clear after the analysis that, regarding mode and tenor, CPs are hybrid texts that, even when planned and based on the written mode of language, respond to the immediate presence of an audience and contextually unexpected situations. Orality features are present in most of the samples of this corpus, and if we consider that experts favor the insertion of spontaneous segments into their planned texts, it is possible to conclude that CPs in this discourse community value presenters that are able to transform their texts in order to cooperate with an audience who is, indeed, other members of the presenter's professional community.

Regarding *technicality,* automatic analysis with *UAMCorpusTool* and *AntConc* software yielded that linguistic texts use more technical terms than literature ones. However, a closer look at the *keyword* analysis reveals that literature uses words normally occurring in everyday speech, like *memory, democracy,* and *story,* but assigns them a technical sense that is only understood within the professional community. However, the whole corpus cannot be described as a high, technical one, in accordance with what Swales (2004) finds for oral academic texts in English. Therefore, oral texts in this corpus are constructed with a lower degree of technicality than their written counterparts, like research articles. However, *UAMCorpus Tool* shows an overall lexical density of 70 %, which signals that abstractions and nominalizations are present even in CPs that are spontaneous texts. Considering that Matsuda et al. (2012) have found similar lexical density in a written corpus from the humanities field, it is possible to conclude that the texts in this corpus, although exhibiting less technicality and oral features of the language, are nevertheless academic and condense the information into nominalizations. Therefore, CPs's are more abstract texts than conversational samples.

At the discursive level, several communicative resources aimed to establish and strengthen an indirect dialogue with the audience were found in most texts. *Formal* texts deploy rhetorical questions and softening of their assertions via modalization, that is, the use of grammatical structures, such as modal verbs, that make claims less categorical (Hyland 2000). Semi-formal and spontaneous texts resort to question tags, hedges, and even direct conversation. Humor is also a recurrent feature in this corpus, present in fifteen presentations: nine experts and six novices. Through the incorporation of humor as a discursive resource, the presenter narrows the distance with the audience and aims at the co-construction of meaning (Hood & Foley 2005).

Finally, the usage of English in the analyzed presentations is not a peripheral aspect in this corpus. Indeed, 65% of participants used English when they included quotations that were not translated into Spanish, or when they used specialized language or technolect. Presenters usually included both the Spanish and English word as if the English word might further clarify the meaning. Interestingly, none of the four speakers of Spanish as a second language, who were dominant in English, integrated this language into their presentations. This last finding calls for further research, however, as this corpus shows that many presenters who use Spanish in CPs in the United States assume a bilingual audience, able to understand non-translated quotations, and seem to resort to English to further comprehension on technical terms that constitute the discipline's technolect. In this regard, English is used with an interpersonal function to preserve the authentic voice of the individual quoted or to acknowledge that the production of collective scientific knowledge in this community is oftentimes carried out in English. Furthermore, the use of English in this community constitutes one of the many strategies speakers deploy to make their discourse more comprehensible for the audience, thus, English seems to be perceived as a linguistic resource to enhance communication in a bilingual academic setting.

4. Conclusions

Since texts are cultural products that depend on contextual circumstances, discourse analysis techniques, as the ones discussed previously, provide a powerful methodological approach to the study of language variation. Analysis showed that the Hispanic scholars who participated in this study modified their texts to follow specific discourse community conventions. Markedly, texts varied in structure and register according to the discipline considered, which shows that novice presenters should be aware of discipline-driven variation when creating their texts. In this sense, the present study offers the most favored generic structure for both literature and linguistics and the preferred stages in which discourse usually unfolds in Hispanic studies CPs. Analysis also shows that interpersonal stages are paramount for this type of text in this community. Once the generic structure of CPs has been determined, contrastive studies with other professional communities would provide details with regard to linguistic variation in the Spanish spoken in academic settings.

Regarding *register,* when the whole corpus is considered, it is clear that informality and more dialogic texts are not favored by most scholars. This finding should not be overlooked since it has been claimed that there is a growing tendency toward more conversational and informal styles in academia (Fairclough 1994; Frober-Adamo 2002; Wineburg 2004). If this finding is representative of a major trend, it seems that this particular community resists the aforementioned register change toward informality and colloquiality in academia. Conference presentation texts also varied depending on the type of membership that the presenter had in the discourse community. *Expert* members resorted to language and discursive strategies to boost interpersonal equal relationships among members of the academic community.

Considering the continuum of writing/orality (see Table 7.1), CP texts in this corpus are eminently oral, however, they also exhibit features that are usually present in formal academic written texts. In this respect, literature texts exhibit the linguistic characteristics associated with written texts to a greater extent than linguistics. Technicality is likewise constructed differently in both disciplines. However, analysis showed that the majority of the CPs in this corpus were lexically dense and characterized by the presence of discipline-specific technical terms. Last, the usage of English by many speakers indexes a Spanish speaking community that works in a bilingual setting. In this sense, Hispanic scholars in this community portray themselves as bilingual speakers and signal that the professional community discourse is usually constructed in both languages.

The present study has shown that rather than a homogeneous phenomenon, academic language is subject to linguistic variation due to contextual factors. In order to study such variation, discourse analysis tools and the genre and register theory have proven useful to establish the language features that are susceptible to change and that could be the focus of further comparative studies among Spanish-speaking professional communities.