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Abstract: Recent years have seen a growing body of literature concerned with the World Wide Web as a new form of communication, and numerous discussions on composition, structure and design of successful company websites are being held daily in all kinds of forums within and outside the Internet. However, most of these discussions seem to focus on the technological properties of the Internet or tend to serve purely practical purposes and only few researchers discuss the rhetorical features of web communication, the exception being a limited number of researchers dealing with metaphors on the Web. In this paper I will discuss the functional and the compositional aspects of corporate communication on the World Wide Web by comparing company websites with traditional market communication media. I will focus on linguistic and visual features of the company website and briefly account for some of the media constraints related to the production and reception of company websites.

Keywords: World Wide Web, Corporate Websites, Hypertext, Rhetorical Strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Judging from the considerable increase in Internet research activities, the interest in defining and describing key issues related to web communication is

enormous. Thus practical skills of website communication such as successful composition, structure and design are dealt with in many handbooks and web guides on Internet use, but little has been done to invesitigate the theoretical approaches to website rhetoric, especially within a semio-linguistic framework. The most significant contributions comes from Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) researchers, who for some years have been studying different aspects of non-technological communication problems of the Internet, including textual and linguistic problems.

In this paper I shall present some of the rhetorical features of online communication from a marketing and business communication point of view and compare company web profiles with traditional company brochures. In order to delimit my study I shall restrict my analysis to the introductory part of the website and the web profile and compare them to similar printed material.

LINGUISTIC INTERNET RESEARCH

There are several studies within Internet research of which most are concerned with problems related to information technology. As for linguistic studies of Internet research some can be found in the work of CMC which embraces a number of sub-approaches such as for instance the Rhetorical Structure Theory or the Rhetorical Criticism.[1] However, an increasing number of working and research groups deal with electronic text production and reception from an interdisciplinary point of view. But the major part of these groups are primarily interested in examining web characteristics and web conventions related to specific text genres such as e-mail, chat room, encyclopedia, etc, that is genres of which several were born with the Internet. Commercial genres have barely entered the arena of digital text linguistic research and this seems to explain the obvious lack of systematic scientific analyses of commercial sites. Most of the results produced within this area are practical guidelines for and by marketing web writers and editors such as Jacob Nielsen, who has published several

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1. Cf. for instance Barbara Warnick, 2001.

books and articles on practical issues.[2] Contrary to the sporadic treatment of genre specific elements of digital media, fundamental topics such as the text structural and text linguistic impact of hypertext production and reception is perhaps the most well covered issue in all approaches to web writing, especially within the German CMC approach.[3] What happens to and how should already existing texts be edited if they are transferred from printed into digital versions? This is an important issue with both pragmatic and linguistic implications, which I shall get back to later in this paper.

WEBSITE MARKETING

In the early 90's being present on the World Wide Web represented a value in itself, because company presence signified expansion and innovation and added a certain amount of prestigious value to the company ethos. However, with the explosion of company websites, this "added value" has totally disappeared. Nowadays there is no news value as such to the act of marketing and communicating through the World Wide Web. Nevertheless, digital communication[4] still represents one of the most strategic challenges to today's industrial and commercial companies. And it is important to stress that if we think of business communication in general and its connection to digital communication, the latter has grown out of its teens in cyberspace and entered a serious and complex life full of obligations (Møller & Rasmussen, 1999: 375). American companies play a pioneering role in the use of digital communication, but the development of a common graphical interface up through the 90's has opened the World Wide Web to a worldwide user segment. Still, there is a tremendous difference between companies who have barely created their first digital presentation and

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2. Cf. for instance Jacob Nielsen, 2000, for one of his latest publications.

3. Cf. for instance Jacobs & Knorr, 1999 and Lobin, 1999.

4. Digital communication can be defined as any type of user oriented digital data, transported by network, or electronically, and available in any form which is intuitively comprehensible for the user (Møller & Rasmussen, 1999: 375).

those who actually use digital communication to interact with particular target groups.

In the business environement in general, marketers no longer discuss the benefit of using digital communication. It's commercial potential as a promotion and shopping tool is a primary motivation in the company's strategic planning of digital communication. Of particular interest is the possibility of targeting product information and advertising messages to small and limited segments, thus individualising communication activities. Many marketing experts see the World Wide Web as a real threat particularly to printed direct marketing media because of the new medium's ability to distribute day by day detailed product information to well defined segments (Leon, Huang & Stanners, 1998). As a hybrid between a mass medium and a dialogue medium the World Wide Web is judged the most suitable medium both to capture new clients and to strengthen and restore the relation with old clients by means of client fidelity programmes. According to Chaffey et al. "the World Wide Web offers a great scope for Public Relations and sales promotion in general, because it significantly changes the very nature of Public Relations, since a company website in itself can act as a vehicle for Public Relations. By hosting a website a company becomes its own media owner and has the opportunity to publish any kind of material without an intermediate review from a publisher or a television company" (Chaffey et al., 2000: 42). But whether the World Wide Web is the most suitable medium or not to use for marketing a product or a brand depends on the particular communicative purposes formulated by the company in order to reach target groups. Thus attracting the attention of potential customers for instance, which is one of the crucial functions achieved by mass media, is not a particular aim in itself of the Internet because of its limited reach compared to television, radio or printed media (op. cit.: 45). This, of course, is also due to the Internet's status as a pull medium (cf. 4). The reasons for using digital communication, e.g. using it as PR and/or marketing tool determines to a considerable extent the form, content and extent of the company website. Thus the marketing researcher Philip Kotler makes a distinction between two types of company websites, *corporate website* and *marketing website*, where the former can be identified as

an electronic company brochure, and the latter as a direct marketing site which includes online-shopping facilities:

> **Corporate website**: "A site set up by a company on the Web which carries information and other features designed to answer customer questions, build customer relationships and generate excitement about the company, rather than to sell the company's products or services directly. The site handles interactive communication initiated by the consumer".

> **Marketing website**: "A site on the web created by a company to interact with the consumer for the purpose of moving them closer to purchase or other marketing outcome. The site is designed to handle interactive communication initiated by the company" (Kotler, 1998: 971).

The most common type, and the one I shall focus on in this paper, is the corporate website which contains general information about the company: its history, mission, products, services, employees, financial situation, etc, very much like the information often found in a company brochure or annual report. The marketing website is a site directly aimed at online communication between suppliers and clients, particularly in business-to-business communication and it contains documents such as catalogues, sales events, coupons, etc, which represent activities connected to direct-marketing. However, as with any information technological phenomenon, things are constantly changing so that today's conventions are soon to be replaced by new ones. This also means that the two types of company websites defined by Kotler a few years ago have now more or less merged into a new and more complex type which covers both interactive and non-interactive communication initiated by both supplier and client. The idea of different types of commercial websites is also supported within a didactical framework of business communication. Hoger, Cappel and Myerscough (1998) have established a typology of website uses for electronic commerce. Thus different types of websites are defined according to their corporate use:

1) Promoting greater awareness of themselves and their products.

2) Providing customer support.

3) Selling products or services.

4) Selling advertising space on websites to other companies.

5) Offering electronic information services.

But again the authors pinpoint the frequent existence of hybrid websites that fulfil more than one corporate function like, for instance, "providing information" and "online selling", which, as mentioned earlier, are often transmitted by one type of website. From a practical point of view portal websites are sometimes chosen as a solution to fulfil different communicative purposes and to serve different target groups at all levels of distribution. However, although the typology above seems like a valuable tool to students and researchers in the analysis and production of commercial websites at first glance, it suffers from the lack of integrating the communicative perspective. In order to account for the strategic uses behind website communication in more communicative and linguistic terms, we may therefore reduce the uses above to the following functions representing the intentional communicative acts behind the activities from a senders' point of view:

1) Promoting a company, brand or a product overlaps with the *act of recommending*[5]

2) Selling products or advertising space can be defined as an *act of persuading into purchase*

3) Providing customer support and offering information services support the *act of informing*

In the list above *recommending* in 1 can be reformulated as an act of *making believe*, whereas *persuading into purchase* in 2 can be interpreted as an act of *making do*, both of which can be seen as overall intentions of adverting and marketing activities. According to the French linguists, Adam & Bonhommes (1997), who apply a text typological and speech act theoretical approach to the definition of advertising discourse, the *act of informing* in 3 often appears strongly in the surface structure as a means of concealing the actual intention

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5. See for instance Adam & Bonhommes, 1997 and Nielsen & Nølke,1991 for rhetorical and texttypological analyses of promotional discourse.

behind all advertising messages: to inspire sympathy in order to sell products and/or services (op.cit.: 25).

If we return to the marketing approach to communicating on the World Wide Web, there is a strong believe in universal problem-solving and general enrichment through technological discovery and few marketers take into account the cultural transformation processes, which govern the use and application forms of the Internet and the World Wide Web in different contextual settings (Castells, 2001: 39). The Internet and the World Wide Web are definitely promising contributions to a prosperous economical and social development of business, but the inconveniences of this development: diverse market dynamics, oligopolistic concentration, enforcement of risk and management, etc. are totally absent in the marketing approach.[6] As it is my purpose to describe concrete rhetorical aspects of web mediated documents, I will nevertheless leave out the discussion of the socio-economic dimension of the Internet and instead continue with a brief account of the website as a medium.

SPECIFIC MEDIA CHARACTERISTICS

In order to account for rhetorical differences between web texts and printed texts it is necessary to point out the technical characteristics of the website compared to traditional marketing media. Naturally, most of the specific properties of the website coincide with those of the Internet or the World Wide Web in general, as it appears from the following list:

1) The website is a pull medium which means that the user/receiver is in an active position of information seeking.

2) The website enables interaction as the possibility of responding is very often an integrated tool on most commercial sites, by online sale activities, e-mail, FAQ[7], etc.

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6. See for instance Slevin (2000) for a detailed cultural analysis of the Internet.

7. FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions). In the linguistic sense that all questions solicit an answer.

3) Like most digital media, the website is multimedial combining both pictorial, graphical, sonoric and image moving elements.

4) The website is a dynamic and fluctuating medium. A website can exist in an incomplete form or as a draft version and may be constantly revised and up-dated.

5) The website is an immediate and global medium available at any time to any Internet user all over the world.

The status of the website as a pull medium is an important characteristic which distinguishes it from traditional mass media generally aimed at providing push information to the receiver who is most likely to categorize push information as irrelevant information. In their book *Planet Internet*, Braa, Sørensen & Dalbom characterise traditional *information receivers* in a company as *information hunters:*

> "Corporate information that used to be distributed in the form of brochures and internal magazines are now being published on intranet web pages. This means that members of organizations become information hunters instead of information receivers" (Braa, Sørensen & Dalbom, 2000: 77).

Active information seeking automatically generates the feeling of relevance if not as to any piece of information then at least to the very process of seeking. Therefore, it is not surprising that communication on the World Wide Web contains more strictly descriptive than promoting elements (cf. rhetorical ana-lysis). In the case of corporations, the website has also a unifying and globalising function since it keeps all company information in one place even though its structure and composition is based on fragmented and autonomous units typical for hypertext structure. But one thing is to describe the technical properties of the World Wide Web. Another thing is to establish a causal relation between such properties and the use of communication strategies on the web. Apart from websites containing both print, sound and/or animation elements based on the multimedial capacity of the Internet, it is doubtful whether the use of specific rhetorical strategies on websites can be considered new in the sense sof being born with the World Wide Web. The clear cut and short style writing which is strongly recommended by web writers due to the down-loading conditions and

the inconvenience of screen reading is not *only* a strategy used for the production of websites. It is also embedded in the production of traditional media publications as for instance advertisements, posters or TV commercials which are also limited in time and/or space from a receptive point of view (cf. reception conditions below). Therefore the question is not so much to investigate the changing procedures of the social environment of the World Wide Web as to examine to which extent the traditional rhetorical features of printed material are transformed when digitalised. When it comes to the contextual environment, we cannot yet say whether digital communication will replace traditional marketing media. A great number of companies are still publishing printed brochure material and reports along with their website edition. And in spite of the huge potential offered by digital communication there are still informational and communicative elements which are more suitable for printed media due to the particular reception conditions of digital communication, as for instance tactile elements which have come to play a significant role in marketing communication and public relations during the last 15-20 years.

RECEPTION CONDITIONS WORLD WIDE WEB

The World Wide Web is subject to particular reception conditions due to the specific characteristics of hypertext reading and comprehension. First, the reading conditions change radically compared to those of printed media. Second, the non-linearity of web texts enables the reader to move in any desired direction on a website. Adopting the list established by Sosnoski, hyper-reading may be described as follows:

> *"Filtering*: a higher degree of selectivity in reading
>
> *Skimming*: less text actually read
>
> *Pecking*: a less linear sequencing of passages read
>
> *Imposing*: the reader's cognitive frameworks override the text's
>
> *Filming*: the "…but I saw the films" response that implies that significant meaning is

derived more from graphical than from verbal elements of the text

Trespassing: loosening of textual boundaries

De-authorizing: lessening sense of authorship and authorly intention

Fragmenting: breaking texts into notes rather than regarding them as essays, articles or books" (Sosnoski, 1999: 135-36).

We also recognise some of the abovementioned elements in traditional reading, depending on which specific genre and media conventions a particular reading situation is subject to, but the above listed features seem to copy the general practical guidelines pointing more or less categorically out that the reading speed and the degree of comprehension are reduced compared to printed media.[8] According to many web technologists the manipulation of the well known reading structure of the book makes it difficult for the reader to build a mental model for text reception and he may easily get lost. The text scanning processing of the reader automatically calls for brief and visually limited text units. This explains why the information structure of web texts should be more condensed and concise than that of traditional texts. A rapid quantitative examination of the company brochure and the website of the accounting group HLB clearly shows that the information given about a specific topic as for instance *History* is far more detailed on print than on the web. We may consider hypertexts derived from printed texts as condensed versions of printed texts, properly due to the fact that reading on the Internet is characterised by high speed and fragmentation. Jacob Nielsen has tested readers' reactions to different stylistic versions of the same key information, more specifically a short tourist description of Nebraska.[9] As it is not a scientific linguistic analysis, there are no distinctions between elements such as lay-out, writing style, language use, etc, which are elements belonging to different semiotic systems. Therefore there is no clear evidence as to which concrete linguistic material is most suitable for web communication. But the result of the analysis might give at

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8. See www.useit.com/papers/webwriting.

9. See www.useit.com/alerbox/97.

least some evidence for the need to change communication strategy when we move from print to digital media. The analysis demonstrates certain tendencies of 5 different writing styles: "marketese" (puns and advertising), condensation, scanned lay-out, neutral language and a style combining the last three of them, the latter has the highest score, whereas the first one has the lowest score as far as *comprehension, memoring, liking*, etc, are concerned. The "marketese" style is said to be the most difficult style to access from a cognitive point of view. On the other hand the result of the analysis may also be due to Jacob Nielsen's obvious contempt for marketese in general.[10] As web reading to a large extent involves the use of hypertext, I will briefly account for the influence of hypertext structure on the production and reception of websites in the following chapter.

HYPERTEXT STRUCTURE

From a text organising point of view, hypertext is a fragmented text form composed of blocks of words ordered in *nodes* or 'chunks' of information and *links* between them, offering the receiver different options of reading paths to follow in his information search. Ordered in a non-sequential, that is a non-linear, system, hypertexts is said to have no centre. As expressed by Bolter:

> "A hypertext is like a printed book that the author himself has attacked with a pair of scissors and cut into convenient verbal sizes. The difference is that the electronic hypertext does not simply dissolve a disordered bundle of slips; the author defines its structure by establishing electronic connections among the slips (Bolter, 1989: 135).

So at the production level, hypertext is composed of textual units that the author links to each other according to his own sense of logic and relevant cohesion, thus establishing an ideal path road structure which the reader is free or not to follow throuh out his reading. Therefore hyptertext is often defined as non-sequential text. However, this defintion is not shared by all hypertext

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10. See also .

experts. Many web technologists do not take into account the distinction between the navigational and the textual part of hypertext. At the navigational or browsing level, it is true that hypertext is structured as a web with no specific indication of linear order of reading, but at the reading level, digital reading is not necessarily more fragmented than reading from print. The reader of a book can jump to and fro the text as he likes just as the reader of a website jumping from one link to another.[11] So from a production point of view the difference between hypertext and text is perhaps rather a question of textual organisation structure than that of linear versus non-linear structure.

In website designing, different models of hypertext structure may dominate according to the size and the complexity of a site. Phaffenberger (1997) distinguishes between four models of hypertext structure, which cover axial (hierarchical) modelling as well as network modelling.[12] Axial hypertexts are structured in levels. The most simple website is composed according to the horizontal structure with a homepage at the first level and a serial of corresponding documents at level two. Vertically structured websites are set up in two to four levels and finally, the staircase website is a sequential text which actually eliminates the hypertext structure as its path system is entirely governed by the sender. The semantic network structure reveals an organic text composition without any hierarchical traces. In this kind of hypertext the reading structure is not given by the sender. It is produced during the reading process by the receivers. Generally the network structure is said to be more complicated to access for receivers than the axial structure, due to the multiple link system of the network structure.

The key principle of the network structure originates from the cognitive psychology and is based on associative models which incorporate hierarchical relations into semantic categories. A concept such as for instance "bitter" is linked by association to different semantic fields such as *drink* (wine), *mood*

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11. See for instance, Niels Ole Finnemann (1999) for the discussion of linear versus non-linear reading.

(anger), and *spices* (herbs), etc. (Dillon et al.,1991: 97). The strength of the association is embedded in the length of the line combining the concept itself and the concepts of the related semantic categories. The receiver of hypertexts continually shifts the centre and determines the point of focus and his own centre of investigation and experience as pointed out by Landow (1992: 11). Hypertext systems thus impose specific orgnisational constraints on both web writing and reading.

Hypertext coherence

As the textual coherence within hypertext systems is not based on a continuum of one sequence following another, the web writer is supposed to insert clearly defined and visualised semantic relations (*constellation, subordination, inter-dependency)* between text and/or picture fragments constituting the nodes and the links of the system. In order to adapt website communication to appropriate information architecture structure, web writers use a topographical system in which formal relations support semantic relations (associations like the ones mentioned above and for instance subordination structuring in the case of a relation combining an explanation (node) and an example (link)).[13]

Where the coherence of a printed text is generally activated by sequentially organised topical units of texts, coherence in hypertexts is produced by:

1) Navigational information indicating the topical and functional structure of the overall hypertext system.

2) Contextualisation of the single unit into the overall structure.

3) Reading instructions related to an average reader (Storrer, 1994: 49).

As it appears from the above list, coherence in hypertext systems is said to be provided by other means than in printed text. As one can see from a quick glance at various websites, the amount of navigational information is often

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12. See Bryan Phaffenberger, 1997: 40-45.

13. See Peter Bøgh Andersen (1990) for a semiotic approach to hypertext systems.

higher than the key information itself. And when it comes to the formal aspect of contextualisation of text units, most sites have a site map visualising the overall structure, but here the production of coherence stops for the web writer leaving it to the receiver to provide the necessary coherence generating elements. As stated by Stross, there is no guarantee of predictable contextual patterns in hypertext:

> "In fact, you must work on the assumption that the information in your document is atomic, that is, the reader may encounter it in the absence of an appropriate framing context" (Stross, 1996: 159).

However, it is very important to stress that although any text writer provides at least a minimum of coherence generating elements by using linguistic cohesive markers such as connectors, anaphoric elements, semantic isotopies, etc., coherence is primarily produced during the textual reception process rather than during the production. No matter how atomic the text structure might seem at surface level, the receivers of web texts always try to interpret the relation between parcelled texts, no matter their order of appearance. But nobody can tell whether the receiver's interpretation of the coherence between them corresponds to what was intended by the writer, because coherence is beyond the web writer's control. An important observation made by Rüdiger Weingarten is that the number of linguistic cohesive markers is highly limited and instead screen page elements are used. Such elements are products of specific typographical and space metaphorical design, in which text and image units appear as autonomous satellites side by side in aggregate clusters (Weingarten, 1997: 215-37). This kind of disintegrated writing sometimes tends to produce topical structuring principles developed at random and to which receivers of digital communication become more and more accustomed. The receiver of hypertexts continually shifts the centre and determines the point of focus and his own centre of investigation and experience as pointed out by Landow (1992: 11). Hypertext systems thus impose specific constraints on both web writing and reading. So we may conclude that both at production and at reception levels, the coherence conditions of the World Wide Web seem to differ from those of traditional media.

What we can conclude from the above-mentioned description of hypertext is that the web writer cannot take a printed text, say a company profile, chop it into appropriate chunks of texts and put it on the Web. To accommodate to the reception conditions of the new electronic medium, the web writer has to adapt existing files to the constraints and potential of this medium. But which design constraints does the World Wide Web impose on the rhetorical structure and form of company websites? This is the main issue of the last part of this paper.

THE RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF THE WEBSITE

The rhetorical structure of the website implies both the study of information architecture at macro level as well as textual and discourse problems at micro level of the website. In the following I shall first introduce the prototypical structure of the company website and discuss some rhetorical macro structural features and secondly deal with micro level features related to hypertext, rhetorical figures, text organisation, etc.

The macro structure of the company website

The company website is generally introduced by a homepage, which presents individual and/or global elements of the site. The homepage can be seen not only as a new medium but as a new genre which has emerged from the World Wide Web. As most website users see the homepage as the first thing on a given site, it has a very important function. It aims at providing relevant information about the content of the web site, but its purpose is also to attract the reader's attention and make him stay on the site. Apart from the informational and attraction purposes, the homepage also fulfils a meta-communicative function, as it indicates where particular types of information may be found on the site. This is the navigational aspect of the website which plays a particularly important role in the use of digital communication. As already pointed out, the quantity of navigational information on the Web is therefore extremely high compared to traditional printed media.

With the homepage as the point of entry, the website is composed of hyper documents representing all kinds of company publications (company profile, annual report, press releases, FAQ, etc.). The macro-structure of the website is thus comparable to the newspaper medium in which content and highlights of the main topics treated in the different sections of the paper are generally introduced on the front page. So the homepage corresponds more or less to the front page of the newspaper or magazine. As the company website contains all kinds of company publications it covers documents taken from the fields of advertising and public relations (company profile, annual report, ads, etc.) and from news reporting (press releases). Thus, the website as such cannot be said to belong to one particular genre. This might also explain why the medium and genre pattern is not fully conventionalised for the company website. However, there seems to be a prototypical set of rhetorical features related to the homepage, which turns it into a genre in its own right.

The minimum of information given at the homepage is what is normally found on a person's card, viz. logo, name, address, and telephone number and quite often a picture or an illustration of the company. Most sites have table of contents i.e. a list of hyperlinks that the user can activate. Although the linear structure is not underlying the hypertext structure, one can trace a minimum of linearity in the frames on which most sites are based. The top frame usually shows the logo of the company, the left frame constitutes the table of hyperlinks, the right frame contains different facts and news, and the bottom frame often indicates the linear order of the hyper documents. Each frame usually reflects semantic linearity at one or several of the following levels:

1) Topical structure: general -> specific (*Company profile -> Contact*)

2) Relevance: most important information -> least important information

3) Order of navigation: *first, next, final*, etc.

The homepage gives the reader a first impression of the type and structure of information to be found on the site. From a semiotic point of view, the homepage gives an idea of the company and its values and priorities, without pro-

viding detailed information about the size, complexity, quality and age as in a company brochure.

Other interesting features of the homepage are the conventions of rhetorical strategies used at the metaphorical level of introduction. The following visual metaphors are among the most frequent on company homepages:

1) Table of contents (menu-homepages and path-based homepages)

2) Advertisement (splash-screens)

3) "Reception desk"

4) Front page (news-oriented pages)

From this list of prototypes we may conclude that the medium and genre conventions of the website are still fairly disparate and loose. There is a tendency to give priority to the news-oriented pages since they often tend to dominate among the most well-known sites, but with the present explosion of electronic commerce one might expect more "reception desk" pages, as they are the closest virtual representations of reality. So it seems that as far as the homepage is concerned an obvious competition between the encyclopaedic, the advertising, and the news specific media exists.

As already mentioned, the hyper documents to which the homepage refers, represent for the most part digital versions of traditional documents targeted at different groups: suppliers, clients, journalists, job applicants, etc. These documents function as autonomous publications which the reader may consult independently of each other so that the only point of unification of the website is the homepage, which the reader might not see, supplemented by visual elements (logo, lay-out and other typographical elements) repeated on each screen page of the documents.

Rhetorical micro structure features of the company website

Web designers provide us with rules and guidelines to follow for practical website creation. We know from them that it is extremely important to use 'scan–able' lay-out, i.e. bulleted lists, headings, sub-headings, icons, etc. We

also know that language use must be plain, concise, succinct, etc. and that information organisation must follow the principle of the inverted pyramid well known from the production of news articles, etc. But how do all these rules apply to the company website? And what is the rhetorical impact of the application of these rules? Is there any trace of them in the linguistic and/or visual structure of the company website compared to printed marketing material? In the following section I will try to answer these questions by comparing examples taken from company brochures and their corresponding websites.

Visual level

As pointed out earlier, heavy graphics and pictures are not recommended on websites due to the time required to download such elements. This of course explains why pictures and photos like the ones you often find in company brochures are not very frequent on the web profile. Although lots of graphical elements are present on websites, they are not of the same type as the ones you meet in company brochures, which generally contain prestigious pictures and photographs of company buildings, surroundings, employees, products, etc., but they also often present scenic photos, human beings or objects used as symbolic illustrations of the company and its activities. Let's take an example from Sara Lee Corporation:

Sara Lee

In the Sara Lee[14] 1999 annual report called: "Investing in what counts" of which the first part fulfils more or less the purposes of a company brochure targeted at shareholders and investors, you find a cover and a feature section containing stylistic black and white photos from the 20's in which small colour photos of Sara Lee products have been inserted. The photos represent humans set in both natural and urban surroundings. Most of them are dressed in clothes from the 20's and this style also applies to the décor. This kind of postmodern set-up is

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14. Sara Lee is a manufacturer and marketer of brand-name products: Hanes T-shirts, Sanex body care, Biotex, Sara Lee bakery, etc..

probably meant to express both quality and solidity. So we have here clear examples of visual metaphors used in order to attract and maintain the receivers' attention, but which, due to the polysemic nature of pictures containing both literal and symbolic messages, also require a certain effort of interpretation.[15] If we now compare these visual strategies to the Sara Lee website, we notice that the top frame of the homepage is held in red and dark colours, which are the colours of the Sara Lee logo. The homepage contains small pictures which are concrete representations of the Sara Lee product line, that is denotative representations of one of the key issues on the site. In other words there is an obvious tendency to eliminate metaphorical strategies at the visual level and use literal and concrete strategies instead. It is of course not correct to say that symbolic signs have no role to play in website communication. However, most visual signs used on the web are merely icons rather than photos. This explains why photos, when used, are relatively small in size, and it also identifies their overall function as navigational items (icons as click bottoms).

As pointed out by many web page designers, the distinction generally established between visual and verbal forms tends to disappear on the Web, where it is common to consider the screen page a picture in itself. That is, textual and typographical elements as well as images form a picture which means that what counts is not so much the individual text and picture fragments in isolation, but rather the set up (lay-out) of the screen page as such, since this is what the reader receives as a whole. So like pictures, the web text has a pictorial rather than a textual function. Let us now continue by examining some of the differences observed at the linguistic level.

As mentioned above, language use on the Web is not a widely discussed issue within marketing communication research. A few observations though have been made within this area. First at the textual level we have already mentioned the rather condensed form compared to the company brochure. Let us therefore

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15. See Barthes (1964) for specific semiotic levels and elements at stake in the process of decoding the meaning of pictures.

take a closer linguistic look at how this textual condensation takes place at the text organisational level. If we return to the Sara Lee brochure, the first topic which is introduced after the letter to shareholders is:

New Products

"Understand the need, imagine the product and deliver it into the hands of consumers. This is a process that demands vision and skill as well as the resources and technology to make it practical and profitable. Consumers craved desserts that were "individual, immediate and indulgent", we bet on *Sara Lee Bakery's* solution by investing more capital than in any product launch in a decade. The pay-off: *Sara Lee cheesecake Bites* – small, delicious confections, consumable straight from the freezer, which nearly doubled category sales for Sara Lee. ……… As fashion designers introduces the "bare leg" look, we debuted new hosiery products – *DKNY Skin and Hanes Silk Reflections Beyond Bare* – with finest, sheerest yarn……". ("Investing in What Counts", Annual Report 1999).

We notice here a very emotional and evaluative introduction to the Sara Lee product lines. The words used to describe the product lines are strong and sensual words (*craved desserts*, *indulgent*, *delicious*, *finest*, *sheerest*…). The products are put into an associative narration instead of just being listed according to line and sub-category. Finally we notice that the syntactic structure of the introductory sentence is based on extrapolation of the subject which is a typical construction for certain types of discourse used in genres such as speeches or advertising.[16] Let us now compare this to the web introduction of Sara Lee products:

"Sara Lee Corporation's leading brand names are household words around the globe. These preeminent brands are built on consumer needs and expectations, offering exceptional quality and value. Even in industries where branding has been previously weak or absent, Sara Lee Corporation builds and maintains leadership positions through innovation and responsiveness. Some of our brand names are decades old, and the majority are leaders in their respective categories.

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16. I refer to 'discourse type' as a macro act of speech determining the overall discourse function of a textual fragment or a whole text, whereas the term 'text type' expresses the concrete form of a text determined on the basis of its text internal components. For further detail see Virtannen, 1992.

Our branded products are grouped into five major lines of business. You can click on Sara Lee Foods, Coffee and Tea, Household and Body Care, Foodservice or Branded Apparel for specific information. We've also provided financial statistics for each line of business over the past five years" (http://www.saralee.com/home.html, accessed 10/09/00)

Compared to the printed version, we notice first at the text organisational level a far more factual than emotional style. The presentation is much more descriptive than in the extract above: X is Y, Y is Z, etc. Second we notice that the Sara Lee brands, after being categorised into product lines, are presented shortly in a listed form and then afterwards further described in detail one by one on the website.[17] This descriptive form in which the topics are brought into a hierarchical explorative rather than a cyclic structure is typical for the rigid hypertext structure in general and may be considered an inherent phenomenon in hypertext documents. Here is an example from another company which also illustrates how descriptive web writing tends to dominate the persuasive and argumentative forms known from advertising brochure material.

Oticon: [18]

The mission of the company is described both in the company brochure and on the web. A quick glance at the introduction of the mission statement reveals (just like the Sara Lee example) that argumentative elements such as persuasion, emotion and detail prevail in the company brochure, whereas the web presentation is rather neutral, rational and brief:

Mission

"Oticon's mission is to *help people with hearing loss live life to the full with the hearing they have*. This expression reflects an underlying set of human values: that we accept people as they are, and endeavour to help them accept themselves. Hearing loss is not something that should be hidden at any cost, nor should a hearing aid necessarily be invisible.

We cannot help people regain their normal hearing. No one can. But we do try to

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17. See: www.saralee.com/brands.

18. Oticon is a Danish world wide producer of technological hearing aid material.

help them live an active life with the hearing they have. In our opinion, good hearing aid treatment means that in daily life the user gets the maximum benefit from a hearing aid. In practise, that means not having to think about it.

Most people believe that the quality of a hearing aid can be measured in a hearing clinic. We do not believe this. Clinical measurements may provide guidance and valuable information, but the only way to determine the success of a hearing aid, is by listening to the user. And finding out how he or she copes on a daily basis with hearing aid" ("Oticon Human Values", 1998).

Company Mission

"Oticon's objective is to help people with hearing deficiencies live the life they want with the hearing they have. Hearing is fundamental to interaction between people and to the life of each individual.

Oticon's professional starting point has been audiological rather than technological. We do not develop technical features unless they reflect actual user needs. We concentrate on the "heart" of the hearing instrument: the actual signal processing and the amplification of sound.

But better hearing requires more than just a good hearing instrument. It also requires professionalism from the specialists who analyse the hearing deficiency, fit the hearing instrument and give advice about its correct use. Oticon focuses on the whole process because this is the only path to better hearing.

Psychoacoustic research and communication with the user form the basis for developing new products. These new products are created by means of advanced technology and an interaction between experts, including audiologists, engineers and those in the marketing field. It is this combination of research, high technology and creative problem-solving which can bring about the break-throughs necessary for a wider use of hearing instruments in society" (Oticon website, http://www.oticon.com/mission, accessed 12/09/00).

A closer look at the two textual fragments above shows, as already mentioned, far more traces of argumentative discourse in the brochure text than in the corresponding web text. A short argumentative analysis based on the toulmian

model of argumentation gives an idea of the value as well as the interrelations of the statements presented in the texts.[19]

Brochure text

1) Hearing loss should not be hidden away (D) --------→ (so) Oticons's mission is to help people with the hearing they have (C)

(because) We have to accept people as they are (W)

2) No one can (D1) -----------→ (so) We cannot help people regain their normal hearing (C1)

But we do try to help them live an active life with the hearing they have (R) (D2) --------→ (so non-C1)

3) Good hearing treatment means that the user gets benefits from hearing aid (D2) --------→ (so) the user does not have to think about it (C2)

4) Clinical measurements may provide guidance and valuable information (D) ------→ (so) Most people believe that the quality of hearing can be measured in a hearing clinic (C)

(but) We do not believe this (R1) -----------→ (so non-C)

(because) the only way to determine the success of a hearing aid is by listening to the user (W)

We have here a macro sequence of argumentative discourse indicating that Oticon's mission is to help people hearing by listening to the user. This macro sequence (or macro act of argumentation) is composed of 4 micro sequences of which the types of argument invoked are based on motivation (1, 4), classification (2) and reason (3). This seems to match the relatively high occurrence of evaluative elements. Justifying statements by means of motivation arguments, for instance, may be considered a sign of emotional evidence, whereas causal arguments do nothing more than stating a causal relation between two statements. At the structural level we notice both refutation by modifiers and

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19. Toumin's argumentative model is based on the following components: a claim (C) is supported by a datum (D) the interrelation between which is supported by a warrant (W) which can be further justified by a backing (B). The interrelation between claim and datum can be qualified by a rebuttal (R) which takes into account particular conditions of refutation. See Toulmin (1958).

justification put forward by explicit warrant components which in most argumentative discourses are left at the inference level. So this text is strongly emotional in its argumentative structure, which is further stressed by its many polyphonic traces. In many ways it resembles a dialogue between the writer and a non-defined opponent:

"We accept people as they are" ("others don't").

"Hearing loss is not something that should be hidden at any cost" ("somebody says it should")

"Most people believe…. We do not believe this" ("Others do"), etc.

So the writer, in building up a web of justification, appeals to the reader and tries to anticipate his potential refutation. This kind of anticipation is very common in the advertising genre; the author simply makes an effort to prevent counter argumentation by refuting his own arguments.

What we also notice in the brochure text above is the use of meta-communicative reference: "This expression" and "In practice, *that means*", whereby the writer puts himself in a expository and pedagogical position. He does not just present a number of facts. He presents himself as someone who has the authority of a teacher. So we also notice that the roles assumed by the speaker and reader in the discourse is that of an expert and a layman. Let us see now how all this relates to the web text extract:

Web text

1) Hearing is fundamental to interaction between people (D)-------→ (so) Oticon's objective is to help people with hearing deficiencies live the life they want with the hearing they have (C)

2) We do not develop technical features (D1)

   We concentrate on the "heart" of the hearing instruments (D2)-------→ (so) Oticon's professional starting point has been audiological rather than technological (C)

   But better hearing requires more than just a good hearing instrument (R) (D1)

   It requires professionalism (D2) --------→ (so) Oticon focuses on the whole process (non-C)

3) The combination of research, high technology and creative problem-solving can bring about the break-throughs (D)-----→ (so) Psychoacoustic research and communication with the user form the basis for developing new products (C)

In the sequences above we see no explicit warrants. It is up to the receiver to establish an inference from one statement to the other. Furthermore, the types of arguments put forward are of a causal rather than motivational nature. The opening sequence is a reason statement and this also goes for the third and forth sequences, while the second one is based on a sign argument. We see only one example of refutation, which is the rebuttal of example 2. So the web presentation of the company's mission is much more causal in its structure than the corresponding brochure presentation. Stating causal relations between events and properties is part of a simple strategy of observing how things are related and quite different from evaluating things and their epistemological connection. There are also a few examples of polyphonic elements such as "We do not develop technical features…." but they are much less frequent than in the brochure text. I therefore suggest that comparative studies of company brochures and company web profiles may show how the electronic medium influences the linguistic micro structure of commercial web texts. However, to a certain extent the high information status of the World Wide Web undermines the advertising and promoting function which is motivating traditional marketing material including the company brochure (cf. earlier). The global nature of the World Wide Web makes the same type of information accessible to several, and often quite different, target groups. Therefore it seems to generate new relevance rules concerning the type and form of information to be presented which is primarily factual and strictly to the point. Together with the structural implications of hypertext, this might explain why web editors and designers warn against the use of 'marketese' on the web.

CONCLUSION

I hope to have demonstrated that corporate communication on the web represents not only a great challenge to web technologists, designers and writers, but also to text linguistic researchers within the field of discourse analysis. It has also been my intention to discuss some of the rhetorical features which the World Wide Web has brought into the discourse of company presen-

tation. However, since corporate communication on the web is characterised by a host of rhetorical features such as the use of definite and indefinit articles in hypertext documents, the written/oral complex and the degree of formality in e-mails etc. [20] — linguistic, pragmatic and typographical features of commercial websites deserve more scholarly attention in future.

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20. See for instance Pemberton and Shurville (2000) for further approaches to computer mediated communication.

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