

Language and Identity in the English Version of Italian University Websites: Preliminary Research Results

Langue et identité dans la version anglaise des sites des universités italiennes: Résultats préliminaires d'une recherche

Limbă și identitate în versiunea engleză a siturilor universităților italiene: Rezultate preliminare ale unei cercetări

Laura FERRAROTTI

University of Rome 'La Sapienza'

Department of Communication and Social Research

E-mail: Laura.Ferrarottibattino@uniroma1.it

Abstract

This study presents the preliminary results of a corpus-based research concerning the promotional language of the English version of some Italian university websites. One of the assumptions of this work is that, as many scholars have pointed out, the role of institutional and educational websites today goes well beyond the strict objective of providing information. In fact, universities in particular have clearly adopted promotional strategies to attract students. The present analysis deals with the introductory sections of 14 university websites which vary in their headings, length and focus. These introductory sections are typically entitled “About us”, “The University of...”, “The History of the University of...”, “Our History”, or that may even present a “Welcome” message by the Rector. They intend to reach out, in particular, to foreign students, and as such contribute to the construction of the university’s identity. Data are being subdivided on the basis of region: North, Center, South of Italy and the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and are analyzed on the basis of a quantitative and qualitative approach. Through a comparison of different universities’ introductory sections, it was possible to detect noteworthy differences. For instance, while for some universities the information is rather concise as it mainly presents figures and descriptions, others present long historical accounts of the institution, and even mention well-known alumni characters who studied there. What emerges is a lack of uniformity that reveals the fact that these university websites are a genre in transition caught, so to say, between a traditional approach of providing information and a clearly promotional one in constructing their own identity.

Résumé

Cette étude présente les résultats préliminaires d'une recherche basée sur un corpus concernant la langue de promotion de la version anglaise de 14 sites web des 80 universités italiennes à peu près. L'une des hypothèses de ce travail est que, comme de nombreux chercheurs l'ont souligné, le rôle des sites web institutionnels et éducatifs d'aujourd'hui va bien au-delà de l'objectif de fournir exclusivement des informations. Il faut dire que les universités ont maintenant clairement adopté des stratégies de promotion pour attirer les étudiants. L'analyse présente porte sur l'introduction de 14 sites universitaires, qui varient dans leurs positions, dans leur longueur et dans leur orientation. Il faut mettre en évidence que l'objectif principal est de promouvoir l'institution auprès des étudiants étrangers potentiels. Ces sections d'introduction considérées ici, sont en général précédées de “About us” (“A propos de nous”), “The University of” (“L'Université de ...”), “The history of the University of...” (“L'histoire de l'Université de ...”), “Our History” (“Notre Histoire”), ou peuvent parfois même présenter un message de bienvenue de la part du Recteur. Les données sont subdivisées sur la base de la région: Nord, Centre, Sud de l'Italie et les îles de Sardaigne et de Sicile, et sont analysées sur la base d'une approche quantitative et qualitative. Grâce à une comparaison de quelques-unes des sections d'introduction des différentes universités, il était possible

de détecter des différences notables. Par exemple, alors que pour certaines universités le mode de l'information est plutôt concis car il présente principalement des chiffres et des descriptions de cours, d'autres présentent de longs exposés historiques de l'institution, et rappellent même des personnages connus qui ont étudié là-bas. Ce qui émerge est un manque d'uniformité qui révèle le fait que ces sites web des universités sont un genre en transition, bloqué, pour ainsi dire, entre une approche traditionnelle et une promotion bien dans la construction de leur propre identité.

Rezumat

Acest studiu prezintă rezultatele preliminare ale unei cercetări pe baza unui corpus ce privește limba de promovare a 14 pagini web de la aproape 80 de universități italiene. Una dintre ipotezele acestei cercetări este că, fapt evidențiat de numeroși cercetători, paginile web instituționale și educative din zilele noastre tind dincolo de obiectivul de a furniza în mod exclusiv informații. Trebuie spus că universitățile au adoptat acum în mod clar strategii de promovare pentru a atrage studenți. Analiza prezintă vizează secțiunile introductive din 14 situri universitare, care variază în poziția lor, în lungimea lor, în orientarea lor. Trebuie să punem în evidență faptul că obiectivul principal este cel de a promova instituția a-i asigura vizibilitatea în percepția studenților străini potențiali. Aceste secțiuni introductive sunt în general precedate de "About us" ("A propos de nous"), "The University of" ("L'Université de ..."), "The history of the University of..." ("L'histoire de l'Université de ...", "Our History" ("Notre Histoire"), sau pot, adesea, prezenta un mesaj de bun venit din partea rectorului. Datele sunt subdivizate în funcție de regiunie: Nord, Centru, Sudul Italiei și insule, din Sardinia și Sicilia, și sunt analizate cantitativ. Datorită comparării unora dintre secțiunile introductive proprii câtorva dintre universități, a fost posibil să detectăm diferențe notabile. De exemplu, în timp ce pentru anumite universități modul de a informa este mai degrabă concis, prezentând mai ales cifre și descrieri de cursuri, altele prezintă lungi incursiuni în istoria instituției și amintesc chiar de personaje celebre, care au studiat în aceste universități. Este evidentă o lipsă de uniformitate care trădează faptul că aceste pagini web ale universităților sunt un gen de tranziție, am putea spune: blocată, între o abordare tradițională și o promovare orientată spre o construcție a propriei identități.

Key words: *university websites - promotional language - English language*

Mots clés: *sites web universitaires, langage promotionnel, langue anglaise*

Cuvinte cheie: *site-uri web universitare, limbaj de promovare, limba engleză*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the preliminary results of a much broader research project which is still in progress involving 14 of about 80 Italian universities [1]. By quantitatively and qualitatively analyzing the websites' introductory sections presented in English, it was possible to outline some of the promotional strategies adopted by each institution in order to attract international students, or better yet, potential customers. The English version of these websites represents a necessary aspect of today's business websites, in fact, "official data say that 80% of internet communication is in English and the number of internet users in English has increased by 450 per cent in the last two years" (Salvi 2002: 27; cf. also Crystal 1997). This globalizing aspect of English has forced companies to adapt the presentation of their businesses accordingly and thus provide an English version of their website.

Like many present-day businesses and companies worldwide, universities have also resorted to the web and to the use of English to present their educational programs and premises. In fact, it was unthinkable for universities to refrain from using the internet and to rely exclusively on their preestablished reputation and paper brochures in order to provide information about their courses and degree programs. In fact, resorting to websites was an inevitable step even for a culturally independent institution like a university. The consequence has caused universities to adapt their promotional language, and consequently the construction of a given university identity,

to a kind of corporation logic that has to sell its own goods (Garzone and Ilie 2001; cf. on promotional language Wernick 1991).

Moreover, with reference to UK universities in particular, Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 116) observe that: "Universities as institutions are increasingly considered to be under threat from market forces". This "shackling of universities to economics" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 9) is one example of the transformation of discourse orders characterizing late modernity, involving changing economic relations between state, institution and student" (Fairclough 1993: 157). "A shift to a market forces-led model of higher education coincides with a more instrumental framework in universities, which 'come increasingly to operate (under government pressure) as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers'" (Fairclough 1995: 41, quoted in Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 116).

Consequently, education becomes a sort of industry, entailing a transformation in the relationship between students and universities. As Fairclough (1993) observes: "the relations between universities and their students have been transformed: where once the university was the authority selecting students, now students are clients choosing universities. Students have become consumers, shopping between courses and institutions, with the aim of becoming employable. Knowledge has therefore become a product" (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 117).

This big cultural transformation is detectable in the choice of using the website for promotional purposes with all the consequences that this decision entails, especially if one considers the complexity of a website as a text. In fact "the internet alters the traditional levels of interaction. A company which decides to open a website is aware that the selection of the information delivered is a fundamental task in establishing its identity and ensuring its presence in a segment of the market" (Salvi and Bamford 2007: 10). On the other hand, "the traditional commercial directories are based on a one-to-many model of communication. Together with this mass communication model, the net implies a many-to-one model of communication, in the sense that it is the surfer who selects – among all different sources – the one s/he is interested in" (Bamford and Salvi 2007: 10). Another issue for corporate websites is to be organized around "recognizable communicative patterns with a well-defined communicative purpose, which have to be understood by unpredictable users. (Bamford, Salvi, Bowker: 2007: 10)

Corpus and Methodology

The corpus of the present research is made up of the introductory English sections of 14 Italian university websites that have been selected according to geographical criteria, in such a way as to include most of the Italian territory: north, centre, south and the two major islands of Sicily and Sardinia. Thus, the following universities were considered:

1. Politecnico di Torino
2. Università degli Studi di Milano
3. Università di Bologna
4. Università di Perugia
5. Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza
6. Università dell'Aquila
7. Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II
8. Università del Salento
9. Università degli studi Mediterranei di Reggio Calabria
10. Università di Palermo
11. Università di Messina
12. Università di Catania
13. Università di Cagliari
14. Università di Sassari

In all these websites there is an English section which is either a translation of the main part or a text written especially for international students; however, access to the English version of the websites is not easy nor the same for all the universities considered. Usually, the English version appears on the upper right hand corner of the first webpage under the heading “English version” or via a small UK flag (cf. on the websites Boardman 2005). Searching for the English sections in the websites of the universities in Sicily and in Sardinia, for example, turns out to be slightly complicated; for the University of Catania in particular, the English section is intentionally devoted to international students and comes under the heading “Handbook for foreign visitors”, while the English section to the University of Messina can be found under the heading “International students” and “Relazioni internazionali”. As for the University of Sassari the English version seems to be devoted only to foreign students already enrolled in the university since it comes under the heading “Guide for Erasmus students” and “Incoming students”.

Also, the introductory sections vary a great deal for each university. Most institutions typically present an “About us” section; other universities, however, prefer to use a different heading for this introductory text, and choose to call it: “The University of...”. Another strategy is that of adding a “Welcome” section where the Rector of the university writes a message addressing new students by employing a direct style in the first person. A rather exploited introductory strategy is that of presenting the “History of the University”, which is frequently used especially by old and traditional institutions. The texts making up these sections were analyzed with the computer software *Word Smith Tools 4.0* (Scott 2044), in order to obtain word frequencies. The total number of words making up the corpus is of 12.642 lemmas. Considered separately each university has the following amount of words in decreasing order:

Università di Napoli Federico II	2.454
Università di Palermo	1.198
Università di Milano	1.178
Politecnico di Torino	1.118
Università dell'Aquila	1.006
Università di Perugia	963
Università di Salento	959
Università di Catania	848
Università di Cagliari	664
Università di Bologna	598
Università di Sassari	556
Università di Roma Sapienza	448
Università di Messina	407
Università di Reggio Calabria	245

Table 1. Number of words in the introductory sections of the universities' websites

Results

As already mentioned, the sections considered, “About us”, “The University of...”, “History of the University of ...” and “Welcome” are a sort of presentation of the university covering various aspects of the institution. This introductory section generally presents the history of the university; the ties between the university and the history of the city; its educational program, research and cooperation with other universities. In seven instances there is also a welcome message/letter to the students from the Rector. It is worth noticing that each university gives a different degree of emphasis to these topics. For instance, the Politecnico of Torino, the University of Salento and all the universities on the islands provide information on all the above mentioned topics in a fairly balanced way. On the other hand, the universities of Milano, Bologna,

Perugia, l'Aquila and Reggio Calabria focus mainly on the history of the university, placing the history of the region and of Italy at large in the background, with the apparent aim of reinforcing the university's historical identity, while the information concerning programs, research and cooperation is placed in the background or in another section of the website. An exception is represented by the University of Rome "Sapienza" as in the section "About us" there is just a short paragraph summarizing its history; also the educational program is presented in a somewhat simplified fashion. Let us consider the opening of the section of "La Sapienza":

Sapienza University of Rome was founded in 1303 by Pope Boniface VIII, it is the first University in Rome and the largest University in Europe: a city within a city, with over 700 years of history, 145,000 students (...)
 Sapienza has a wide academic offer which includes over 300 degree programmes and 250 one or two year professional courses. Sapienza has 116 libraries and 21 museums as well as efficient student services such as Ciao (Information, welcoming and counselling centre), SoRT (Counselling and tutorship services) and assistance for disabled students. Concerning with students' origin, over 30,000 of them come from all parts of Italy; over 7,000 people come from abroad. Incoming and outgoing Erasmus students are about 1,000 people per year. Sapienza is implementing ICT services for students, such as online enrolment, University e-mail address and wireless hotspots around Campus.
 (Emphasis added. Università di Roma, "La Sapienza", retrieved from website in May 2011).

The language tends to be rather flat and mainly informative, except for the superlative adjective "the largest university in Europe" and a general positive lexis. It is worth noting that the use of numbers, or what has been defined as *quantification discourse* (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), here fulfill an important function in that they are used to construct the specific identity of "Sapienza" and contribute to enhancing its value as a product. Interestingly, the history of Rome is not even mentioned, thus, it appears to be taken for granted. However, it may be argued that reference to Rome's history would have probably taken too much space pushing "La Sapienza" as a university somewhat in the background; on the contrary, "La Sapienza" here is treated as an independent element from Rome itself and viewed almost as an autonomous city, "a city within a city", asserting its separateness from it.

In sharp contrast with "La Sapienza", the University of Napoli "Federico II" presents a rather long narration of the history of the university from its origin, in 1224, to the present, while the overall present-day description emphasizes internationalization:

The University Federico II is striving to become a world university and, to this end, places the *highest* priority in *nurturing* relationships, both within Italy and internationally. Our students are relentlessly *encouraged* in the pursuit of *excellence*, at home and abroad. Our staff and students take part in a variety of exchange programmes, within Europe, the Americas

and Asia. While promoting cooperation with the more scientifically advanced research institutions of the *affluent* world, we are making every effort to help the less fortunate.

(Emphases added. Università di Napoli, “Federico II”; retrieved in May 2011)

The importance given to international relations is also evident in the careful construction of the university’s website. In fact, “Federico II”’s website is the only one among the ones considered that has every section translated into English. As opposed to the English version of “La Sapienza”’s website, “Federico II”’s emphasizes the good quality of its educational program. In the university presentation there is a larger number of adjectives and nouns than in “La Sapienza”, many of which are of Latin origin: *research, nurturing, encouraged, excellence, advanced* and *affluent*. Moreover, possessive pronoun ‘our’ is used here to reinforce the university’s identity and, at the same time, to involve the readers albeit in an indirect way. In fact, with the use of ‘our’ “the ambiguity of the target addressees is suggested in the shifts between positioning them as external, but potential members” (Benwell and Sokoe 2006: 118; see also, Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990) .

Politecnico Torino	A welcome letter from the Rector	At a glance	Historical background
Univ. di Milano	The University	History	A Heritage
Univ. di Bologna	Our history		
Univ. di Perugia	The founding of the university	The university today	
Univ. Roma Sapienza	About us		
Univ. de l'Aquila	A welcome note	Our history	
Univ. di Napoli Federico II	A message of welcome from the Rector	History	
Univ. del Salento	Rector’s message	UniSalento history	UniSalento World Wide
Uni. Reg. Calabria	History		
Università di Catania	Welcome of the Rector	History	
Università di Messina	Welcome	History	
Università di Palermo	Rector’s welcome	Historical profile	Research activities
Università di Cagliari	The Chancellor’s welcome	The university and its history	
Università di Sassari	A welcome letter from the Rector	A welcome letter from the Socrates-Erasmus Coordinator	Our University and international cooperation

Table 2. Headings of the introductory sections of each university website

As for the other universities under study, it is worthwhile to briefly consider other contents of their presentations. The Politechnic of Torino offers a rather balanced introduction by presenting its educational program, the letter from the Rector and a general historical background. The emphasis is on research and development, while the University of Milano underlines its ties with the city and mentions the various buildings that the city of Milano gave to the university, thus strengthening its geographical identity. The University of Bologna, on the other hand, highlights its history by mentioning important historical characters who have studied there and who contributed to its development: Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, Guido Guinizelli, Cino da Pistoria, just to name a few, taking a sort of ‘name dropping’ stance, whereby the mentioned scholar contributes to strengthen the historical roots and traditions of this academic institution. The University of Perugia offers a balanced picture by underlining the cultural and historical ties to the city. There is a description of the university today and of the international exchange programs.

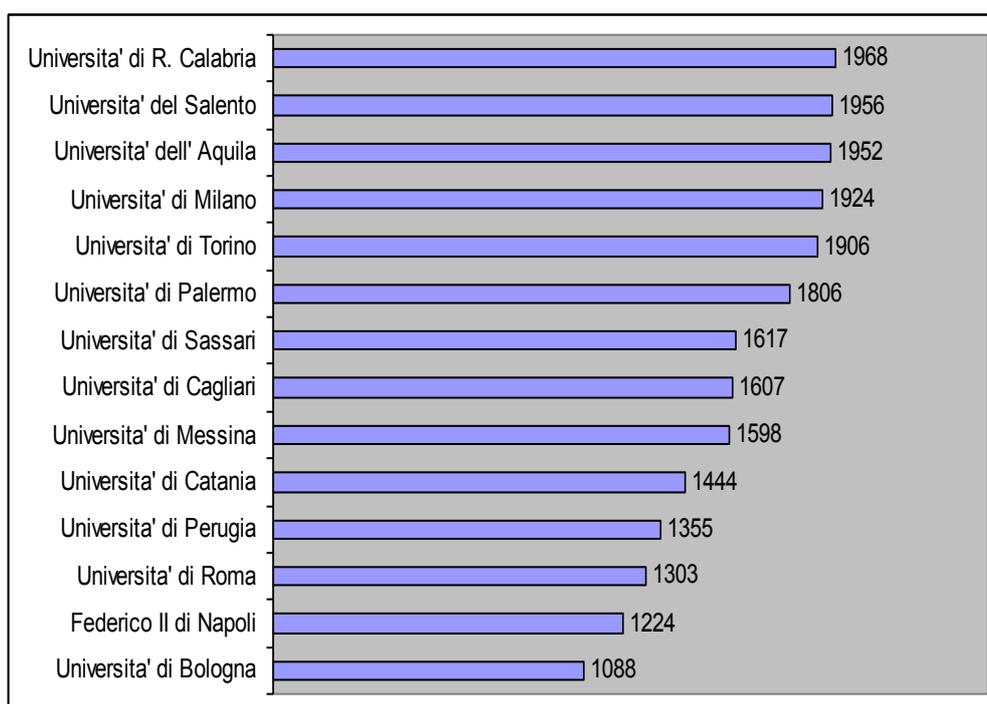


Table 3. The Founding Year of each university

In considering the year each university was founded, it is interesting to observe that the four oldest universities, namely the University of Bologna, University of Naples Federico II, University of Rome “Sapienza” and the University of Perugia, are also the ones that, except for “La Sapienza”, choose to rely more on an historical account in the introduction.

Conclusive remarks

In conclusion, it should be observed that the content of the introductory sections of these websites presents a close connection between the language of advertising and that of companies' websites, in particular when it comes to the extensive use of adjectives and of pronouns in line with the mainly promotional intent of the text. What strikes the reader, though, is the lack of an overall uniformity in the style and tenor. The more traditional websites, like “La Sapienzas”, tend to rely more on presupposition and on the university well-established reputation, while newer universities, like “The Politecnico di Torino”, present a more dynamic website and display the typical creative features of advertising language in their presentations, thus directly and overtly linking their identities to self-promotion. We can conclude by highlighting that the university

website is a genre in transition, struggling to find its own dimension in the midst of a culture oriented on self promotion on one extreme and a long-standing tradition on the other. A possible project for the future could be that of conceiving a suitable format capable of satisfying the promotional needs of these university websites, while protecting and enhancing the cultural and historical heritage of the very institution each website represents.

References

[1] This is a so-called ‘Prin’ project (Research Projects of National Interest) involving the Universities of Modena-Reggio Emilia, Bergamo, Florence, Rome ‘La Sapienza’ and Naples ‘L’Orientale’, entitled: “La costruzione dell’identità personale, professionale e aziendale” (Personal, professional and business identity construction), carried out in 2010-2012.

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