

Study of Information Generating Linguistic Features in Online University Prospectuses

Tabinda Amjad (Corresponding author)

Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Email: tabinda.30@gmail.com

Aleem Shakir

Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Email:almsha@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research studies the function of language of online university prospectuses through 1st dimension, i.e., involved versus informational production, of multidimensional analysis modeled by Biber (1988). A corpus based methodology is used. Corpus has been collected from about us, facilities, department, and vice chancellor message and library sections of Pakistan, UK and India. Multidimensional tagger (v 1.0) is used to tag and analyze the data. Scores and co-occurrences of linguistic features are calculated quantitatively and are interpreted qualitatively through 1st dimension of multidimensional analysis. The results show that online university prospectuses are informational in its nature. Cross culturally, India is highly informational and UK is less informational due to their highest negative and less negative score respectively. It is also observed that department section is highly informational and vice chancellor is less informational and more interactional in their nature. Highly informational texts are carefully written and provide bundles of information.

Keywords: Online university prospectuses, Multidimensional analysis, Corpus, Co-occurrence of linguistic features, Informational features, Involved features

1. Introduction

The role of universities has changed in 20th century and they have transformed into business entities so they have to promote themselves along with giving information. Peter (1997) observed that nature of university has changed into corporate. Policy experts, government officials and university administration talk about university's mission in terms of excellence. In order to provide cheap and correct information, now a day, it is a common trend among universities and educational institutions to develop up dated websites. 'The invasion of promotion has come hand in hand with the rapid development and spread of new communication technologies, which have brought an equally effective impetus for shaping and reshaping forms of discourse' (Tomášková, 2011).

University prospectus is a self promotional material and 'a genre of consumer advertising colonising professional and public service orders of discourse on a massive scale, generating many new hybrid partly promotional genres' (Fairclough, 1993, p.139). Universities issue prospectuses every year to inform the future students about the educational courses specifically and the institution generally (Roggendorf, 2008). Online Oxford dictionary (2000) defines prospectus as 'a brochure detailing or advertising the facilities or activities of a school, university or any educational institution'.

All the previous researchers studied prospectuses as promotional tool through CDA, visual analysis, genre analysis, content analysis and considered it as promotional genre. Linguists and educationists have studied prospectuses keeping in view different fields. Fairclough (1993) led the way of examining prospectus of British university through critical discourse analysis and established the fact that for the purpose of selling and promotion, changes have been made in writing texts. Maree (2004), Saichaie (2011) also discussed prospectuses under the field of CDA. Jamil (2011), Roggendorf (2008), Sevansson and Zia (2012) and Teo (2007) studied prospectuses as tool for promotion. Very few researches on online prospectuses cover the area of linguistics and particularly language.

2. Research Questions

The present study aims to answer the following major research questions:

- Where does the language of online university prospectuses fall on the Dimension 1 of multidimensional analysis by Biber?
- How does the online university prospectus's language differ across various cultures?
- How far online university prospectus's language differs in comparison with other registers on the Dimension 1 of multidimensional analysis by Biber?

3. Literature Review

Before the end of the 20th century, according to Jarvis (2001), the role of universities was to educate the students in various fields of life. 20th century brought change and universities are no more traditional or government

owned entities rather they are transformed into corporate universities. According to Connell and Galasinski (1998), universities were transformed into business like entity rather than the centers of institution of higher education. The university has become a commodity and its prospective students are considered as consumers (Wernick, 1991). Nicolescu (2009) considered students as, 'direct and immediate customers of higher education services' (p. 37). Bunzel (2007) and Goi (2013) studied universities' promotional strategies and concluded that they have rebranded and strategically publicized through it.

Different types of strategies are used in order to promote the product. Universities, acting as corporate entities, also use prospectuses as a promotional tool. Yang (2013) observes that academic 'info-promotion' genres have gained the attention of linguists. Linguists and educationists have studied prospectuses keeping in view different fields. Fairclough (1993) led the way of examining prospectus of British university through critical discourse analysis and established the fact that for the purpose of selling and promotion, changes have been made in writing texts. Saichaie (2011) also discussed prospectuses under the field of CDA. Peppiatt (2007), Roggendorf (2008) and Teo (2007) studied prospectuses as tool for promotion. Hui (2009) studied prospectuses from the perceptive of higher education and globalized marketing. Very few researches on online prospectuses cover the area of linguistics.

In today's world, students want to access information through digital technologies which are faster and are vital part of academic marketing mix. Porter (2001) pointed out that internet is influential set of tools which is used in every industry and in every strategy wisely and unwisely. Online advertising, also called as internet advertising, is used to deliver promotional marketing messages to consumers. Advertising through internet is rapid growing trend. Institutional websites are 'official websites of higher education institutions' (Saichaie 2011, p. 1). Official educational website is the easiest and quickest source of information and all the information available on university website which is also termed as *online prospectus* (emphasis added). Teo (2007) studied discursive practices in the prospectuses of Singaporean universities in order to bear the pressure of globalization and marketisation. Roggendorf (2008) studied prospectuses to find the tendencies of commodification, marketisation and corporatization.

The objective of this study is to establish online universities prospectus as informational and promotional register. Co-occurrence of linguistic features is the key to study register variation. Halliday (1988) observed that linguistic features occur together in the text to perform certain functions. They should not be studied individually. Multidimensional approach is best suitable for the study of register variation as it studies the co- occurrence of linguistic features in the text. This approach is quantitative and qualitative in its nature. The frequencies of linguistic features are calculated quantitatively but these frequencies are interpreted qualitatively in order to understand their functions in the texts.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study is corpus-based study for the establishment of online university prospectuses as informational or involved register. Quantitative and qualitative approaches are used to study online university prospectuses through Dimension 1, i.e., involved versus informational production, of multidimensional analysis proposed by Biber (1988).

4.2. Corpus building

For present study 267 of university web pages are selected. Corpus has been gathered by copying the online prospectus's sections into word files. Before saving the data in relevant files, refinement of data was very crucial step. As online prospectuses are considered as a promotional tool so, on the websites, images and graphics are used for holding the attention of students. Being the quantitative research, the present research required textual data only. So before saving the data from online prospectus to word file, all numerical values, bullets, pictures, graphics, headings, signatures, names, hyperlinks, email addresses etc. were deleted from the data. Each word file was converted into text file because multidimensional analysis tagger (MAT) accepted only 'txt' formats as input.

4.3. Data analysis

Multidimensional analysis tagger (MAT) v.1.0 was used to tag the data. 'The multidimensional analysis tagger (MAT) is a program for Windows that replicates Biber's (1988) for the multidimensional functional analysis of English texts, generally applied for studies on text type or genre variation' (Nini, 2013, p. 01). As present research has studied the online prospectuses through Dimension 1, i.e., involved vs. informational production, so few linguistic features are studied. This dimension is having two poles, i.e., positive and negative. The highest score marks the text as 'involved' and the lowest score declares the text as 'informational' text.

5. Results and discussions

5.1. Cross-cultural comparison of online university prospectuses

Biber (1988) claims that texts are different from one another due to the functions they perform. They can be informal or formal, non-narrative or narrative, informational or interactive in their nature. As Dimension 1 of multidimensional analysis focuses on informational or involved functions of text so Figure 1 shows the nature of

online university prospectuses of whole corpus and also compares the nature and function of online university prospectuses of selected countries. The negative score on the scale makes the text informational and positive score results into involved text. The given figure confirms that all the online university prospectuses are informational in their nature because they all carry negative score.

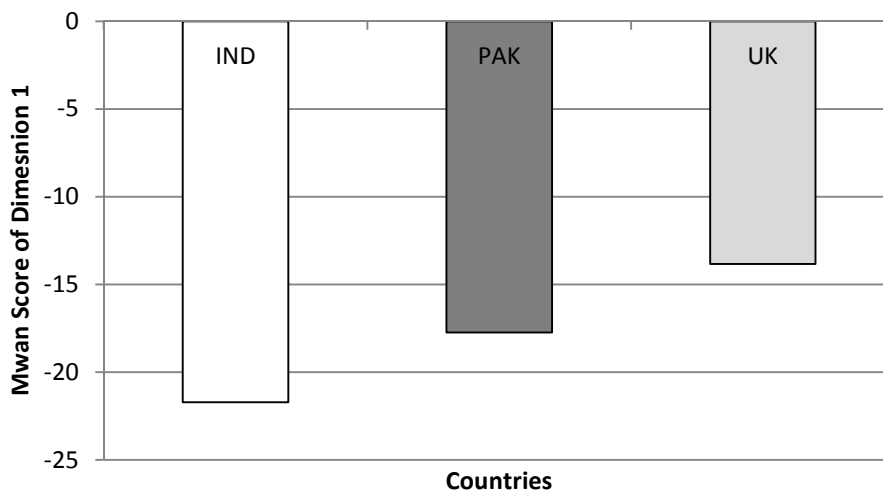


Figure 1. Comparison of online university prospectuses of different countries on Dimension 1

5.2. Cross-sectional comparison of online university prospectuses

Figure 2 compares different sections of online university prospectuses of each country on Dimension 1 of multidimensional analysis.

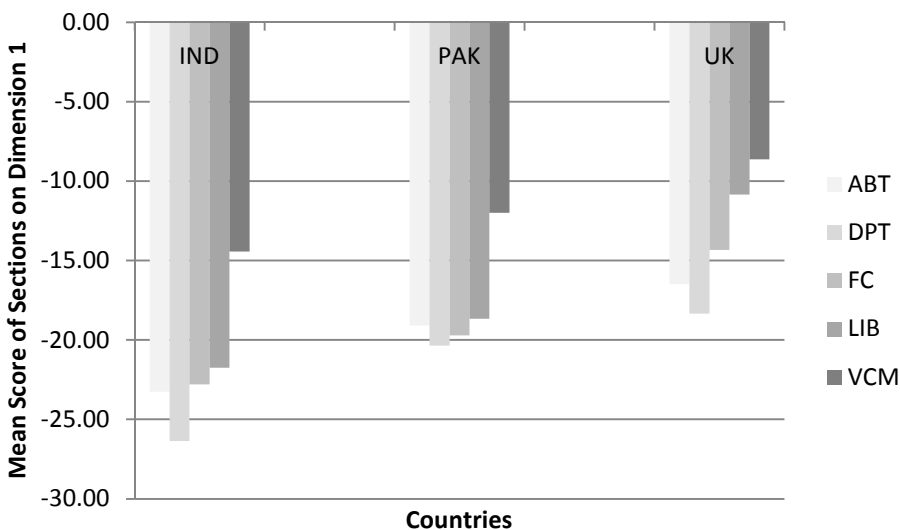


Figure 2. Comparison of sections of online university prospectuses of different countries

This figure reveals that India is more informational in comparison with other countries' data. This figure also demonstrates that among all sections, DPT section of all countries is having more negative score. It is clear from the figure that VCM section of all countries is having less negative score, making this section less informational and more interactional. ABT, FC and LIB sections are in between the two extremes of DPT and VCM. Consult Appendix 1 for the abbreviated terms. To sum up, it is evident that DPT is more informational and VCM is less informational on Dimension 1 of multidimensional analysis.

5.3. Interpretation of Dimension 1

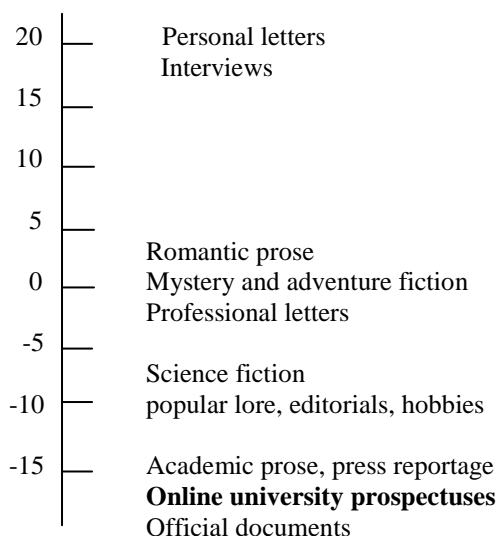
To understand this dimension, one must know the functions contributed by the co-occurring features. Dimension 1 consists of twenty seven linguistic features. Nouns, word length, prepositional phrases, type/token ratio and attributive adjectives are the reason of negative score. Private verbs, THAT deletion, contractions, 1st person pronoun etc.co-occur together and result in positive weight. Biber (1988) established the fact, '... when a text has several occurrences of features with negative weights it will likely have few of the features with positive weights, and vice versa...' (p.101). The negative and positive features mark out the two ends of scale and frame this dimension.

Negative weights are due to relatively few linguistic features and their explanation is straightforward. According to Biber, ‘high frequencies of all these features can be associated with a high informational focus and careful integration of information in a text’ (1988, p. 104). High frequency of nouns is the sign of higher density of information in the text as nouns are the carriers of referential meanings. Dense technical texts include academic monographs, broadsheets newspapers and legal documents. In this noun feature category, gerunds and nominalizations are not included. Prepositional phrases bear large amount of information in the text. Chafe (1982, 1985 and Danielewicz 1987) consider prepositions as way for combining information into an idea units and increasing the information enclosed within an idea unit. Biber (1986) uncovers that prepositions tend to occur repeatedly with nominalizations and passive in informational types of written text like professional letter, official documents, academic prose etc. The text is considered highly informational if average word length and type/token ratio is high and it can be seen in department section of different countries (See appendices). More specific and specialized meanings are conveyed through longer words. According to Zipf (1949), general meaning is conveyed by shorter words which are frequently used. For the elaboration of nominal information, attributive adjectives are used. Attributive adjectives are considered more concise than predicative adjectives. The above mentioned all five features integrate large bundles of precise and concise information into texts and also act as promotional and persuasive elements.

5.4. Comparison with Biber’s (1988) registers along Dimension 1

In his work of 1988, Biber selected 23 different registers from different walks of life. Among those registers, no register is related to researcher’s area of study which is online university prospectuses. It is hypothesized that the nature of online university prospectuses resembles with academic prose. It is clear that from Figure 4 that online university prospectuses’ results fall in between academic prose and official documents. Biber (1988) highlights the difference between academic prose and official documents. Academic prose is different ‘due to the freedom of personal expression and personal style’ (p.178). On the other hand ‘official documents are in some sense truly faceless and conform to much more rigid form’ (p. 178). To conclude it is proved that online university prospectuses provide exact and highly dense information about universities just like official documents.

Involved Score



Informational score

Figure 4. Mean Score of Dimension 1 of online university prospectuses (in bold) and Biber’s selected registers (Adapted from Biber 1988) - Dimension 1: Involved versus informational production

6. Conclusion

The ongoing study has revealed that language of online university prospectuses across various cultures is informational in its function. Online university prospectuses of three different cultures are studied through Dimension 1, i.e., involved vs. informational production of multidimensional approach developed by Biber (1988). India and Pakistan are more explicit and informative in their writing as they are non-native English speaking countries. By comparing the results of online university prospectuses with Biber’s work of 1988 and other promotional registers, it is also uncovered that language of online university prospectuses is like official documents and grant proposals. With an effect of co-occurrence of linguistic features (nouns, prepositions and adjectives), text is considered to be informational in its nature. This study will provide guidelines for the writing of online university prospectuses and web pages keeping in view its promotional and informational functions.

This research will ensure that writing of online university prospectuses and official documents are almost same in their nature and requires caution and vigilance while writing. The findings will also guide future writers of prospectus regarding the use of certain linguistic features in different sections of online university prospectuses. This research will help the writers of non-native English speaking countries like India and particularly Pakistan in writing the online university prospectuses. As these are colonised countries and here English used as second language so they can match their language with the native English speaking counties in order to attract the local and foreign students.

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Appendix 1. List of abbreviation

| | Abbreviation |
|-------------------------|--------------|
| India | IND |
| Pakistan | PAK |
| United Kingdom | UK |
| About Us | ABT |
| Facilities | FC |
| Department | DPT |
| Library | LIB |
| Vice Chancellor Message | VCM |

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