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A walk through the multimodal landscape of university websites

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A Walk through the Multimodal Landscape of University Websites

Abstract

The study provides an insight into the ways in which universities employ multimodal elements to advertise the academic experience, research-informed teaching and research results, thus attracting prospective students. Anchored in the methodology of genre analysis and multimodal discourse analysis related to Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics, the research focuses on the contribution of images – photographs and pictures – to the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings conveyed by the websites to prospective students. The corpus analysed includes the home pages and prospective students' web pages of British, North American and Czech university websites. The corpus design not only provides material for a case study of this web genre, but also enables a cross-cultural comparison to be made. The contrastive analysis revealed significant differences both in the form and the function of images between the British/American and the Czech sub-corpora suggesting the relevance of the social and cultural contexts for the realization and the establishment of genres. The development of web genres also seems to be significantly shaped by the progress of internet technologies and their growing affordances.

Key words

Genre analysis; multimodal discourse analysis; university website; institutional discourse; advertising education; language metafunctions

1. Introduction

The research aims pursued in the present study were inspired by two conspicuous trends which have characterized and shaped communication in a number of social contexts during the last two decades, namely the spread of promotional

features across genres and discourse domains, far beyond the borders of advertising proper, and the increasingly multimodal realization of many genres, with the verbal mode often ousted from its traditionally exclusive or dominant role.

The promotionalization of discourse mirrors the competitive nature of contemporary western society, which influences the behaviour of not only for-profit but also non-profit organizations, including educational institutions. As Bhatia comments, "[universities] are finding it extremely difficult to maintain their privileged status of excellence ... [and] are gradually coming closer to the concept of a marketplace, where each has to compete with everyone else for client's attention" (2005: 224). Even though a gradual shift in universities' rhetoric of presentation towards the greater use of promotional features was already noted by Fairclough in the early 1990s (Fairclough 1992), the trend has developed rapidly since then, accelerated by the new possibilities brought by the Internet and the ever-broadening array of related technologies.

New communication technologies also play a key role in the advancement of the multimodal character of discourse. Here, likewise, these technologies have not themselves created the potential for multimodality in communication, but they have enhanced this potential profoundly, accelerating and multiplying its application in an increasing number of contexts and thus contributing essentially to the transformation of the concept of literacy, its requirements and expectations (cf. Kress 2003). The multimodal representation of the world, involving an important share of non-verbal modes, presents the world as shown rather than told – and, on the screen in particular, even verbal texts become controlled by the demands of visual design (cf. Kress 2003; Ventola 2009). The rapidly developing internet technology once starting with presentations of relatively static digitalized material on the web (in the stage referred to as Web 1.0) has smoothly risen to the stage of Web 2.0 offering a growing number of possibilities of the employment of multimodal content and instigating interactivity (for more details see http://webtrends.about.com/od/web20/a/what-is-web-30.htm).

2. Generic features of university web presentations

The widespread use of the Internet has opened up an unparalleled space for communication, which has become densely populated with an array of more or less clear-cut forms, more or less established genres. Genre is a social, culture-bound entity reflecting both the historic development and the contemporary needs of society (cf. Martin 1997, Swales 2004, Bhatia 2004, Bax 2011), and as such it is always a part of a dynamic generic repertoire subject to continuous evolution (cf. Santini 2006, 2010) – all the more so within the revolutionary technology of the virtual space. The synchronic generic repertoire always covers a span between traditional and well-established genres on the one hand and novel genres on the other, between emerging genres gaining ground in certain discourse domains and submerging genres on the path to extinction. The span is obviously scalar in na-

ture, with a pool of genres exhibiting different degrees of establishment and current relevance.

University websites represent a novel genre of institutional discourse, still in an advanced stage of emergence – at least in certain cultures: not only genres but also the levels of their development and relevance are culture-specific, thus forming an uneven skyline on the horizon of intercultural comparison. Whereas in British and North American contexts university web presentations can be seen as close to well-established genres, in the Czech environment university websites still manifest certain features typical of emerging genres (for more detail see Tomášková 2011b, 2012).

As a discussion on whether the institutional website could be defined as an independent genre lies beyond the scope of this study, for the current purpose it is taken to be an independent genre, albeit a very specific one. University websites, like other institutional websites, can best be characterized as discourse colonies, using a term first defined by Hoey (1984, 2001; cf. Tárnyiková 2002, Tomášková 2011a, 2012, Dontcheva-Navratilova 2006, 2007, 2009), i.e. as discontinuous structures built from series of constituent texts of a variety of subgenres, unified by a common communicative purpose – presenting the institution and promoting it.

The complex composition of the website colony is further enriched with elements from genres other than institutional discourses, which penetrate the home page as well as the hierarchy of levels in the hypertext. The genre colony of university websites is a hybridized genre (cf. Bhatia 2004, Santini 2007) shaped by both key hybridization mechanisms – genre mixing, here revealed in the colonization by promotional discourse, and genre embedding, here seen in the occurrence of recontextualized tourist guide texts, essays, blogs, diaries or academic lectures. Finally, one of the most striking characteristics of this genre is its multimodal realization. The meanings expressed, the moves taken to pursue and achieve the unifying communicative goal, result from an interplay of verbal and non-verbal material.

3. Multimodality in communication

Multimodality in communication, i.e. the combination and integration of a variety of semiotic systems used to interact with others, to send and receive messages, is certainly not a development of modern times, but rather a historically experienced social given: "Indeed, we can define culture as a set of semiotic systems, a set of systems of meaning, all of which interrelate." (Halliday and Hasan 1985: 4).

As was suggested in the Introduction, digital technology has not itself created the meaning potential of different modes and their co-operation: "Semiotically, we never in fact make meaning with only the resources of one semiotic system: words conjure images, images are verbally mediated, writing is a visual form, algebra shares much of the syntax and semantics of natural language…" (Lemke

2002: 3), and thus any communication is a constant process of resemiotization, as "meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, from mode to mode" (Iedema 2003: 41). The technology has, however, substantially contributed to shifts in the structure of genres traditionally based on the dominance of the written (verbal) mode, moving towards essentially multimodal forms, changing the proportions in which the individual modes participate and the level of their integration in meaning-making.

Mode, defined in line with Kress, "is a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning" (Kress 2009: 54). Kress's approach does not lean only on the general distinction between visual, aural, and audio-visual resources, but prefers to focus on the characteristic features and mutual relations of their specific representatives: image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, or moving image, which are seen as individual modes. In accordance with the social semiotic theory of the Hallidayan school, the constitutive feature of a mode is seen in its capacity to represent the reality of the world, the social relations of participants in communication, and to represent both as a coherent message – in other words to fulfil the ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions (Kress 2009: 59; 2010).

One of the concepts used in Kress's accounts on multimodality and multimodal literacy (Kress 2003; Domingo, Jewitt & Kress 2014) which is particularly relevant to the present study is the notion of a site of appearance, meant simply as the place or space where modes appear. Sites of appearance have their own culture-dependent rules which shape the texts or images they contain. The spread of the Internet has replaced the (paper) page with the screen: "The screen is the currently dominant site of appearance of text, but screen is the site which is organised by the logic of image." (Kress 2003: 48). Even if presenting texts, the website on the screen is *designed* rather than *written*; facilitating visual variation and creativity, the screen inspires the exploitation of and experimentation with multimodal ensembles, i.e. "representations or communications that consist of more than one mode, brought together not randomly but with a view to collective and interrelated meaning" (http://multimodalityglossary.wordpress.com).

4. Aims, methodology and corpus

Related to broader research into the generic status and generic features of institutional websites, this paper aims to explore the multimodal landscape of university web presentations and to reveal whether, and if so how, the non-verbal modes contribute to the ideational, interpersonal and textual semantic components of the websites. Respecting the culture-specificity of genre, and also testing the novelty of web genres in the contemporary genre repertoire, the study includes a comparison of British, North American and Czech university websites including a cross-cultural view, and striving to detect similarities and distinctions in the extent to which texts are accompanied with non-verbal elements and in the ways

they convey meanings. The analysis is anchored in Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis and draws upon the theory of language metafunctions, referring to Halliday (1989), Lemke (2002), Iedema (1997) and others, relies on the classifications and categories of visual grammar introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), occasionally employing van Leeuwen's findings on the discourse representation of social actors (van Leeuwen 2008).

Within Systemic Functional Linguistics language is viewed as a socially and culturally grounded tool of communication, which is in principle multifunctional and fulfils simultaneously three metafunctions, or in other words, realizes three semantic components: the ideational component, as language reflects and represents reality; the interpersonal component, as language reflects but also shapes interpersonal, social relationships; and the textual component, as language also represents an organized, structured, and cohesive form that enables it to fluently realize ideational and interpersonal meanings.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) see all the modes of communication as participating in an interplay, shaped both by the intrinsic features of each of them and by society, creating the semiotic landscape. The non-verbal visual structures, they believe – substantiating their claims with arguments and a wide range of examples – not only illustrate or specify the verbal message, but also express (independently) their own message, fully realizing all three metafunctions by their own affordances. Non-verbal visual messages are not viewed as accidental but as following their own grammar, akin to the grammar of language. The authors' comprehensive treatise provides an invaluable resource of tools which can be used both for purposes of description and as a key to the interpretation of visual and multimodal data.

Visual images are presented as representational structures depicting the objects represented as part of a narrative or conceptual process. Narrative representations are characterized by a vector emanating from an actor to a goal or spanning between two interactors, or just running to an invisible, non-present goal. Conceptual representations are more static, showing images as belonging to taxonomies, as representing a set of features for analytical purposes, or as symbols of attributed qualities and suggestive associations. The design of images conveys meanings through the presence or absence of gaze and the angle and proximity of shot, positioning the viewer in a certain relation to the viewee. The reality is modelled as real, less real, or unreal through the choice and quality of colours and brightness of the image.

The methodology revealing and describing the grammar of the non-verbal mode was further developed by van Leeuwen (2008) to meet the needs of the critical approach in discourse analysis. Drawing upon the concept of social practices as "socially regulated ways of doing things" (van Leeuwen 2008: 6), he elaborates on the aspects of the representation of elements performed social practices include (van Leeuwen 2008: 7), e.g. participants, actions, performance modes, or times and locations. The representation of a social practice is then shaped by the representation of its participants, or social actors, as groups or individuals, as

impersonalised entities or personalised actors; social actors could also be significantly supressed or backgrounded, represented as identities, "in terms of what they are" (van Leeuwen 2008: 42), or functionalized, i.e. defined "in terms of what they do" (van Leeuwen 2008: 42). The ways of representation thus construct a picture of a social practice in line with the communicative goal(s).

As institutional websites have developed into large hypertextual complexes, rich in verbal and visual material and sprawling still further through links to other hypertext nets, the corpus for analysis is inevitably selective. To obtain a manageable amount of material relevant to the research aim, this study has focused on the pages which are most likely to be colonized by promotional features – the pages for prospective students and the path potential students are likely to follow. The corpus consists of the university home pages and prospective students' web pages of three universities – the University of Oxford, Harvard University and Charles University in Prague. The choice of these three universities was motivated by the effort to achieve relative compatibility of data: even though it is virtually impossible to avoid a considerable variability of factors present in any selection, the universities in the corpus are at least comparable in their long-term tradition and prestige as respected centres of research and education with an international reputation, and thus possible differences in the findings are less distorted by the discrepancies in the nature of the institutions and their social status and may provide a more distinct image of their cultural specificities.

Even if genres in general represent a dynamic field undergoing constant development (manifesting itself in converging, conventionalizing tendencies alternating with diverging, individualizing trends), web genres, carried by the fluid medium of the Internet, are particularly susceptible to change. It is therefore important to note that the corpus data used for the present analysis were retrieved between May and August 2013, with occasional illustrative references made to the current versions of 2014 and older versions of 2012.

5. The visual and its role in university web presentation

The university home pages and prospective students' websites include an array of non-verbal elements, namely photographs, pictures, diagrams and graphs, and moving pictures such as strips of alternating photographs and video recordings. The verbal material present on the sites does not limit itself to the written mode; downloadable audio recordings of lectures, speeches and interviews with administrators and students giving information about university life belong among the regular components of university websites. The following subsections focus on photographs and pictures, explore the ways in which these images express ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings, and suggest some of the threads which come together to weave the texture of multimodal ensembles.

5.1 Ideational meanings

The choice and combination of elements provided by university websites are entirely shaped by their dual communicative purpose: to present a multifaceted view of the institution and to promote it. Home pages and prospective students' websites construct a picture of the multifarious environment offered by universities, representing a broad range of activities and events, their settings or venues, and most importantly their participants.

The images are prevailingly photographs with students in the central and salient position, only very rarely featuring students as well as teachers. If teachers do appear in the shot, they are either backgrounded or positioned as interactors in a bidirectional action with a student/students; the setting of the action clearly shows it is not a testing situation, and the caption disambiguates it as advising (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Advising & Counseling, Harvard (2014)

Figure 2. Preparatory courses, Charles University (2014)

Teachers are often assumed rather than present, in photographs where the vector emanates unidirectionally from students towards an absent goal – and it is again the setting that helps the viewer make the image meaningful, albeit elliptical (Figure 2). Photographs presenting solely teachers appear only on home pages in relation to the section(s) dealing with current events and the universities' achievements, never on prospective students' sites.

As mentioned above, students are almost invariably the centre of attention: both academic and extracurricular life, everything a university offers, comes to the viewer through images of narrative structures in which students are agents – either oriented towards a "passive" goal (working on a computer, exercising with a ball, playing the flute etc. – Figure 3, vector a), or interacting (laughing, speaking to each other – Figure 3, vector b), or joining in different numbers in a shared activity, co-operating towards a common goal (Figure 3, vectors c, and Figure 4).
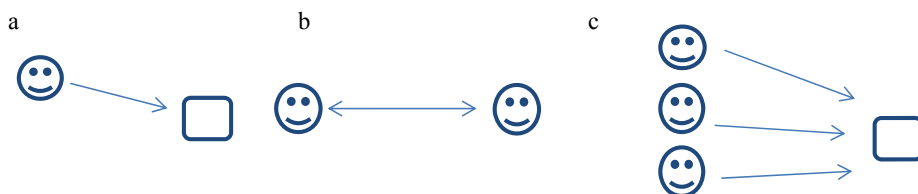

Figure 3. Vectors in narrative structures

Figure 4. Harvard College Admissions (2013)

Dynamic, narrative processes far outnumber static, conceptual structures – i.e. structures which lack an action or interaction characterized by a vector, but which instead represent an object or objects classified into sets, displaying or suggesting certain qualities. Conceptual images are typically used on university home pages, related to headlines and leads of news articles reporting on current events and achievements. They are symbolic in nature, suggesting certain qualities rather than displaying them, and evoking the atmosphere of a vibrant but harmonious environment: all the universities surveyed take care to balance their offer between sciences (Figure 5) and humanities (Figure 6), to present themselves as cherishing historic traditions and at the same time keeping pace with modern technologies. Conceptual images tend to show subjects of research and study as aesthetically appealing objects, attractive and worthy of respect (see Figure 7, with both objects taken from the same strip of alternating images). The text in Figure 7 can hardly be perceived as representing primarily a piece of writing

to be read: with the shot making most of the words illegible and cutting off the lines, sacrificing readability for the layout, this verbal text can only be enjoyed as a visual artefact, for the beauty of its shapes and its historic value.

Figure 5. Charles University (2014)

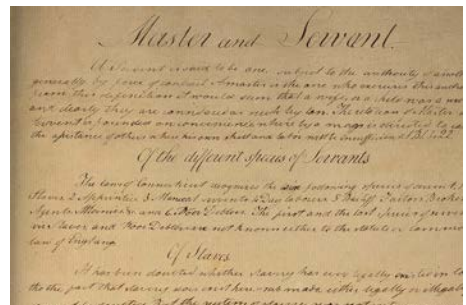**Figure 6.** Charles University home page (2014)

Figure 7. Harvard University home page (2013)

The setting is not always part of the image (cf. the manuscript in Figure 7); it is often minimalistic and slightly out of focus (Figures 2, 4–7), but within each of

the university websites the sum of the photographs provides a varied and colour-ful mosaic of settings: yards, classrooms, labs, common rooms, sports centres, parks etc. Whereas university venues form an inseparable part of students' life anywhere, and their range and quality at prestigious Western universities is quite comparable, the location of a university in a city, region, and country is an oppor-tunity for showing its uniqueness and distinctiveness. In scenic views of the cities the setting is not backgrounded; on the contrary, it is granted salience (through the perspective, camera angle and colours), and this causes the students to natu-rally blend into their environment (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Harvard University (2013)

Showing students in a variety of settings, the images are instrumental in con-structing students' identity. Students appear either in groups or as independent individualities, representing a wide range of social variables: they are of both genders and of different age, ethnic origin and social class, culture and religion; they show their love for an array of professional interests, sports and art forms. Even if the students are part of a group they are individualized – depicted as spe-cific people rather than types (cf. van Leeuwen 2008: 146). The diversity of the mixed community is unified by the active role the individuals play in the narrative processes, with their facial expressions implying interest and drive (Figure 9). The variety of student portraits mirrors the desired variability of the prospective students – the target audience of the websites and provides a rich choice of im-ages they can identify with. Along with the positive and energetic atmosphere the photographs display, the images contribute substantially to the promotional objectives of the website presentations.

   The ideational meanings carried by the images are bound up with the mean-ings brought by the verbal mode; the images visualize the qualities and values highlighted in the texts, and thus confirm what the texts describe: a vibrant, active atmosphere, a hands-on learning experience, a closely-knit academic community of diverse individualities, an international and multicultural university environ-ment (for an analysis of the verbal texts see Tomášková 2011b). The dominance of students in the images, and the exclusion of teachers, also corresponds with students' agentive role in the verbal mode of British and American university

websites. Both the university's offer and the university's requirements tend to be presented as attributed to students as agents or assumed agents (e.g. *you will, you can, you are expected to*; cf. Tomášková 2012); the university positions itself as a helper or enabler rather than a doer, and avoids referring to students as (passive) recipients of study content – an attitude which is also textualized in causative structures (e.g. *we help you broaden your knowledge*; cf. Tomášková 2011b). This phenomenon may be interpreted as an illustration of the tendency in the social constitution of the self in contemporary society towards a more autonomous, self-motivating self (a self-steering self), as discussed by Fairclough (1992).

Figure 9. Harvard University (2014)

5.2 Interpersonal meanings

Both the home pages and prospective students' websites are primarily designed for presenting the university outwards, to readers and viewers who may not know the university, or may not even have personal experience with the university environment as such. The general aim of the presentation is obviously thus to introduce the institution in a positive light and possibly meet the expectations which the public, academia and potential students might have. These expectations are certainly not identical; this is reflected in the distinct ways in which the home page and the prospective students' website are tailored, including distinct preferences in the design of visual images.

The promotional goal plays an essential role and causes the surveyed websites to be colonized by the discourse of advertising: not only on the lexico-grammatical level in texts, but also on the level of generic structure – where the staging complies with the promotional move structure as defined by Bhatia (2004; on the move structure of university websites see Tomášková 2011b). Advertising is a tenor-dominated discourse (Bhatia 2004); its successful realization is crucially dependent on its persuasive effect, and thus on establishing and maintaining contact with the audience – prospective students, collaborators, or sponsors.

Visual material, and the photographs and pictures which are the centre of attention here, substantially contributes to the expression of interpersonal meanings and to the process of intersubjective positioning between the university and the audience. As a colourful image attracts attention more readily than a verbal text

and is also easier and faster to survey, images dominate the home pages of all three universities in the corpus. They occupy a central position in the upper part of the page layout.

As has already been noted, the website structure and content is sensitive to the intended audience. Whereas the main home page, trying to address varied audiences including the public, visualizes the university's achievements and activities and presents its outreach into diverse communities and regions of the world (as represented by teachers and students, with both narrative and conceptual images), the prospective students' home page sticks to visualizing exclusively students in action, in their family or cultural environment, at university venues or in outreach spaces.

Pursuing the goal of presenting the university outwards, the choice of the "news" items as well as the choice of the images avoids featuring university-internal matters – with the exception of Charles University's announcement shown in Figure 11 – and focuses on news which reveals the impact of academia on the world around us. In the same vein, the images rarely stress distinctions of academic position (as in Figure 11 again); instead, they mostly portray teachers and students in casual professional situations (Figure 10), working or speaking about the results of their work.

<u>Truth in fiction</u>
<u>Lessons for future leaders in literature, says HBS professor</u>
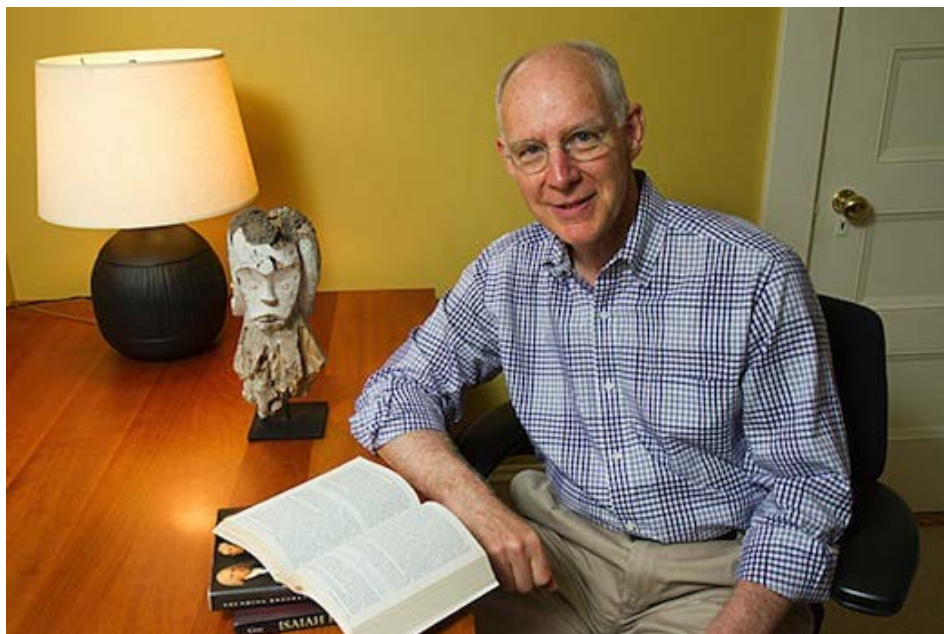<u>Read More…</u>

Figure 10. Harvard University home page (2013)

Nový rektor profesor Tomáš Zima složil inaugurační slib

Figure 11. Charles University home page (2014)

The variability in the content of images goes hand in hand with the variability of their rendering. Teachers, students or symbolic concepts are always in the central position, but can be pictured frontally (Figure 10), in semi-profile or profile (Figure 11), with level, low or high angle, with the gaze at the viewer (Figure 10), or without eye contact. If we take into consideration that the home page usually presents a whole set of photographs (Harvard and Charles University but not Oxford) – a couple of them in an alternating strip at the top, others introducing news articles in the middle – viewing the images constitutes a virtual walk through the world of research, study and field work. During this walk, the viewer can meet some of the representatives in person – in more or less close-up face-to-face shots, in an attention-demanding position, watching others lecturing from a low angle, in long-distance shots – conveying the atmosphere of a formal occasion, and observing groups at work from the detached position of an invited out-group.

The prospective students' websites clearly target a more specific audience for a more specific purpose – to encourage potential students to take an informed decision and apply for admission. Even though the variability of the content depicted is high, its rendering in photographs tends to be much more uniform. The absolute majority of non-verbal items portrays exclusively students and belong to narrative processes, with students either in the frontal position signalling closeness to and involvement with the viewer, or in a semi-profile position implying semi-detachment or a lower level of involvement with the audience. Profile shots are very rare, and shots from the rear do not appear at all. The viewer can thus feel aligned with the participants represented; they are part of a shared world (cf. Kress & Leeuwen 2006: 136). This feeling of closeness and alignment is further supported by a relatively close-up shot with a proximity ranging between far personal and

close social distance (cf. Kress and Leeuwen 2006: 124). Students are invariably foregrounded, they are in the centre of the picture, or slightly to the right or to the left of centre. This location defines the importance attributed to them at the university and during the process of education. Picturing the students in the eye-level position to the viewers constructs a relationship of equality and partnership.

The frontal eye-level position, however, is not necessarily connected with eye contact; in fact the gaze is absent in the majority of cases in the corpus (see Figures 1, 2, 4, 9 above). Whereas gaze demands attention and contact and is frequent in advertising and in certain other genres (cf. Lirola and Chovanec 2012), e.g. in newsreading, the absence of gaze could be interpreted as an offer for the viewer to observe the displayed participants impersonally, as if they did not know they were or are being watched. The absence of gaze creates the effect of a hidden camera or of a feature film, and lends the viewer the role of an observer who might be tempted to join in. Within the prospective students' website, such images may substantially contribute to the promotional effect through their implicit persuasive power. The presence of gaze is connected with portraits, close shots in personal distance – which are only seldom used as illustrative photos (as in Figure 12). Their association with advertising, and the imposition of explicit persuasion that they represent, may make them too blunt to be really effective. The image in Figure 12 is an isolated specimen within the corpus involving not only gaze as such but a gaze shaped by categorization, i.e. by a depiction that concentrates "on what makes a person into a certain social type" (van Leeuwen 2008: 143), here overshadowing the students' individuality with a gender stereotypical feature – a feminine inviting expression with a possibly sexualized undertone. Portraits with gaze are normally not categorized and are regularly used in contexts where they serve a dual purpose: they introduce a personality and at the same time invite the viewers to use the picture as a link to a text providing more information or to launch a video interview.

Figure 12. Charles University (2013)

Nine out of ten of the portrait photos in the opening section of Harvard student blogs (see Figure 13) look into the eyes of the viewer, demanding attention and

arousing interest in the personal blogs, for which the portraits play the role of a clickable gateway.

Recent Student Blog Updates

Figure 13. Harvard Admissions Website (2013)

The images of students – in portraits of individuals as well as in group photographs – are powerful means of personalization; even though the verbal texts employ a variety of strategies to personalize the often impersonal institutional discourse, at the same time they cannot avoid generalized and impersonalized language. The images represent a visualized and personalized counterpart to the generic expressions *students/the student* used in the text, providing models or samples viewers can identify with. Students are presented here as a mixed group, which is nevertheless unified by an active and positive attitude, reflected in their facial expressions and creating a positive atmosphere throughout the world of the university website, encouraging the viewers to construct a friendly relationship with the university environment. The diversity of the participants represented, which is a particular feature of the Harvard University website, invites diversity among applicants and thus helps target the desired audience. The diversity shown visually also corresponds with the diversity proclaimed verbally: both Oxford and (even more so) Harvard stress they are open to all talented and motivated students regardless of their families' social status, ethnic origin or cultural background, and exhibit a gender-balanced composition of the student population.

The harmonization of text and image encourage prospective students to self-target themselves, to recognize themselves as expected and welcomed. Minorities and other students from outside the mainstream may be especially susceptible to such implications (Figure 14), and the more sensitive a viewer is, the more disturbing the possible incongruence between the text and the image may feel – as for example in the case of a picture of two teenage girls accompanying a description of a life-long learning offer aimed predominantly at mature students (Figure

15). Such incongruences are rare and in the present corpus they were limited to its Czech component. Prospective students returning to the education system after a period spent in practice or combining their professional life with a new study experience occupy an important position among the groups targeted, at British and U.S. universities usually referred to specifically as *mature students* and represented visually by images of students from a variety of age groups.

Figure 14. Charles University, Special needs students (2014)

Figure 15. Charles University, Life-long learning site (2014)

5.3 Textual meanings

Within all three university websites, the visual images – photographs and pictures – play an important role in the layout of individual pages along the prospective students' path through the web. Their size, quantity, and location within the

layout changes depending on the position of the relevant page in the hypertext net. Non-verbal material tends to gain prominence on the opening pages, which function as gateways to specialized nets: university home pages and subsequent prospective students' home pages (termed *Study*, or *Admissions*, or *Prospective Students*), and gradually loses its salience when submerged deeper and deeper in the hypertext. Even though the variability in the website design is high, university websites share certain patterns of visual structuring, and certain patterns are unique within each of the university websites.

Due to the relative regularity in their location on the page and the sensitivity of their content to the expected audience, images can also work as orientators: they facilitate identification of the active page, i.e. the page the user has come to, and also of the choice of further pages by providing supportive specifications for the links, the clickable expressions opening them (Figure 16). Transforming generic links into specific links (e.g. in the case of the very general label *Afford* in Figure 16 the photo can actually be interpreted as specifying the link as leading to information on financial support for students from lower social classes and ethnic minorities who can then afford to study at Harvard), and working as clickable links in themselves, images can be seen as a part of the navigating mode (cf. Askehave and Nielsen 2004).
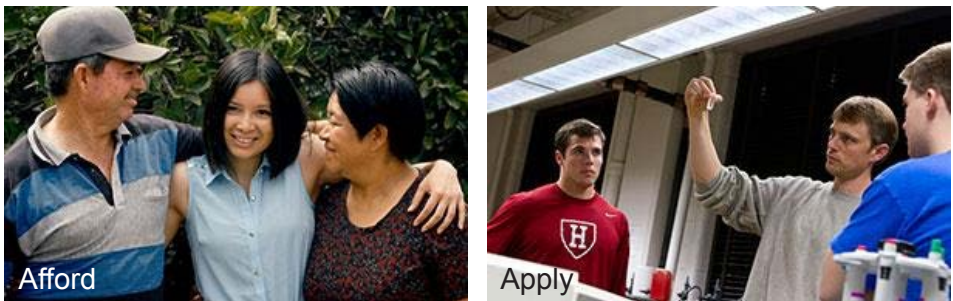

Figure 16. Harvard University Admissions (2014)

The parallel location of photographs or pictures (e.g. photos presented in the top part of a series of related pages as a kind of header) on pages along a specific path performs a cohesive function and supports the coherence of a whole set of pages co-creating individual sections and layers of an institutional web, and the web as a whole. Unlike Harvard and Charles University, the University of Oxford employs retro-style images instead of photos to unify the prospective students' site (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Oxford University Admissions (2013)

The string of symbolic conceptual images framing the prospective students' website then serves as a resource for illustrating the whole hierarchy of sites stemming from the gateway. The introductory set of images represents a complex visual theme split into parts which are used and developed in the subsequent sites, or are at least echoed in its retro style across this part of the hypertext. Besides their role of cohesive devices tying together pages addressed to prospective under-graduates, the pictures also perform the function of non-verbal discourse markers co-signalling a new sub-chapter or paragraph, adding an element of playfulness to the message (Figure 18).
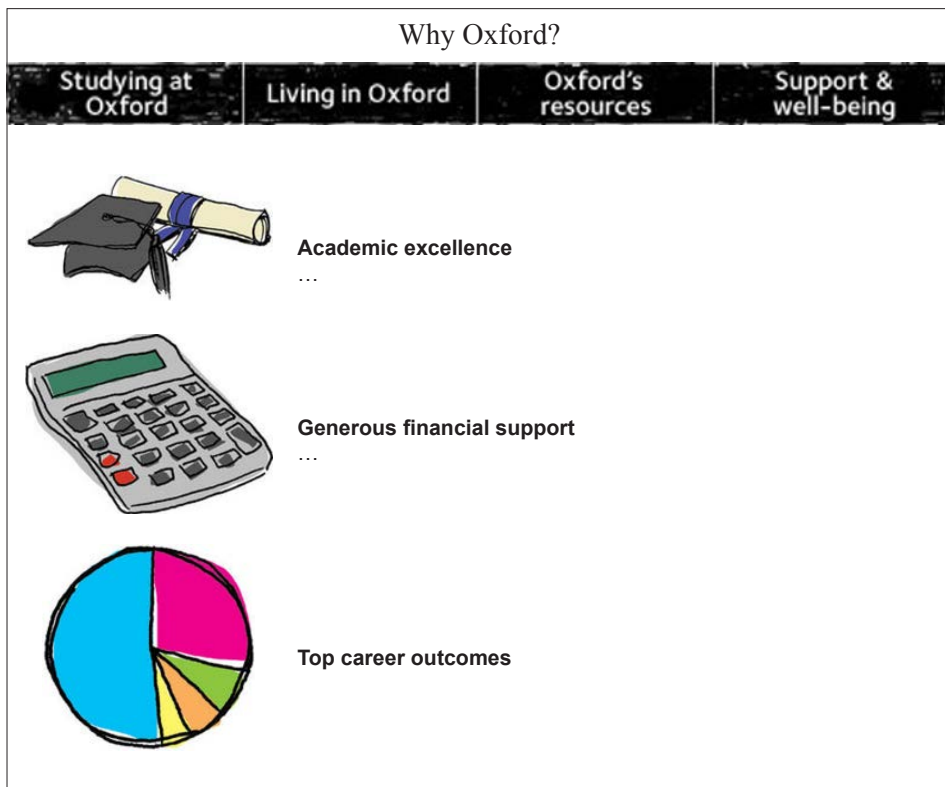

Figure 18. Oxford University (2013)

6. The research results in a comparative perspective

Even though all the three university websites employ non-verbal visual material, the extent to which it is used and the range of its forms and functions is individu-alized and may differ considerably. Within the corpus, essential distinctions are evident between the British and the American universities on the one hand, and the Czech university on the other.

The most conspicuous difference consists in the amount of the non-verbal material itself, with 211 non-verbal items in total on the Oxford and Harvard prospective students' websites, and 8 items included in the Charles University prospective students' site. This study is essentially qualitative, and the quantification is not directly relevant to its research aims, so the numbers here are presented purely to demonstrate the significant differences in the proportion of non-verbal material. Non-verbal items counted include all visual as well as audio-visual elements published across the home page and the prospective students' pages of the universities, surveyed in August 2013.

A closer inspection reveals deeper differences – not only in the diversity of the material used, but also in the composition of images and their relation to the verbal message. Whereas Oxford and Harvard employ photographs, pictures and also a number of videos, Charles University limits the choice to photographs. Unlike Harvard and Oxford, where the majority of images show and develop what the texts say (students doing research, sports; students in multicultural groups; students of different age groups), Charles University's images seem to play merely a decorative role (young people sitting in a classroom), which does not provide a visual support to the verbally presented characteristics and values. The Oxford and Harvard websites prefer the hidden camera view, constructing an objective image of university life and positioning the viewer as an independent observer; gaze is thus avoided unless the photo portrait is at the same time a clickable link. The Charles University website, on the other hand, presents a total of four photos featuring students, out of which two are characterized by gaze (see Figure 12).

The differences found can hardly be commented on without considering the context, namely the preceding and the subsequent composition of the websites, and also their situational and cultural relevance.

Institutional web presentations, as part of the fluid medium of the Internet, tend to be regularly updated and upgraded. Even though the frequency and the extent of such upgrades varies, they nevertheless reflect current trends in the development of the genre, in the needs and expectations it is supposed to meet. The home page news sections are obviously updated continuously, including the visual images co-creating the news; the prospective students' website as a whole is annually refurbished substantially in the case of Harvard University and partially at the University of Oxford, whereas the Charles University website (after remaining the same for a long time) was completely redesigned in 2013, since when it has been undergoing a process of gradual enhancement. Whilst the refurbishment of the Harvard and Oxford websites means a change or modification in the choice of non-verbal elements, the redesign of the Charles University site has brought a shift from a complete absence of photographs, pictures, or videos to their gradual implementation. The only visual image present before 2013 was the photo of the University foundation charter (Figure 19). The new version of the web started with eight photographs, and the number has increased in 2014, when the first video appeared. The newly added images are photographs avoiding gaze, some of which interact more specifically with the textual content (see e.g. Figure 14 above).

Figure 19. Charles University home page (2012)

The "multimodalization" of the Charles University website has been accompanied with a supply of new verbal texts, apparently written – in contrast to the previous version – freshly for the website presentation and the audience (cf. Tomášková 2011b). What was previously a too presentational and detached modality of the genre of the institutional website is thus changing, by degrees, into a fully-fledged example of the web genre, with an increasingly orchestrated ensemble of multimodal means.

The specificity of the target audience can also not be ignored in the comparison. The target audiences of the universities in the corpus are far from comparable, for two main reasons. First, in English-speaking countries English plays the role of the first language and at the same time of the lingua franca in communication with native speakers of other languages; for this reason, university websites do not need different language versions, and they address both local citizens and international applicants. Czech-language university websites, on the other hand, target almost exclusively Czech and Slovak native speakers, and institutions need to invest in separate English versions in order to address international students, expecting mainly participants in short-term European mobility programmes as evident from the menu of the English version of Charles University website (here the number of photographs is not significantly higher and the images focus neither on cultural diversity nor on attractive representations of the University environment). Second, the cultural diversity within the countries differs. In contrast with the multicultural society of the United Kingdom and the USA, Czech society is much more homogeneous, with its members sharing the same or a very similar experiential background. Whilst Czech or Slovak prospective students either know or can easily imagine the reality referred to in texts, for viewers from diverse (and possibly faraway) cultures the photographs and videos may represent an essential source of information about the possibly dissimilar environments: the atmosphere in and out of the lessons at the universities, lifestyle and locations.

The necessity to get the message across to vast and culturally varied audiences may thus inspire the influx of non-verbal elements and require a focus on their representational and interpersonal meaning rather than a superficially decorative function.

7. Concluding remarks

The analysis of the non-verbal elements of university websites has supported Kress and van Leeuwen's view of visual images as independent messages carrying their own ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings rather than relying fully on the verbal text as its illustration or specification (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Independent but related within the frame of the website layout, the visual image meanings come into a simple or complex interplay with the texts, and loosely or closely integrated, they co-create the multimodal discourse colony representing and promoting an institution. The fact that the amount of visual images (photographs, pictures, videos) decreases the more the viewer delves into the depth of the hypertext suggests that non-verbal modes are perceived and used as important attention-getting devices and effective promotional tools.

The considerable differences between the frequencies of occurrence and the roles played by non-verbal elements in the British and American websites on the one hand, and in the Czech website on the other hand, suggest that – generally speaking – the genre of institutional website presentations could still be seen as emerging, having reached different levels of evolution in different cultures. It is, of course, not only the value of multimodality that serves here as an indicator of the development of the genre: in the corpus surveyed, the developing use of non-verbal items corresponds with developmental changes in the content and form of the verbal texts (for an analysis of university website texts and their cross-cultural comparison see Tomášková 2011b).

The current findings contrasting the British/American and Czech university presentations suggest that the distinctions are related to the social and cultural contexts, and thus confirm that genres as such are culture-based and culture-specific, and that they originate, develop and decline in accordance with the resources, needs and expectations of the society in which they live. For many years in the Czech environment, the historically long-term substantial excess of demand over supply with regard to the numbers of students applying and admitted, steady financial support from the state and the perceived self-evidence of the impact of universities on society absolved educational institutions from the necessity to present and promote themselves to the general public on a daily basis. Whereas Fairclough commented on the promotionalization of British university discourse in the early 1990s (1992), in Czech society this phenomenon has only recently come to the fore. This is obviously a trend that provokes evaluative remarks of a different kind. Even though such evaluation is beyond the scope and the aims of this study, it may be noted that – besides the possibly

negative aspects of burdening universities with a self-presentational and promotional agenda –this development also makes universities focus their attention on the students and their needs, and on the importance of open communication and social responsibility.

  Discussing possible approaches to multimodal analysis and genre analysis in general, Bateman (2008) also stresses that analysts should not ignore the potential of the technology behind it, which may either enhance multimodal creativity or significantly limit it. The state of Internet technology, and the course it takes in the future, will inevitably inspire and shape the generic set on the web. The transformation of the Charles University website in 2013 was a step away from the static, non-interactive, notice-board-like Web 1.0 to the realm of the communicative, receiver-oriented Web 2.0, whilst the 2014 upgrade of Harvard University website may augur the gradual approach of the interrelated, dynamic virtual world expected in Web 3.0. Narrative images in photographs at the 2013 Harvard website have been largely replaced with audio-visual interviews with students (current as well as alumni), teachers and staff, many of which abandon the model of a rather static interview with a seated interviewee and instead present a documentary introducing the student's and/or university life, with the interviewee present as a voiceover. The trend thus seems to head for the construction of a multifarious multimodal image of the university world within institutional discourse with the verbal message co-created by a polyphony of voices.

Acknowledgements

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