

LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CORPORATE WEB SITES IN THE GLOBAL NET

(the difference between text and hypertext)

The Internet's recent emergence into our reality has modified, influenced and even changed different aspects of human life. Today the **world wide web** ("**www**" or simply the "**web**") comprises a large number of processes, communities, styles and genres as everything may be on-lined and transmitted via the global net. Literature, commerce, arts may be digitalized and introduced electronically to an auditorium of huge sizes and in a large spectrum of forms. Before the world wide web, the Internet only provided screens full of text (and usually only in one font and font size).

- The world wide web is a system of interlinked, hypertext documents that run over the Internet. With a web browser a user views web pages that may contain text, images and other multimedia, and navigates between them using hyperlinks. Tim Berners Lee, who created the web in around 1990, conceived it to be a **semantic web** where all its contents should be descriptively marked up

There are many varieties of web sites, each specializing in a particular type of content or use, and they may be arbitrarily classified in any number of ways. A few such classifications might include:

- **Affiliate:** There are usually three relationship tiers: Affiliate Agencies (e.g. Commission Junction), Advertisers (e.g. Ebay) and consumer (e.g. Yahoo).

- **Archive site:** used to preserve valuable electronic content threatened with extinction. Two examples are: Internet Archive, which since 1996 has preserved billions of old (and new) web pages; and Google group, which in early 2005 was archiving over 845,000,000 messages posted to Usenet news/discussion groups.

- **Corporate web site:** used to provide background information about a business, organization, or service for purchasing goods, such as Amazon com..

Today the Internet became new area for activity of state organizations and private companies. It is not simply idle interest. Well composed informative official corporate page in the Internet creates good impression for the company, gives favorable conditions for important negotiations, creates desirable impression about the company. Corporate sites help to find new partners, estimate area of its interests, immediately exchange commercial information. So the Internet is a huge wilderness area for advertisement activity. Nowadays a usual official corporate site in the Internet includes:

- 1 list of services, catalogue of goods, current price list;
- 2 contact information for potential clients: phones, fax, e-mail addresses;
- 3 post address, detail map for office location.

Every corporate website contains general information about the company: its history, mission, products, services, employees, information about participation in various specialized exhibitions, financial situation, etc. Consequently, own representation in the Internet is useful in every respect. For typical commercial web sites, the basic aspects are:

- *The content*, substance and informational value of the site, from its target public's point of view;
- *The usability* of the site, navigation scheme, intuitive interface, compatibility and reliability of dynamic functions;
- *The appearance*, what is communicated by the styles, aesthetics, and professional appearance of the pages;
- *The visibility* of the site on the Internet, particularly within the major search engines, effected by compatibility with those search engines and all of the above.

Among the many web-induced trends, the emergence of a new writing genre designed to accommodate the reading habits of web users is especially notable. People read differently on the web. One reason for this is that reading text on-screen is unpleasant. Given the low resolution of the computer screen and the clumsiness of the scrolling page, many readers scan onscreen and print pages for reading. Another reason is that web reading is not a stationary activity. Users roam from page to page collecting salient bits of information from a variety of sources. They need to be able quickly to ascertain the contents of a page, get the information they are seeking, and move on. Also, because corporate web pages may be accessed directly without preamble, they must be more independent than print pages. Too many corporate web pages end up as isolated fragments of information, divorced from the larger context of their parent web sites through the lack of essential links and the simpler failure to inform the reader properly of their contents. Concepts about structuring information today stem largely from the organization of printed books and periodicals and the library indexing and catalogue systems that developed around printed information. Every feature of any book, from the contents page to the index, has evolved over the centuries, and readers of early books faced some of the same organizational problems that users of hypermedia documents confront today.

World wide web pages differ from books and other documents in one crucial respect: hypertext links allow users to access a single web page with no preamble. For example, the headers and footers of web pages should be more informative and elaborate than those on printed pages. It would be absurd to

repeat the copyright information, author, and date of a book at the bottom of every printed page, but individual web pages often need to provide such information because a single web page may be the only part of a site that some users will see.

Web authors use hypertext links to create or supplement concepts: a list of related links can reinforce their content or even serve as the focus of their site. The problem posed by links has little to do with the web but is rooted in the concept of hypertext. Can the quick juxtaposition of two separate but conceptually related pieces of information encourage a better understanding of the overall message?

A collection of links cannot create or sustain an argument or deliver a collection of facts as efficiently or legibly as conventional linear prose. When there is no sustained narrative, readers are sent aimlessly wandering in their quest for information. Links also become a maintenance issue, because most web pages are ephemeral. Broken links shake the reader's confidence in the validity and timeliness of content.

From a text organizing 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, hypertext is said to have no centre. 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. It thus appears that 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. Therefore hypertext is often defined as non-sequential text.

However, this definition is not shared by all hypertext experts (Rivlin E., Rotafofo R., Shneiderman B. and some others). Many web technologists do not take into account the distinction between the navigational and the textual part of hypertext.

It is true that at the navigational or browsing level 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 jumps from one link to another. So from a production point of view the difference between hypertext and text is perhaps rather a question of textual organization structure than that of linear versus non-linear structure. 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 visualized semantic relations (*constellation, subordination, interdependency*) between text and picture fragments constituting

the nodes and the links of the system. Where the coherence of a printed text is generally activated by sequentially organized 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. contextualization of the single unit into the overall structure;
3. reading instructions related to an average reader.

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 higher than the key information itself. And when it comes to the formal aspect of contextualization of text units, most sites have a site map visualizing 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. 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, 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 texts, regardless of 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.

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. Like any other website, corporate one consists of text and images, the combination of which makes its final impression on the user of the site.

Thus summing up, we can claim, that the text of a corporate web page should correspond to certain linguistic principles. This should be done in order to make an impression on the user, as the text in the corporate web site is a kind of advertisement of the product represented by a certain company. It gives the reader the first impression of the type and structure of information placed on the site. From a semiotic point of view, the text gives an idea of the company, its values and priorities. In fact this text differs from a conventional one in usual documents.

It stands to reason that one of the most obvious characteristics of web texts is hypertext link, which enables the author to establish an ideal path road structure which the reader is free to follow or not throughout his/her reading.

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