The Genre of Annual Reports and the Promotional Discourse: a Case of Hybridization

Several studies have focused on genre analysis (Bhatia 1993, Swales 1990) and have identified processes of genre mixing and hybridization (Fairclough 1992, Bhatia, 2004). Within this framework some studies have specifically analysed the genre of annual reports (Rutherford 2005, Lester 2007, Garzone 2005, Nickerson, de Groot, 2005).

This paper aims at identifying the change in the genre of annual reports through the case of Wal-Mart, the American retailer, and demonstrate the extent of the hybridization process between financial discourse and promotional discourse.

After having identified the parameters which allow to define annual reports as a definite genre - a class of communicative events, commonly shared communicative purposes and a complex social setting, such as the use of annual reports to provide information to a variety of stakeholders (Swales, 1990, Rutherford, 2005), - my analysis will be carried out on a corpus of Wal-Mart annual reports from 1998 to 2008 taken from the Wal-Mart official website. A diachronic, qualitative research will be carried out, analysing, from a stylistic point of view, the genre of annual reports itself, and the type of change that such genre has experienced in favour of promotional discourse. As a matter of fact, this paper aims at showing the process of change in the style of Wal-Mart annual reports, and at identifying the main linguistic elements that have changed or turned out to be brand-new in the text of the reports.

My analysis aims at showing whether or not this process has grown steadily from the beginning of the period analysed to the end. The style and the form of the earlier annual reports are typical of the formal business communication to stakeholders (investors, shareholders, suppliers), as highlighted by the comparison with typical financial discourse (Gotti 2003, Bargiela-Chiappini 2007). Gradually, as the Corporate Social Responsibility issue has become generally relevant in the business environment, and consequently in Wal-Mart’s business strategy, the discourse has become more self-promoting and it has taken the form of a narrative text type, with a growing number of images conveying a message of cooperation and solidarity instead of comment to financial facts, which make annual reports more similar to advertising posters than to financial documents.

REFERENCES

- www.Walmart.com/investors