

Cultural Values and Digital Discourse

An Intercultural Communication Approach to the Transactional Discourse of Spanish and US Sales Websites

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the impact of the cultural dimension of *masculinity* (Hofstede 1991) on the linguistic variables that shape the transactional discourse of Spanish and US sales websites when transmitting information about their products. It is hypothesized that the different cultural orientations that both countries hold with respect to Hofstede's masculinity indexes may promote different professional discourse cultures. The corpus consists of 100 sales websites from the toy industry (50 from Spain and 50 from the USA). Both a qualitative and quantitative analysis is followed. The results obtained reveal significant differences in the way Spanish and US companies describe and promote their products on-line as a result of their different cultural values.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, cultural dimension, digital genre, transactional discourse*

Introduction

There have been many definitions of the concept of *culture* throughout the decades. The first definition of this term correlates with "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871: 21). Culture has also been defined as "a shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviour" (Gibson 2000: 7) or "the software of the mind or collective mental programming" (Hofstede 1991: 4). Despite this, it is commonly accepted that the theme of *shared values* is central to any definition of culture (Hofstede 1991; Singh and Pereira 2005; Guillén 2009). In other words, culture refers to the way a particular group of people is trained from a very early age to internalize the behaviour and attitudes of the group. The identification of these cultural values at the collective level of a society, regardless of the differences that might exist between one individual and another, could enable the language researcher to explain in cultural terms the general preference its members may show for certain patterns of non-linguistic and linguistic behaviour, namely "genre conventions, communication strategies and rhetorical patterns" (Guillén 2009: 37)

Researchers interested in the field of intercultural communication have designed different theoretical paradigms in order to identify the basic social problems that affect all societies equally –*cultural or value dimensions*– but for which members of different societies may have different answers –*cultural values or orientations*. Within the framework of the cultural dimensions theory, one of the most outstanding models that has been developed is the Dutch anthropologist and social psychologist Geert Hofstede's (1991) five-value dimension paradigm (*individualism vs. collectivism, high-power distance vs. short-power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, strong uncertainty avoidance vs. weak uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation*).

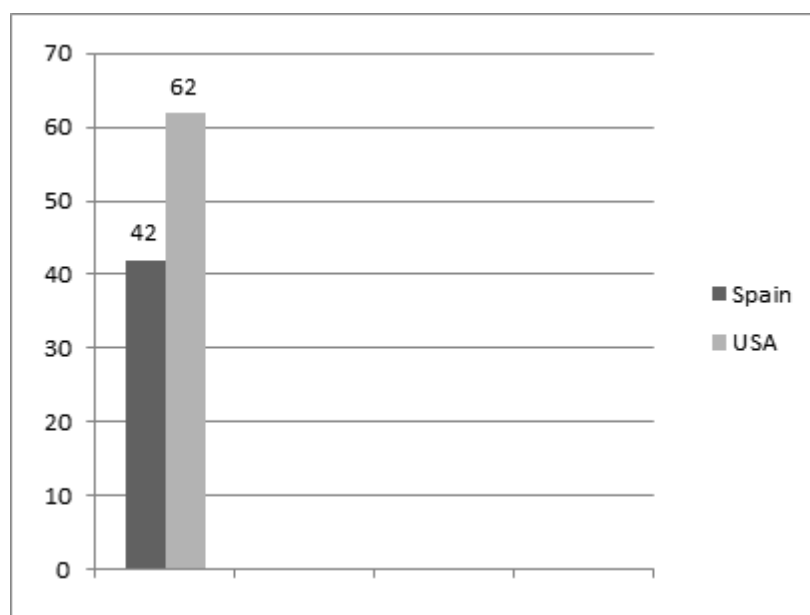
In this research paper we will draw our attention to the cultural dimension of *masculinity*, which is mainly related to the values that individuals from different societies have traditionally ascribed to gender roles

(Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars 1993; Walker, Walker & Schmitz 2003; Loukianenko 2008; Guillén 2009). Following Hofstede's own explanation, this value dimension may be explained as a *continuum* between two opposite extremes along which cultural groups may show divergent or similar preferred strategic orientations in relation to this dimension affecting all societies equally but for which national cultures may offer a different solution. These are often referred to as *masculine* and *feminine* cultural orientations.

Hofstede (1991: 81) states that in societies with a tendency to masculine cultural values assertiveness and competition are usually reinforced; however, in those societies holding less masculine cultural values a concern for relationships and for the living environment is highly valued. In this sense, a more feminine approach is preferred instead.

In his widely known work *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (1991), the aforementioned psychologist and anthropologist analysed a large data base of employees' values scores collected by the IBM between 1967 and 1973 covering more than 70 countries. He designed a scale to measure the index of masculine cultural values of people from different countries in the world. This scale ranges from a low to a high level of masculinity (0 corresponding to the less masculine society and 100 to the most masculine) and the overall results obtained in his research indicate that Spain scores 42 points on this cultural dimension while the USA scores 62 points. Hofstede's empirically verified scores seem to confirm that there are cultural differences between Spain and the USA as far as this cultural dimension is concerned. Consequently, the Spanish society may be considered a less masculine culture than the USA and oriented, therefore, to a fairly feminine cultural orientation. The USA, on the contrary, appears to hold fairly masculine cultural values. The graphic depicted below shows the different scores of Spain and the USA on the cultural dimension of masculinity:

Graph 1. *Spain and USA's scores on the masculinity cultural dimension (Hofstede 1991: 53)*



It is important to highlight that Hofstede's five-dimension model has attracted a lot of criticism lately because it has been considered old-fashioned (the research was carried out during the 60's and the 70's), it may promote cultural overgeneralization or it might lead to stereotyping (Loukianenko 2008).

Nevertheless, in the opinion of some scholars (Clark 1990; Simon 1999; Guillén 2009, to be inserted after review), Hofstede has provided the most comprehensive and influential study based on empirical quantitative data of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture at a collective level. In other words, Hofstede's quantitative results can be interpreted as 'cultural generalizations', which can be made while avoiding stereotypes by maintaining the idea of 'preponderance of belief' (Bennet 1998: 6). This concept underlies the fact that each different culture has a preference for some beliefs over others. This preference, stemming from quantitative research, is a 'cultural overgeneralization'. One can find people in a culture who hold beliefs similar to those of people in a different culture; however, they are 'deviant' since they do not represent the preponderance of people who hold beliefs closer to the main tendency of

the group (Bennet 1998: 6; Stewart et al. 1998: 158). In this same vein, it is also important to remark that Hofstede's study does not pay attention to the different ethnic groups that one can find within a culture.

It is necessary to say that the advances made in social anthropology and social psychology have also run parallel to the reaction against the alleged 'universalism' of certain linguistic theories formulated by Anglo-Saxon scholars (Grice's conversational maxims 1975; Brown and Levinson's linguistic politeness principle 1987) with the emergence in the 1970's of a new discipline called *intercultural pragmatics*. This focuses its attention on the descriptive and contrastive analysis of the culture-specific pragmalinguistic conventions ruling speech acts, social interaction, and discourse strategies across languages (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989; Wierzbicka 1991; Trosborg 1995; Márquez 1997; Díaz 2003; Hickey & Stewart 2005).

Even though the studies mentioned above tackle the analysis of the intercultural use of language, in our view they seem to lack an underlying theory that can explain why the principles of interaction that speakers from different societies hold may be motivated by the cultural values that solve many of the cultural dimensions shared by all human beings. Actually, since the 1990's many academics have been interested in this research question (Kaplan 1966; Clyne 1994; Scollon and Scollon 1995; Loukianenko 2008; Guillén 2009; to be inserted after review).

The study proposed in this paper brings new insights to the influence of culture on communication. In this sense, the impact of the cultural dimension of masculinity on the transactional discourse used by Spanish and US companies on their sales websites is analysed. More specifically, we aim at examining the influence of this value dimension on the linguistic variables by means of which information about their products is conveyed.

Up until now there have been numerous studies examining the influence of Geert Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions as well as those proposed by North American anthropologist and pioneer in the studies of intercultural communication Edward T. Hall (1976) on the discourse of different professional business genres, either written or oral: (a) negotiations and sales letters (Guillén 2006; 2009, to be inserted after review), (b) advertising (Pollay 1983; Mueller 1992; Lin 1993; Zhang & Gelb 1996; Albers-Miller & Gelb 1996; De Mooij 1998; Grande 2004), or (c) business websites (Marcus & Gould 2000; Simon 2001; Singh, Zhao & Hu 2003; Marcus & Baumgartner 2004; Singh & Baack 2004; Singh & Matsuo 2004; Singh & Boughton 2004; Würtz 2005; Cho & Cheon 2005; Ahmed et al. 2009; to be inserted after review).

In fact, it must be said that many of the aforementioned studies have been very useful in our research as a reference point to analyse how Spaniards' and North Americans' cultural orientations towards the 'masculinity' cultural dimension are shown in the linguistic variables that make up the transactional discourse of their sales websites in order to transmit information about their products. The results of their works suggest that the specific cultural values that individuals from different societies hold with respect to Hall's *context-dependence* cultural dimension (1976) as well as Hofstede's (1991) *power distance*, *individualism*, *masculinity*, *uncertainty avoidance* and *long-term orientation* are reflected in different linguistic contents and strategies as far as professional genres are concerned. Nevertheless, one noticeable difference in our research that previous studies have not been able to deal with is how cultural values influence on the communication styles of business websites from different cultures. Let us briefly define Hall's 'context-dependence' as well as Hofstede's cultural dimensions:

Hall's (1976) 'context-dependence' makes reference to the level of context that people from different cultures make use of to communicate. The result of his investigation was a scale with 'high-context' communication at one end and 'low-context communication' at the other. "A high context communication is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall 1998, 61). On the contrary, "a low-context communication is one in which the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall 1998, 61).

As for Hofstede's cultural dimensions, 'power distance' concerns the different solutions that cultures assign to the problem of human inequality; 'individualism' examines the relationship between the individual and the group; 'masculinity' draws its attention to the division of emotional rules between men

and women; ‘uncertainty avoidance’ is related to the way people in culture cope with the unpredictable and the ambiguous; and finally, ‘long-term orientation’ focuses on the choice of focus for people’s efforts.

Objective and Hypotheses

This paper aims at analysing the influence of the masculinity cultural dimension on the linguistic variables that are used by Spanish and US manufacturers to transmit information on their products in their toy selling websites. After examining the scores of Spain and the USA on the value dimension of ‘masculinity’ in relation to the empirical data obtained by Hofstede (1991), the main hypothesis of the present research is that the different cultural values held by both societies may foster different professional cultures of sales websites. This may result in Spanish and US toy manufacturers having different socio-cultural expectations in the linguistic variables included in their sites so as to describe and promote the toys they sell on-line.

Given the fact that Spain scores 42 points whilst the USA scores 62 points on the index of masculine cultural values proposed by Hofstede (1991), it might be expected that Spanish companies identify themselves as social entities holding more feminine cultural values than their US counterparts. In this sense, they could use linguistic variables that enhance feminine values like expressiveness and people-oriented issues when informing potential consumers about their products. By contrast, the 62 points scored by the USA could be reflected in the more masculine social entity that characterizes a US company and the linguistic variables used could be encouraging masculine cultural values when conveying this same information. These masculine values could be reflected in a more instrumental, objective and task-oriented communication style.

Methodology and Corpus

This was an empirically-based research in which a corpus of 100 sales websites (50 from Spain and 50 from the USA) belonging to export toy companies was selected. One of the main reasons for choosing the toy sector is due to the fact that this is one of the leading industrial fields in export activities nowadays. The toy selling websites were collected during the year 2013 making use of different Internet directories, such as www.aefj.es, www.uschamber.co.uk, or www.kompass.es. In addition, we found interesting to follow the corpus selection methodology proposed by the linguist Moreno in which she states (2008: 26) that “one thing that can be done in this direction is to make sure we are comparing what is comparable across cultures”. In this way, we tried to analyse whether the professional discourse culture of Spanish and US sales websites was comparable in terms of the variables used to describe and promote their products.

Regarding the process of analysis, on the one hand, a qualitative study was carried out in which we examined both corpora of sales websites, paying attention to the most frequent linguistic variables that are used by these companies to provide information on the toys they sell on-line.

On the other hand, a quantitative study was applied and we calculated the absolute and relative frequency of the main linguistic variables used in both corpora. However, in order to decide whether the differences in the frequency of each variable in Spanish and US websites were significant or highly significant from a statistical point of view, the Chi-square test of homogeneity in a contingency table was used with the aid of the computer program SPSS Statistics 18 Software. This is a type of non-parametric test used to compare frequencies in studies dealing with data measurable on nominal scales (Moreno 2008). The statistical comparison of the frequency of the different linguistic variables at a $p < .05$ level and a $p < .01$ level made it possible to determine the statistically significant differences in the variables analysed. If the result obtained was equal to or below $.05$ ($*p = .05$; $**p < .05$) the statistical difference was considered significant and if it was below $.01$ ($***p < .01$) this was interpreted as highly significant.

Results

After having carried out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the main linguistic variables by means of which information about the product is transmitted in the toy selling websites selected for the corpus, the results obtained are included in Table 1 below:

Table 1. *Frequency of linguistic variables in the toy selling websites analysed* (* $p=.05$; ** $p<.05$; *** $p<.01$)

Cultural dimension: <i>Masculinity</i>	Spanish websites		USA business websites		Chi Square Test
Product information: Main Linguistic variables	Absolute Frequency n/50	Relative Frequency %	Absolute Frequency n/50	Relative Frequency %	Spanish-USA business websites
Accurate and solid description of the product	7	14%	39	78%	41.224 (.000)***
Advantages of the products comparing them with others from competitive markets	1	2%	19	38%	20.250 (.000)***
Description of the quality and security of the product	45	90%	17	34%	32.277 (.000)***
Expressiveness and affectivity with the consumer	44	88%	1	2%	74.707 (.000)***
Offers and special discounts	2	4%	27	54%	30.355 (.000)***

The results clearly show highly statistical differences in the linguistic variables that make up the transactional discourse of Spanish and US websites as far as the information of the product is concerned.

In relation to the variable of ‘offers and special discounts’, the absolute and relative frequencies obtained by the US companies in their websites are higher (27/54%) than those reached by the Spanish ones (2/4%). Furthermore, these differences are highly significant if we have a look at the results that stem from the Chi-square test analysis ($\chi^2=30.355$, $p<.000$). For instance, in the US website that follows we can appreciate how the company provides information on the main offers and discounts of the products manufactured, e.g. “Dollhouse *Deal of the Week*...*Save 20% on our Adirondack Log Cabin Dollhouse. Save Now on the Adirondack Log Cabin Dollhouse Kit-A Real Good Toys Best Seller!*”:

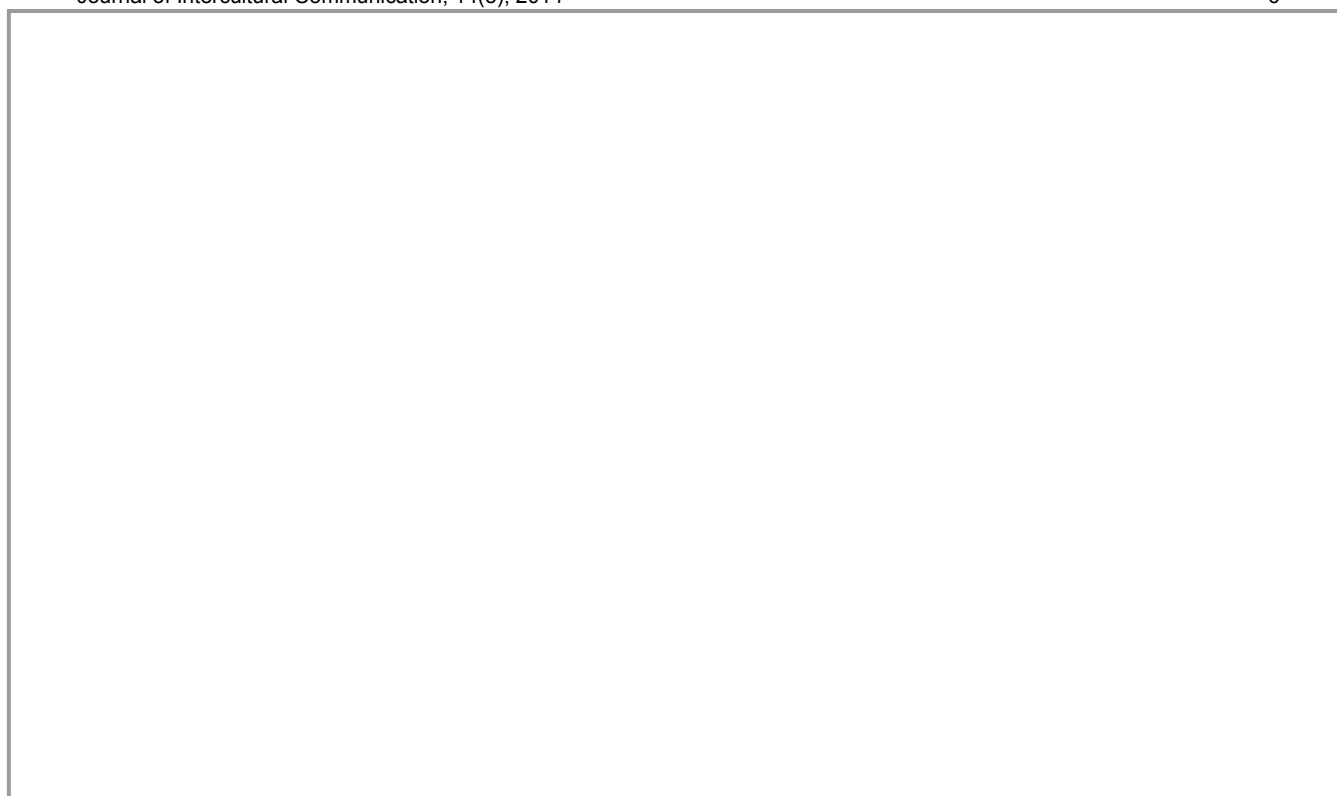


Figure 1. *US toy selling website. Information on discounts and special offers.* URL: <http://www.realgoodtoys.com>[1]

The aforementioned variable can also be observed in the following US website, e.g. “Take advantage of our special offers and new products releases by joining our wholesale plush mailing list”:

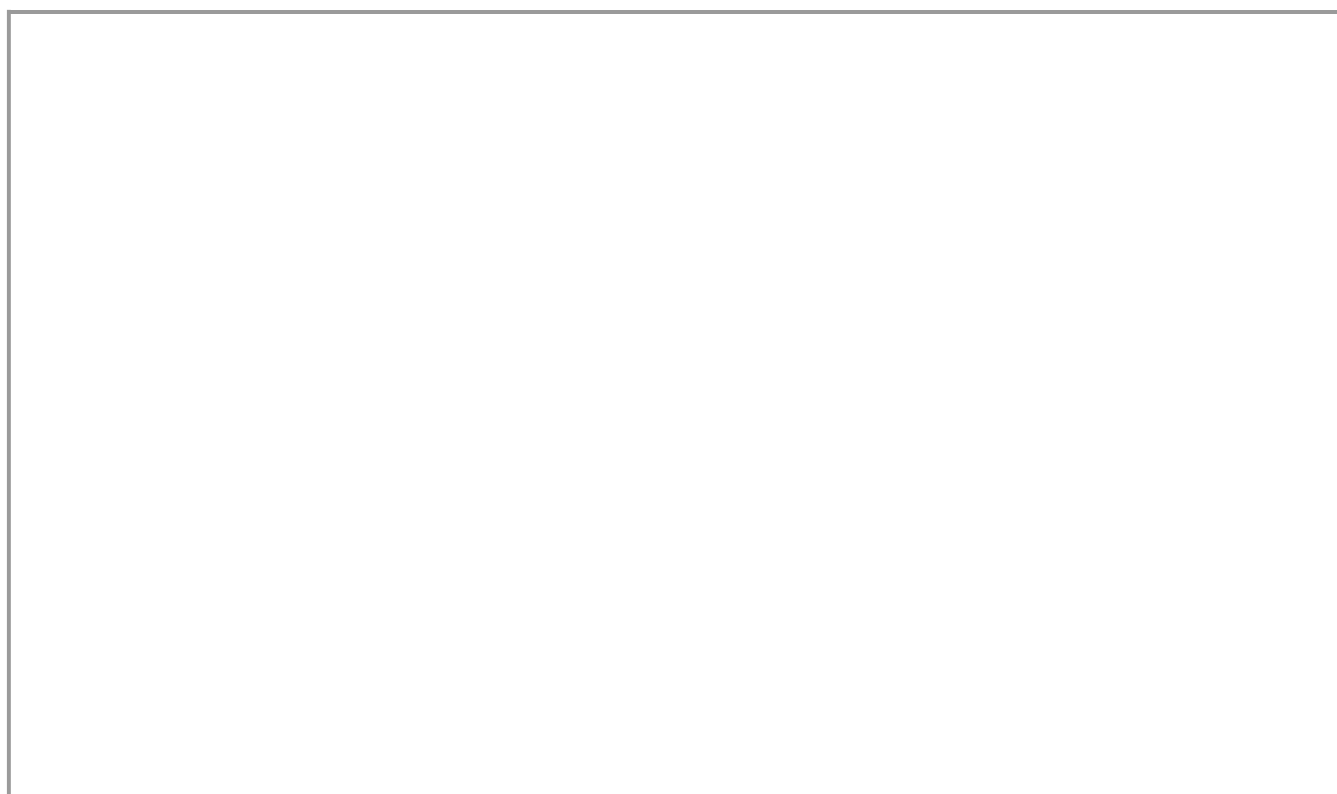


Figure 2. *US toy selling website. Information on discounts and special offers.* URL: <http://www.jojollc.com>

Another linguistic variable in which we can see highly significant statistical differences between Spanish and US sales websites is the one concerned with the description of ‘the main advantages of the products

comparing them with other similar products of competitive markets'. One more, the results obtained reveal that the US corpus obtains higher absolute and relative frequencies (19/38%) than those got by the Spanish one (1/2%). Moreover, the statistical difference regarding this variable is highly significant as the Chi-square test of homogeneity shows ($\chi^2=20.250$; $p<.000$). One clear example that can shed light to our results can be found in the following US website, e.g. "*There is no other case in the market that can hold various magnetic and colouring activities, and also serve as an activity board during travel...*":

<http://www.magnaplay.com>

Figure 3. *US toy selling website. Information on the main advantages of the products comparing them with other similar products of competitive markets.*

Similar information is also found in the linguistic variables observed in the US sales website that comes next, e.g. "*X[2] swing sets outshine the competition in safety and durability every time*" "*The X warranties are the best in the country*" "*Many swing set catalogue photographs are deceiving. X swing sets are HUGE!*":

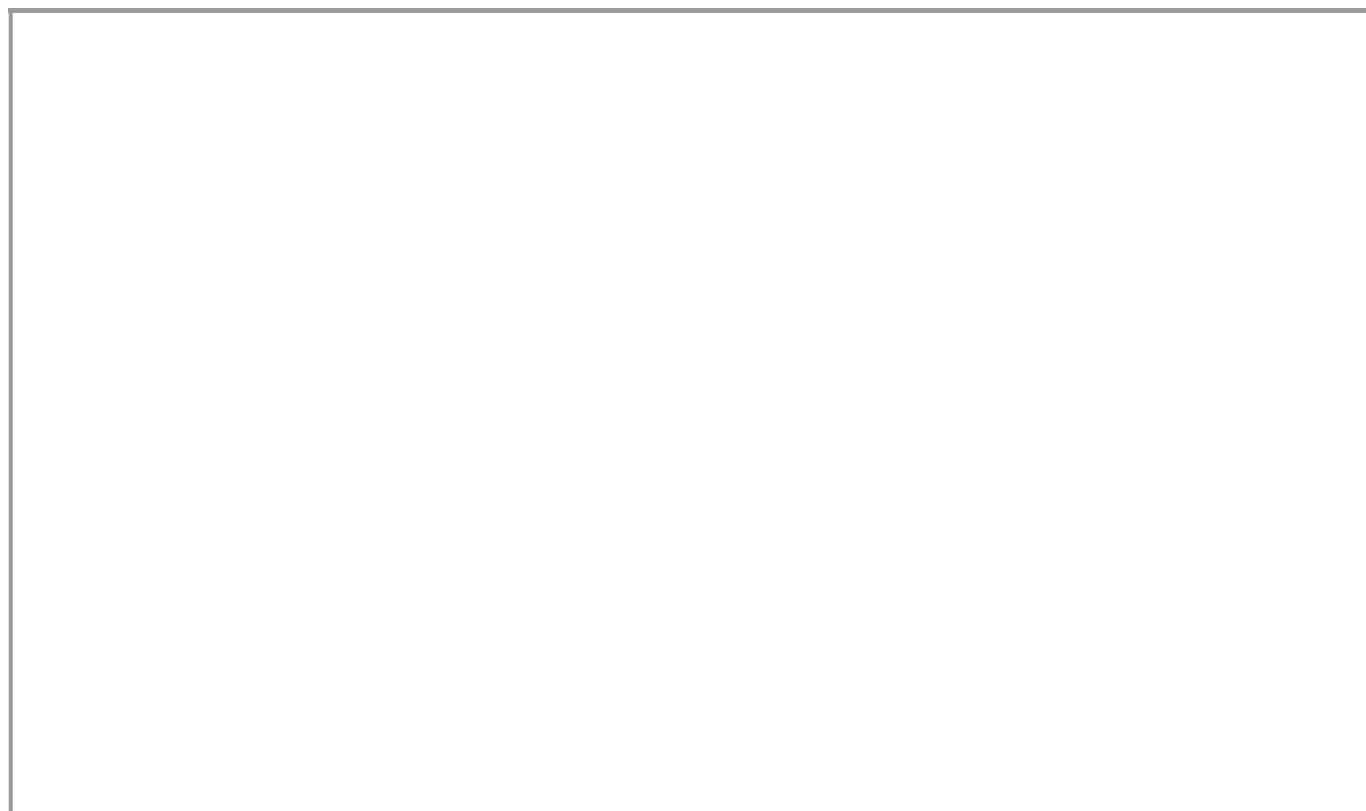


Figure 4. *US toy selling website. Information on the main advantages of the products comparing them with other similar products of competitive markets.* URL: <http://www.rainbowplay.com/index.php/about-rainbow/comparison-shop/>

In relation to the variable 'accurate and solid description of the main features associated with the product' we notice that US companies also obtain higher frequencies (39/78%) than the Spanish ones (7/14%). As in the previous variables analysed, the statistical differences have also been found highly significant ($\chi^2=41.224$; $p<.000$). The inclusion of this linguistic variable can be appreciated in the following US sales website from the corpus selected, e.g. "*Build on a proud heritage of quality craftsmanship, innovative function, and timeless design, the reinvented Iron Mountain Forge line of site amenities establishes a uniqueness of place to gather, relax and play*", "*NU-edge incorporates modern and sophisticated design fused with a rugged, adventurous look that speaks directly to kids. From giant boulders to metal trusses to stacked timber walls, the NU-edge play events are sure to invoke a multitude of imaginative scenarios for every stage of development*":

Figure 5. US toy selling website. Accurate and solid description of the product. URL: <http://www.littletikesccommercial.com/catalogs.aspx>

As our results indicate, Spanish toy selling websites obtain higher absolute and relative frequencies in variables such as linguistic expressiveness with a content based on solidarity and affection with the consumer (44/88%) as well as a description focused on the quality and security of the type of product they sell (45/90%). US business websites, on the contrary, obtain a much lower frequency in the use of these variables. As a result, highly significant statistical differences have also been observed ($\chi^2=74.707$; $p<.000$ regarding expressiveness and $\chi^2=32.277$; $p<.000$ in relation to the quality and security of the product). Two relevant examples from the Spanish sales websites illustrate the presence of these linguistic variables.

In the Spanish website shown below it is worth noting the use of an expressive language as well as linguistic expressions that connote solidarity and cooperation with customers when describing one of the main products manufactured by the company, e.g. “No hay nada más preciado para los padres que la *seguridad y el bienestar de su hijo*. Como padres y fabricantes del juguete tenemos muy claro a quiénes va dirigido nuestro producto, y qué premisas debe este cumplir: proporcionar diversión y fomentar el desarrollo de las habilidades de los niños. Todo ello sin dejar de pensar en todo momento *en su seguridad*. En X sometemos a todos nuestros productos a *los más estrictos controles de seguridad*, con el fin de *garantizar que los más pequeños estarán protegidos* en todo momento, *igual que entre los brazos de sus padres*. En X unimos la ilusión y el buen hacer de nuestro equipo humano...con el fin de ofrecer la gama más completa de *productos de calidad al público más exigente: los niños*”.

English version: “There is nothing more precious for a parent than *the safety and well being of a child*. As toy manufacturers and parents ourselves, we know perfectly well whom our products are addressed to and what standards they should comply with. Providing fun and entertainment, promoting child development and the achievement of new skills, and above all, *safeguarding the security of the ones we care for most*. At X have encouraged each one of us to ensure that all our products conform to *the strictest safety and quality tests*, thereby guaranteeing that *children who see our products are fully protected against hazards* at all times, as if they *were safely protected in their parents’ arms*. We combine the skills and craftsmanship of our human resources team with the use of state-of-the-art technology. At our company strives hard to achieve that special aim that is uppermost in our minds: *satisfying and protecting our most important customers –none others but children themselves*:

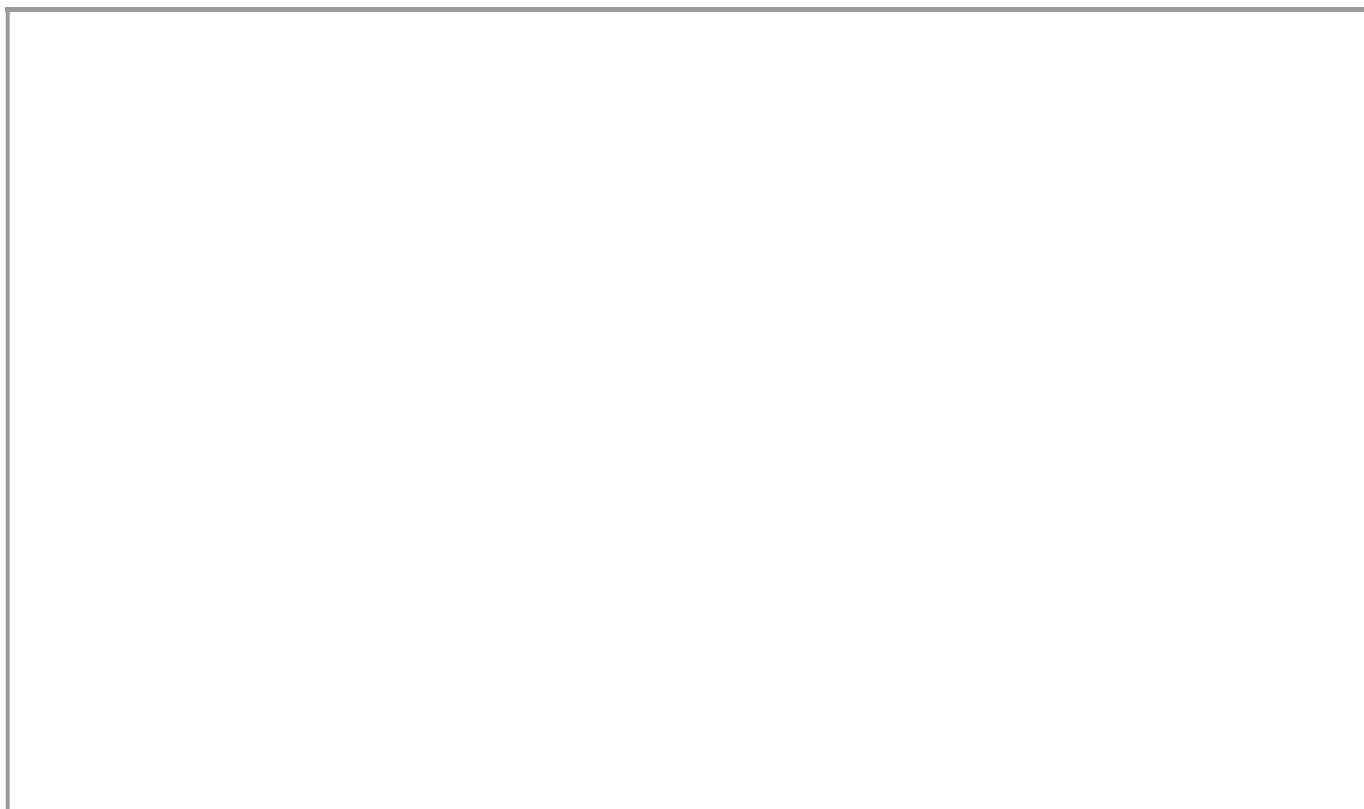


Figure 6. Spanish toy selling website. Content based on an expressive language and cooperation with customers. URL: <http://www.injusa.com/injusa-objetivo.html>

We can also find another example of Spanish website in which a linguistic content based on cooperation with the consumer as well as the importance of the quality and security of the product are emphasized in the discourse, e.g. “*Con el claro objetivo de dar al niño lo que espera y necesita, esta compañía cuenta ... La calidad de nuestro producto y la satisfacción del consumidor final son prioritarias para X. X ofrece a los niños lo que buscan. La adaptación es la clave de nuestro éxito*”

English version: “*With the clear objective of giving kids the game they wait for and they need. The quality of our product, the security and the consumer’s satisfaction are X priorities. Adaption is the key of our success*”:



Figure 7. Spanish toy selling website. Content based on the quality and security of the product as well as cooperation with customers. URL: <http://www.cefatoys.com>

Discussion

The results described above confirm that there are important statistical differences in the use of linguistic variables between Spanish and US toy selling websites when it comes to provide information on their products. Whereas US sites prefer including information about offers and special discounts, an accurate description of the product as well as highlighting its advantages in relation to other similar products of the market, Spanish sites use the aforementioned variables in a much lower frequency. In the Spanish corpus, product information is conveyed by means of an expressive communication style in which there is a clear cooperation with potential buyers. Apart from that, issues like the security and the quality of the product are considered to be relevant by Spanish toy companies.

In our opinion, the main linguistic variables that have been found in the sample of US websites may be correlated with a *hard-sell approach* when describing and promoting the selling of the product. This approach would be encouraging issues related to masculine cultural values. On the contrary, it has been observed that in the Spanish corpus there is a predominance of linguistic variables that seem to be more aligned with a *soft-sell approach* in the information transmitted to describe and promote the product. In sharp contrast with the US websites, this last approach would be fostering issues reflecting more feminine cultural values.

It is necessary to point out that some previous studies (Singh, Zhao & Hu 2004; Singh & Matsuo 2004; Singh & Pereira 2005) establish a link between the *hard* and *soft sell approach* discussed above and the level of *context-dependence* in communication developed by cultures (Hall, 1976). While members from *high-context* cultures rely on symbolic, nonverbal and situational cues to convey their communicative messages, individuals from *low-context* cultures believe that explicit messages and detailed communication have more value than contextual factors to transmit one's communicative message (Lewis 1996: 184; Walker, et al. 2003: 130). For instance, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) focusing their analysis on the dichotomy designed by Deborah Tannen (1994) between *report* and *rappport* cultures, state that in informative cultures (*report cultures*) there is a preference for including in discourse much more explicit and accurate information in the description of the product as well as in its selling promotion. This is the reason why it is understood that potential buyers will be more interested in this

type of explicit information than in the possible cooperation and solidarity that the company may want to establish with them. The focus is just the opposite in relational cultures (*rappport cultures*), where the phase of establishing social relationships with the consumer is far more important than providing explicit information about the product.

Although we partially agree with the thesis proposed by the aforementioned researchers in terms of the relationship that exists between the *hard-soft sell approach* and *low-high context cultures* respectively, from a linguistic perspective we consider that these two selling approaches would fit better in the *instrumental* and *expressive* communication styles conveyed by cultures. For instance, it is our belief that an instrumental communicative style could be fostering more masculine cultural values whilst an expressive communicative style could be encouraging more feminine cultural values.

In line to what has been said before, studies like the one driven by Mueller (1987: 52-53) shows that advertising messages from low-context cultures - masculine cultures in this study- include information about offers and special discounts of the product. In our analysis it is clearly observable that US sales websites make use of this variable in higher frequencies than their Spanish counterparts. It is also worth considering the information on the advantages of the product comparing its features with other similar products of competitive markets, in which the US corpus reaches higher frequencies than the Spanish one. These results may have an explanation in the fact that in societies holding more masculine cultural values like the USA, its speakers use a direct, explicit and confrontational communicative (*low-context*) style when transmitting their messages. This explains that advertising messages in these cultures contain linguistic strategies that convey rational arguments to convince consumers that their products are unique and the best in the market (Mueller 1987; Cho et al. 1999; Singh, Zhao & Hu 2003; Singh & Matsuo 2004).

It is also relevant the highly significant statistical difference observed in the accurate and solid description of the product, in which US sales websites also get higher frequencies than the Spanish corpus. As we see it, the solid information through which the description of the product is conveyed in US websites could be associated with societies holding more masculine cultural values like the USA. According to Singh and Pereira (2005: 147), in societies more oriented to masculine cultural values their advertising messages are prone to include explicit information of the product, such as the materials it is made of, how to use it as well as the main benefits that it has for the consumer. In our opinion, the variables contained in the sample of US websites would be emphasizing an instrumental communication style in which masculine cultural values like assertiveness, objectiveness and competitiveness are highlighted in the transactional discourse.

In societies more prone to hold feminine cultural values like Spain, the Spanish corpus analysed proves that product information is transmitted by means of much softer information than their US counterparts. The results confirm that the moderate information through which Spanish websites describe their products is translated into an expressive communicative style that contains linguistic strategies that imply affectivity and cooperation with the consumer. In this sense, we support the thesis of Mueller (1987) and Cho et al. (1999) when they claim that in high-context cultures -feminine cultures in the case of this analysis- advertising messages incorporate themes of subjective nature that evoke a sort of cooperation with the consumer. In addition, this soft information is also reflected in the emphasis that Spanish websites use when describing the quality and security of their products or even the design and the carefulness through which the product is manufactured. It seems to us that unlike the linguistic variables included in the corpus of USA websites, the Spanish ones would be reinforcing feminine cultural values such as care, subjectivity, tenderness and cooperation.

Conclusions

The findings obtained in this research confirm the main hypothesis set forth at the beginning of this paper, that is, the different masculine cultural indexes that Spain and the USA have traditionally ascribed to gender roles are reflected in different communicative styles to convey information on the products they sell on-line.

On the one hand, the results point out that in the US toy selling websites there is a predominance of linguistic variables that foster masculine cultural values like objectiveness and assertiveness (explicit and accurate information of the product) or competitiveness (the superior advantages and benefits of the product are compared in relation to similar products sold in other markets as well as there is a clear preference for including information on offers and special discounts). These variables clearly reflect an instrumental communication style when US companies describe and promote the toys they sell on their sites.

On the other hand, the results stemming from the Spanish toy selling websites point into another direction. In the Spanish corpus, it has been observed the frequent use of linguistic variables that encourage more feminine cultural values, such as subjectivity (the information of the product is transmitted through the use of an eloquent style but there is no explicit information of the main features associated with it) or cooperation (there is a clear preference for establishing social relationships with potential buyers as well as emphasizing the quality, the security and the carefulness through which the product is elaborated). In contrast with the US websites, these variables are translated into an expressive communication style when products are described and promoted.

One important observation that we have found in this study is that the great majority of the Spanish websites transfer, most of the times, the linguistic and rhetorical strategies of Spanish into the English version. From our point of view, they may do this unconsciously since they could not be aware of the different interpretations that these texts could have in the US market. One of the reasons for this to happen is the lack of cultural sensitivity that there is in the Spanish toy industry nowadays, especially in small and medium-sized companies.

It is our view that lack of cultural learning could have lasting business relations consequences in today's globalized world. Efforts are needed by Spanish toy companies to find ways to help their companies become active producers of meaning who can deeply reflect on intercultural communication and decide which rhetorical patterns they would choose to communicate with foreign partners through their websites.

Traditionally, in business English classes there have been a concern for teaching the visible aspects or peripheral aspects of culture, such as people's patterns of behaviour, their clothing, their eating habits, social etiquette or body language. Nevertheless, at the current state of globalization that international commerce involves, not only the outer expression of culture should be taught but also its invisible, hidden and inner expression, that is, the different cultural values through which individuals from different societies face the basic social cultural problems affecting all societies equally, such as the level of context dependence, social inequality, social identity, gender roles, ambiguous and uncertain situations and how these values affect the way people from different societies communicate and express their meanings. All these aspects would be of the utmost importance when offering English training courses for export manufacturers.

Despite the importance of the study carried out, we must say that it has its own limitations too. As we have noticed, the corpus selected for this research clearly shows that the frequency of linguistic variables that connote feminine cultural values is higher in the Spanish toy selling websites than in the US ones. By the same token, US toy websites obtain higher frequencies than their Spanish counterparts as for linguistic variables that connote masculine cultural values. Nonetheless, it might be a good idea in future research to analyse more deeply whether business websites from other industrial sectors as well as from other countries could combine both a hard and a soft-sell approach. In order to carry out a research of that type, it would be necessary to analyse, quantitatively, how much of the information contained in the sites relates to masculine or feminine cultural values. This last issue could promote more reflective openness and intercultural communication and sensitivity.

Holding interviews with US manufacturers could be carried out to gain more factual knowledge about how they process and interpret the information contained in the English version of Spanish sales websites. In other words, applying a sociolinguistic approach could be very interesting to widen the results of the present study. It would also be a good idea to analyse the impact of other cultural dimensions in this same professional genre as well as in other professional digital genres to obtain more knowledge on the influence of cultural values on professional discourse.

Last but not least, it would be worth questioning ourselves as consumers whether we would choose a toy company using a more masculine hard-sell approach or, on the contrary, one which uses a more feminine soft-sell approach. It is generally acknowledged that globalization and homogeneity are two important social issues in today's world and these are receiving more importance year after year. In the business sector, English has become the *lingua franca*, par excellence, to communicate with other countries in the international arena. If people are encouraged to learn English all over the world to survive in the globalization era, would it also be necessary to promote one type of discourse as well? Or, on the contrary, would consumers feel more satisfied and persuaded to buy products whose information is transmitted in a type of discourse that contains rhetorical strategies adapted to the cultural values of their own societies? These questions may be answered in a much deeper study in which consumers can actually provide their own opinion in front of the computer, fill in questionnaires, hold interviews and the like so as to know what really motivates them to purchase the products displayed on-line.

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[1] The visualization of the sales websites and reference made to individuals have been omitted for the data protection rights of the company.

[2] For the data protection rights of the company, the letter 'X' has been used in order to avoid mentioning its name.