HAS THE TONE OF ONLINE ENGLISH BECOME GLOBALIZED?

An Empirical Research Study Investigating the Written Tone of University Web Sites around the World

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Abstract. Surface-level similarities among Web sites around the world have led to speculation that a new, globalized culture is emerging on the World Wide Web. However, it is possible that substantial differences occur below the surface—at the rhetorical level—either in the rhetorical structure of the content or in the syntax and semantics. A content analysis of more than 350 university Web sites in 20 countries focused on one rhetorical factor: the tone of Web site content written in English. Results are being analyzed, and will be presented and discussed at the conference. Uniformity of tone among the 20 countries would suggest that globalization has occurred; substantial differences in tone among countries would suggest that national culture continues to influence Web content.

1. Introduction and Relevant Literature

To log onto the World Wide Web today is to feel in some respects like a rider on a magic carpet, effortlessly transported from one culture to another. In a single session of surfing, we can electronically circle the globe, “touching down” successively in Web sites located in a multitude of countries. Though we might expect to find dramatic differences among the Web sites that we encounter, we cannot ignore the many similarities we find as well, even among Web sites created by people from widely divergent cultures. First, similarities of content are evident. Everywhere, we see familiar corporate logos and the familiar faces of the internationally famous. Many of the top news items and editorial topics are the same in online editions of The Times of India, Asahi Shimbun, The Washington Post, and Le Monde. And, second, we find striking similarities in design. We can observe a worldwide preference for left-hand link menus and we can readily recognize an online newspaper, even if we cannot read the language. Another, perhaps less obvious global similarity is a trend towards using characteristics of scientific graphs and tables in commercial design.

Sackmary and Scalia (1999) identified so many similarities in the design and language used in U.S. and Mexican business Web sites that they concluded they were seeing “the emergence of a global Internet culture.” We can wonder, however, whether similarities among Web sites of different cultures are restricted to surface features, or whether similarities exist at deeper levels as well.
The present study asks whether, at the rhetorical level, there are cross-cultural differences among Web sites that affect the way in which ideas and concepts are expressed. Unlike differences in surface features, these rhetorical differences would not be easily explained in terms of Web designers copying each other’s code or visual design. Differences at the rhetorical level would suggest that a fundamental, deeply-rooted kind of globalization might be taking place on the Web.

It is possible to ask two kinds of questions about rhetorical differences and similarities that might exist among Web sites. One kind of question concerns the structure of information presented in Web sites. For example, one could ask whether the main arguments are structured inductively or deductively, or whether they are presented in a parallel or circular manner. Other questions about rhetorical structure might concern whether narratives are used to frame discussions and, if so, how the structure and content of those narratives differ.

A second kind of question about rhetorical differences among Web sites concerns semantics and syntax. This study focuses on one such rhetorical factor: the tone of Web page text. The tone of a text has commonly been defined as the author’s attitude towards the subject and the audience, as manifested in the text (e.g., Alred et al., 2000; Souther and White, 1977). This study examines two dimensions of tone in particular: (a) its personalness (how personal or impersonal the tone seems), and (b) its formality (how formal or informal the tone seems). We chose tone as our object of study because many authors argue that a document’s tone affects its credibility as judged by its readers. Some authors assert that a personal, informal tone improves the credibility of written messages. For example, Coney and Steehouder (2000) maintain that personal tone such as “In the British Library, you will find…” is better than impersonal, third-person tone like “The British Library provides…” because personal tone is more inviting.

However, other authors assert that such a tone may not be better in all situations, and warn that readers from different cultures judge tone differently. For example, Ferraro (2000) states that the personal, informal tone preferred by North Americans can offend people from more formal cultures. Similarly, Hodge (2000) recommends that Americans who visit other countries speak more formally when they are abroad than when they are in the U.S. These authors suggest that communicators need to take culturally-based differences in rhetorical expectations into account when crafting their messages.

The consideration of ethnographers’ findings about international cultural dimensions can inform our thinking about document tone and help us to predict how perceptions of tone might differ among cultures. For example, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) conclude that cultures differ in terms of the acceptability of expressing emotions, with emotional neutrality being more valued in countries such as Japan, Norway, and the United Kingdom, and emotional display being more acceptable in other countries, such as Italy and France. We can speculate that a personal tone might be less acceptable and less credible in more emotionally neutral cultures.

Hofstede (2001) argues that cultures differ in terms of power distance, with greater social distance between superiors and subordinates in high power distance cultures, and less distance in low power distance cultures. We can speculate that a personal, informal tone would be judged as less authoritative and less credible by readers in high power distance cultures. For example, in a country with a high power distance score, such as
the Philippines, the citizens might be accustomed to content that is presented formally and somewhat impersonally. But in a country with a relatively low power distance score, such as New Zealand or the U.S., we might find that residents are accustomed to seeing documents and Web sites that present content informally and with a somewhat personal tone.

It is possible that culture determines both the tone adopted by writers and the tone perceived by readers. Alternatively, though, it is possible that tone is in the process of becoming globalized, and that a standard international tone is developing, reducing the influence of individual cultures and culturally-based expectations. One way to distinguish between these two possibilities is to rate the tone used in Web sites sampled from multiple countries to see whether tone differs substantially among those countries. Uniformity of tone among the sampled countries would suggest that globalization has occurred; substantial differences in tone among countries would suggest that national culture continues to influence semantics and syntax on the Web.

If substantial differences in tone are observed, one way to attempt to understand the observed variation is to assess the relationship between Web site tone and scores on commonly cited cultural dimensions, such as power distance. For example, a positive relationship between tone formality and power distance would suggest that culture influences tone—in other words, that Web content providers use the tone appropriate for their countries’ power distance values. A neutral relationship would suggest that cultural dimensions—or at least, the particular cultural dimension of power distance—have little influence on the tone of Web sites. Of course, the lack of a relationship between tone and a single cultural dimension such as power distance would drive the need for further research to examine other cultural dimensions that could relate to tone.

2. The Present Study

To measure the relationship between tone and culture, we have undertaken a quantitative examination of the written tone of university Web sites from 20 different countries that rely on English as a primary or secondary national language. For each university Web site, we analyzed the tone of the “About Us” page—the page on which the university presents its written description of itself to the rest of the world. We chose this content in part because nearly all university Web sites, regardless of nationality, include some self-descriptive text about the university.

2.1. STUDY METHODOLOGY

Our study involved a content analysis of self-descriptive text from university Web sites from 20 countries; this text typically came from the main “About Us” page of each site. Countries included in the study were those listed by Kachru (1992), and more recently by Gilsdorf (2002), as countries in which English is either the first language or the official language or co-language. The complete list of university Web sites for the included countries was collected from the “Universities Worldwide” database (Forster, 2004), and these sites were randomly sampled to yield a total of 384 sites for analysis. Content was selected for analysis by reviewing each sampled Web site and identifying the specific Web page that best reflected the school’s description of itself.
Next, three coders independently analyzed the content for the occurrence of certain pronouns, verb forms, and phrases that are believed to influence tone personalness and formality. Among the tone elements tallied in the study were personal pronouns, verb contractions, and informal punctuation (e.g., ellipses and dashes). Verb contractions such as “I’m” are considered less formal than the full syntax, “I am.” Also tallied were the number of passive voice clauses in each page, since using passive voice is believed to increase tone formality and impersonality. For example, passive voice syntax, such as “the school was visited” is considered to be less personal and more formal than its active voice equivalents, such as “we visited the school.”

The frequencies of these tone elements will be compared among the countries included in the study, and the relationship of tone to those countries’ power distance scores will be assessed. If differences among countries are found to exist, yet relationships to power distance are not identified, then other cultural dimensions will be assessed for possible relationships with cultural tone.

2.2. ANTICIPATED STUDY RESULTS AND APPLICATIONS

A preliminary cluster analysis indicates that the US Web sites are not distinctly different from Web sites in other countries. Finding similar frequencies of tone elements across cultural contexts would suggest that decisions are being made similarly in many countries included in this study and would lend weight to assertions that a global writing style is evolving on the Web. Finding different frequencies across cultures, especially if a relationship is found between tone and country scores for cultural dimensions such as power distance, would suggest that Web writing style is not in the process of being globalized.

Such findings will make it possible to develop best practice recommendations for Web site developers and content authors who are trying to reach audiences in other cultures. For example, finding that frequencies of tone elements differ substantially among the countries in this study would suggest the need to localize tone of Web site text for audiences in target countries, in order to ensure that those audiences judge the content to be credible. Finding that frequencies are similar would suggest that a globalized tone could be adopted without concern that credibility could be lost.

3. Future Directions

This study could lead to additional research in at least two areas. First, further studies could assess whether the use of tone on Web sites differs from the use of tone in more traditional media, and whether traditional media tone relates to cultural dimensions. Given that the Internet offers users greater exposure to Web sites in other cultures than traditional media do, it is possible that the Internet may be becoming a medium that is normalizing tone and making readers increasingly tone-deaf. That is, culture may influence producers and consumers of Web sites less than it influences producers and consumers of other media.

Second, it is possible that people expect a different experience when they read content online compared to printed materials. As a medium, the Internet might have an associated level of informality by virtue of its potential for everyone to publish their own
content. Further studies could address whether the Internet, and especially the World Wide Web, is changing people’s expectations about the content they read. If these expectations are changing, one could then ask whether the change indicates the emergence of a global Web culture.

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References


