

BUSINESS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: DESCRIPTION  
AND EVALUATION IN A CORPUS OF PRODUCT PAGES IN  
BUSINESS TO CONSUMER WEBSITES

Christina Samson - University of Florence

### 1. *Introduction*

Over the centuries, the showcasing of goods has both enhanced their visual communication and has gradually transformed consumption from a collective, social act into a solitary one, as Codeluppi (2007: 7) claims:

La vetrinizzazione sociale ha avuto inizio con la comparsa nel Settecento della vetrina che metteva in scena e valorizzava oggetti in precedenza inerti e passivi. L'individuo si è trovato così, da solo di fronte alle merci e ha dovuto imparare a interpretare il loro linguaggio senza l'aiuto del venditore. Ha dovuto, cioè, abituarsi a leggere la comunicazione visiva [...] Nel corso del Novecento, i media hanno progressivamente rafforzato il modello di comunicazione della vetrina, passando da un modello di fruizione collettiva a uno fondato sul consumo solitario.

The transformation of consumption has been particularly reinforced by Internet. On the one hand, the latter has been progressively exploited by companies to promote their image through the creation of websites. On the other hand, it has increased the solitary many-to-one model of communication between the 'product' and the browser (Salvi et al. 2007), or potential consumer, who selects a website, or pages of it, according to his/her interests.

Such communication is based on what Codeluppi (2003) views as a *dialogue* in a broad sense between the browser and the co-presence of verbal and non-verbal elements in website pages. This has resulted, as Boaretto, Noci and Pini (2007) advocate, in website browsers becoming *reloaded consumers*, i.e., active subjects searching, receiving and evaluating information from, construing knowledge through, a direct dialogue with companies, the representation of their products on websites, and feedback from other browsers of the same website. The reloaded consumer is therefore well informed, knows that s/he can use his/her opinion to influence others and is co-creator with the company of knowledge and value (Boaretto, Noci and Pini 2007: 23).

Websites, as a result, have gradually been transformed into interactive dream worlds or perfect spaces to move in, where the

browser is provided with accurate descriptions and evaluations, not only of the products presented, but also of the company's image and its wider business goals.

The creation of such virtual spaces has the function of delivering a company's identity in seconds through the three basic functions of language: the referential, which provides information about facts and situations related to the real world; the expressive, i.e., the expressiveness of the message delivered; and the vocative or persuasive function, which influences others (Salvi et al. 2007).

Indeed, knowing how successfully to present a brand online is a crucial part of the Web design, since branding revolves around differentiation and trust (Drew 2002). Differentiation is what makes a product different from any other. It relies on description, which has a pivotal role in distinguishing between products and on informing, promoting and selling goods or services to website browsers. Differentiation, however, becomes more credible if the company conveys its integrity in an effective, persuasive way, in order to be trusted. This aim can be attained by creating a confident, decisive image and by interacting with its browsers.

Such interaction is to be considered as if taking place in a network of social relations (Kress 1989) in which every meaning occurs in a social context (Gee 2001). For, as Vygotsky (1962) argues, no meaning can be divorced from people:

[...] it is not that we exist first, in isolation from each other, and then attempt to overcome that isolation through communication; but, rather, we come into existence through our language and the social relationships it creates. What we refer to as self, individual, participant, are to be found in discourse rather than outside it.

Moreover, according to the heteroglossic view of text, the linguistic resources implemented in websites can be seen as reflecting the process of negotiation between alternative socio-semiotic positions, since we do not just create relationships of offering and demanding, but also construct attitudes towards, and evaluations of, our own and others' discourses (Lemke 1998).

Thus, this paper investigates how description and evaluation are organized in a corpus of product pages from business to consumer sites in which products are presented and sold on the web (henceforth P2CWPs). The study investigates the lexicogrammatical and rhetorical resources typical of description and evaluation as employed in three sub-corpora of P2CWPs offering different types of products. These are analysed in a mixed approach: qualitative and quantitative. The findings are illustrated with examples from the three sub-corpora with the purpose of highlighting the rhetorical features which characterize

the communicative and persuasive purposes of companies on the web.

## *2. Description*

To date, while Hall (2002), Campagna (2007), Denti (2007), and Fodde and Memoli (2007), have investigated the construction of identities in the semiotic landscape, and others have focussed on visual communication in multimodality (Cranny-Francis 2004; Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 2001), there has been little attention to the linguistic features of product descriptions on websites. Smith (2003) has analysed the linguistic properties of description in short stories, novels, articles from journals and newspapers, but once again not in website pages. She has focussed on the grammatical features and the patterns of distribution that distinguish Description from four other modes – Narrative, Report, Information and Argument.

Specifically, Smith (2003: 12-13) differentiates the four modes from one another in terms of the types of situation which each introduces into the universe of the discourse and of the principle of text progression each favours. In the case of Description, situation type and text progression take the following forms:

1. Situation type: states and ongoing or atelic events focusing on particulars, objects, people and mental states;
2. Text progression: spatial progression through a scene or object.

Like the other Modes, Description exhibits surface structure presentation, or presentational features that organize the information in a sentence, usually into topic and comment, focus and background. Description may also show forms of subjectivity, which, through communication, mental state and evaluation, allow access to the mind of the writer/speaker.

This study, by contrast, will analyse descriptive and evaluative discourse in P2CWPs by highlighting the promotional and persuasive purposes of lexico-grammatical patterning and other rhetorical choices in the web-pages. It will also refer to Smith's (2003) study, in the attempt to bring to the fore possible similarities or dissimilarities of description in different genres.

## *3. Evaluation*

Evaluation, as much recent research has underscored (e.g. Hunston and Thompson 2000; Del Lungo Camiciotti and Tognini-Bonelli 2004), is ubiquitous in human communication and comes in a wide variety of grammatical and discursive forms.

It varies according to genre and communicative purpose (Conrad and Biber 2000) because it pervades not only socio-cultural contexts but also economic ones. This is never more true than when a company attempts to persuade its customers of the validity of its point of view, in representing the company's socio-economic strategy at a specific time.

Evaluation, therefore, cannot be defined as restricted to the purely grammatical category of modals, for instance, since it is highly subjective, value-laden, and comparative, along parameters which often intertwine, giving rise to a complex scenario (Samson 2006).

As Hunston and Thompson (2000: 6) argue, every act of evaluation expresses a value-system belonging either to the writer or to the disciplinary community (or, in this case, to companies) and the construction and maintenance of relations between writer and reader (here between company and browser). Every act of evaluation helps build up the value system informing the ideology that lies behind every text. Thus, identifying the lexico-grammatical patterning and rhetorical choices in the P2CWPs will reveal the ideological weight linked to the positive value and persuasive effect produced in the web-pages.

These also have the central function of assessing the worth of the company and its products. So evaluating the products along the good-bad parameter is highly significant. By doing so, companies implicitly invite the website browser to be convinced by their point of view. This is one of the reasons why evaluation, as Bamford (2007) argues, is used so frequently and effectively in advertising, which is an archetypically persuasive genre. An advertisement which states a product is good invites agreement, and the average customer or consumer tends automatically to agree with the evaluation made from a specific viewpoint in the advertisement.

Following Hunston and Thompson (2000: 5), I consider *point of view* inherent to evaluation, that is, as the expression of the speaker's or writer's attitude towards, or feelings about, the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about. In the present case, a point of view is expressed by the slant the company casts on the description it provides of its products.

I therefore relate point of view to the use of different interpersonal metadiscursive devices (Hyland 2005; Samson 2006), such as person markers, i.e. personal pronouns and/or possessive adjectives, deixis and adjectives, which reflect the way and the extent to which the companies try to involve and persuade their customers or consumers of their quality.

I will therefore not concentrate on modality as a grammatical category realized by means of verbal moods, modal verbs, or other morpho-syntactic categories, such as modal adverbs functioning as

downtoners or intensifiers (Campagna 2007). I will rather highlight the less explored attitudinal, affective meanings in P2CWPs by focussing on their lexico-grammatical combinations.

#### 4. *Corpora and methodology*

The data consist of a small specialized corpus of P2CWPs of about 50,000 words, related to a Business to Consumer Websites Corpus. Specifically, the corpus under scrutiny in this study comprises three sub-corpora, of about 15,000 words each, regarding different categories of products:

- communication devices (mobile phones, accessories, tvs);
- vehicles (jeeps, suvs);
- surgical tools (vascular/endovascular grafts, stents, catheters).

The decision to include communication devices and vehicles was driven by the high number of advertisements in the media promoting these products among the general public. On the other hand, the decision to collect surgical tool websites was stimulated by personal communication with a professional<sup>1</sup> implementing such tools and by the wish to include products targeting a highly specialized sector of the public. This, I assumed, would entail variation in the lexical items chosen for use in description and evaluation.

The corpus was therefore designed to serve the specific function of being maximally representative of a particular language domain: P2CWPs<sup>2</sup>. In creating the corpus I decided to concentrate on the linguistic features in the main body of the descriptive website pages forming the P2CWPs. This meant excluding from my scrutiny images and any other graphical elements, or texts organized by lists of links, or scattered around the main body without a linear progression.

The analytical approach followed was a mix of qualitative and quantitative analysis, involving several steps:

1. an initial qualitative examination of all the texts;
2. the computerized compilation of the corpus;
3. the quantitative search of the corpus;
4. the contrastive analysis of the three sub-corpora.

Because of the relatively small dimensions of the corpus, I started off by reading the whole texts to acquire an overall sense of the web-pages. This procedure allowed me to ascertain which type of structure/s emerge from the different categories of products forming the P2CWPs. The diverse incidence of lexico-grammatical features was to be confirmed or disproved by subsequent empirical research.

The corpus was then processed using *Wordsmith Tools 3.0* to obtain a Word and Frequency List containing features of interest in each sub-corpus of P2CWPs. The features were then analysed through concordancing to underscore the recurring patterns highlighting their typicality or individuality/uniqueness (Sinclair 1991).

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Qualitative analysis

The initial qualitative analysis highlighted divergence from Smith's (2003) analysis of description as a mode of discourse. The descriptive passages analysed by Smith, while independent as units of description, are set into a narrative framework that tends to render them scenic in character and link them to one another through the sequence of events narrated.

Descriptions in the P2CWPs, on the other hand, are presented to the browser in separate units between which there is no preset, or even predictable, sequential pathway. The author/designer can only plan a potential meaning construction along imaginable reading sequences (Lemke 2005), because it is the browser or interactive participant (Lemke 2002) that decides which traversals or personal reading paths to follow. As a result, the description of a product in web-pages requires brevity and high evaluative impact to be transmitted within a few seconds, before the browser decides to change traversal.

Furthermore, my data show that in the three sub-corpora of the corpus, description varies according to the communicative purposes of the company. For instance, in example (1), the browser is presented with a grid containing bare technical specifications of mobile phones and their connectivity features:

---

(1)

J2ME™:	MIDP 2.0 / CLDC 1.1 plus APIs
Bluetooth®:	v1.2, class 1
Connectivity:	CE bus (mini USB)
GPRS:	Class 10
WAP:	2.0

---

Clearly, the function of the description in (1) is to identify the product and its characteristics in a very unambiguous way, with the aim of emphasizing its powerful connectivity system. The object described, though, is not a specific, particular object, of the kind Smith (2003: 32) claims that descriptive passages tend to focus. The descriptions included in the Communications,

Vehicles and Surgical Tools sub-corpora have a different form from those analysed by Smith. The entities introduced are not ongoing events or atelic events but states, in the sense of products whose particular features distinguish them from one another, within the overall range of products produced and sold by the company, or that differentiate the product from those produced by competitors.

Similarly, in example (2), from the surgical tools sub-corpora, the description provides details regarding the use and purpose of a specific device, a catheter, together with its code/number, order number and features. Such a description needs no sequential reading, and no further links are offered to the browser.

As in (1), the description has the purpose of identifying the device among many others of its kind in the website, but with the additional function of allowing the browser and the producer to identify it in the online catalogue:

(2)

Used for endoscopic cannulation of the ductal system. This device is supplied sterile and is disposable – intended for single use only.

Global Product Number	Order Number	Catheter Tip	Catheter Length	Minimum Accessory Channel	Wire Guide Diameter	Color Connection
G31528	FS-GT-2	Dome	200 cm	3.2	.035 inch	Purple

In example (3), by contrast, the description referring to vehicles includes not only a purely technical file, as in examples (1) and (2), but also several links connected to units on the exterior and/or interior features of the car, its codes, models and so on:

(3)

Links to information featured below:

- ▼ Wheels and tyres
- ▼ Interior Features
- ▼ In car entertainment
- ▼ Comfort, convenience and safety
- Printable version
- ▼ Exterior
- ▼ Bodystyle Applications
- ▼ Seating

WHEELS AND TYRES

Tyre	Wheel	Tyre size	90 HT/PU	90 SW	110	110 HD	130
Michelin XPC	Std steel	7.50R16	N/A	S	S	N/A	N/A
		205R16	S	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Michelin XPC (Tubed tyres)	Std steel	7.50R16	O	O	O	N/A	N/A
		205R16	O	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Michelin XZL	Std steel	7.50R16	O	O	O	O	S

Michelin XS	Std steel	7.50R16	O	N/A	O	N/A	N/A
Goodyear G90	HD Steel	7.50R16	N/A	N/A	N/A	S	O
General Grabber	Alloy	235/85R16	O	O	O	N/A	N/A

Key: S= Standard, O = Option, NCO = No cost option, N/A = Not available

#### INTERIOR FEATURES

90/110	90 PU/110 PU	110/130	90 Station	110 Station
Hard Top/	110 HCPU	Double Cab	Wagon	Wagon
Base,	Base,	Base,	Base,	
County,	County	County, XS'	County, XS	
Interior				
Seats:				
Twill vinyl	S N/A S N/A S N/A	N/A S N/A N/A S N/A	N/A S N/A N/A S N/A	N/A S N/A N/A S N/A
Seats:				
Cloth	N/A S N/A S N/A S	N/A N/A S N/A N/A S N/A	N/A N/A S N/A N/A S N/A	N/A N/A S N/A N/A S N/A
Seats:				
Part leather	N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A	S N/A N/A S N/A N/A S	N/A N/A S N/A N/A S N/A	N/A N/A S N/A N/A S N/A
Individual rear stowable seats	N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A	N/A N/A S S S O O O		
Cubby box with twin cup holders	O O O O O O	S O O S O O S		
Steering wheel - leather	N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A N/A	S N/A N/A S N/A N/A S		

The P2CWP's browser is presented with more discursive descriptions when a product needs to be introduced more extensively. A case in point is example (4):

(4)

HemaCarotid Patch Heparin UltraThin is specifically designed to enhance patch performance and clinical outcomes. HemaCarotid Patch Heparin UltraThin incorporates the proprietary UltraThin wall technology and its unique Heparin bonding process. HemaCarotid Patch Heparin UltraThin offers excellent handling and host vessel conformability with no suture hole bleeding and is indicated in routine endarterectomy procedures where the use of a patch is required.

Coated polyester fabric	Cross-linked Type 1 bovine collagen
Construction	Knitted velour, reverse locknit
Water permeability	< 5ml • cm <sup>-2</sup> • min <sup>-1</sup> @120 mmHg
Wall Thickness**	0.41 mm
Burst strength**	32.7 kg/cm <sup>2</sup>

In (4) the description progresses by providing information on the product's purpose (*specifically designed to enhance patch performance*), functionality (*bonding process*) and usability (*excellent handling; indicated in routine endarterectomy procedures*).

The company creates meaning by progressively and cumulatively underlining the value of its product. This is achieved by highlighting the product's qualities and presenting it from a particular point of view, with the function of differentiating it from similar tools on the market. The choice of a specific verb, such as *to enhance*, and of emphatic lexis, as in the use of adjectives (*excellent, unique*) contribute to instil trust and persuade potential customers of the worth of the surgical tool.

Notably, the name of the product itself, a long NP, elliptically corresponding to a predicative adjectival construction 'X is Y', includes an evaluation: HemaCarotid Patch Heparin *UltraThin*. Moreover, the patch is not only ultra thin but *specifically designed to enhance patch performance and clinical outcomes*. The company simultaneously describes the product, explains why it has been designed in a specific way and expresses a positive evaluation by using lexis that gives special prominence to the product's features. This ensures renewed attention on the part of the browser, whilst the company underscores the product's performance.

The emphasis on the relevant characteristics of the product is repeated in the next sentence, which is backgrounded by the first – 'HemaCarotid Patch Heparin *UltraThin incorporates the proprietary UltraThin wall technology and its unique Heparin bonding process*'. The third sentence – 'HemaCarotid Patch Heparin *UltraThin offers excellent handling and host vessel conformability with no suture hole bleeding and is indicated in routine endarterectomy procedures*' – develops the idea of the reliability of the product's performance, while providing the browser with an explanation. Thus, the example indicates the interdependence of three different rhetorical acts: description, explanation and evaluation.

Positive evaluation is enhanced by the repetition of the product's name, with a cumulative force that has the function of interacting with the browser and promoting the product, whilst evaluation emphasizes the perspective from which the tool should be considered. Once persuaded, the browser finds the product's catalogue type of description at the end of the discursive description, as can be seen in example (4).

To sum up, the findings of the qualitative analysis suggest that, in the P2CWPs, description varies in the lexico-grammatical items employed according to the communicative purposes pursued by the companies. This leads to the interdependence of different cognitive processes.

## 5.2. Quantitative analysis

In order to search for specific features of interest not open to

direct observation but which are prevalent in website descriptions, I began the quantitative analysis by examining the Word and Frequency List of the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora of the P2CWPs corpus. The results are listed in Tables 1 and 2, below.

Table 1. Communications

Tokens	Frequency per 1,000 words				
YOUR	225	1.79	IS	92	0.73
YOU	207	1.65	CAN	86	0.68
MOTOROLA	60	0.48	HAS	29	0.23
THIS	55	0.44	HIGH	26	0.21
NOKIA	53	0.42	WE	19	0.15
IT	49	0.39	SAMSUNG	19	0.15
COMPATIBLE	36	0.29	WILL	18	0.14
HAVE	34	0.27	TAKE	16	0.13
DIGITAL	32	0.25	CONNECT	15	0.12

Table 2. Vehicles

Tokens	Frequency per 1,000 words				
IS	210	1.25	CAN	65	0.39
YOU	134	0.80	AVAILABLE	60	0.36
VOLVO	129	0.77	THIS	58	0.35
ARE	100	0.60	WE	48	0.29
YOUR	84	0.50	HAS	46	0.27
IT	77	0.46	PERFORMANCE	42	0.25
OUR	74	0.44	HIGH	29	0.17
ROVER	73	0.44	PROVIDE	21	0.13
VEHICLE	73	0.44	UNIQUE	20	0.12
JEEP	66	0.39	OFFERS	18	0.11

Tables 1 and 2 reveal a high frequency per 1,000 tokens of person markers – personal pronouns *you*, *we* – and of possessive adjectives – *your*, *our* – whose function is to accentuate the company's interaction with the browser, whilst trying to persuade him/her of the many functions performed by the devices offered, as can be seen in examples (6) and (7), extracted from the two sub-corpora:

(6) The Nokia 9300 device also gives *you* access to a large contact database where *you* can store multiple phone numbers, email details and even a thumbnail photo for each contact.

(7) [...] *your* mobile business even more convenient and time-saving, the SK65 features a full size keyboard. Now *you* can type emails and text-messages just as fast on *your* mobile phone as on *your* PC.

Moreover, the data indicate that the perspective from which the companies want a browser to view their products is linked, mainly, to the frequent repetition of the company's name – *Motorola, Nokia, Samsung, Volvo, Rover, Jeep*. Self-mention, is, indeed, a strategy adopted to identify companies with innovative solutions and activities (Samson 2007). In the P2CWPs, this is related to the marketing strategy that tries to persuade the browser/customer that by purchasing that specific product their lives will improve and they will be able to showcase a particular lifestyle. Examples (8-13) show this:

- (8) From the 1930s' first practical car radio to the latest wearable cellular phone, **Motorola** has repeatedly pioneered products for the consumer marketplace.
- (9) With the **Nokia 9300** device it is easy to multi-task while on a call. Email and Messaging Gain more freedom with the **Nokia Wireless Boom Headset**.
- (10) Experience an instant connection with **Samsung's** latest Push to Talk innovation. Certain cues tell the world who is on top of their game.
- (11) With Genuine **Volvo** Parts, you can therefore always be sure of having access to the very latest technology.
- (12) Thanks to extensive computer analysis and testing. The **Range Rover Sport** achieves impressive levels of safety.
- (13) Solid and Secure UniFrame construction is a durable combination of building **Jeep Cherokee's** body and frame as a single, solid [...]

The findings in Tables 1 and 2 show how the description of a product in the P2CWPs is characterized by a relatively high frequency of the present tense – *is, have, has* – and stative verbs – *provide, offer, take, connect* (a metaphorical movement). These verbs co-occur with lexical items that give prominence to particular features of the products and to the superiority of the various companies over their competitors, as examples (14-16) highlight:

- (14) The **Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8** cabin is distinguished by power-adjustable, deeply sculpted performance front seats [...]
- (15) At **Nokia** we are sensitive to concerns about mobile communications safety issues, and **have** committed resources not only to sponsor ongoing research programs, but also to **provide** [...]
- (16) Our company has been developing new ways for people to **connect** – no matter where their worlds take them. Even the first hand-held two-way radio used by the U.S. Army was a **Motorola** design.

Modal verbs are frequently used to indicate, not only the reliability of specific products and their functions, but also the trustworthiness of the company, as examples (17) and (18) show:

(17) Only with Genuine Volvo Parts you can be entirely sure that the vehicle always behaves as expected [...]

(18) This Samsung gives you CD-quality sound from a number of formats (mp3, aac or aac+). So you can listen to your favourite music wherever you go - even if you're staying home.

The superiority of the company producing the goods described is also expressed by the use of adjectives intensifying their value, such as *high* and *unique*, which in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora prevalently encode the ability to satisfy customers' expectations regarding a high level of technology. This can be seen in examples (19) and (20):

(19) With the S65, Siemens mobile presents a mobile phone that meets the **high** expectations of today's business people.

(20) Further contributing to its aggressive stance, the Jeep Grand Cherokee SRT8 is fitted with **unique** forged 20-inch five-spoke aluminium wheels shod with high-performance Goodyear tyres [...]

The Word and Frequency count was also applied to the Surgical Tools sub-corpus, in order to compare the data resulting from it (illustrated in Table 3) with those from the quantitative analysis of the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora:

Table 3. Surgical tools

Tokens	Frequency per 1,000 words				
STENT	203	1.13	UNIQUE	33	0.18
IS	186	1.03	OPTIMAL	31	0.17
GRAFT	170	0.94	RESULTS	31	0.17
VASCULAR	122	0.68	AVAILABLE	30	0.17
USE	111	0.62	YOU	30	0.17
GORE	78	0.43	HAS	28	0.15
ARE	65	0.36	MEDTRONIC	27	0.15
DESIGNED	50	0.28	OFFERS	26	0.14
THIS	49	0.27	SHOULD	26	0.14
PROVIDES	44	0.24	EASY	23	0.13
MAY	38	0.21	PROVIDE	22	0.12
STRENGTH	37	0.21	REDUCE	21	0.12
FLEXIBILITY	38	0.21	SMOOTH	21	0.12
EXCELLENT	33	0.18			

Table 3 indicates that the frequency of lexical items referring to the name of the tools and companies is somewhat higher than that of person markers, as in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora.

Examples (21) and (22) show how, in surgery, the name of the product encodes its excellent performance. Example (23), on the

other hand, shows how company names, even if less frequent in this sub-corpus than in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora, have the same function of creating a confident image that instils trust by transmitting an impression of certainty, assurance and superiority over competitors:

(21) Excellent Contourability: Micromesh geometry and segmented design helps ensure stent conforms to artery wall; small-cell geometry maximizes lumen coverage.

(22) [...] full of twists and turns. A successful journey demands a strong yet extremely flexible stent-graft capable of adapting to the tortuous challenges and relentless forces [...]

(23) In this fast paced, highly competitive business environment, you need to produce a superior product with fewer resources. **Gore Medical OEM** is the answer.

As in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora, the description of Surgical Tools is characterized by the use of the present tense and of stative verbs, such as *provide* and *offer*. Examples (24) and (25) show how the verbs occur in emphatic discourse accentuating the positive characteristics of the company or its product, whilst minimizing any negative operational results:

(24) Medtronic Vascular combines a host of expertise to offer state-of-the-art solutions for coronary vascular [...]

(25) The main body and limbs of the Powerlink stent graft are fully supported by a cobalt-chromium alloy stent to reduce the risk of kinking.

As to the modal verbs used, *may* and *should* are more frequent than *can*, which however is frequently used in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora. *May* is prevalently used in recommendations on the part of the company not to use the tool when complications deriving from the product itself or from other sources may arise, as (26) and (27) illustrate:

(26) This device is not recommended for patients whose weight exceeds 350 lbs (150 kg) or whose weight may impede accurate fluoroscopic imaging. Regular follow-up including imaging of the device should [...]

(27) The stent may cause a thrombus, distal embolization, or may migrate from the site of implant down the arterial lumen.

Moreover, the high frequency of adjectival intensification is used to stress the quality, functionality and reliability of the product, which, if implemented, ensures optimal outcomes, as shown in (28-30):

(28) Visualize Your Path With a Highly Radiopaque Flush Catheter.

Excellent Fluoroscopic Visualization Highly radiopaque tip ensures easy visualization.

(29) **Unique** Intelligent Balloon Folding and Selective Dura-Trac Coating aid in reaching and crossing [...]

(30) Patented SLIX Valve provides the optimal balance between catheter manoeuvrability and hemostasis.

Unlike the adjectives in the Communications and Vehicle sub-corpora, e.g. *high* and *unique*, which intensify the companies' value whilst encoding capability to satisfy customers' technological expectations, those in the Surgical sub-corpus have more than one function. They not only underscore the high technical quality and functionality of the devices, but also create an emotional impact by stressing the excellent results for both the customer/surgeon and patient. This functional variation of the adjectives chosen in the three sub-corpora reflects the different promotional and persuasive communicative purposes of the companies in the website pages.

## 6. *Concluding remarks*

The qualitative and quantitative analyses of description in the three sub-corpora – Communications, Vehicles and Surgical Tools – of the P2CWPs corpus revealed variety in the structural organisation of description. This changes according to the different communicative purposes of the companies included in the corpus. Description can be provided in a very technical form, as for instance in a simple grid, or can be developed into a discursive text involving interdependence between different rhetorical acts – description, explanation and evaluation.

In the P2CWP corpus description is restricted to Product pages that may be read following personally chosen paths or traversals and not a narrative sequence of events as, for instance, in short stories, novels or news articles. This means that a product is described in an autonomous page without requiring a connection to other links within the website.

Furthermore, whereas in Smith's (2003) analysis descriptive passages focus on specifics, in the P2CWPs the focus is on the particular features unambiguously distinguishing one product from the many others produced by the companies. The function of description is therefore highly instrumental.

How the products are described in P2CWPs recall the features of printed advertisements or brochures. For instance, the repetition of nominalization, stative verbs and adjectives have the function of accentuating the unique value of companies and promoting their products. Such features co-occur to create highly

positive evaluative discourse. On the other hand, the accumulation of strata of information about a described product helps build up a final positive effect on the browser.

In conformity with Smith's (2003) analysis of Description, the situation type characterizing the descriptions in the P2CWPs is that of a state. However, the present tense used does not express a particular state that holds at a particular time (Smith 2003: 76). Rather, accumulated strata of information aid progression through the various parts of the product described.

My data also underscore a difference between the adjectives used in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora and those in the Surgical Tools sub-corpus. The latter is characterized by a variety of adjectives which are strictly related to intensifying the quality and the excellent outcomes promised to the surgeon, but also affecting positively the patient's health and life. This contributes to creating an emotional impact. By contrast, the adjectives in the Communications and Vehicles sub-corpora are more generic and relate to the expectancy of the user. The findings therefore suggest a constraint on the choice of lexical items according to the type of product and to the company's end consumer and/or market.

The interdependence between the description and the evaluation of the products in the corpus reinforces branding, even when the companies indicate possible negative effects from using their products. On the other hand, it develops dialogue and trust between the companies and their reloaded consumers. This is reinforced by subjectivity, encoded by person markers, self-mention and adjectives, all explicitly conveying the perspective which marks out the company's identity (Hyland 2005; Samson 2007).

Lastly, the surface structure of the discursive descriptions in the P2CWPs confirm the organizational structure of topic and comment in Smith (2003). My findings, however, extend such a structure to a genre not representing an idealized world, as in novels or short stories, but to that of socio-economic reality, in which the browser has become a solitary expert, or reloaded consumer of products showcased in business to consumer websites.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Charl Dreyer MBChB., FCS., MMED (SURG) – Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital, Cape Town, South Africa – for kindly providing me with the necessary information

regarding the companies producing vascular and endovascular surgical tools.

<sup>2</sup> P2CWP's form an additional corpus to the existing B2CW's corpus of about 50,000 words, which I created in a previous COFIN/PRIN research project (2003-05).