

## Chapter 19

# Textuality on the Web: A Focus on Argumentative Text Types

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter focuses on computer mediated communication from a linguistic perspective, exploring aspects of textuality which have been impacted by the pervasive spread of the hypertext. Central features in the construction of texts are the notions of cohesion and coherence, originally tailored on linear time-based modes of communication, where both the elements and their sequentiality – fully controlled by the author – contribute to meaning making. In light of the disruption of linear sequentiality brought by the space-based logic of the hypertext, this chapter aims to understand how cohesion and coherence work in the website environment, with specific regard to genres characterised by an argumentative drive, which potentially suffer more than other text types from the loss of the author’s control on the linear dispositio of arguments. The analysis identifies different patterns for the construction of cohesion and coherence in argumentative websites, which accommodate traditional standards of textuality into the new environment.*

### INTRODUCTION

Of all elements characterizing electronic discourse, hypertextuality has probably been the most macroscopic, resulting in a loss of linearity as well as a reduced author’s control on text construction, with users gaining ‘power’ in that respect. Following closely are multimodality, i.e. the coexistence of different semiotic modes (verbal, visual and audio), and in more recent times

increased interactivity, marking the transformation of the website from a hypertextual information space to a ‘remote software interface’ (Garrett, 2000), where the user is increasingly pushed to action. Such a profound innovation has triggered far-reaching change in our conception of discourse, at least as far as its formal aspects are concerned, which – some claim – has started exerting a deep influence on literacy itself and on cognitive processes of meaning formation, whose effects cannot yet be fully grasped (Kress, 2003).

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A similar scenario certainly poses several important questions from the viewpoint of the adequacy of the tools traditionally employed by discourse analysts. Considering discourse from a linguistic perspective, where the textual component is the privileged object of investigation, this paper addresses a basic concern: in what way are textual realizations on the Web unique? What is the impact of website affordances on the standards of textuality? In particular, attention will be focussed on argumentative discourse, as one which more than others, might suffer from the loss of a rigorous logical progression, jeopardised on the Web by the disruption of linear reading modes.

Indeed, in argumentative discourse it is the logical sequence of reasoning that is fundamental, and arranging arguments in the best possible order (*dispositio* in classical rhetoric) was traditionally seen as a crucial ability of the orator in the pursuit of rhetorical effectiveness. On this ground, argumentation on the web, here epitomized by an NGO's campaign against genetically engineered food, is investigated with a view to understanding how coherence is imposed on the fragmented and multi-linear (Landow, 1992) content of a website.

## BACKGROUND

The impact of the hypertextual/web environment on textuality has been investigated both from a linguistic (Fritz, 1998; Tosca, 2000; Bolter, 2001; Askehave & Ellerup Nielsen, 2005; Garzone, 1997; Garzone, Catenaccio, & Poncini, 2007) and a computer-science perspective (for a review of the literature, see Carter, 2000), even though only rarely has the focus been specifically on argumentative discourse (Carter, 2000; 2003; Shauf, 2001; Degano, 2012; Catenaccio, 2012). Salient factors affecting textuality on the web, as emerged from previous research, include multimodality, hypertextuality, co-articulation and interactivity, multiple reading modes and granularity (Garzone, 2007, pp. 20 and ff).<sup>1</sup>

Multimodality refers to the possibility of combining different modes of communication in the same communicative event and is strictly dependent on multi-mediality (Askehave & Ellerup-Nielsen, 2004, pp. 12-13) i.e. the integration of different media into a single environment, which is an inherent characteristic of the Web. The ease with which visual and written semiotic resources, both in their static and dynamic forms, can be combined on a website has certainly contributed to accelerating the process of 'dethronization' of written discourse – which had been dominating western cultures since the seventeenth century (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 18) – started with the spread of TV. From the viewpoint of discourse analysis, this has raised the issue of the (in)adequacy of purely linguistic models to grasp the complexity of contemporary discourses.

If multimodality is not exclusive to the web, but only heightened by its affordances, hypertextuality is the very innovative trait of web-textuality.<sup>2</sup> According to a well-known definition by Landow (1992, pp. 3-4), hypertext designates "text composed of blocks of text – what Barthes terms a *lexia* – and the electronic links that join them." It is the presence of electronic links that disrupts the perception of text as something linear, creating what Landow calls 'multilinear or multisequential' texts. According to the same author the term *hypertextuality* is interchangeable with *hypermediality* as in fact web affordances are such that written text is as easily linked to visual content, sound, animation as to other texts properly intended.

Co-articulation and interactivity denote the reader's concurrence to the construction of the text, as the website architecture offers a number of different paths, but it is the user's action which determines the shape (i.e. the contents and their sequentiality) of the text s/he will actually engage with (Garzone, 2007, p. 23). This is all the more true when website visitors shift from the reading to the navigating mode (Finnemann, 1999), with the former corresponding to traditional sequential

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