

Writer-reader interaction: adopting a diachronic perspective

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Even though textbooks have been considered for some time as a secondary genre, they play a crucial role in the learners' understanding of a subject, as they provide an epistemological map of the discipline (Hyland, 1999) and tend to be organised in such a way as to render their reading at an appropriate level for students.

The most important function of textbooks is probably pedagogical. In fact, they provide the fundamental notions of a discipline, introducing students to the complexity and tentativeness of knowledge (Hyland, 1999). From a social semiotic perspective – appropriate when dealing with texts used by a group of people in interaction (Halliday and Hasan, 1989: 11), such as in the case of textbook writers and their readers – textbooks can be seen as instances of social meaning negotiated in a particular context or situation and thus as process as well as product, since they partake of both a transactional and interactional nature.

In textbook interaction, interactional discourse is at times foregrounded, as the writers enrich the process of knowledge and meaning negotiation with new shades of meaning, in order to prevent misunderstandings or objections on the part of their readers. In fact, textbook writers have to try and create the conditions for the readings by different readers to be as similar as possible, since, “[...] in apparent contrast to the rigidity of the written text, we are assured that each reading of it, even two readings by the same reader, is a unique communicative event” (Sinclair, 1985: 14). Because of their audience, textbooks provide only minimal training in the kinds of processes involved in research discourse, offering, on the other hand, explicit assistance in extracting information (Hyland, 2000).

Taking into account the clearly dialogic nature of written language (cf. Bakhtin, 1986 and Nystrand, 1986, 1997) and of texts (Hoey, 2001), the present contribution will investigate the interaction between a textbook author and his readers, with focus on a specific case-study of a highly successful textbook in the field of economics. Successive editions of P.A. Samuelson's *Economics* will be studied with a view to investigating how the features of the writer-reader interaction have evolved and changed, during the time-span (1948-2001) which separates the first and the seventeenth edition.

Revisions of the textbook will be shown to pay increasing attention to metadiscourse elements as well as to updating transactional content. The analysis will therefore highlight the presence of different patterns of diachronic variation in textual and interpersonal elements.