

# ITALIAN AND UK UNIVERSITY WEBSITES: COMPARING COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

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## **Abstract**

The Bologna Declaration, with its focus on a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), has encouraged trends to teach courses exclusively in English, promoted students and staff mobility and asked universities to change and implement reforms at a local, national and European level. In order to comply with this international regulatory framework, European universities have had to change the way they communicate and disseminate information, especially through the web by using English as a Lingua Franca (Mauranen 2010).

The present paper explores the acWaC-EU corpus, a collection of Irish, British and Maltese university websites and other European university websites in English (Bernardini and Ferraresi 2013).

A previous study (Venuti and Nasti 2013) conducted on the corpus has shown that native English universities use a more descriptive, promotional language with a focus on students' needs while other European universities seem to be more interested in university matters and in the internationalization process without considering students' concerns. Within this framework, this article confines its analysis to the comparison of Italian and UK university websites in order to investigate how UK universities employ movement metaphors on their institutional websites, and to what extent Italian universities use the conceptual frame of movement with a self-promotional purpose as English and Irish universities seem to do. On the basis of the analysis we try to assess to what extent Italian universities use English only to comply with the international rules or whether they are actually interested in entering the European higher education system, addressing and attracting a greater number of students. This paper also explores whether Italian universities are competing at a global level or are just providing a mere web-mediated version of their curricula and activities.

## **1. Introduction**

This study is part of a larger multidisciplinary project that involves researchers active in different fields such as corpus linguistics, multimodality, economics and governance studies. The project aims at investigating communicative and organizational strategies used by non-English speaking universities, particularly focusing on Italian university websites and practices, in order to achieve internationalization and greater European integration. The multidisciplinary research also aims at proposing a set of policy recommendations by exploring current international experiences, and evaluating

to what extent competition between universities would affect social welfare. The research is carried out in cooperation with the University of Bologna in Forlì, where scholars collected the acWaC-EU corpus, a corpus of institutional academic English as opposed to disciplinary genres.

In the following subsections of this section we provide an overview of the Bologna Process developments and the consequences of its provisions (subsection 1.2) and an outline of some previous works in the academic discourse and metaphor analysis in the educational domain (subsection 1.3).

### 1.2. *The Bologna Process and the EHEA*

In 1998 the ministers of France, the UK, Germany and Italy signed the Sorbonne Declaration whose aim was to create a common framework of reference within the intended European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and promote mobility for both the students and the teaching staff. A year later, the goals of the Declaration were confirmed in the Bologna Declaration, which aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area and strengthening the competitiveness and attractiveness of all European Higher Education Institutions, along with staff and student mobility and the recognition of degrees and courses across Europe. The objectives of the Bologna Process combine to facilitate internationalization by adopting a system of easily readable and comparable degrees and a system with two main cycles (undergraduate/graduate), by establishing a system of credits, by promoting mobility and European co-operation in quality assurance and assessment.

Since the Bologna Process, European universities have been asked to implement reforms at a local, national and European level aiming at harmonizing practices and systems to enhance mobility. Moreover, internationalization in European Higher Education institutions has been prompted by a) increasing the number of networks and partnerships for curriculum development as well as research and innovation; b) increasing the number of joint degrees; c) enhancing the vertical mobility of students; opening up new degrees in order to attract students; and d) developing marketing strategies for the promotion of European Higher Education abroad. Undoubtedly, over the last two decades, European Higher Education institutions have been subject to internal and external trends that have led them to change and organize their internationalization activities.

These implementations have enhanced the attractiveness of EU universities across the world but have also moved towards a standardization of the information universities provide. Universities in fact were asked to translate their university websites at least into English in order to address an international audience. As a result, universities have had to change the way they disseminate information and have had to adjust the information provided to the needs of international students. Italian universities have implemented this requirement to different degrees, and preliminary investigations reveal a rather disappointing situation (Venuti and Nasti 2013; Nasti *et al.* 2014).

### 1.3. *Previous research in the academic domain and educational metaphors*

Academic discourse has been a breeding ground for many scholars interested in how linguistic features vary across registers and disciplines. Some research studies have taken into consideration spoken and written English within the academic environment, focusing on traditionally neglected areas such as interactions in study groups, dialogues

with administrative staff, web-based course guides and prospectuses (Biber and Conrad 1999; Halliday 1988). Biber (2006) shed light on a range of features that are specific to the various academic registers, including the institutional ones, pointing out that the correct fruition of these texts is in fact an essential requirement for the success of disciplinary academic communication.

Critical discourse analysis has also focused on academic discourse and on the changes that it has undergone. Some scholars have shown that in accommodating their message on the web, universities use linguistic patterns that indicate a marketization and popularization of university discourse (Fairclough 1993; Swales 2004). It seems that universities, like business, are trying to present their courses as products to sell and are considering students as valuable customers to persuade. Mautner (2005) shows that, in changing their communication style, universities tend to borrow commercial models and words from the business domain and use persuasive techniques. Fairclough and Wodak (2008: 20) also analysed the Bologna Declaration and other texts related to the European Area of Higher Education System proving that textual analysis is “a semiotic point of entry to analysis of governance and *regulation*”.

Within academic discourse, attention has often focused on the use of English as a Lingua Franca which has been considered a privileged code of communication due to the flexible and international features of academia (Mauranen 2010). Research on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has mainly focused on spoken corpora (Mauranen 2010; Seidlhofer *et al.* 2006) or on disciplinary writing (Mauranen 2003)<sup>1</sup>. A recent case study has focused on institutional genres from a descriptive point of view proving that institutional academic genres are more of a breeding ground than disciplinary genres for comparing cultural features of native and non-native varieties (Bernardini, Ferraresi and Gaspari 2010). Other approaches have focused on the translation process of Italian university websites (Palumbo 2013) as a particular form of localization.

Web-as-corpus investigations on the academic domain include Thelwall (2005) who compared textual features of university websites from Australia, UK and New Zealand. A more recent study (Bernardini and Ferraresi 2013) compared the use of modal and semi-modal verbs as expressions of stance in the native and non-native varieties. Academic discourse covers a very wide area to explore and investigate, especially in the globalized and international era we are living in.

Educational contexts have been a much-debated area and metaphor analysis has been a useful means of investigation to understand the complex practice of teaching and learning. Both qualitative and quantitative studies on metaphors have proved that these figures of speech and thought are central in educational discourses (Browne, Hiers and Quinn 1995, 1998; Deignan, Gabrys and Solska 1997). Scholars have investigated metaphors in education with particular emphasis on the student-teacher relationship pointing out how metaphors are used to help students understand complex contents easily, or to construe teachers' roles and responsibilities (Cameron 2003; Chapman 1997; Clarken 1997).

It has been revealed that metaphors are powerful tools appealing to the shared beliefs and values of potential students and that they are an open window on the perceptions and experiences of the participants of a given community. As students should be

<sup>1</sup> In 2015, the compilation of the Corpus of Written English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (WrELFA) was completed, making available a written complement to the spoken ELFA corpus (see <http://www.helsinki.fi/englanti/elfa/wrelfa.html>).

the first addressees of universities, and metaphors appeal to common shared values and are easily recognizable, activating a close relation between the hearer and the speaker, they might be useful linguistic resources for involving students in university discourse. Moreover, metaphors are potentially persuasive and are also commonly used in the advertising genre. As a result they might be valid, communicative devices to attract potential students.

Against this framework, the present paper aims to compare, through a quantitative and a qualitative approach, how Italian universities and UK/Irish universities employ movement metaphors on their institutional websites. The study examines to what extent Italian ELF universities tend to use the conceptual frame of the journey metaphor (Turner 1998) with a self-promotional purpose as English and Irish universities seem to do. It also intends to explore whether Italian universities are competing in a globalized era to attract a greater number of international students and are boosting the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) set by the regulatory framework of the Bologna Process.

## 2. Data and methodology

The data analysed in the present paper come from the acWaC-EU corpus, an acronym for “academic Web-as-Corpus in Europe”. The corpus has been developed by a group of scholars of the University of Bologna through the web-as-corpus method and is itself part of a larger project (Bernardini and Ferraresi 2013). AcWaC-EU is an annotated monolingual comparable corpus of nearly 90 million words of web pages in English crawled from the websites of European universities based in countries where English is both a native language and a lingua franca.

The university websites have been collected using a semi-automatic procedure that consists in a manual selection of relevant URLs from a list of the URLs of all the European university websites published on the Webometrics website<sup>2</sup>. These URLs were then used as seeds to collect and download web pages through the BootCaT toolkit (Baroni and Bernardini 2004). The resulting corpus allows researchers to compare native and lingua franca (ELF) varieties of English in the institutional academic domain. Tables 1 and 2 below provide a general overview of the distribution of the number of texts retrieved with BootCaT, and the total number of running words of the various subcorpora based on language families.

For the present paper, we will base our investigation on the comparison between the whole of the native English subcorpus and the Italian ELF subcorpus that consists of 3275 texts and 1,806,499 tokens. In a previous study comparing the whole of the native English and of the ELF subcorpora (Venuti and Nasti 2013), we highlighted how native English universities tend to use a more descriptive, promotional language with a focus on students’ needs while other European universities tend to be more interested in university matters (as opposed to student matters) and in the internationalization process, particularly in issues related to the Erasmus exchange programme.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.webometrics.info](http://www.webometrics.info). Universities and other higher education institutions are listed according to their presence on the web.

Language family	No. of texts	No. of tokens
Baltic	2052	1141921
Caucasian	747	361303
Germanic	21130	9909694
Germanic-Romance	2009	1235474
Hellenic	1439	874852
Hellenic-Turkic	487	272728
Illyric	250	143699
Romance	16847	10615280
Romance-Germanic	2124	1069884
Semitic	1251	669595
Slavic	17025	10663503
Thracian	404	211865
Turkic	2611	1392176
Uralic	4920	3134336
Total	73296	41696310

**Table 1.** Composition of the ELF subcorpus

Language family	No. of texts	No. of tokens
Germanic	61465	41911277
Germanic-Celtic	6286	3974306
Germanic-Semitic	260	286846
Total	68011	46172429

**Table 2.** Composition of the native English subcorpus

Starting from a similar approach, we compared the native English and the Italian ELF subcorpora to investigate the use of lexical items that could express a conceptual frame describing the students' experience as a 'path', a journey that displays both a spatial and a temporal dimension (i.e. beginning, intermediary stages, final achievement), as it has been revealed that students' educational experience is often described in terms of a journey or path. The journey metaphor in education is a conventional metaphor in both the Italian and in the Anglo-Saxon contexts. There is ample evidence of linguistic realizations in both Italian and English educational discourses with expressions such as *percorso formativo* (literally an 'educational path'), and 'to embark on an educational journey' being fairly common ways of describing the learning experience. Therefore, we hypothesized that, on the basis of the conventionality of the metaphor, there should not be substantial differences in the native English and in the Italian ELF subcorpora with regard to the linguistic realization of the same conceptual frame.

In order to analyse how the learning/student experience is conveyed in native English and Italian ELF university websites, we decided to focus on key words, as they tend to

highlight differences between the compared corpora (Scott and Tribble 2006). In the identification of key words, we followed the procedure suggested by Gabrielatos and Marchi (2012), according to which keyness is computed as the difference in normalized frequencies of each lexical item in the two subcorpora, whenever the difference is statistically significant. The authors suggest that traditional methods of computing keyness merely highlight the statistical significance that a word is 'key' in a corpus and not how 'key' that word is. Regardless of this difference, the statistical significance is very often erroneously used to rank key words in order to identify the most salient words for the analysis, i.e. those words that most identify corpus A in comparison to corpus B and *vice versa*. Gabrielatos and Marchi suggest that what is relevant in identifying and ranking keywords is the frequency difference, which is the calculation that actually highlights words that are more salient in a given comparison, and not the statistical significance *per se*.

We therefore compared the wordlists of the two subcorpora, and selected only those words whose frequency difference was statistically significant according to a Chi-square test, and whose normalized frequency was bigger than ten occurrences per million words. This procedure left us with nearly two thousand keywords for each subcorpus.

The lists of keywords were manually read to identify candidate terms that could be the linguistic realization of the journey metaphor. Once they had been identified, we concordanced them to verify whether they were actually used metaphorically, and then deleted those occurrences when the term was used literally or discarded the term altogether if it was not used as part of the journey scenario. Only the terms used metaphorically in the native English and in the Italian ELF subcorpora were taken into account and are found in Tables 3 and 5 respectively. They are listed according to the normalized frequency in the corpus in which they are 'key'; normalized frequencies for the reference corpus are also provided.

### 3. Analysis

Our analyses start from a quantitative description of the number of lexical items identified and the number of their occurrences in each subcorpora to compare their distribution, and then we provide a more detailed analysis of representative samples to show how linguistic metaphors are used.

#### 3.1. *Movement metaphors in native English university websites*

As mentioned earlier, Table 3 below contains the list of the lexical items that were identified as linguistic realizations of the journey metaphor.

As is visible, the key words that express the metaphorical journey are frequently distributed in the native English websites and account for 34 lexical items and a total number of 4602 occurrences; total frequency in the Italian ELF subcorpus accounts for just 2170 occurrences. The greater number of terms and their higher frequency seem to suggest that the journey scenario is more present in the native English subcorpus.

The journey metaphor can be read metaphorically as a path to follow having a beginning, a middle and an end. Some lexemes only describe one part of the path while others express different stages in the path to be followed. Table 4 shows the journey sce-

WORD	NAT pMw	ELF IT pMw	WORD	NAT pMw	ELF IT pMw
entry	696	210	pathway	77	5
complete	416	306	journey	66	43
designed	398	220	explores	64	28
background	333	256	backgrounds	58	23
completed	277	203	routes	58	16
progress	244	121	pathways	55	10
explore	240	72	explored	42	22
stage	233	128	initially	34	17
completion	185	96	gateway	28	3
road	174	36	entries	28	13
forward	128	75	commencing	25	1
progression	113	7	progressing	21	1
completing	111	45	entrants	18	1
route	94	16	commence	17	3
move	93	64	progressed	11	1
exploring	85	30	embark	14	5
moving	81	48			
TOTAL				4602	2170

Table 3. Metaphorical terms in the native English subcorpus

Beginning	Middle	End
entry	progress	complete
background	explore	completed
stage*	stage*	stage*
route*	road	completion
initial	forward	completing
backgrounds	route*	gateway*
routes*	move	
initially	exploring	
gateway*	moving	
entries	pathway	
commencing	journey	
entrants	explores	
commence	routes*	
embark	pathways	
	explored	
	progressing	
	progressed	

Table 4. Journey scenario in the native English subcorpus

nario in detail by grouping the metaphorical lexemes according to the different stages they describe.

Table 4 reveals that some metaphorical lexemes such as *stage*, *route* and *gateway* can be found at the beginning, middle and end of the educational path. It is interesting to notice that many lexemes are used to describe the ‘progress’ stage, the one that focuses the most on the student’s experience. Examples 1 and 2 are only exemplifications of the

way metaphorical patterns are used in the native English subcorpus in order to provide an overview of the analysis carried out herewith.

- 1) Many of our students decide to stay with us for postgraduate study either to do individual research or to take a postgraduate course such as our MA in TEFL or MA in Applied Linguistics. We hope you too will decide to join us and **embark upon an exciting and fulfilling journey towards** a successful career.
- 2) At Kent, you can study the history of these ancient civilisations inside one programme, or you can follow a **broader pathway** that engages the study of history with that of ancient literature or archaeology.

In Example 1, taken from the Manchester Metropolitan University, the metaphorical lexemes ‘embark upon’, ‘journey’ and ‘towards’ are used to promote the university MA courses. In fact the metaphorical patterns are positively evaluated in terms of a worthwhile experience as the adjectives ‘exciting’ and ‘fulfilling’ indicate. The positive evaluation is also enhanced by the adjective ‘successful’ that make the destination ‘career’ a desirable endpoint.

Example 2 also confirms the use of journey-related metaphors to talk about programmes and learning. The metaphorical pattern, creating the conceptual frame of journey in students’ minds, might facilitate students’ choice of the right programme. Both examples 1 and 2 reveal that metaphorical lexemes related to the journey scenario are used as a promotional tool and a means to help students understand university matters.

The analysis has shown that the native English university websites use a greater number of lexemes that confirm the conceptualization of the educational discourse and learning as a journey in which students have to follow a path with different routes towards a destination, which might be the completion of a master degree or a job career.

### 3.2. *Movement metaphors in Italian ELF university websites*

Table 5 shows the key words that were identified in the Italian ELF subcorpus. The first striking difference is the limited number of lexical items in comparison with Table 3. Not only are there just 12 terms but also their frequency – 1681 total occurrences – is much lower compared to the total frequency of metaphorical terms identified in the native English subcorpus, as shown in Table 3. In both cases figures account for less than half of the corresponding figures in the native English subcorpus.

WORD	ELF IT pMw	NAT pMw	WORD	ELF IT pMw	NAT pMw
admission	506	92	goal	108	34
point	223	152	path	102	40
orientation	144	43	reach	99	61
mission	143	69	reached	43	25
entrance	143	88	paths	38	18
goals	121	52	enters	11	3
TOTAL				1681	677

*Table 5.* Metaphorical terms in the Italian ELF subcorpus



<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Middle</b>	<b>End</b>
admission	point*	point*
point*	orientation	goals
entrance	mission	goal
enters	path	reach
	paths	reached

**Table 6.** Journey scenario in the Italian ELF subcorpus

Another consideration is that the list seems to be lacking in those verbs (*to commence, to progress, to explore, to complete, to embark*) that were used in the native English subcorpus to describe the student's experience as a 'journey'. This is even more visible if we look at Table 6, where the terms are divided according to the stage of the journey. Nearly all the key words seem to describe the process in abstract terms rather than describing the process students undergo during their university experience.

Some of the differences that emerge from the keyword analysis may be due to either characteristics in the use of ELF in this specific context, the use of 'path(s)' instead of pathway(s) and 'point' rather than 'stage'<sup>3</sup>, or to describe concepts that are culturally specific. This is the case of 'orientation', which occurs in the Italian ELF websites to refer to the *orientamento studenti*, the expression used by Italian universities to describe practices aiming at helping students during their study career, as shown in examples 3 and 4 from the website of the Università di Milano and the Università di Bologna, respectively.

3) There was also an increase in the University's commitment to providing **student services (orientation, internships and training, online education)**.

4) The Welcome Week, planned in September before the classes start, is designed to show to **new admitted students** what UNIBO is all about. Students will attend **orientation meetings and Kick-off meetings** for each Program.

Having accounted for these cultural differences, there are even fewer terms which are used in the Italian ELF subcorpus to conceptualize the student's experience as a journey and, as said earlier, the identified linguistic expressions seem to describe the process at an abstract level (*entrance, admission, mission*) rather than describing the student as a traveller embarking on a journey as example 1 suggested.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

The analysis has confirmed that there is ample evidence of path metaphors in the native English university websites. On the other hand, it has revealed that Italian uni-

<sup>3</sup> If we look at normalized frequencies in the two subcorpora, this becomes fairly clear: 'pathway(s)' occurs 132 times per million words, and 'path(s)' 140; 'stage' occurs 233 times and 'point' 223. The terms in the two subcorpora are used with similar normalized frequencies and mainly for the same functions, and are therefore identified as key words only due to the selection of different linguistic realizations for the same metaphorical frame.

versities use metaphorical patterns relating to the journey domain to a lesser degree. As has been shown, native English and Italian ELF university websites differ in terms of the range of linguistic realizations of the journey metaphor and their frequency. However, it may be argued that keyword analysis mainly highlights differences, and consequently some similarities may have been overlooked. It can also be pointed out that differences are a result of translation practices and/or cultural differences, and that some other different metaphors might be found in Italian ELF university websites. Nevertheless, based on previous studies (Nasti *et. al* 2014) and the present analysis, it can be said that the relative dearth of metaphorical lexemes might be due to a lack of awareness of effective web-based communication in English. It seems in fact that Italian universities are just complying with regulations when communicating via the web, for instance, describing the education journey at an abstract level rather than talking to enrolled students and prospective students, providing them with advice and encouragement for their 'journey'. Therefore, in order to proceed towards greater integration and internationalization of a common European Higher Education system, and to compete with other European institutions, Italian universities need to improve the way they communicate via the web through the pages aimed at an international target audience.

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