

KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION IN CYBERSPACE

Discourse Analysis of Professional Web Forums as Internet Subgenre

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TEZĂ DE DOCTORAT / 2011

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
RESUMEN.....	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
REZUMAT	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
1. INTRODUCTION.....		8
1.1 Motivation of the Investigation.....		9
1.2 Hypotheses		10
1.3 Purpose of the Investigation.....		11
1.4 Phases of the Investigation.....		12
1.5 Outline of the Investigation.....		12
2. EXPLORING TEH DISCURSIVE FIELD OF CYBERSPACE;		Error! Marcador no definido.
2.1 The Cyberspace: communicational environment;		Error! Marcador no definido.
2.2 Electronic Discourse. General Overview;		Error! Marcador no definido.
2.2.1 What is E-Discourse?		15
2.2.2 E-Discourse Categories		17
2.2.3 Emergence and Development...;		Error! Marcador no definido.
2.3 The Virtual Communities.....		18
2.3.1 What is a Virtual Community?.....		19
2.3.2 Categories of Virtual Communities.....		21
2.4 Professional Web Forum: a Virtual Community.....		25
3. KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION ON THE INTERNET;		Error! Marcador no definido.
3.1 What Is Knowledge?	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
3.2 Knowledge Structures	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
3.3 Discursive Forms of Knowledge.....	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
3.4 Transmission of Knowledge.....	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
3.5 Explanatory Strategies Used in Knowledge Transmission;		Error! Marcador no definido.
3.5.1 Definition.....	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
3.5.2 Procedures/Instructions	;	Error! Marcador no definido.
3.5.3 Prototypical Explanation	;	Error! Marcador no definido.

3.6	Knowledge Transmission on the Professional Web Forums;	Error! Marcador no definido.
4.	APPROACHES IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS	27
4.1	The Complex notion of Discourse	27
4.2	Approaches to Discourse Analysis	28
4.3	A Social-Communicational Model of Discourse	31
4.3.1	Discursive Identities	32
4.3.2	Objectives of the Verbal Exchange	33
4.3.3	Discursive Device	34
4.4	Text Linguistics and Discourse Analysis	35
4.4.1	Explanatory, expository, and informative texts	37
4.4.2	Parameters of the Explanation	38
4.5	Conversation and Verbal Interactions	39
4.5.1	The Construction of Interactions	40
4.5.2	The Organisation of Actions within Interactions	41
4.5.3	Thematic Progression	42
5.	COMPUTER WEB FORUMS CORPUS DESCRIPTION;	Error! Marcador no definido.
5.1	Introduction	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.2	Issues in Corpus Creation	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3	Design and Implementation	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.1	Protocol	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.2	Methodology	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3	Parameters of the Sub-corpora	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3.1	English Sub-corpus	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3.2	Spanish Sub-corpus	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3.3	French Sub-corpus	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3.4	Romanian Sub-corpus	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3.5	Catalan Sub-corpus	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.3.3.6	Computer Web Forums Corpus	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.4	Web Forum Communication Profile	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.5	Statistics of Web Forums Communication	;Error! Marcador no definido.
5.6	Conclusions on Corpus Structure	;Error! Marcador no definido.
6.	METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS	43
6.1	Conceptual Aspects	43
6.2	Phases of the analysis	46
6.3	Protocol of Analysis	;Error! Marcador no definido.
7.	KNOWLEDGE TRANSMISSION ON THE PROFESSIONAL WEB FORUMS	;Error! Marcador no definido.
7.1	Discourses of Ignorance. Identity on Web Forums	;Error! Marcador no definido.

- 7.1.1 The Construction of Identity on the English Corpus;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.1.1 The Sincere Locutor;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.1.2 The Addressee as Adviser ...;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.1.3 The Stranger behind the Lines. The Appeal to the Audience;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.2 Construction of Identity in the Spanish Sub-corpus;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.2.1 The Emotional Locutor;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.2.2 The Valuable Addressee.....;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.2.3 The Passive Audience;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.3 Construction of Identity in the French Sub-corpus;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.3.1 The Challenging Locutor.....;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.3.2 The Minimised Addressee...;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.3.3 The Impersonal Audience ...;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.4 Constructions of Identity in the Romanian Sub-corpus;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.4.1 The Impenetrable Locutor ...;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.4.2 The Discourse of Action.....;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.4.3 The Supporting Addressee ...;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.4.4 The Friendly Audience.....;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.5 Construction of Identity in the Catalan Sub-corpus;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.5.1 The Powerful Locutor;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.5.2 The Addressee, an Informant;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.5.3 The Audience, the Imperceptible Expert;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.5.4 The Discourse of the Distance;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.5.5 The Bilingual/Multilingual Locutor;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.1.6 Conclusions on Identity on Web Forums;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2 Discourses of Experience: Explanation on Web Forums;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1 Explanation on English Forums;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1.1 Introductory Strategies;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1.2 Explanations to Explanations;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1.3 Prototypical Explanation and Other Types of Explanations;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1.4 Fewer References;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1.5 Concluding Closures.....;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.1.6 Heterogeneous Explanatory Text;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.2 Explanation on Spanish Forums;**Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.2.1 Supporting Introductory Strategies;**Error! Marcador no definido.**

- 7.2.2.2 Rhetorical Explanations; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.2.3 Modalised Explanatory Cores; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.2.4 Empathic Closures.....; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.2.5 Brief Explanatory Text.....; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.3 Explanation on French Forums.; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.1 Clarifying Introduction of Explanations; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.2 Definitions and Other Types of Explanations; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.3 Sporadic Meta-Explanations; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.4 References and Quotations..; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.5 Humour in the Explanation .; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.6 Closures and Invitation to Action; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.3.7 Uniform Explanatory Text ..; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.4 Explanation on Romanian Forums; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.4.1 Introducing Explanation by Epistemic Modalisation; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.4.2 Concise Instructions and Other Types of Explanations; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.4.3 Personal, Titles and Internet References; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.4.4 Complex Meta-explanatory Structures; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.4.5 Fewer Closures.....; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.4.6 Diversity in Explanatory Texts; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.5 Explanation on Catalan Forums; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.5.1 Introducing Explanation as Possibility or Alternative; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.5.2 Description of Actions and Other Explanatory Cores; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.5.3 Fewer Meta-explanations; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.5.4 Explanatory References.....; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.5.5 Encouraging Closures.....; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.2.5.6 Complex Procedural Structures; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.2.6 Conclusions to Explanation on the Web Forums; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
- 7.3 Knowledge Construction: Negotiation between Ignorance and Experience ; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.3.1 Introduction; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.3.2 Explanatory Interactions on the English Web Forums; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.3.2.1 The Unfinished Discussion .; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.3.2.2 The English Web Forum Polilogue; **Error! Marcador no definido.**
 - 7.3.2.3 The Tardive Solution.....; **Error! Marcador no definido.**

7.3.3	Explanation as Interaction on the Spanish Web Forums;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.3.1	Unexpected Turn Taking.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.3.2	Symmetric Organisation of Actions in an Interaction;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.3.3	The Changing Themes.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.4	Explanation as Interaction on the French Web Forums;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.4.1	Polite Alternating Turns	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.4.2	Multireferential Interventions;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.4.3	Interrogation by Experts.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.5	Explanatory Interactions on the Romanian Web Forums;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.5.1	Waiting for the Right Solution;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.5.2	Multiple Reactions	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.5.3	The Quotation and Textual Cohesion;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.6	Explanation as Interaction on the Catalan Web Forums;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.6.1	Clarifying Turns	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.6.2	The Linear Interaction.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.6.3	Rephrasing and Linguistic Precision;	Error! Marcador no definido.
7.3.7	Conclusions on the Explanation as Interaction;	Error! Marcador no definido.
8.	CONCLUSIONS TO THE PROFESSIONAL WEB FORUM COMMUNICATION	
	48	
8.1	Conclusions on the Genre	48
8.2	Knowledge Transmission on Professional Web Forums.....	50
8.3	Knowledge Transmission across Languages.....	51
8.4	Original Contributions to the Domain.....	54
8.5	Further Development of the Investigation.....	55
9.	ANNEXES	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.1	Professional Web Forum Corpus. Samples;	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.1.1	English Sub-corpus. Sample.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.1.2	Spanish Sub-corpus. Sample	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.1.3	French Sub-corpus. Sample.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.1.4	Romanian Sub-corpus. Sample.;	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.1.5	Catalan Sub-corpus. Sample.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.2	Lists of Participants.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
9.3	Titles of the Professional Web Forums;	Error! Marcador no definido.
10.	BIBLIOGRAPHY	Error! Marcador no definido.
10.1	Books.....;	Error! Marcador no definido.
10.2	Articles	Error! Marcador no definido.

10.3 Webography;Error! Marcador no definido.

KEYWORDS

Linguistics, discourse analysis, genres of the web, knowledge communication, professional web forums, knowledge transmission, conversation analysis, genre description, explanatory sequence, text linguistics, corpus analysis, comparable corpora.

Lingvistică, analiza discursului, genuri ale Internetului, comunicarea de cunoștințe, forumuri web profesionale, transmiterea de cunoaștere, analiza conversației, descrierea genurilor, secvența explicativă, lingvistica textului, analiză de corpus, corpusuri comparabile.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the Internet, its features have been used to communicate knowledge between researchers in different universities or scientific laboratories, and later, with the increasing growth of the World Wide Web, knowledge became a collective good shared by its users. Long before becoming a place for commerce and entertainment, the Internet was a social virtual place where people around the world shared knowledge and information.

One of the first testimonies about the life of a virtual community is presented by Howard Rheingold in his book *The Virtual Community. Homesteading on the electronic frontier* (1993, 2000). In its introduction, the author affirms that in the virtual community of whom he was member, he found three important collective goods the other members shared with one another and which maintained the virtual community of the WELL united. The three collective goods were: social network capital, knowledge capital, and communion. The author describes his experience in sharing knowledge on the Internet as:

Knowledge capital is what I found in the WELL when I asked questions of the community as an online brain trust representing a highly varied accumulation of expertise (Rheingold, 2000, p.xviii).

Later in his book the author recounts a personal situation when knowledge transmission through cyberspace had been essential to solving a health problem:

In the summer of 1986, my then-two-year-old daughter picked up a tick [...], and we weren't quite sure how to go about getting it off. My wife, Judy, called the pediatrician. It was eleven o'clock in the evening. I logged onto the WELL. I got my answer online within minutes [...] I had removed the tick by the time Judy got the callback from the pediatrician's office. (Rheingold, 2000, p.1)

The author expresses his astonishment concerning the new features of communicating and learning the virtual environment provided to its users. He was surprised to observe that Internet wasn't only about meeting new people and spending time with them talking about hobbies and general topics. The Internet was a place where one could learn and share knowledge through communicational interaction with the other members of the virtual community. A new way of learning was about to emerge and the author describes its uniqueness as follows:

What amazed me wasn't just the speed with which we obtained precisely the information we needed to know, right when we needed to know it. It was also the immense inner sense of security that comes with discovering that real people – most of them parents, some of them nurses, doctors, and midwives – are available, around the clock, if you need them. (Rheingold, 2000, p.1)

Since the golden days of the beginning of the virtual communities, when the Internet users experimented for the first time how useful virtual communication could be, many other systems of knowledge transmission have been created. Today, learning through Internet is no more surprising, formal and informal learning being habitual activities in the actual life of the virtual communities.

A plethora of neologisms describe now the complexity of the learning phenomenon in the cyberspace: distance learning, e-learning, online learning, v-learning, virtual collaborative learning, computer based training, Internet based training, computer supported collaborative learning, social learning, technology enhanced learning, mobile learning, ubiquitous learning, lifelong learning, and the list continues. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between the different methods of learning on the Internet, and sometimes complicated terms turn out to be mere synonyms. Nevertheless, as one can observe learning on the Internet has become a complicated matter. A very rich bibliography describes the new implemented methods of in-classroom e-learning, and today many schools and universities present a diversified offer of online/distance learning curricula in addition to the traditional curricula.

The majority of the terms mentioned above refer to forms of learning developed by educational institutions (formal learning based on curricula), while the genuine form of learning existing on the Internet since its beginnings seems to have been marginalised or even forgotten. Only few works mention the professional web forums and their importance to the transmission of specialised knowledge between its members and the Internet users.

But is e-learning on a professional web forum different from e-learning in school? Do the professional web forum members talk differently when they learn on the professional web forum than when they are in the classroom? If they speak and relate differently on the Internet, how exactly do they speak? In what way is the communicational relation they establish on the Internet different from face-to-face conversation? What language features precisely do the interlocutors use in order to communicate knowledge?

Since the discourse(s) of the Internet have gained recently growing attention from the discourse analysts and many scholars have already described some interesting features of the Internet communication, we, too, will try to focus on this domain and investigate a particular web genre.

1.1 Motivation of the Investigation

The motivation of our choice consists in the fact that professional web forums are a less studied form of computer mediated communication. Considering the main web genres: the email, the chat, and, the web forum, the first two present a richer bibliography of studies than the web forum.

The importance of the web forum consists in being the unique form of interactive knowledge transmission in informal learning situations that can be easily studied¹. Being public, it can be studied without any issue of copyright infringement, since the participants in the discussion assume that their texts are publicly accessed by anyone in the web. The web forum presents a rich thematic diversity: entertainment, news, shopping, professions, etc. Another advantage would be the fact that it is the most durable and challenging of the web genres. The previously mentioned The WELL, a multiuser system especially known for its forums, began its activity back in 1983 and is still functioning to this day, being regarded as one of the oldest systems of Internet communication. Such durability allows the researcher to access a very rich linguistic content chronologically and thematically organised.

Besides the complexity and the diversity of the linguistic material displayed by the web forums, another aspect that has motivated us in choosing this subject consists in the fact that there are very few descriptions of web forums. All of them are very general and tend to describe the web forums as a homogeneous form of communication. Or, it is obvious that people communicate differently on a forum of opinions, on a forum of rumours and gossip, or on a professional web forum.

So far there has been no reliable classification of the forum types, and the web forum seems to have multiple forms of communication. A description of the web forums must take into account the variety of forms of this genre. Since our interest is focused on knowledge transmission in cyberspace, we have decided to describe in the present work the professional web forum as a subgenre of the web forum.

Our choice is also motivated by the fact that one of the most important aspects of the Internet is represented by the interactive transmission and communication of knowledge, the main purpose of the Internet since it was implemented and became public.

1.2 Hypotheses

We set off on our investigation with the following hypotheses of research:

Web forums are a modality to transmit knowledge that has been used since the first implementations of the interactive systems of communication on the Internet. Like *emails* and *chats*, the *web forums* present a rich variety of themes, one of which is the transmission of knowledge. The web forums dedicated to the transmission of knowledge on the Internet are known as *professional web forums* and it is on this topic we will focus our attention in the present work.

Since the majority of web genres are described as *a hybrid between written and oral discourse*, we assume, based on the bibliography, that the communicational interaction on the *professional web forum* is structured very similarly to a *written conversation*.

Due to the form of written conversation of the professional web forums, the transmission of knowledge is realised interactively through negotiation between two or

¹ Knowledge transmission can also be performed by *email* or by *chat*. The problem is that email is a private web genre, since it is meant to communicate information between two or a determined group of persons, which makes it very difficult to study how knowledge is transmitted. *Chat* can be private or public, depending on the choice of the participants in the discussion, but the conversation is meant to disappear when the discussion ends, which is an inconvenient for a systematic study. The *web forum* contains texts produced by a determined group of persons whose reception is public since everyone on the Internet can read them.

more parties. Consequently, knowledge is constructed collectively, collaboratively, and interactively.

We assume that within the web forum genre there are different types of web forums, each developing a different type of discourse adapted to the objectives of the communication, the theme and the participants involved in the communication. We also assume that the communication of knowledge on the professional web forums presents special features that distinguish its discourse from that of other types of web forums.

We assume that knowledge communication on the professional web forums is realised through explanation. Since the explanation has turned out to be a complex phenomenon, we assume that different types of explanations and explanatory strategies may be used on the professional web forums. The prevailing presence of the explanation in the text of the web forum determines a specific discursive configuration.

This specific discourse can be observed on the professional web forums in different languages. The discourse of the professional web forum presents similarities and differences across languages.

During our investigation we will procure the evidence to confirm or infirm these hypotheses in order to obtain a relevant description of the professional web forum as a web subgenre.

1.3 Purpose of the Investigation

The current investigation has three main objectives: a) to describe the professional web forum as a discursive subgenre of the web forum, b) to illustrate the mechanism of knowledge transmission on the professional web forums, and c) to observe the variation across languages of the professional web forum as a subgenre of the knowledge transmission process.

Different secondary objectives derive from the main objectives. In order to describe the professional forum as a subgenre we shall proceed to:

- a) demonstrate that the professional web forum is a type of electronic discourse (CMC);
- b) illustrate that the professional web forum discussions emerge in the social interactions between the members of a virtual community;
- c) determine what are the conditions of the discursive production of the professional web forum genre;
- d) determine what is the objective of the communication;
- e) determine who communicates;
- f) determine how the interlocutors communicate.

In order to describe the mechanism of knowledge transmission on the professional web forums, we shall:

- a) determine that knowledge transmission is one of the objectives of social interaction in Internet and it is transmitted through genres;
- b) determine that knowledge communication is involved in the creation of meaning;
- c) determine that the main discursive mechanism of knowledge transmission in the cyberspace is the *explanation*;
- d) identify the different types of explanations used on the professional web forum in order to transmit knowledge;
- e) describe the explanatory occurrences on professional web forums;
- f) compare the observed features of the professional web forum explanations with the literature in order to create a specific explanatory profile;
- g) observe the construction of explanation in interaction.

In order to observe the variation across languages of the professional web forum as subgenre of the knowledge transmission process, we shall:

- a) determine the parameters of genre variation across languages;
- b) compare the parameters of variation between languages;
- c) create a specific profile of knowledge communication on professional web forums for each language.

The focus of our analysis is the linguistics insight and we intend to analyse the recurrent discursive patterns of the professional web forum discussion in a comparative corpus. The present investigation will be developed in the theoretical framework created by different text linguistics, conversation and discourse analysis trends developed mostly in France.

1.4 Phases of the Investigation

The description of the *professional web forum* as a web subgenre involved in the transmission of knowledge in the social networks entails not only an interdisciplinary approach to the topic but also a strict methodology to be applied in the analysis of the facts. In what concerns the present investigation, our research on this complex phenomenon will follow the following steps:

- a) establish the hypotheses and the objectives of the current investigation;
- b) establish the basic bibliography of the investigation;
- c) creation and implementation of the corpus :
 - a. reference books in corpus creation;
 - b. comparison with different existing corpora;
 - c. list of candidates for *professional web forums*;
 - d. establishing the definitive list of *professional web forums*.
- d) analysis of a corpus sample;
- e) establishing the theoretical framework of the investigation:
 - a. e-discourse and virtual communities;
 - b. knowledge and knowledge transmission;
 - c. Discourse Analysis theoretical framework;
- f) methodology and protocol of analysis;
- g) discursive analysis of the corpus;
- h) conclusions.

1.5 Outline of the Investigation

The first chapter represents a justification of the research and contains a general introduction to the context of our investigation, *knowledge transmission in cyberspace*, the motivation of the research, the hypotheses and the objectives to through the research.

The 2nd chapter describes the cyberspace as communicational environment and defines the electronic discourse (CMC). The description of the e-discourse is realised from different perspectives: definition, categorisation and evolution. The evolution of the e-discourse is presented as part of the process of the evolution of the Internet. Every device, every online service represents a potentially new form of e-discourse. In this chapter we pointed out chronologically the emergence of the main e-discourse categories. The second part of this chapter deals with the notion of *virtual community*

presenting a definition and different classifications of the *virtual communities* by different criteria.

The 3rd chapter distinguishes between *skills*, *know-how* and *expertise*, as types of communicated knowledge on the Internet. The explanation is considered to be the main mechanism of knowledge transmission on the *professional web forums*, and consequently, a substantial portion of the chapter is dedicated to the description and the definition of this category.

Since the explanation represents the main strategy for introducing knowledge on the professional web forums, different studies of the explanatory forms and categories were taken into consideration in order to identify the main forms of the explanation involved in the learning process. The forms we took into consideration were: the definition, the description of actions (procedures), and the prototypical explanation (the regular explanation).

The fourth chapter describes different insights into the problem of the genre description. Our first approach has been the presentation of the study of the web genres following the theory of Biber (the traditional approach to the study of the web genre), after which we changed perspectives focusing on different genre insights such as Charaudeau's, Jean-Michel Adam's, Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni's, Veronique Traverso's. In our study we will follow the model of genres description proposed by Patrick Charaudeau.

The fifth chapter contains the description of the corpus for analysis, general issues in corpus creation, protocol and methodology of implementation, the parameters of the sub-corpora. The essential part of this chapter is represented by the quantitative analysis of the sub-corpora.

The next chapter contains the methodology and the protocol of analysis. The methodology we followed initially describes the professional web forum as a discourse genre taking into account the theoretical framework created by Patrick Charaudeau. The professional web forum is analysed as a *situation of communication* regulated by certain parameters identified for the subgenre: *identities*, *objectives of enunciation*, *theme*, and *discursive device*. The *objectives of enunciation* and the *identities* were analysed within the same theoretical framework established by Charaudeau. An important part of the analysis of the professional web forum consists in the analysis of the explanatory sequence regarded as the main mechanism of knowledge transmission. Knowledge transmission is analysed in two instances: as *explanatory sequence* and *explanatory text (series of explanatory sequences)*, and the *explanation as interaction*. For the first instance, we used the theoretical framework of text linguistics (Jean-Michel Adam). In what concerns the second instance, the *explanation as interaction* was analysed within the theoretical framework of the conversation analysis (Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Veronique Traverso).

Chapter seven represents the analytic part of the present work. The first part of the chapter is a general description of the professional web forum as a discursive subgenre within the framework described by Patrick Charaudeau. The second part of the chapter represents the analysis of the discursive representations of identities. The focus is on the representations of the self as *novice*, the initiator of the knowledge transmission on the professional web forums. We examined the representations of the self in different languages and specific aspects of each sub-corpus were highlighted. Since the focus on the identities involved in the situation takes into account the novice as active agent, we denominated this part *Discourses of Ignorance* in order to illustrate that dealing with ignorance makes the *novice* an *intentional learner* causing him/her to establish his/her goals in the learning process. The 3rd part of the chapter focused on the *Discourses of*

Experience, that is, the complementary discourse developed by the *expert* who participates in the situation. As we have already mentioned, we consider the explanatory sequence to be essential for knowledge transmission in the cyberspace. Consequently, this section of the Chapter 7 presents the analysis of the explanatory sequences encountered in each sub-corpus. The last section of the chapter represents the analysis of the explanation as interaction, a discursive construction specific, in our opinion, only to the professional web forum interactions. In this section we observed how knowledge was constructed gradually through the interaction between the *novice* and the *expert(s)*, or sometimes, through the interactions between the *experts* only.

Chapter 8 presents the conclusions to the present work, while Chapters 9 and 10 contain the *References* and the *Annexes*. Due to the multidisciplinary nature of the investigation, we structured the *References* according to the different chapters of our work. Thus, we established three main sections of the bibliography comprising: *books*, *articles*, and *webography*.

The *Annexes* contain a sample of each sub-corpus formed by an illustrative thread in order that one may appreciate the structure and the setting of the e-discourse on the professional web forums. The 2nd annexe consists of a list of the participants in the professional web forums communication in the corpus of analysis. The 3rd annexe represents a list of the titles of threads of the corpus of analysis.

The present work will be accompanied by a CD-ROM containing 1,000 pages of *Computer Web Forums Corpus*.

1.5.1 What is E-Discourse?

It is obvious for every Internet user that, when we are connected to the Internet and we interact with other users, we do it differently than if we would over the phone or in face-to-face conversation. A recurrent topic in the linguistic studies of Internet communication consists in answering the questions: *What is the language of the Internet?* and *How is it different from other types of communication?*

Since the early empiric observations of the linguistic phenomenon on the Internet, one has noticed the constant tendency to set apart the *Internet language* from the other known types of communication: *written* and *oral*.

Different names have been coined for this new form of virtual communication. 'Computer Mediated Communication' (Herring, 1996), 'Netlish', 'Weblish', 'Internet language', 'cyberspeak', 'netling' (Thurlow, 2001), 'netspeak' (Thurlow, 2001; Crystal, 2006), 'electronic discourse' (Davis&Brewer, 1997; Panckhurst, 2006), 'electronic language' (Collot, 1996), 'interactive written discourse' (Werry, 1996), are just some of the terms in use, to which we can add that of 'cyberlanguage' (MacFadyen et al, 2004) and 'virtual language' (Pop, 2008). By describing communicational interaction in the virtual space, they actually join two concepts: the *medium* (net, web, Internet, cyber-, electronic, virtual) and the *communication* (speak, -lish², language, and discourse). Their degree of specialisation and the field of use may also differ. These denominations reflect the heterogeneous nature of this discourse, considered by many scholars as a hybrid between the *written* and *oral* discourses. Many of them, with the intent of describing/defining the electronic discourse (Baron, 1998, Herring, Chrystal, etc.) start their argumentation presenting literacy and orality as the main general profiles of discourse and then determine the specific profile of the electronic discourse as resulting from the comparison between the *oral-electronic* and *written-electronic* aspects. Other insights (Macfayden et al, 2004, pp. 19-22) study *cyberlanguage* under three different categories: as *digital text*, as *semiotic system*, and as *discourse*.

One of the clearest definitions of the *electronic discourse* comes from Herring. In his opinion *computer mediated communication* (CMC) is: "...communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computer" (1996, p.1). The author distinguishes between different modes of CMC and defines:

[...] text-based CMC, in which participants interact by means of the written word, e.g., by typing a message on the keyboard of one computer which is read by others on their computer screens, either immediately (synchronous CMC) or at a later point in time (asynchronous CMC). (*op. cit.*, p.1)

We consider Herring's definition to be partial only, since the author takes into consideration mainly the material conditions of its CMC production.

In their study of the electronic discourse, Boyd Davis and Jeutonne Brewer point out that "*electronic discourse* is not a surrogate for language [...] but just a different

² Explained in Crystal (2006) as created from the combination of the words 'net' and 'English'. In other words Netlish.

context of its use” (1997, p.1). Their intention is to observe the characteristics of the electronic discourse in order to individualise and classify it as the genre or register of a language. The authors distinguish between *electronic discourse* and CMC, because they claim that *electronic discourse* “emphasises our focus on language above the sentence – language as utterances, whether written or spoken” (1997, p.2).

The most important insight into the systematic description of CMC is represented by C. Thurlow’s study *The Internet and Language*. The author describes CMC as: “language and communication in different channels (of niches) of the Internet (on net)...” (2001, p.287). He considers CMC in its context of production pointing out five essential aspects: *multilingualism, language change, conversation/discourse, stylistic diffusion, and metalanguage and folklinguistics*. Thurlow is the first author to suggest that the Internet texts have to be studied from the point of view of genre description. In his study Thurlow states that language and communication on the Internet can be studied under such contextual factors as: *format and type of channel, participants, length and nature of the relationship, topic and purpose, and synchronous and asynchronous* aspects of the communication.

On the other hand, David Crystal prefers instead to use the more general concept of *variety of language* and avoid the difficulties of defining electronic discourse. By defining CMC as a *variety of language*, the author sets it under the linguistic point of view: language as used on the Internet:

In a setting where linguistic differences are likely to loom large, the concept of a language variety will be helpful. A variety of language is a system of linguistic expression whose use is governed by situational factors. (2006, p.6)

*Electronic discourse*³ has been described by different authors, the most important of which are Baron (1998), Thurlow (2001), and Crystal (2006). All scholars agree that the electronic discourse has special features which individualise it. A general presentation of its most common linguistic patterns would include:

- Orthography: *neography, acronyms, typing errors, misspelling*
- Punctuation: *reduction of punctuation, capitalisation, and hyphenation*
- Lexis: *special lexis, lexical compounds, blends*
- Discourse organisation: *reduction or less use of openings and closures*
- Extra-linguistic marks: *emoticons*

It is important to mention that these linguistic patterns describe the features of *textual electronic discourse*. Electronic discourse is not homogeneous and it displays a rich variety of styles. Since our work focuses on the *written asynchronous electronic discourse* we have decided to point out these characteristics of e-discourse.

Other characteristics of the electronic discourse can be influenced or limited by the electronic devices and, as many scholars have already mentioned, with a view to the analysis of the electronic discourse it is important to separate the role of the medium and the contribution of its users.

³ We will use the terms CMC and *electronic discourse* in our investigation for the language on the Internet. We will make an exception when we cite the work of an author who used a different term to refer this concept. In this case the term used by the author in the cited work will be maintained.

1.5.2 E-Discourse Categories

Electronic discourse is heterogeneous, consequently it lends itself to classifications and categorisations. One of the first to remark on the diversity of the electronic discourse is Herring (1996, pp.1-6). The author distinguishes between different electronic discourses based on different criteria such as: *type of interaction* (synchronous – asynchronous), area (local – global), and theme (academic – recreational).

Most scholars – Davis&Brewer (1997), Thurlow (2001), Yus (2001), Crystal (2006), among others– classify the electronic discourse between *synchronous* and *asynchronous*. They also discuss the language features of the different categories of electronic discourse as the result of the hybridisation between two modes⁴: *written* and *oral*.

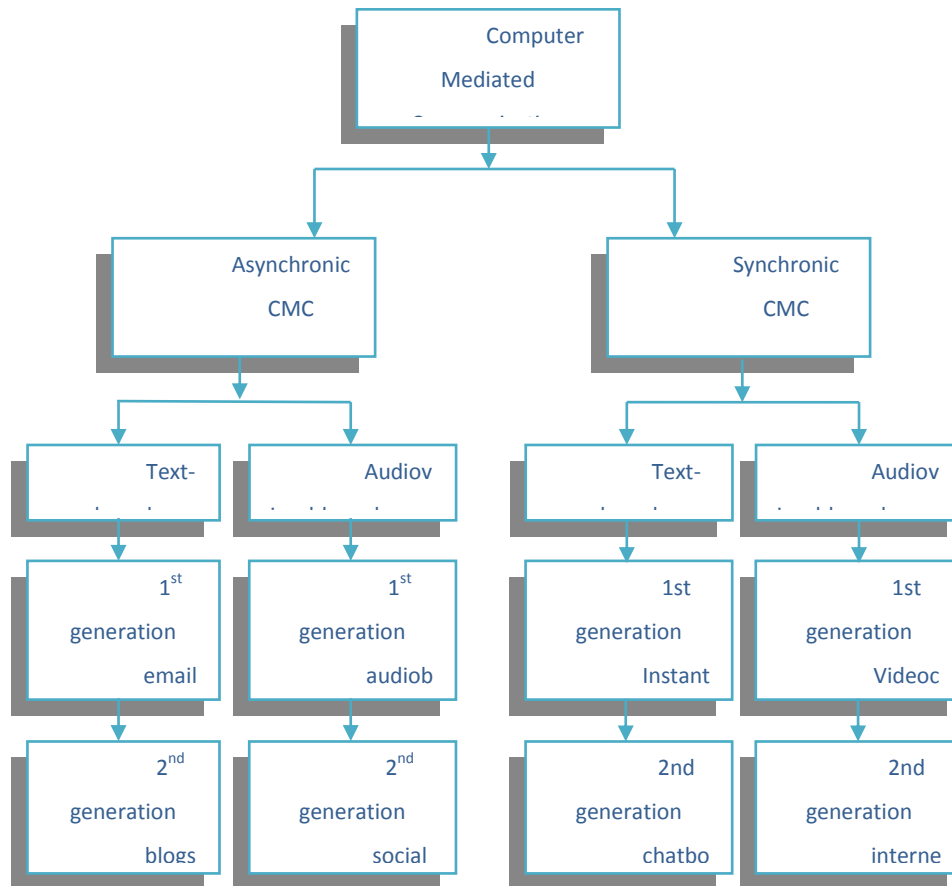
A more complete panorama of the electronic discourse categories is presented by Chun (in Magnan, 2008, p.17-18). The author takes for her starting point the traditional perspective of the two primary modes of the *electronic discourse*⁵ and denominates ACMC (asynchronous computer mediated communication) and SCMC (synchronous computer mediated communication). The innovation of her study consists in the fact that the author continues the classification diachronically starting from the text-based *electronic discourse* and mentioning the 1st and the 2nd generations of CMC. She identifies as categories of ACMC text-based emails, bulletin boards, newsgroups, forums, blogs, and wikis. The audio and video modes consist in asynchronous audio and video clips. The SCMC modes include: text-based instant messaging, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), multiuser virtual realities (MUDs – Multi User Dungeons and MOOs – MUD Object Oriented)⁶. Chun also mentions as a novelty the possibility to access audio and video-based programs. Since the publishing of the study in 2008, video and audio conferencing have become a common occurrence of CMC and new integrated solutions of CMC are now promoted on the market.

In what follows we will reproduce the scheme of the CMC modes as proposed by Chun (2008, p.18). This will give us a clear image of the variety of CMC modes and will allow us to identify the exact place of the CMC mode we propose to analyse in the present work.

⁴ Some of the authors use the term *style*, after Biber's (1998) terminology.

⁵ The author uses the term CMC (computer mediated communication). For more details on the various denominations of the *electronic discourse* see the present work 2.2.1, Chrystal (2001; 2006), or Thurlow (2001).

⁶ This classification is based on the one elaborated by Chun (Chun, 2008: 17).



The modes of Computer Mediated Communication (Chun, 2008, p.18)

This classification will permit us to follow the diachronic perspective of the emergence and development of the *electronic discourse* in Internet.

1.6 The Virtual Communities

"Home is where the hard drive is." (David Holtzman, CSO, 2003, 2004)

As we have noted from the evolution of the Internet and the *electronic discourse*, the most popular and attention-grabbing aspect of the Internet concerns its interactive features. Accessing virtual places (web pages, social network pages, channels, etc.), interacting with people, or sharing ideas and information has become a routine for most of us. Modern life is shared between the real and the virtual space, one can have a social life with friends to meet, events to participate in, or activities to carry out (professional working, e-business, e-learning, artistic creation) in either of them. The "global village", the utopia of the '60s (McLuhan, 1962, 1964) has become a reality and today it is used as an Internet metaphor.

A more precise image of the virtual communities and their role in the social organisation of the Internet was portrayed by J.C.R. Licklider, one of the Internet pioneers. The virtual communities were considered a logical development of the "Galactic Network" described by Licklider.

1.6.1 What is a Virtual Community?

Virtual community, e-community or online community is difficult to explain. The first description of *virtual community, e-community or online community* was realised from the 'inside' was realised by Howard Rheingold⁷ (1993) with an enthusiastic insight into the life and activities of the e-communities. The first important reference about the *daily life of a virtual community*, the book by Rheingold, testifies to the friendship, empathy, and newness shared, back in 1985, by the members of one of the most ancient virtual communities, the WELL⁸ and to how problems from real life found a solution through collaboration and information sharing in the virtual world. Written with wit and charm, the book portrays the beginning of the virtual society and has some of the fascination of *the age of innocence*. Here's the author's definition of the *virtual communities*: “*Virtual communities* are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 2000, p.xx).

Rheingold's definition of a virtual community focuses on two key concepts: *public discussions* and *human feeling*, which explain the author's experience of how communities emerge and dwell in cyberspace. The virtual community the author describes is defined in terms of *space* (virtual space), *time* (the span of time the members are logged in), and *communication* (topics of interest). From the coincidence of these factors there emerge the feeling of common shared values and the friendship of its members. The virtual community has also to do with the newness of the interactive communication in Internet. It was demonstrated that the Internet became more popular after the development of the social networks services than ever before, when the user of the web had only the traditional Internet services consisting in *searching for information, email, and discussion lists*, a set of activities that involved little human interaction.

Depending on the insight one has into the phenomenon (social, humanities, technology, commerce, entertaining, etc.), the *virtual community* can be understood in a number of ways. The term can refer to:

- 1) a group of people who associate themselves over time with a computer-mediated environment, with emphasis on the social behaviour of the group;
- 2) the phenomenon of online group formation, typically in light of the historical and theoretical implications of the terms 'virtual' and 'community';

⁷ Rheingold (1993) represents the 1st edition of the book. For this work we consulted the following editions: 1993, 2000, and the electronic version at <http://www.rheingold.com/vc/book/> (last accessed on 29.12.2010). All editions were cited in the bibliography.

⁸ According to the *Wikipedia*: “The *Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link*, normally shortened to *The WELL*, is one of the oldest virtual communities in continuous operation. It currently has about 4,000 members. It is best known for its Internet forums, but also provides email, shell accounts, and web pages. The discussion and topics on the WELL range from the deeply serious to the generally silly, depending on the nature and interests of the participants.” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WELL_\(virtual_community\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WELL_(virtual_community))) – last accessed on 29.12.2010).

3) the technological environment – e.g., listserv, chat room, web-based environment – that facilitates and potentially shapes the formation and activity of online groups (Herring, 2008, p.920).

The study of the Internet from a social and communicational perspective commenced after the publication, in 1978, of the book of Hiltz&Turoff: *The Network Nation*. The early studies of the virtual communities focused mainly on how the new media was about to change the social and communicational relations and how the virtual communities were constructed. The bases for the social studies of the Internet were created during this period by the works of Jones (1995, 1998), Ludlow (1996), Oldenburg (1989), Wellman (1999), Wellman&Gulia (1999), Turkle (1996), Smith (1992).

Jones (1995 and 1998) considers the emergent forms of interactive CMC (*newsgroups* and *bulletin boards*) to be the basis of the virtual communities. The author notes that the virtual community structure is very different from the traditional definition of the term ‘community’ in the social sciences and tries to apply Effrat’s⁹ (1974) model of a traditional community to the new virtual communities. The author considers that all these features have appeared in CMC, and consequently, they are characteristic of the virtual communities. Jones introduces the term of *spatiality*, a social constructed space of CMC, different from the physical space¹⁰. As for Rheingold and Oldenburg, the virtual communities in Jones’s conception are communities of individuals that share the same interests and goals.

Another approach to the virtual communities is developed by Ludlow (1996, pp.xiii-xvi) who highlights the fact that computer technology caused the disappearance of the traditional community and tries to analyse if it is possible to reconstruct a new concept adapted to the new realities, where the community may not be bound to the idea of space and geography. The author critically analyses the idea of “communities of interest” and that of “virtual community” contrasting them with the traditional “geographic communities”. The author tries to understand how the new “virtual communities” fit in our society and what would be the reaction of the social system (political and legal). The insight of the author is critical and he doubts whether the virtual communities deserve in truth to be considered so.

The analysis of virtual communities is re-examined in Turkle (1996) starting with a comparison with Oldenburg’s (1989) perspective. Two virtual communities (MUD) are contrasted and severely criticised. The virtual community is assimilated with an alienating activity that can confound its members and make them asocial in the real society. The author’s arguments consist basically in two study cases of MUD members that seem to prefer virtual life to real life. The aspects the author is concerned about are the loss of reality (the digital model of the world is not reality), the isolation, the emergence of a new type of violence in the virtual communities, and the escape from the real life problems and responsibilities.

⁹ Effrat (1974) describes the traditional community as a three main elements structure formed by: solidarity institutions; primary interaction; institutional groups.

¹⁰ Space and its conceptualisation seems to be an issue in the social definition of the virtual communities, at least in the early studies.

Wellman (1999) criticises what he qualifies as “apocalyptic speculation” in the debate on the WWW and the Internet implications in the modern society. He considers that the Internet phenomenon is not isolated and can’t be studied out of the general context of people’s lives. Instead of the naive enthusiasm or of the pessimist insights, he recommends an analytic perspective of the *network community* in the more general context of the online interactions in the “global village”. This desiderate for a contextual analysis is reiterated later (Wellman, Mok, Carrasco, 2009¹¹). The conclusions of the study demonstrate that the importance accorded by the social science researcher to “distance” as the definitory factor for the existence of a community in the ’90s, is only the result of an interpretation of the data out of their context. Further works of the same author on the description of the structure and the evolution of the *virtual communities* are Wellman&Gulia (1999) and Wellman (2004).

A social study that points out the communicational impact of the CMC represents the first observations on the Internet language (Smith, 1992). The author identifies essential aspects that impact the communicational interactions in the virtual communities. The author creates a profile of the *virtual interaction*, which in his conception is *aspatial* (the distance doesn’t influence the interaction), *asynchronous* (the interactions are different than face-to-face conversation), *textual* (the interactions are very similar to written conversations), the participants aren’t co-present during the interaction, the quantity of information is limited by the capacity of the technical devices that intermediate the communication, and *anonymous* (complete or partial).

In the present work we will adopt the sociological point of view and consider the virtual community as a group of people that share values, beliefs and activities and that interact constantly with one another through CMC. Based on human interaction, the virtual communities made it possible through CMC for the emergence of new forms of knowledge and information sharing and facilitated new forms of democratic participation in society (Flew, 2005, p.62). Their diversification is based on a combination of three factors: *technologies* (formats and modes of communication), *activities* (purpose), and *theme*. These factors determine the typology of virtual communities and consequently their specific type of discourse and form a basis for the study of the web genres.

1.6.2 Categories of Virtual Communities

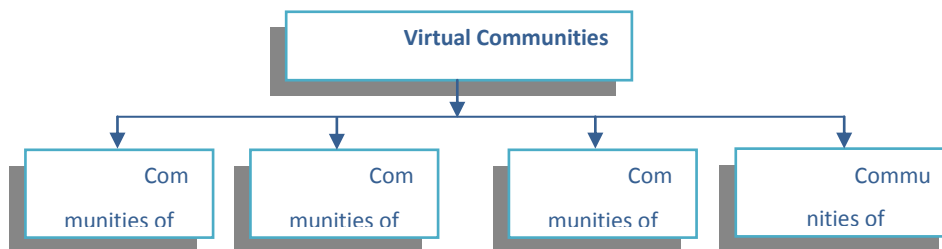
As one can notice from the previous section of the current work, an important part of the users’ activities on the Internet consist in the participation in social networks and in virtual communities. The rich variety of forms the social interaction adopts in the *virtual life* is difficult to describe and categorise. Even if the categorisation of the virtual communities would be a very useful tool in the study of the field, there are not many studies regulating this complicated aspect of the virtual life. The existing classifications of virtual communities are somewhat problematic. Some are out of date, partial or not descriptive enough. In this section we propose to survey some of the existing

¹¹ Wellman, Barry, Mok, Diana, Carrasco, Juan-Antonio - the forthcoming article can be accessed on Wellman's publication's web page at: http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/has_distance_died/Distance.htm (last access 29.12.2010).

classifications of the virtual communities and the criteria used to organise them. The finality of such presentation is to establish the place occupied by the virtual communities formed on the professional web forums in the panorama of Internet virtual communities, their general features and categorisation in order to proceed in the next chapters of this work to a further analysis of this type of community.

The virtual communities are generally classified on the basis of their content or on the revenue they produce. Since our focus is on knowledge transmission in cyberspace through professional web forums, in what follows we will limit our discussion on the classification of the virtual communities to the *content-based classifications* and we will present some of the most important models.

One of the first approaches to the classification of the virtual communities belongs to Armstrong and Hagel (1996). They distinguish between four categories: *communities of transaction*, *communities of interest*, *communities of fantasy*, and *communities of relationship*, and they concentrate in more detail on the *transaction communities* in their description.



Lazar et al. (1998) propose a schema of classification following four main features of the virtual communities, presenting a *technical*, *psychological*, and *sociological* insight into this topic. The four features are: *attributes*, *supporting software*, *relationship to physical communities*, and *boundedness*¹². Following this model of classification, the authors identified the following categories of virtual communities:

<p><i>Attributes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The reason of being of a virtual community (goals, common values and beliefs, interests, etc); • Shared activities and resources; • Strong interactions and emotional ties; • Support between community members. <p><i>Supporting software:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • newsgroup, bulletin board, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), or Multi-User Dungeon (MUD). <p><i>Relationship to physical communities:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on physical communities;
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¹² *Boundedness* is a sociological concept, which relates to how many social relationships remain within the defined population of a group or community. In a tightly bounded community, a majority of the social relationships, and therefore the communication, take place among the members of that community. In a loosely bounded community, community members have more social ties with people who are outside of the defined community (Wellman, 1997).

- Somewhat based on physical communities;
- Not related to any physical community

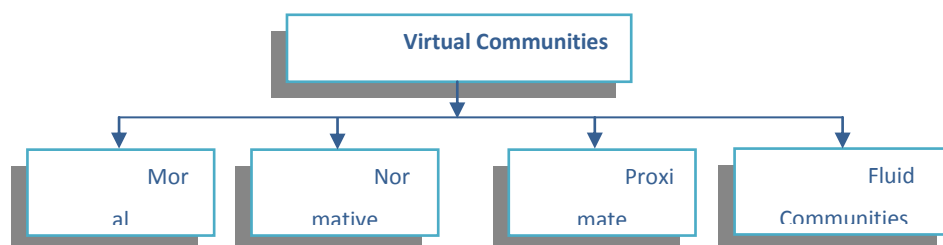
Boundedness:

- Work communities;
- Intranet;
- Specific geographic area;
- Specific segment of population.

Scheme of classification of the virtual communities, Lazar et al. (1998)

Nevertheless, the criteria of classification are, in some cases, too general and can't constitute an effective means of distinguishing between different classes of virtual communities. This work is important because it discussed the need of criteria to help the specialist recognise and categorise the different types of virtual communities. The final goal of the study was to apply these criteria in the design and implementation of new virtual communities.

A different model of classification of the virtual communities was proposed by Komito (1998). The author takes into account a more subjective point of view on the virtual communities. He describes four types of communities based on the way the members of a community interact: if they are supportive and friendly, if there is a community feeling (in the sense mentioned by Rheingold 2000, p.5) existing between persons that never see each other in real life. A scheme of the Komito classification could have the following structure:

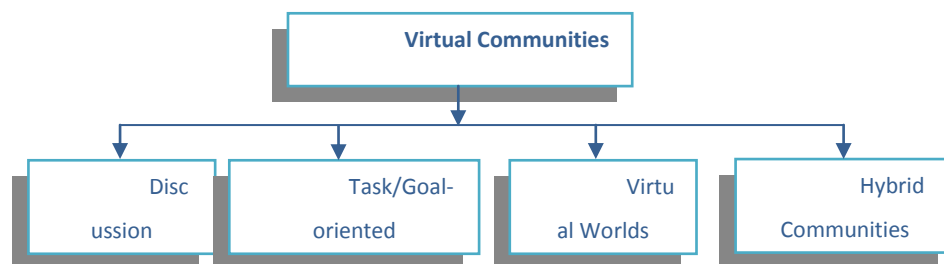


Scheme of classification of the virtual communities, Komito (1998)

The author considers as *moral communities* the communities where the members share the same moral and social values, a united community with a strong feeling of solidarity. We will associate this description with the description of the virtual communities in the beginning of the electronic era. The *normative communities* group people that share the same experiences or frameworks of understandings. In this category the author introduces the *communities of practice* and the *communities of interests*, the essential element of this community being the topic of the discussion which makes its participants participate in interactions and share the virtual space. The *proximate communities* are communities that involve the idea of space. In *virtual communities* like MUD and MOOs, the interactions take place in virtual spaces (public or private). The author seems to consider the conceptualisation of the space as the distinctive category of the *proximate communities*. The *fluid communities* are generally

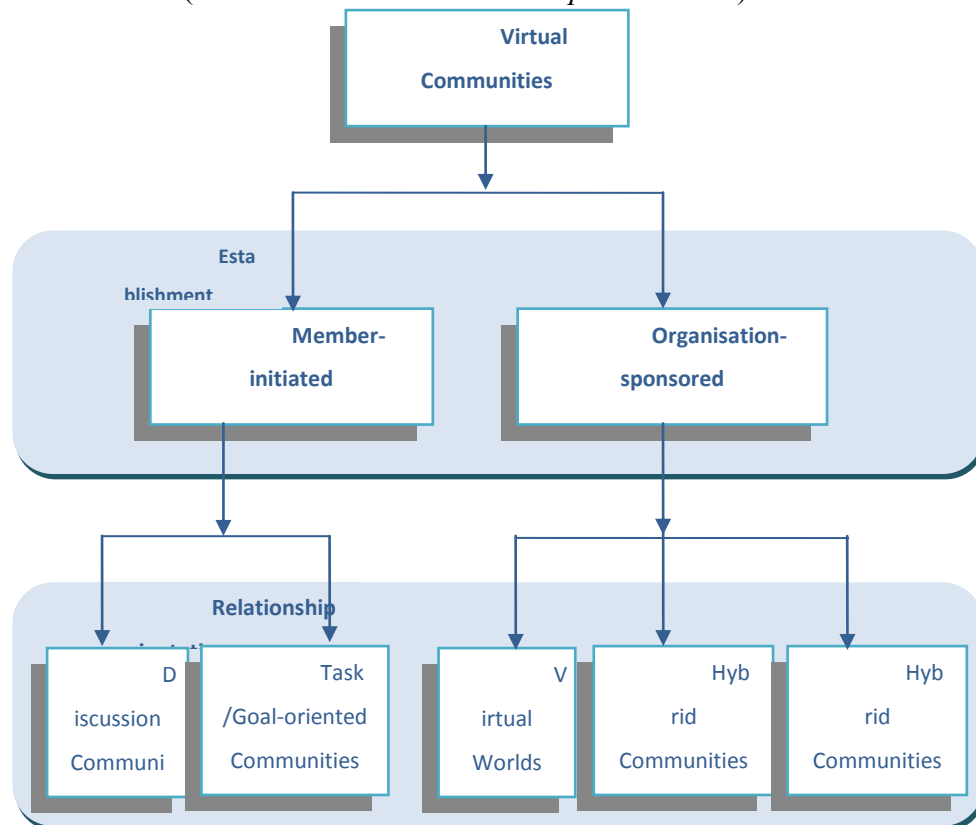
described through a metaphor that refers to the life in the ancient societies and represents a very subjective point of view on their description.

One of the most comprehensible classifications of the virtual communities was presented in Stanoevska-Slabeva&Schmid (2001) and in Stanoevska-Slabeva (2002):



Scheme of classification of the virtual communities, Stanoevska-Slabeva&Schmid (2001)

As noted by Porter (2004), the classification operated by Stanoevska-Slabeva (2002) takes into consideration only one variable in the organisation of the virtual communities. The categorisation proposed by Porter is much more complex and in the following section we will use it especially in order to identify the category of the *professional web forum* (see 2.4). Porter (2004) establishes a two level model of the virtual communities (*establishment and relationship orientation*):



Scheme of classification of the virtual communities, Porter (2004)

This two level typology is completed with a characterisation of the virtual communities consisting in five attributes, named by the author 'the five Ps': *purpose* (content of interaction), *place* (extent of technology mediation of interaction), *platform*

(*design of interaction*), *population interaction structure (pattern of interaction)*, and *profit model (revenue-generation)*.

Other authors that one can take into account in what concerns the categorisation of the virtual communities are Jones&Rafaeli (2000), Bagozzi & Dholakia (2002), or Wu Song (2010).

1.7 Professional Web Forum: a Virtual Community

As a conclusion to this presentation chapter we consider that, after the general overview of the e-discourse (CMC) and virtual communities we can answer a series of essential questions concerning the object of our analysis in the present work: the professional web forum.

These questions are meant to describe the professional web forum from a scientific and objective point of view. We consider that it is important to relate the object of our analysis to different essential CMC concepts, for the different insights we have already found in literature are *partial*, too *descriptive*, or focus on other domains.

The first aspect we want to clarify is: *are the professional web forum interactions a form of e-discourse (CMC)?* If we take into account, as we have already commented on (see 2.2.1), the definition of Herring (1996, p.1), one can observe that the professional web forum is a form of e-discourse: a) it is the result of “text-based CMC”; b) the text that forms the interactions is written “... using a keyboard of one computer”; c) the collocutors receive and “... read the message on their computer screens...”.

The next step in the definition of CMC on the professional web forum consists in determining *what category of e-discourse (CMC) professional web forum interactions belong to?* In order to answer this question we must refer to the e-discourse categories (see 2.2.2). According to the scheme of the CMC modes (Chun, 2008, p.18) the *communication on professional web forums* belongs to the 1st generation of asynchronous, text-based CMC. Here, if we take into account the tradition established by Biber’s studies, we can state that the *professional web forum* is a hybridised discursive mode that has the aspect of a *written conversation*. If we point out the nature of the *professional web forum* under thematic aspect (Herring, 1996, pp.1-6), we may also observe that the *CMC on professional web forums* concerns specialised topics.

Another aspect of the description of the CMC on professional web forums concerns the moment of its creation: *when did CMC appear on the Internet professional web forums?* Based on the information presented in 2.2.3, the emergence of primitive forms of *web forums (newsgroups and mailinglists)* was recorded in the late ’70s. According to Rheingold (1993; 2000) the WELL was very active in 1985. The WELL is one of the most durable virtual communities and was best known for its *web forums*.

Since it seems that a form of CMC has been produced as a result of communicational interactions on professional web forums, the next question we have to answer is: *can professional web forums be defined as a virtual community?*

The answer to this question is affirmative. The *professional web forum* is a virtual community since its members form “a group of people who associate themselves over time with a computer-mediated environment” (Herring, 2008, see 2.3.1)

The answer to the last question will further clarify our assertion : *what category of community is the professional web forum?* Based on Porter's (2004) typology the professional web forum is a *member-initiated virtual community* (in terms of establishment) and a *task-oriented community* (in terms of relationship orientation). Supplementary descriptions of the professional web forum can be obtained from the five descriptive attributes of the virtual communities typology. Based on these attributes, the *professional web forum* has: a *specialised purpose* (eg. computer problems assistance); a sense of the *virtual space* where the participants share values, beliefs, and information; the platform of the professional web forum is represented by the asynchronic design of interaction, and there is no profit model since the participants in the web forum don't generate income.

As a conclusion to this chapter, we think that we have already demonstrated that we can talk about the *professional web forums interactions* as a particular form of e-discourse (CMC), as resulting from the communicational activity of the members of a professional web forum.

2. APPROACHES IN DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Communiquer c'est procéder à une "mise en scène"
(Patrick Charaudeau, 1992, p. 635)

In this chapter we will establish the theoretical framework necessary to describe the genre professional web forum. We will propose to begin with a general overview of discourse and discourse analysis, and then we will focus on three main insights into discourse analysis, all belonging to the *école française*. These insights will provide us with the necessary tools to describe the professional web forum, highlighting aspects such as enunciation, discursive strategies, and communicational interactions.

2.1 The Complex notion of Discourse

The heterogeneous theories of discourse have for their main object of study the linguistic and communicative aspects of *the utterance (énoncé), the text, and the discourse*, starting from their conditions of production. Many studies on discourse analysis (DA) point out the complexity of views on, definitions, and interpretations of these concepts and the relations between them. Referring to the diversity of opinions in defining *discourse*, J. Renkema (2004, p. 54), states that "... there are so many definitions as there are textbooks".

One of the first definitions that influenced the modern approaches to discourse analysis states that a study of the discourse takes into consideration the: "mise en fonctionnement de la langue par un acte individuel d'énonciation" (Benveniste, 1974, p. 80). The author underlined in his works the necessity for a discourse linguistics whose object is not the utterance but the strategies of enunciation. The author places at the center of all linguistic concerns the discourse. A continuation of Benveniste's theoretical framework from the perspective of the enunciation and its strategies is realised by Culioli, who takes a step forward and affirms that each locutor is implicitly a receiver and each receiver is a virtual locutor. His perspective on the enunciation is that of an interactive process, and consequently, he refers to it as co-enunciation (Culioli, 1973, p. 83). The co-enunciators as participants in a dialogue modulate their discourse: "l'énoncé n'a pas de sens sans une double intention de signification chez les énonciateurs respectifs." (Culioli, 1973, p. 86).

Another step forward in the development of the modern perception of discourse is represented by the contribution of Bakhtin and Ducrot, who introduced in the theory of

discourse the idea that the locutor can't be conceived as one entity. The polyphony in language is expressed as follows:

Dans le parler courant de tout homme vivant en société, la moitié au moins des paroles qu'il prononce sont celles d'autrui (reconnues comme telles), transmises à tout les degrés possibles d'exactitude ... (Bakhtin, 1978, p. 158)

Bakhtin's contribution is fundamental to the further development of modern discourse analysis, and for "l'école française" in particular the subjectivity of language opens new ways of research in discourse analysis. In Bakhtin's conception discourse has a double dimension: *individual* and *social*, and is essentially polyphonic. The author establishes polyphony as the main aspect of discourse. This has led him to proclaim the "dialogic" character of the discourse, which will form a solid theoretical framework for its typology (genres and styles).

Ducrot considers that polyphony is implicit in language and that it is a constitutive element of the enunciation. His position is more theoretical in what concerns polyphony. The polyphonic conception of language is continued by the works of Anscombe and Ducrot (1976, pp. 14-15), who present the utterance as a polyphonic unit invested with "force argumentative":

Signifier, pour un énoncé, c'est orienter. de sorte que la langue, dans la mesure où elle contribue en premier lieu à déterminer le sens des énoncés, est un des lieux privilégiés où s'élabore l'argumentation. (Anscombe&Ducrot, 1976, pp. 14-15)

In the same line of studies, that is, developing the conception of an utterance in possession of an *argumentative force*, Moeschler (1985) introduces the pragmatic analysis of the argumentative discourse insisting that any analysis should be based on a corpus of reliable texts used in real situations of communication. The author considers that: "L'analyse du discours conversationnel aura donc pour objectif de mettre à jour les coactions et argumentations qui interviennent dans les interactions verbales" Moeschler (1985, p. 18).

Beginning with the '70s, the interest in discourse analysis has been growing constantly. The main focus is no longer the enunciation but the discourse. More complex theories are proposed on the basis of the previous theoretical frameworks that have defined the *utterance*, *the enunciation* and *the discourse*. Many different approaches focusing on discourse are proposed, such as: *conversation analysis*, *text pragmatics*, *text linguistics*, *discourse analysis*. We will present a brief survey of these approaches in the next section.

As one can notice, the definition of discourse is a complex matter. In what concerns the present investigation, we will take into account the definition of discourse as *language in use* and we will completely assume Bakhtin's perspective on the subjectivity of the speech acts.

2.2 Approaches to Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis as a discipline displays a multifaceted structure and very different trends. Much intellectual effort was put into making clear the heterogeneity of the approaches to discourse analysis. One of the important works in this domain is

represented by Deborah Schiffrin's *Approaches to Discourse*. At the beginning of her book the author states that:

My aim is not to reduce the vastness of discourse analysis: I believe that at relatively early stages of an endeavour, reduction just for the sake of simplification can too drastically limit the range of interesting questions that can and should be asked. (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 5)

Schiffrin underlines the fact that one of the main difficulties one encounters when approaching discourse studies is the complexity and the heterogeneity of perspectives and directions. Facing this reality of the domain, the author states that there is no point in simplifying the discourse analysis problems, but a clarification and ordering of the multitude of approaches would be in order. The complexity and the vastness of the domain is exactly what make it interesting and challenging. Trying to clarify the aims of discourse analysis, Schiffrin identifies six main approaches to discourse analysis she considers essential. They are: the theory of the *speech acts* (John Austin, 1962; and John Searle, 1969), *interactional sociolinguistics* (John Gumperz, 1982, and Erving Goffman 1974, 1979), *the ethnography of communication* (Dell Hymes, 1974), *the pragmatic approach* (H.P. Grice, 1957, 1968), *the conversation analysis* (Harold Garfinkel, 1967, 1974; Harvey Sacks, 1974; Emmanuel Schegloff, 1972, 1979; and Gail Jefferson, 1987), and last, the *variationist approach* (William Labov, 1972). The author presents discourse analysis as a complex discipline that allows transitions from one approach to the other and which tries to assimilate everything the approaches mentioned above can offer for the analysis of utterances.

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A different perspective on how the concept of *discourse analysis* can be understood is presented by Juan Herrero Cecilia (2006, pp.145-150), who pinpoints five different ways the word *discourse* is perceived. The author matches the different perceptions of *discourse* with different approaches to discourse analysis as follows:

Discourse1: equivalent to what Saussure denominates *parole*, discourse represents the most general meaning of the word and integrates all types of discourse (written, oral).

Discourse2: the second meaning is understood as *the way the utterance is structured*. The author attributes this meaning to the theory of Benveniste and the complementary concepts of *plan énonciatif du discours* and *plan énonciatif de l'histoire*, where the former is considered to be an element that organises the meaning of the utterance in relation to the "I – You – Here – Now" deixis (*embrayage énonciatif*), while the latter (*débrayage énonciatif*) organises the meaning of the utterance by separation from the context of enunciation.

Discourse3: corresponds to the concept of *text* perceived as a verbal message (written or oral) produced by a locutor in a communicational act. This notion of *discourse* is equivalent to the text linguistic perspective. The text=discourse is perceived as a series of propositions that form a global semantic unit (thematic macrostructure). This thematic macrostructure is organised following a determined sequential organisation pattern and forms a *type of text*. The structure of a *type of text* is determined by the genre's *compositional scheme*.

Discourse4: illustrates the concept of the term in Anglo-Saxon linguistics, where the author points out some conceptual differences of meaning. He highlights that *discourse* is a term designating the interactive dimension of the conversational interactions. Thus, the proper meaning of *discourse analysis* in this context may be *conversation analysis*.

Discourse5: the last conception of *discourse* corresponds to the definition of discourse given by *l'école française*. Here the author identifies two different approaches: *the analytic tendency* (M. Pêcheux, 1969, Authier-Revuz, 1995) and *the integrative tendency* (F. Rastier, 1989).

The author's intention to bring order to such a complex domain has been fruitful, since he has been able to highlight, like Schiffrin, the main tendencies in discourse analysis starting from the way the different trends approached the concept of *discourse*. The limits of the presentation dwell in the fact that the author doesn't go into detail. He designates the general trends without evaluating the commentaries or its historical evolution.

*

A different effort to establish order in the discourse analysis approaches has been carried out by Angermüller (2007, p. 9). The author limits the area of his investigation to Europe and proposes a diachronic overview of the emergence and evolution of different discourse analysis trends. The author affirms that in the beginning, discourse analysis was developed in different countries in quite a uniform manner and he identifies three major trends: French, Anglo-Saxon, and German. The development and diversification of discourse analysis makes it impossible to identify today these initial trends. They continue to exist as "clusters", identified by the author as: *l'école française*, the post-structuralist discourse theory, the critical discourse analysis, and the interpretative discourse analysis. Apparently, the *trends* seem to be the initial moment in the emergence of discourse analysis in the '60s, while the *clusters* represent the current discourse analysis trends.

Each trend is briefly described. For example, the *French formalism*, a heterogeneous trend based on linguistics (Saussure), psychoanalysis (Lacan) and ideology (Althusser), was subsequently abandoned when the French linguistics focused on *enunciation*.

The *Anglo-Saxon pragmatism* combines American pragmatism with analytic philosophy, and is especially known for the speech act theory (Austin, Searle) and for creating the theoretical foundation for the actual conversation analysis by analysing the rules that organise interactions (Brown & Yule).

German hermeneutics is based on the works of Jürgen Habermas and emerged under the influence of the Anglo-Saxon pragmatism. The main area of application for this theory was the social sciences and political discourse. The author observes that the German trend in discourse analysis was not quite developed as a domain of investigation and was abandoned in the '90s, the *discourse* becoming the object of study of another discipline: the *sociology of knowledge*. Angermüller (2007) mentions cursorily the Russian semiotic trend (Bakhtin and Lotman).

The *discourse analysis trends* correspond to an early stage of the development of discourse analysis in Europe and none of the initial perspectives has lasted to the present. Actually, in the '70s *discourse analysis* was developed by different researchers in different countries. The common basis is not the territory but the theoretical framework of the varied studies.

The author identifies the following clusters: *l'école française* of discourse analysis, the poststructuralist discourse theory, the critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the interpretative discourse analysis. It seems that the most cohesive discourse analysis core is represented by *l'école française*, which still constitutes a national tradition in this domain.

Different other intents to regulate, simplify, sort, arrange, or only present the vast and multifaceted field of discourse analysis were carried out by scholars such as:

Phillips & Hardy (2002), Georgakopoulou & Goutsos (2004), Paltridge (2006), Jørgensen & Phillips (2004), Johnstone (2002), Calsamiglia & Tusón (2007), or Bhatia (2006).

In what concerns the present investigation, this overview of the discourse analysis trends helps us to situate our theoretical framework. Thus, to begin with, we will ground our investigation on the perception of discourse as *language in use*. We place our investigation within the framework defined by “*l'école française*” of *discourse analysis*, and within this trend we will use the theoretical approaches provided by three theories we will apply to the different aspects of the corpus analysis (see Chapter 6, section 6.2.1). These theories are: the communicative and semiodiscursive conception of discourse (Charaudeau), the text linguistics theory (Adam), and the conversational model (Orecchioni, Traverso).

In what follows, we will proceed to a brief presentation of each of these theories insisting on the aspects we have deemed important for our investigation.

2.3 A Social-Communicational Model of Discourse

Patrick Charaudeau¹³ contemplates *discourse* in the general context of communication:

Il faut se représenter l'acte de communication comme un dispositif au cœur duquel se trouve le sujet parlant (le locuteur, qu'il parle ou écrive), en relation avec un autre partenaire (l'interlocuteur). (1992, p. 634)

The author identifies the following essential components of discourse: a) *la situation de communication*, b) *les modes d'organisation du discours*, c) *la langue*, and d) *le texte*. These components are defined as follows:

- a) *The situation of communication* represents a psycho-social dimension and represents the setting of the *contract of communication* that the participants establish during the communicational interaction. The setting also depends on the constraints of each situation.
- b) *The modes of discursive organisation*: represent the way the locutor chooses to organise his/her discourse depending on the finality of the communication.
- c) *The language*: represents the semiotic system the locutor uses in order to construct his/her discourse.
- d) *The text*: is the final result of the speech act. It is a heterogeneous construct formed by the semiotic system (language) organised in a specific manner by the *discursive modes*. The author marks the difference between *text* and *discourse*. The text represents a category that depends on the “*projet de parole*” of the locutor and on the *contract of communication*. The *text* is also a subordinate category of the discourse, since texts emerge from discourses.

The *situation of communication* represents the central concept of Charaudeau's theory and when defining it, the author underlines that it must not be understood as ‘*context*’ of communication or ‘*domaine de la pratique sociale*’. The *situation of communication* represents a general setting where the participants (two or more persons) interact by means of communication and come to establish a certain degree of

¹³ The evolution of the model created by Patrick Charaudeau and presented in this chapter was observed in the author's publications from 1984 to 2007. All the titles can be consulted in the chapter *References*.

inter-comprehension. The meaning they create through communicational interaction results, in part, from the general conditions in which communication takes place.

The author states that the description of what the situation of communication is can simply result from the answer to four questions, as follows: Which is the aim of the communication?, Who communicates with whom?, What is the topic of communication?, and Which are the circumstances of communication?

The answers to these questions determine the discursive finality of the speech acts, the identities involved in the communication, the theme of the verbal interaction, and the physical settings of the communication that the author denominates *dispositif énonciatif*. One can notice that, in time, Charaudeau's theory became more complex and the things that in the early stages of the elaboration were subject to interpretation became clearly defined. Beginning with his varied early works (1984, 1991, 1993, 1994) and up to the last titles (2005, 2006, 2007), the author gradually developed the concept of *contract of communication* established between the participants in a situation as determined by two main factors: *contraintes situationelles* and *contraintes discursives*. The author establishes a relation between the *contraintes situationelles* and the *situation of communication* as the external space of the discourse, and another relation between the *contraintes discursives* and the *contract of communication* perceived as the internal space of the discourse. Both are related, for the first type of *contraintes* determines the discursive production of the locutor by means of the second type of *contraintes*.

In short, *communication* is represented as a doubly articulated space:

[...]Un espacio externo, lugar de la construcción de las identidades psicosociales de los sujetos, de su finalidad de influencia y de las circunstancias materiales de la comunicación; un espacio interno, lugar de la construcción de las identidades discursivas de los sujetos y de la finalidad enunciativa a través de la puesta en escena lingüística, que resulta, por una parte de las instrucciones dadas por la situación de comunicación y por la otra, de los proyectos de habla específicos de los sujetos interlocutores. (Charaudeau, 2006, p. 43)

Discourse is the result of this set of constraints and is manifested by the discursive strategies used by the interlocutors. These strategies constitute the object of our study.

The genre, in this theoretical approach, is determined by three parameters: *the discursive identities*, *the objectives of the verbal exchange*, and *the enunciative device*. These elements are closely related to the social communication rituals, and consequently, to the discursive genres:

La communication est un phénomène général de la société humaine qui englobe divers types et genres de discours, toujours dans une intentionnalité d'intercompréhension et d'influence. (Charaudeau, 2007, p. 5)

In what follows, we propose to take a close look at these three parameters which will allow us, firstly, to study in more detail the discursive device of the professional web forum subgenre, and secondly, to establish our methodology of analysis (see chapter 6).

2.3.1 Discursive Identities

In the interior space of communication determined by the contract, the locutor constructs his/her own identity. Patrick Charaudeau insists that the identities constructed within the contract of communication are not personal, social, or cultural but *discursive identities*. In other words:

[...] on parle (ou écrit) en organisant son discours en fonction de sa propre identité, de l'image que l'on a de son interlocuteur, et de ce qui a été déjà dit. (Charaudeau, 1992, p. 643)

The locutor constructs a discursive identity corresponding to the *self*, an image that the locutor assumes for a concrete situation of communication and that can change if the communicational parameters change. Other identities are also constructed linguistically by the locutor and these identities are *the addressee* and the *audience*. Independently of the psycho-social identity of the *addressee*, when the locutor tries to establish a communicational relation, he also assigns to the *addressee* a discursive identity defining the type of communicational relation the locutor intends to establish.

The author observes the existence of different types of relations that can be established between locutors. They are relations of association, relations of authority, relations of inclusion or exclusion, relations of indulgence or relations of objection. These relations establish which of the two identities is stronger and the role each participant in the contract of communication assumes.

In other words, if someone asks for *help*, for *assistance*, or for *collaboration* the identities involved in the different contracts of communication these verbs determine are different. In the first case, the verb *help* involves two discursive identities, the one of a person in need for help, the other of a *helper*. The identity of the *helper* is discursively constructed as a person that *knows how to help*, *wants to help*, and *can help* somebody; the complementary identity, the *helped*, is the person who *asks for help*, *wants to be helped*, and *accepts to be helped*. Between the two identities involved in the relation imposed by the verb *to help* one can notice a difference of positioning, with the *helper* placed in a position of authority as compared with the *helped*.

In Charaudeau's model (1992, p. 644) the identities are denominated *les protagonistes* of the utterance and the author mentions that they are defined only by their discursive behaviour. He distinguishes between the identities involved in the discourse *locuteur-énonciateur* – the identity who expresses the discursive intentions of the locutor –, and *l'interlocuteur-déterminataire*, who has been assigned a particular place by the locutor in his/her discourse.

In the present work we will use the terms Locutor and Addressee to designate the *locuteur-énonciateur* and *l'interlocuteur-déterminataire* respectively.

2.3.2 Objectives of the Verbal Exchange

Every enunciation emerges in a context and has a motivation. Without motivation the communication doesn't exist. When we establish a communicational relation with somebody it is because we have an objective that we assume and that makes us enter in contact with the others through communication.

In this stage of the communication the locutor has to perform to justify his/her right to speak. The intentionality of the message has to fit in the situation if the locutor wants it to be recognised by the addressee, and consequently, establish a verbal interaction with the other. The validity of the message consists in the fact that the speech act

corresponds to the finality of the communicator, which allows the collocutor to interpret and understand it. For that, the participants in a situation of communication may have the proficiency to *know* not only what they want to tell but also *how* they may articulate and adapt a message in order that it should be recognised as the locutor intended it to.

In order to make it clearer, we will give the example of a Latin-American locutor who, looking for directions in Barcelona, asked a Spaniard: “Señor, ¿me puede ayudar, por favor?” The utterance based on the *proficiency (savoir)* of the locutor is one of the current introductory expressions by which a person formulates a polite request for information (a question in our case) in order to establish a communicational relation with an unknown person he/she meets on the street. The utterance of the locutor, however, was differently interpreted by the addressee who possessed a different *savoir*. The reaction of the *addressee* was that, instead of waiting for the other to ask him a question, he took a coin from his pocket and gave it to him. This resulted in a series of intention clarifying verbal interaction between both participants in the situation in order to establish the communicational relationship the locutor originally intended.

2.3.3 Discursive Device

The *discursive device* represents the material manifestation of the discursive production of the participants in a situation of communication. There are different parameters that regulate the discursive production in a situation of communication. It is important, for example, if the participants in a situation are present and see each other, or not, at the moment of the exchange. Another important parameter is represented by the channel of communication and the mode of communication through this channel. Generally, we talk about written and oral communication, but most recently, with the development of the new technologies, more and more authors talk about multimodal communication. Another important aspect of the communicational device is represented by whether the exchange between participants is allowed (*permis*) or not.

In his model of discursive analysis, Charaudeau states that different combinations of the parameters mentioned above will determine a different discursive production:

[...] telle ou telle combinaison sur le comportement langagier des interlocuteurs, et donc sur l'organisation de la configuration verbale. (Charaudeau, 1992, p. 639)

In order to better explain his point, Charaudeau distinguishes between two main types of situations: *interlocutive* and *monolocutive*, and gives some examples demonstrating how the situation of communication determines the configuration of the discourse.

In what concerns the limitations imposed by the situation of communication to the professional web forum discussion, one can observe the following regulator parameters: the professional web forum is a *monolocutive situation*, since the participants involved in the exchange are not co-present in a certain location. The channel of communication is, basically, written. Depending on the situation and on the locutor's intentions or the technical implementation of the channel, it can also display some extended features in order to permit multimodal communication (text, text-image, or even text-video). The locutor can't perceive the reactions of the interlocutor. On the professional web forums, as in all computer mediated communication, the channel allows the participants to express their feelings by the use of *emoticons*. The problem of their interpretation is culturally related, consequently, we agree with Charaudeau that in the case of the

monolocutive situation the locutor can only imagine the reactions of his/her discussion partner. Sometimes the partners have to explain to one another the significance of the *emoticons* they use in order to express gestures, feelings, and mimics. Since the locutor is not conditioned by the immediate reactions of his/her partner, s/he can organise his/her discourse in a logical and progressive manner.

In the following chapters of the present work we will analyse the verbal configuration of the professional web forum grounding our analysis on this configuration of the discursive device.

2.4 Text Linguistics and Discourse Analysis

As one can notice in sub-chapter 4.2, the socio-communicational model presented studies discourse starting from the situation of communication and the conditions of production. Within this frame the social aspects are highlighted.

The socio-communicational model, however, doesn't go into more details in what concerns the detailed organisation of produced texts, therefore we need a complementary point of view in order to reach the objective of the thesis, which is the description of the professional web forum as an Internet sub-genre.

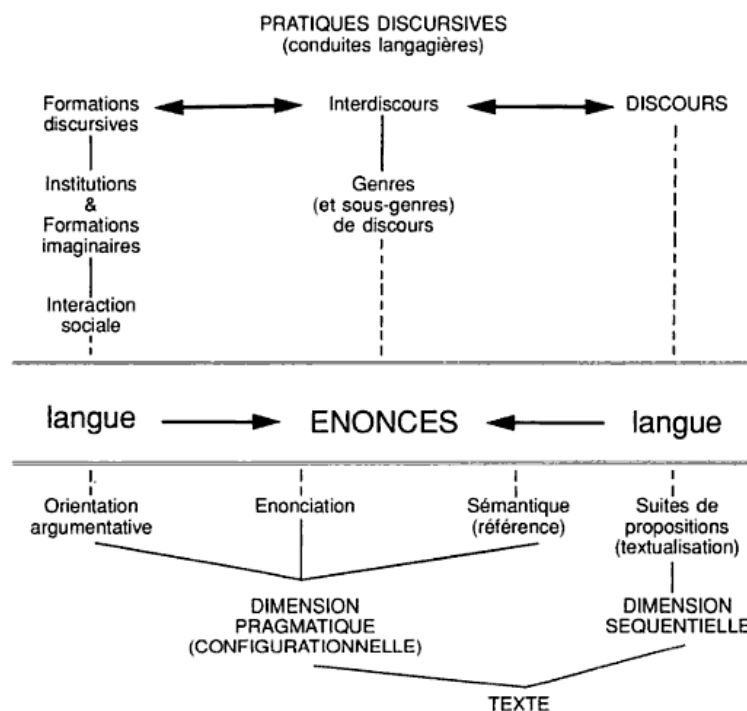
A more detailed point of view on discursive organisations is provided by text linguistics, a textual pragmatic discipline. This discipline focuses mainly on the contemplation of the internal structure of an utterance produced in a specific situation of communication by means of a specific study of the sequences organisation.

Jean-Michel Adam, whose theoretical framework¹⁴ will be used in order to carry out this investigation, also presents his perspective on the relations that exist between texts, genres and discourses¹⁵. The author distinguishes between *text linguistics* and *discourse analysis* as complementary disciplines that study texts, genres, and discourse(s) from different perspectives. In *Linguistique textuelle. Des genres de discours aux textes* (1999, p.35) the author defines *text linguistics* and *discourse analysis* complementarily. He distinguishes between the *principes ascendants* and the *principes descendants* that rule the *text*. Adam states that text linguistics has as objective the identification and description of the ascendant principles that order complex propositions in a unit he designates as TEXT. *Discourse analysis* has as object of study the description of the descendant principles that the situations of communication, the language, or the genres impose to the TEXT.

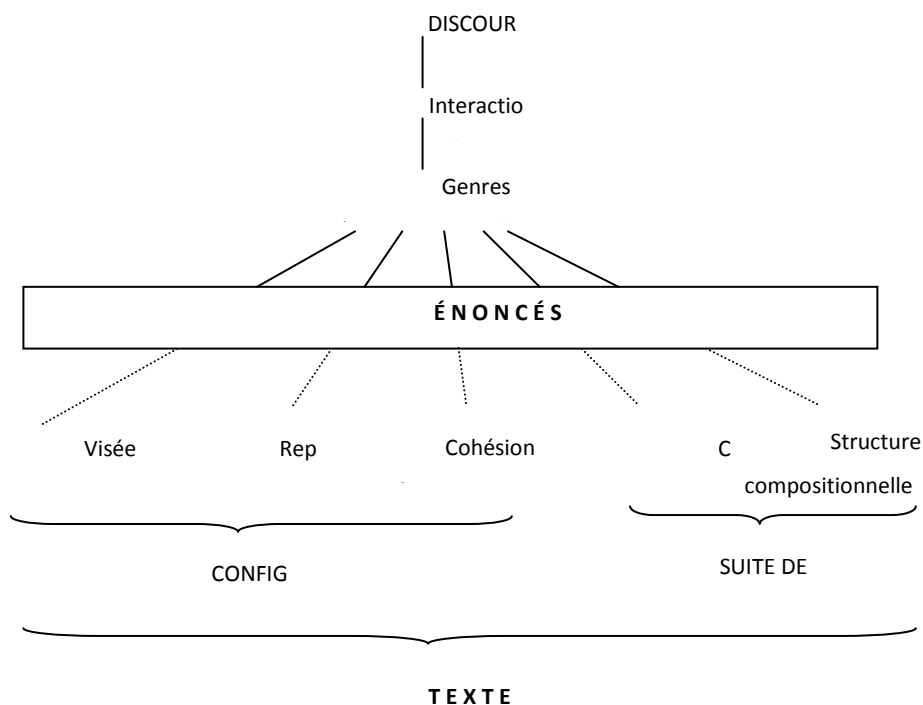
Jean-Michel Adam (1990, p.21) constructs a system that relates *text linguistics* to *discourse analysis*:

¹⁴ We ground our presentation of the explanatory sequence on the different studies J.-M. Adam published between 1990 and 2007.

¹⁵ The author affirms that the use of the term *discourses* is more fitting than *discourse* since it corresponds better to the linguistic reality.



In Adam (1992, p.17) the system is modified in order to better express the ascendant and descendant principles that rule the TEXT and are responsible for its variation. The views of the text, especially regarding the aspects concerning the *ascendant principles*, are centralised and focus on the genre. The terminology, too, is more precise, as one can notice from the figure below:



The author details the levels of the textual organisation in the following terms:

Pour la linguistique textuelle que je développe depuis une dizaine d'années, un texte est formé par la combinaison-composition d'unités élémentaires et il s'agit

de décrire et de théoriser une compositionnalité qui doit être approchée par niveaux d'organisation et de complexité [...]. Une compositionnalité de bas niveau assure la mise en paquets des compositions. Nous nommerons ces paquets : périodes et séquences. (Adam , 1999 , p. 18)

The internal structure of the TEXT is specified in Adam (1992, p. 30), where the author intends to present a unified insight into the sequential structure of the texts. It results that the text is a hierarchic structure formed by *propositions*, *macro-propositions*, and *sequences*, where the propositions are the constituents of a macro-proposition and the macro-proposition is a constituent of the sequence:

[# T # [Séquence(s) [macro-propositions [proposition(s)]]]]

On this basis, the author establishes the theoretical framework of the sequential prototypes:

Mon hypothèse est la suivante : les « types relativement stable d'énoncés » et les régularités compositionnelles dont parle Bakhtin sont à la base, en fait, des régularités séquentielles. Les séquences élémentaires semblent se réduire à quelques types élémentaires d'articulation des propositions. Dans l'état actuel de la réflexion, il me paraît nécessaire de retenir les séquences prototypiques suivantes : *narrative*, *descriptive*, *argumentative*, *explicative*, et *dialogale*. (Adam , 1992 , p. 30)

As one can notice, the heterogeneity of the discourse is reduced to some prototypical sequences that regulate its construction. In what concerns the present investigation, as already shown in section 3.5, the dominant sequence that seems to rule the discursive organisation of the professional web forum is the *explanatory sequence*.

In what follows we will focus on the description of this prototypical construction in order to contemplate it in detail for further use in the methodology of analysis of the present work (see Chapter 6).

2.4.1 Explanatory, expository, and informative texts

According to J.-M. Adam, every approach to the explanatory sequence should be preceded by a clarification of the concept *explanatory*. Similar to other scholars¹⁶, Adam (1992, p. 127) underlines the multiple interpretations the term *explanation* has undergone in the literature. He also observes that the term has to be contrasted with the other interpretations in use, and discusses the notion of *explanatory text* in contrast with that of *expository text* and *informative text*. On the other hand, the author also discusses the opposition *explanatory vs. argumentative*.

Both approaches are sustainable because all texts are to some degree informative:

Le type de texte qui nous intéresse ici doit maintenir un délicat équilibre entre ce qui est supposé être plus ou moins connu du lecteur, le stock de connaissances préalables à la réception, et l'apport de renseignements qui constitue la fonction même du texte informatif. Le 'dosage' est réalisé dans tous les types de texte, mais se trouve au centre même de la problématique du texte informatif : c'est toute la question de la 'cible' et de sa délimitation correcte. (Combettes&Tomassone, 1988, p. 9)

¹⁶ See E. Werlich (1975), Combettes & Tomassone (1988), Moirand (1999), Herrero Cecilia (2006).

Moreover, many explanatory texts are also expository (E. Werlich, 1975) and display definition-like structures. It seems that in the literature, due to the contributions of Combettes & Tomassone (1988), the distinction *expository-explanatory-informative* is generally accepted. The term ‘informative’ is considered too general and, since it can determine all types of texts, it is not operational. Consequently, the authors seem to prefer the term *expository* as more specialised. Another distinction that the authors operate is that between the *informative-expository* and the *argumentative* types. The authors affirm that the argumentative discourse aims to produce a transformation in the receiver. This modification affects the beliefs and the representations (cognitive or not) of the receiver. They claim that the argumentative sequence is not knowledge transmission-oriented but is intended to modify opinions, impressions; it is intended to convince that a fact is real.

J.-M. Adam establishes the following difference between *expository* and *explanatory*: “la distinction à opérer entre exposition et explication passé par la différence entre POURQUOI? et COMMENT? La plupart des séquences en COMMENT en sont pas explicatives” (1992, p. 129). The author considers that the latter sequences don’t fall in the category of prototypical explanatory sequences.

The author argues that as linguistic activity the explanation improves, augments, specifies a certain cognitive content for the addressee. It involves a logical progression and it is based on objectivity and distance.

Another distinction the author introduces is *explanation-justification*. Quoting J.-B. Grize (1981), Adam affirms that the explanation is constructed as an answer that clarifies things/facts/events (Adam, 1992, p. 130), while the *justification* is oriented to the clarification of words.

The explanation is a very vast phenomenon and can be encountered in all domains of life. It also appears in a very rich variety of texts organised in *genres* and *subgenres*. The specificity of these genres is that they are generally related to situations or activities in which the main aspect consists in the transmission or improvement of knowledge.

2.4.2 Parameters of the Explanation

In the same line of studies with the publications of Adam, Herrero Cecilia (2006, p. 131) states that the explanatory texts present specific aspects and he distinguishes the following: *enunciative*, *discursive*, and *lexico-semantic*.

It is important to observe that the description of these characteristics refers to the prototypical explanatory sequence described by Adam and may slightly differ from other types of explanations¹⁷.

Following the description of Herrero Cecilia (2006), the *enunciation* in the explanatory texts is characterised by the use of the *present tense*, the presence of the deixis with *endoforic* function, the constant use of impersonal expressions. The locutor is frequently referred to by “we”, and Herrero also mentions the temporal and spatial discursive marks that refer to a text.

The explanatory text is also characterised by different text modalities that indicate the attitude of the locutor concerning the topic of discussion. The specific modalities one can notice in an explanatory text are: *logic modalities* and *epistemic modalities*. They are used as verbal forms or adverbial forms in order to express *possibility*,

¹⁷ We refer here to the web genres where the explanatory sequence can be encountered but has different structures and is realised through different discursive strategies (see section 7.2.6).

probability, *impossibility* (logic modality) or certainty, uncertainty, opinion, recommendation (epistemic modality). The author underlines the fact that, due to the nature of the prototypical explanatory sequence, the affective modalities and subjectivity marks are not compatible with this genre.

The *lexico-semantic* aspect of the explanatory texts is represented mostly by terminology and the use of adjectives with descriptive and evaluative functions. In what concerns the *terminology*, it consists of *specialised vocabulary*, *professional jargon*, *neology*, and *loanwords*. It is also characterised by the use of *nominalisation* and *apposition* with explanatory aims.

The author also distinguishes between the following discursive strategies that a locutor uses in order to construct an explanatory discourse: *definition*, *classification*, *rephrasing*, *exemplification*, *analogy*, and *quotation*. It is also important to mention that this inventory of discursive strategies is not complete; other explanatory strategies can also be observed, especially in the genres less studied, such as the genres of the Internet.

The author mentions the function of each of the strategies used in the explanatory genres. The *definition*, for example, is considered a discursive strategy used for focusing on a topic to clarify it. The *classification* represents a way of distinguishing and organising by certain criteria an apparently chaotic class of objects/concepts in order to observe and know them better. The *reformulation* is a good strategy used as an alternative to an initial statement. In specialised communication it is frequently used when the collocutor doesn't understand the terminology of a specialised field. It has the function to make things simpler and clearer. The *analogy* is a discursive strategy that creates a relation between a complex and abstract concept and a more familiar one. Finally, the *quotation* represents a reference to a third person's opinion in order to gain support and authority for a cognitive content.

These strategies correspond to the prototypical explanatory sequence. In the case of other explanatory genres, several other discursive strategies can also be encountered.

2.5 Conversation and Verbal Interactions

In sub-chapter 3.5.3 we have presented the structure of the prototypical explanation according the descriptions of text linguistics (Grice, Adam). One of the aspects all the scholars seem to agree with consists in the fact that the explanation is constructed as an answer to a question. The question can be one of the following types: *What?*, *Why?* and *How?*, and depending on the question the explanation answers, the answer may be a *definition*, a *prototypical explanation*, or a *description of actions*. The questions can be implicit or explicit, and can be organised discursively as monological or dialogical. In professional web forums discussions, the discursive organisation is dialogical. Thus, the explanatory sequence is developed by the communicational interaction of at least two persons. This means that the explanatory sequence can be contemplated at an interactive-conversational level¹⁸ too.

In order to analyse the interactive construction of the explanation, we need to adopt a different theoretical framework that will allow us to operate with the proper instruments of discourse analysis in the social interactional context.

The first question the investigator may ask is what interactional theory would be adequate to operate with in the context of the analysis of the explanation in the

¹⁸ In sections 4.2 and 4.3 we developed the theoretical framework necessary to analyse the explanation as text and as discursive strategy.

professional web forums discussions. The answer resides in the investigation we have already carried out in sub-chapters 2.2.1 and 2.2.2, where we explained that the theoretical approaches to e-discourse concord with the fact that it represents a hybrid discursive structure that displays oral and written features. In 2.2.2 we mentioned that the web forum is generally considered as having the features of a written conversation. Consequently, we appreciate that the theoretical framework of conversation analysis may be adequate for the analysis of this type of e-discourse, especially because it is written conversation and many of the oral features that make face-to-face conversation so difficult to analyse are absent in the professional web forums interactions.

Conversation analysis is a theoretical framework that has its origins in the ethnomethodologist approach to oral interactions. It was developed by the group of researchers known as *École de Genève*. Their theory of conversation is based on different studies of pragmatics (Bakhtin, Searle, Austin, Goffman, Labov, Ducrot, and others) and proposes a hierarchic model of conversation. This model was developed in France in the '90s by Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, who adds to the Geneva School model some operative concepts from the ethnomethodologist model. This model was later developed by Veronique Traverso (2004).

Kerbrat-Orecchioni states that there are two levels, one superficial and the other more profound, of the organisation of conversations. The first level contains the turn taking aspect of the face-to-face conversations, while the other consists in a conversational grammar consisting in the principles of internal coherence that determine the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic construction of conversation. According to the author, the conversation can be hierarchically structured in monological and dialogical units, each category displaying distinct subcategories. The participants in the conversation can establish different relations, identified by Kerbrat-Orecchioni as horizontal and/or vertical, and finally, the author considers politeness “un phénomène linguistiquement pertinent” (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996, p. 50), a very important dimension of conversation:

La notion de « politesse » est ici entendue au sens large, comme recouvrant tous les aspects du discours qui sont régis par des règles, et dont la fonction est de préserver le caractère harmonieux de la relation interpersonnelle. (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1996, p. 50-51)

Here the author distinguishes the concept of *linguistic politeness* perceived as “art de la conversation” in opposition with other aspects of politeness, such as good manners and social behaviour, or the way one adapts his/her outfit to a situation.

This theory was developed by a former student of Kerbrat-Orecchioni's, Veronique Traverso, who establishes the following structures of conversation analysis: *the construction of the interaction*, *the organisation of the actions within an interaction* and *the thematic construction of an interaction*. In the present work we will take into consideration the model developed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso as conversational framework.

2.5.1 The Construction of Interactions

Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso agree that the lack of organisation in conversations is just a superficial impression, for interactions *are* organised structures.

The two authors distinguish between *a local organisation* and *a global organisation of the interactions*.

The local organisation comports turn taking (*tours de parole*), the rules of alternation of turns (*allocation des tours*), the speech turn composition (*composition des tours de parole*), and the regulation of turns (*la regulation*). Following local organisation, the conversation is structured by the alternation of the locutors, who obey certain rules: one person speaks at a time (sequentially organised), the others wait for their turn, and the locutor can select explicitly/implicitly the addressee. If the locutor doesn't select an addressee, each participant in the conversation will negotiate his/her turn and his/her positioning. If nobody participates in the interaction, the initial locutor has to continue to develop different discursive strategies in order to obtain attention from the audience. The turns of speech consist in the turn and the transition points which mark the end of a turn and the beginning of another. The transition points are not mandatory, but they are usually present in the conversation. A transition point can be realised discursively or by the means of the channel, as in the case of CMC where the communicational channel presents video and audio transition points¹⁹. In the case of the professional web forums one can observe only "full turns" (*tours pleins*), for the channel of communication is not designed to allow interruptions.

The *global organisation* of conversation establishes that each conversation consists of three important moments: *the opening*, *the body*, and *the closing*²⁰. The *opening* represents the initial part of the conversation where the locutor opens the channel and establishes contact with the addressee; it is the moment where linguistic politeness and communicational routines are noticeable in conversation. *The body* of the conversation contains the sequences²¹ that organise the internal structure of the conversation. *The closing* represents the end of the conversation, when the locutor closes the channel and performs the discursive routines/rituals of closure.

It is important to notice that the main part of the conversation is represented by the *body* and that the *openings* and *closings* depend on the situation, locutor, and other factors that regulate the discursive production.

2.5.2 The Organisation of Actions within Interactions

The organisation of the actions within interactions represents the hierarchical model of the organisation of conversations proposed by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1996). The author distinguishes between *monological* and *dialogical units*. The monological units comport: the speech act (the minimal unit of a conversation) and the intervention (consisting in one or more speech acts). The monological units interact in a conversation and consequently they form the *dialogical units* of conversational discursive organisation. They are: *the exchange*, *the sequence* and *the interaction*.

The *exchanges* are interrelated series of interventions. They can form groups of one intervention, when the locutor initiates a conversation but no other participant assumes

¹⁹ An example of a video transition point can be observed on the web forums where the intervention of each participant in the situation is inserted in a table cell which graphically delimitates the extension of a turn. In Internet chats, chat programs such as *YahooMessenger* or *Skype* emit a sound every time a participant in the conversation introduces his/her intervention in order to indicate to the user that a new intervention to the conversation was added.

²⁰ Here we use the terminology of Traverso (2004).

²¹ Here we use the terminology of Kerbrat-Orecchioni and Traverso, which is different from the terminology of Adam.

the role of the addressee, groups of two interventions consisting of the *initiative intervention* and the *reactive intervention*. There are also groups formed by three interventions consisting of an *initiative intervention*, followed by a *reactive intervention*, and closed by an *evaluative intervention*. The exchanges counting more than three interventions are considered *extended exchanges*. The *sequence* consists of several exchanges thematically/pragmatically related. The most complex structure is the *interaction* that consists in a conversational act, such as: *shopping*, *asking for directions*, or a *phone call*.

2.5.3 Thematic Progression

Veronique Traverso (2004) considers that their thematic construction is an important aspect of interactions. In the present work this aspect is essential, since the interactive construction of knowledge is realised thematically, so that one whole section of the present investigation (see 7.3) has been devoted to this aspect in particular. Furthermore, a model of knowledge construction based on the thematic analysis has been elaborated for each sub-corpus.

The thematic dimension of communication is generally constructed through *semantic cohesion*, *anaphora*, and *cataphora*. In what concerns the thematic construction, two main aspects are important: the *thematic continuity* and the *thematic discontinuity*. The thematic discontinuity can adopt forms such as: closure of theme (implicit/explicit), thematic rupture, and proposal of a theme (implicit/explicit). They represent moments in the conversation when the interlocutors operate a certain change in the topic of their conversation. The ruptures can be related with the beginning, the end of the conversation, a digression, or an interruption.

The thematic continuity is the aspect that contributes most to the thematic progression and has an important role in the interactive construction of knowledge. It consists in two main elements: the *ratification of the theme* (implicit/explicit) and the *elaboration of the theme*, depending on the different modes of thematic elaboration.

The ratification of the theme consists in the response of the addressee to a previous *proposal of a theme*. The locutor opens the channel of communication and when establishing the communicational relation he also defines thematically the interchange. The addressee, when accepting to enter in the communicational relation with the previous speaker, not only assumes the identity the locutor assigns to him/her but also *ratifies the theme*. In other words, in order to establish a communicational relation, from the thematic point of view the addressee has to agree to talk about the theme proposed by the locutor. After the *ratification of the theme*, there follows the *elaboration of the theme* which means that the conversation enters in a phase of thematic progression. Different modes are involved in the thematic elaboration, such as: descriptive-commentative, explanatory, narrative, argumentative, and *échanges à batôns rompus* (Traverso, 2004, p. 44).

*

As one can notice, in the presentation of these three discourse analysis theories we have mentioned the possibility of operating transmissions from a theoretical framework to another, exactly as Schiffrin stated in her book (see 4.2). In the current investigation we will use the different theoretical approaches presented, in order to observe the main characteristics of the professional web forum, describe this subgenre and compare the discourses in the five languages studied. With this purpose in mind, we will first

describe the communicational device in Chapter 6, exploring the conditions of the production of web forums, and presenting our corpus.

Our discursive analysis (Chapter 7) will focus on the main aspects that characterise the web forum, as we have explained in Chapter 6. These aspects are the identities and the explanatory sequence in the web forums. Next, we will consider these *explanatory texts* as *interventions*, in other words we will consider them as part of a conversation. At this level we will observe how the explanation is constructed interactively and how knowledge is structured discursively through semantic cohesion, anaphoric/cataphoric relations, and different modes of theme elaboration. To this purpose, we will use the conversationalist approaches presented above. The concrete model of analysis we will apply in this investigation in order to describe the Internet subgenre we have denominated *professional web forum* will be detailed in Chapter 6.

3. METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

In what follows we will present the model of analysis which will be applied in order to describe the professional web forum as genre. In this section we distinguish between *conceptual aspects* of the methodology (theoretical approaches, concept and terminology) and *phases of analysis*, where the order of actions and the manners of working with the corpus will be described.

3.1 Conceptual Aspects

In order to describe the genre *professional web forum*, we will take into consideration three discourse analysis approaches presented in sections 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4. These approaches are: the communicational model of discourse analysis (Charaudeau), textual linguistics (Adam), and conversation analysis (Orecchioni, Traverso). We consider that these three approaches may offer the effective conceptual tools necessary for the discursive analysis of our corpora.

Each of the three approaches can provide effective support in the study of the different discursive aspects of this genre, and together they can facilitate a complete description of the enunciative mechanism and discursive organisation of the professional web forum. Consequently, we have distinguished three essential levels of the genre description: the enunciative level, the sequential level, and the interactional level. Since a different approach to discourse analysis can provide the theoretical

support for our research, we have elaborated a three level model of analysis in order to observe the features of the genre we are investigating.

The 1st level of analysis, the most general, is the *discourse level*. Here we will use the communicational model of Patrick Charaudeau and the theoretical concepts he proposes: *contract of communication*, *discursive project*, and *discursive strategies*. In the theoretical framework outlined by the concept *contract of communication* we will also use the main elements that determine and constrain the genre in a specific situation of social communication: *the objectives of the enunciation*, *the discursive identities*, and *the discursive device* or *discursive "mise en scène"*.

We consider that the features of the professional web forum as genre consist in a specific way of representation of identities and in a complex construction of the interactive device. Both aspects will be analysed, described, and commented on in the present work.

In what concerns the representation of identities, we will take into account the discursive identities and we will focus especially on *deixis* and *positioning* as the essential strategies that organise the verbal production of each participant in a situation of communication. We regard *deixis* as important explicit evidence of how the locutor represents himself/herself and how he/she represents the other(s), the *addressee* and the *audience* respectively. *Positioning* is also considered an essential clue in establishing a communicative contract between the enunciative "I" and the addressee "You". The *objectives of enunciation* also emerge from the first contact between participants, and we have established that these represent a unique theme, *the knowledge communication* which, too, determines the contract of communication.

At this first level the *discursive device* is very complex, so that we have decided to probe deeper into the subject and introduce the 2nd level of analysis. At this level we will use the concepts and terminology of textual linguistics (see section 4.2) and we will assume that the text of each locutor's intervention is formed by a series of sequences. We will also assume that these sequences are explanatory (see Chapter 3, especially section 3.5). As pointed out by different authors (see section 4.2), the explanatory sequences are expressed through different *discursive strategies*, respectively *explanatory discursive strategies*. For the moment we will assume three main explanatory strategies: *definition*, *description of actions*, and *prototypical explanation*, with their subcategories (see 6.3 protocol of analysis). If different categories of discursive strategies will be encountered during the analysis, they will be highlighted in the analysis and in the partial conclusions of the corresponding chapter.

In line with textual linguistics theory, besides the sequences we will take into account the *textual* dimension of the communication and we will point out how the *explanatory text* is constructed through a series of explanatory sequences on the professional web forum. We consider that this double perspective on the explanatory construction of the discourse on the professional web forum as *sequence* and as *text* will provide a complete panorama of the discursive phenomena involved in knowledge transmission on the Internet.

The 3rd level of our analysis will focus on the interactional dimension of the explanation. In order to analyse this aspect we will use the conversationalist hierarchic model of interactions. We will align our investigation with the studies defined by Orecchioni and Traverso (see section 4.3). At this level of the analysis we will consider

the professional web forum as communicational interaction. This idea is supported by the fact that e-discourse and CMC are generally considered hybrids between the written and oral discourses (see Chapter 2, especially sections 2.1, 2.2.1 and 2.2.2), which structures the professional web forum into an asynchronic written dialogue, making it fit into the theory of communicational interactions.

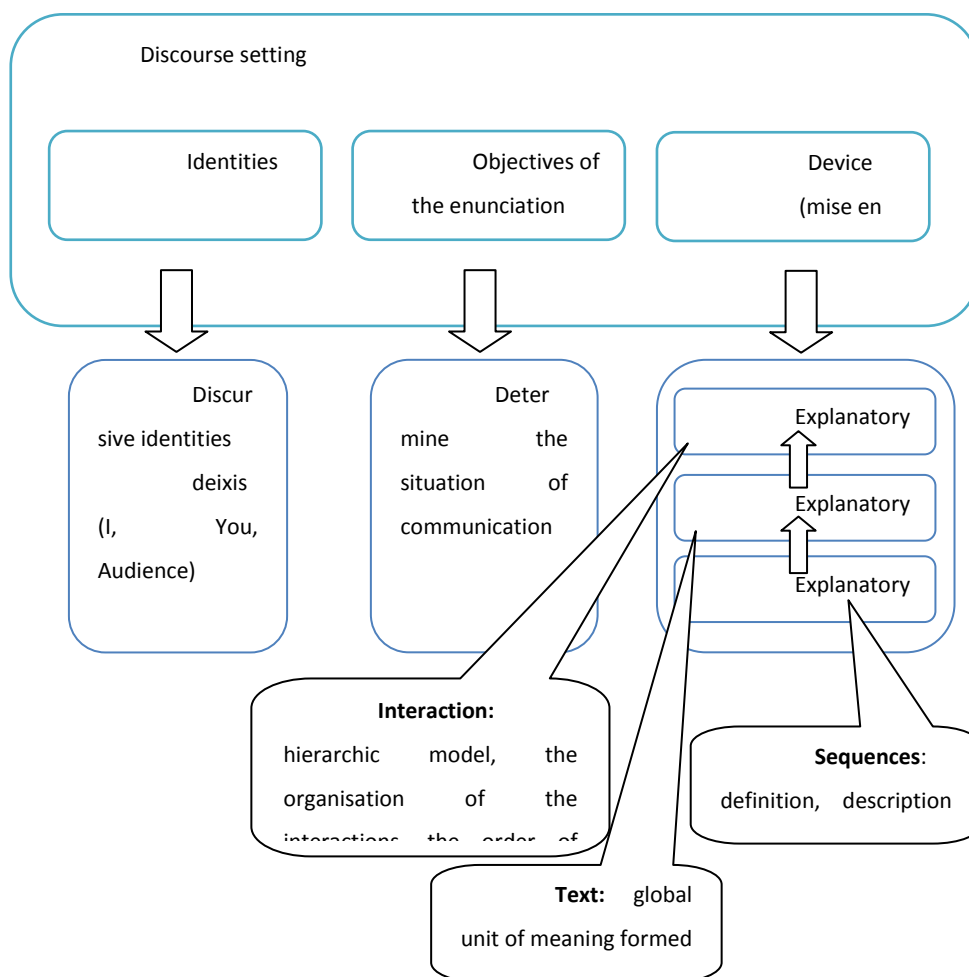
In line with this theory we will consider that the professional web forum discussions display the following hierarchic structure: *monological units* and *dialogical units*. We will use in this work the term *intervention* for the *monological units* and *exchanges* for the *dialogical units*. We have also taken into account the different dialogical pairs (see 6.3 protocol of analysis). A *series of exchanges* was considered, a *sequence*, and at this level the *sequence* will be conceived of in conversationalist terms, which will distinguish it from the sequence in textual linguistics analysis. We used the term sequence firstly in line with J.M Adam's theory, and subsequently in line with the conversationalist theory, because the two treat different conceptual levels of the discourse, and therefore, will appear in distinct sections of the analysis.

This 3rd level of the analysis is intended to demonstrate the complex discursive articulation of the explanation, firstly as sequence, then as explanatory text, and finally as explanatory interaction. In this part of the analysis we will take into account how the participants in the interaction establish communicational relations. Basically, we examine three main aspects of the professional web forum interactions: *the construction of interaction*, *the structuring of actions within interaction*, and *the thematic progression in interaction*.

Each main aspect is considered in detail and adapted to the features of CMC when necessary²². Thus, the description of the professional web forums interactions features a description of the *local* and *global discursive organisation* of the interactions, a *ranks analysis* and a *thematic progression analysis* for an optimal view of the way the explanation is constructive collaboratively on the Internet.

In what follows we will display a conceptual scheme of the professional web forum as genre.

²² For example, turn taking is different in computer mediated communication than in face-to-face conversation.



3.2 Phases of the analysis

In what follows we will describe the main phases of the analysis, which consists in the following main parts: a) discursive representation of identities²³, b) explanatory sequences and explanatory texts, and c) interactive construction of knowledge as negotiation between ignorance and experience.

a) *Discursive representation of identities*: represents the analysis of the identities involved in the transmission of knowledge. Two identities are involved in this situation: *the novice* and *the expert*. Since *the novice* seems to be the active agent as initiator and supporter of the discussion, in this first section of the analysis we focus on his/her discourse. The most important part concerning knowledge transmission in *the novice*'s discourse is the *asking for information* sequence. The *asking for information* sequence consists generally in an interrogation and its immediate context. It represents a discursive strategy through which the locutor determines the contract of communication. He/she expresses his/her ignorance, positions the participants in the discussion and establishes the contract of communication. Certain discursive patterns are recurrent. Since the recurrence is an indication of systematicity, all the recurrent patterns will be registered and analysed. Each sub-corpus will be analysed separately. We will focus on the elocutionary, allocutionary and delocutionary acts of speech as discursive representations of the identities of the self and the other. After the analysis of all sub-corpora, we will present the

²³ Objectives of enunciation: result from the social interaction between the participants in the situation (knowledge communication, knowledge transmission, collaborative knowledge construction).

partial conclusions to the construction of identity on the *professional web forum* and we will highlight its specifics in each of the languages scrutinised.

b) *Explanatory sequences and explanatory texts*: in the *expert* portion of the professional web forum discourse the most interesting part consists in the rich variety of explanatory sequences. Thus, we will focus our attention on knowledge transmission through explanation. We will distinguish between two main categories of explanations: simple explanations and complex explanations. The first category consists in different types of explanations. We distinguish between object/concept-oriented explanations, procedures/instructions, and prototypical explanations. These categories will be identified and described in each sub-corpus. The partial conclusions to the section will portray the way users ‘explain’ on a *professional web forum* and how they construct their discourse. Specific features of each language will also be highlighted.

c) *Interactive construction of knowledge*: the transmission of knowledge as negotiation between two entities lends itself to an interactionist model of analysis adapted to the specifics of *computer mediated communication*. We highlight that a longitudinal analysis of the professional web forums interactions would constitute an advantage, because it will emphasise the contextual functions of the speech acts.

Since examining each interaction in the Computer Web Forums Corpus would exceed the scope of our work, we will choose from each sub-corpus a unique and representative interaction which we will analyse in order to observe how knowledge is constructed, transmitted, and validated through communicational interaction.

The observations that will result from the analysis will form the basis of the description of the mechanism of knowledge construction and transmission. At the end of each analysis we will provide a model of the interactive construction of cognition.

d) *Multilingual approach to discourse analysis*: the analysis will be applied to a multilingual corpus (see chapter 5) consisting in professional web forum texts in five different languages in order to highlight the same discursive construction of knowledge. The contrastive analysis of the comparable corpora will allow us to observe repetitive discursive patterns in different languages and will give more support to our hypothesis of investigation. The multilingual approach will reveal discursive patterns specific for each language.

4. CONCLUSIONS TO THE PROFESSIONAL WEB FORUM COMMUNICATION

As we announced in the beginning of the current work, we have established three purposes for our research. They are: a) to describe the professional web forum as a type of discourse, b) to illustrate the mechanism of knowledge transmission in the professional web forums interactions, and c) to observe the discursive variations of knowledge transmission across languages.

In what follows we will present our conclusions on each of the three aspects. All the affirmations and evaluations will be based on the theoretical framework, on the analysis, and on the partial conclusions each chapter ends with.

4.1 Conclusions on the Genre

A genre is a complex discursive construction whose configuration is regulated by a series of conditions external and internal to the discourse. In order to describe the professional web forum as a genre we had to verify the existence of the necessary conditions for its discursive production and determine what these conditions were.

a) External characteristics of the professional web forums CMC (definition, historic and social aspects, categorisation):

Since the beginning (see Chapter 2) we have focused on the investigation of pertinent information in the literature that would allow us to describe *the nature, the categorisation, the historical evolution, and the social context of work* characteristic of the professional web forum communication. This initial investigation allowed us to observe that the professional web forum is a space where meaning is created as the result of the social interaction between its members whose aim is to communicate knowledge.

We identified as CMC the *nature* of the professional web forum communication, basing our statement on the definition of CMC:

...text-based CMC, in which participants interact by means of the written word, e.g., by typing a message on the keyboard of one computer which is read by others on their computer screens, either immediately (synchronous CMC) or at a later point in time (asynchronous CMC). (Herring, 1996: 1)

The next step in the description of the characteristics of the professional web forum communication was to identify its *category*. Based on its features, the professional web forum belongs to the 1st generation of asynchronous, text-based CMC (see 2.2.2). If we take into account a categorisation based on the communicational aspects, the professional web forum can be described as a hybridised discursive mode that has the aspect of a *written conversation*. And last of all, if we focus on the thematic aspect of the CMC, we will include the *professional web forums* discourse in the category of specialised discourses.

Another external characteristic of the professional web forum is represented by its historical evolution. The emergence of the professional web forum, as in the case of many other important genres of the web, can be determined in time, since its emergence depends on the channel of communication. The precise chronology of the evolution of the Internet from the beginnings until approximately 2005 allows us to affirm that the professional web forum emerged in the late '70s. This information is important, for it creates a general view of the existence of the mentioned web genre. We can better appreciate the professional web forum as one of the most durable genres of the web. Its constant presence on the Internet is also confirmed by the forums that form our corpus. Their continuous activity on the web was observed over a time span of 2 to 8 years. In other words, the professional web forum as a discursive genre is not only a popular form of communication but also an enduring discursive practice.

The professional web forum communication emerged in a special *social context*. It is the result of the communication between “a group of people who associate themselves over time with a computer-mediated environment” (Herring, 2008 – see 2.3.1). In other words, the professional web forum needs special conditions of production, such as “group of people”, “computer-mediated environment”, a social relation established through language, and communication over “time”.

These four aspects describe the external context and features of the professional web forum communication. The features are completed by *internal characteristics*, which describe the internal configuration of the professional web forum as discourse.

b) Internal characteristics of the professional web forums CMC (discursive aspects):

In what concerns the inherent discursive characteristics of the professional web forum, we have tried to describe the professional web forum as genre using the framework developed by Patrick Charaudeau. Thus, we contemplated the professional web forum as *situation of communication* and observed its characteristics as discursive genre. According to the theoretical framework established by Patrick Charaudeau, in the professional web forum, as in any other discursive genre, the discourse is determined by a series of factors: *the identities involved in a social interaction, the objectives of enunciation, the theme, and the enunciative device*. They individualise the professional web forum as a type of discourse from other types.

We observed, thus, that the *identities* the locutor and interlocutor assume on the professional web forum are constructed in accordance with the *goal* of their communication, which is *knowledge acquiring*. This objective makes the locutor who initiates the interaction to assume an identity accordingly. *Learning* and *knowledge*

acquisition are processes that involve an *identity that possesses knowledge* and an identity that is *searching for the knowledge* he/she is deficient in. We designated those identities as the *expert* and the *novice*, and we observed from their discursive production that the identity of the *novice* is characterised by a *discourse of ignorance*, for he/she has to perform ignorance in order to obtain information/assistance. The identity of the *expert* is characterised by a *discourse of experience*, the expert being identified as a source of knowledge.

In what concerns the enunciative device, we determined (see Chapter 4) that the professional web forum is a *monolocutive situation*, where the participants are not physically present at the moment of enunciation. The channel of communication is basically written but can also display extended features of multimodal communication (image, video). We also noticed that the locutor is not conditioned by the immediate reactions of his/her partner of discussion, which determines a certain type of discourse organisation.

We consider that the union of the internal and external characteristics that describe the professional web forum has allowed us to consider it a complex discursive subgenre.

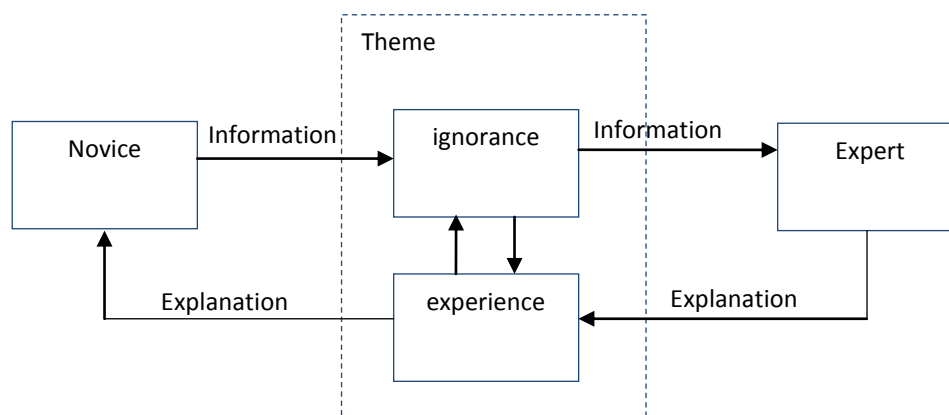
4.2 Knowledge Transmission on Professional Web Forums

The second objective of our investigation, the description of the mechanism of knowledge transmission in cyberspace through professional web forums communication, has led us to the following conclusions.

The transmission of knowledge in CMC is conceived as an act of creation of meaning that involves tacit and explicit knowledge. One deals every day with knowledge that can be articulated through language and knowledge that can't be expressed verbally (see Chapter 3). The knowledge transmission process consists in the effort to encode knowledge in language. The knowledge can be oriented to the theory of practice and its transmission may differ based on the type of knowledge and the intentions of transmission. In the professional web forum discussions the knowledge transmitted is *explicit* and *practice-oriented*. Within this classification it is important to distinguish a hierarchy of knowledge transmitted through communication. Based on the theoretical framework we have determined that the knowledge transmitted on the professional web forums can be ordered hierarchically as *skills*, *know-how*, and *expertise* (see Chapter 3). The type of knowledge communicated determines the level of specialisation of the discourse on the professional web forums. It also differentiates the degree of expertise of the members of the forum, where the hierarchy is constructed only on a cognitive basis.

The participants in the process of knowledge communication are also classified by their degree of expertise. The *novice* is a person who lacks knowledge and is motivated to acquire *skills*, *know-how*, or *expertise*, while the expert is evaluated by the type of knowledge he/she can transmit. Lack of knowledge is also important in the process of knowledge communication. It is the lack of skills, know-how, and expertise that constitutes the motive for the existence of the professional web forums..

In order to illustrate the process of knowledge transmission we propose the following scheme:



As one can notice, the knowledge is transmitted from a *source* (expert(s)) to a *receiver* (novice(s)) by an *informal communicational channel*²⁴. The message transmitted by the *source* encodes *explicit knowledge* (articulated as *text*) and *tacit knowledge* (multimodal content – audio, video, image). The knowledge is transmitted voluntarily by self-motivated participants. Both participants in the exchange, *source* and *receiver*, consider knowledge transmission as a social act (*dialogue, collaboration, assistance*). The knowledge communication process on a professional web forum doesn't encourage competition between the participants. Here, the most proficient is considered the best and his/her expertise is widely acknowledged within the virtual community. We can conclude that, compared with other existing models of online learning, such as *e-learning* and *corporatist knowledge communication* (see Chapter 3), the communication of knowledge on the professional web forum presents specific features that individualises it as an alternative to the types of online learning mentioned above.

The specificity of knowledge communication on the professional web forums consists in the fact that it prepares *self-motivated autonomous learners* and that the learning process is precise and flexible, since it doesn't depend on pre-established curricula. On the other hand, the hierarchy is established through negotiation between users and the expertise is recognised and explicitly appreciated. It is a *social* and *collaborative* learning environment where there is no competition between the participants.

As one can notice, the model of knowledge transmission on the professional web forum is individualised by specific features which distinguish it from e-learning and corporatist knowledge communication. In other words, it is a completely different form of knowledge communication.

4.3 Knowledge Transmission across Languages

²⁴ We use here the terminology and classifications of knowledge management we detailed in Chapter 3.

In the 3rd chapter we observed that knowledge is encoded in the expert-locutor's discourse and we distinguished between different discursive sequences and discursive strategies used in order to transmit knowledge. The main procedure used in interaction in order to transmit knowledge on the professional web forum seems to be the *explanation*. In the interaction between participants in the situation, the *explanation* presents a rich variety of forms and strategies. Within the theoretical framework we presented the main explanatory strategies discussed in the literature: *the definition*, *the description of actions* (instructions/procedures), and the *prototypical explanation*.

In our contrastive analysis of the corpus we tried to observe and outline the way knowledge was constructed within discourse. We also observed that the same discursive strategies and forms were used in different languages, but the explanation as strategy of knowledge transmission was configured in a different way in each language.

The analysis of our corpus revealed two important elements concerning the explanatory strategies. The first element consisted in new explanatory forms, not mentioned in the literature. The second important element consisted in the profile of the explanation on the professional web forums, which presents a completely different profile if compared with the description of the prototypical explanation. One of those aspects, the explanatory strategies, differs from language to language, the other is identical in all the languages analysed.

The *explanatory forms* the locutor chooses when constructing an explanation in order to transmit knowledge consist mainly of *definitions*, *description of actions*, or *prototypical explanation*. Statistically (see 7.2.6) these are the most used explanatory sequences. Apart from these, we have also observed the constant use in the languages scrutinised of explanatory forms we consider specific to the professional web forums discussions, since they are not mentioned in the literature: *the reference* (hyperlinks) and *the meta-explanation* (consists in explanatory comments to an explanatory sequence). Other explanatory sequences are specific to one language rather than to all: the *self-reference* (when the locutor refers to himself/herself as a reliable source of knowledge), *ironic explanations* (jokes and puns with explanatory form whose main function is to entertain and not to transmit cognitive content), *multimodal explanation* (explanatory images), *argotic explanations*, and *rhetorical explanation* (explanatory constructions with no cognitive content) (see 7.2).

The analysis of the corpus revealed that in each language the explanatory configuration of knowledge is different and that the individual profile of each language is structured on the combination of the main explanatory structures and the specific explanatory structures. Consequently, we were able to individualise the explanatory profile of knowledge transmission in each language as follows:

English: *instructions, prototypical explanations, definitions, meta-explanations*

Spanish: *instructions, prototypical explanations, definitions, rhetorical explanations, self-reference, argotic explanations*

French: *instructions, prototypical explanations, definitions, ironic explanations, visual explanations, meta-explanations*

Romanian: *instructions, prototypical explanations, definitions, meta-explanations, self-references, visual explanations*

Catalan: *instructions, prototypical explanations, definitions, meta-explanations, argotic explanations*

One can notice that the first three explanatory elements in each profile are constant. The high rate of the *instructions* reveals that the knowledge transmitted on the professional web forums analysed is *practical* rather than theoretical. The peculiarity of each language is portrayed by the use of specific explanatory constructions.

The statistics on formation (see 7.2.6) also reveals that the sub-corpora we characterised in 5.5 as *high extended* (ES, FR) don't display a high number of explanatory sequences. On the contrary, the sub-corpora considered in 5.5 as *low extended* (RO, CAT) contain a high number of explanatory occurrences.

Another observation consists in the different importance with which is credited a specific form of explanation in the communication in a language.. For example, we observed in our corpus that English displays an excellent construction of the prototypical explanation. In the Spanish sub-corpora one can notice the modalisation of all types of explanatory cores as well as their low extension compared with the social dimension of the communication. The French professional web forum excels in the construction of *definitions* (see the definitory structures analysed in 7.2.3.2). In the Romanian sub-corpus there prevails the use of short explanatory structures (instructions) and of implicits, while in the Catalan forum even if the explanatory sequences are brief in general, the description of actions (instructions) is extremely complex. For more statistical data on the mentioned profiles, see Chapter 7, especially the conclusions.

All these differences we mentioned could have led us into thinking that the explanation as communicational strategy for knowledge transmission on the professional web forums may be a miscellaneous phenomenon. Instead, the explanation on the professional web forum has turned out to be a quite uniform phenomenon across all the languages of the corpus. In the partial conclusions of section 7.2.6, we realised a comparative analysis between the features of the *prototypical explanation* as presented in literature and the *professional web forum explanation* whose features resulted from the corpus analysis carried out in sub-chapter 7.2. We observed then that the explanation can be described taking into account: *the enunciation, the enunciative modalities, the terminology, the descriptive and evaluative adjectives, the stages of the explanatory activity*, and finally, *the discursive strategies*.

As it results from the analysis carried out in Chapter 7, the explanatory sequence on the professional web forum has different features. In what concerns the *enunciation*, for example, it presents more deictics than the prototypical explanation, more verbal tenses and a lower use of time and space references in the text. The use of epistemic, logic, affective modalities, and *subjectivity marks* also represents a feature of the professional web forum explanation. The use of specialised lexicon, loan words or technical terms is reduced to the basics in the professional web forums explanation. The imprecision in the explanatory texts of the web is generated by the frequent use of polysemy, ambiguity and professional jargon. Irony and/or slang are also a frequent occurrence.

The explanatory sequence is constructed on the professional web forum through a very rich variety of discursive strategies not used in other contexts, such as: *definition, exemplification, analogy, quotation, explanatory reference (self-reference), description*

of actions, meta-explanations, rhetorical explanations, reformulation, ironic explanations, argotic explanations and analogy.

The main conclusion in what concerns knowledge transmission on the professional web forums is that it is prevalingly realised through explanation. The explanatory discursive forms and strategies represent special features that individualise this explanation from its other uses in academic or research context, where the professional web forum explanation is uniform across languages. The variation of the professional web forum explanation can be observed across languages in its internal discursive configuration, each language presenting clear tendencies to use different explanatory strategies.

4.4 Original Contributions to the Domain

Besides the profile of the *professional web forum* as subgenre of the Internet knowledge communication, which represents our main contribution to the investigation, other secondary aspects of the research are original and innovative. In what follows, we will point out some of the original points of the current investigation. They consist in:

- a. The main topic of the investigation: the professional web forum represents one of the first genres of knowledge transmission on the Internet. Nevertheless, it has been little studied as a form of discourse. In the current investigation we have accomplished a systematic and multidisciplinary analysis and description of the professional web forum taking into account the issues concerning this topic in e-discourse and CMC, the nature of the knowledge it transmits, and its discursive features. The partial conclusions of Chapters 2 and 3 are intended to describe the *professional web forums communication* in terms of a specific type of e-discourse, which has emerged from a specific type of communicational interactions that characterises a specific group of persons: the *learning virtual communities*. At present we have no evidence that such a systematic study has been applied to this discursive genre so far.
- b. The multilingual analysis of the same discourse carried out in five languages (EN, ES, FR, RO, CAT) represents, too, an innovative aspect of this research. The contrastive analysis and the punctual observations on the different discursive structures we have analysed may be the incentive for a cultural approach to the explanation as a social phenomenon differently encoded and organised across cultures.
- c. A contribution of the present study to discourse analysis is represented by the description of the *explanatory sequence* on the professional web forum. The analysis of 1,000 pages of corpus in five languages supports the idea that the *explanatory sequence* we have analysed is very different compared to the existing descriptions of the explanation as prototypical discursive sequence or the explanation in didactics, in sciences or academic research. The comparative study of its features we have carried out in section 7.2.6 represents the paradigm of a new explanatory sequence that one can observe in CMC.

- d. The multilingual study of the representations of discursive identities doesn't represent a completely new approach to the study of identities. A similar study was realised by ScaPoLine some years ago. The originality of the present investigation approach consists in the major number of languages we have worked with in a comparable corpus (five languages), while ScaPoLine used for their research only three languages. Likewise, the reference domain of the corpora is different: our domain is the professional web forum while ScaPoLine's was scientific research articles. The languages are also different, ScaPoLine carried out their studies on NO, FI, and EN. In the case of our investigation, we have focused mainly on Romance languages and EN. Moreover, the parameters we have taken into consideration as well as the discourse we focused on are different from the studies of ScaPoLine.
- e. A last innovative element we want to mention in conclusion is represented by the approach to the explanation as communicational interaction on the professional web forums. A contemplation of the explanation within the framework of conversation analysis can highlight complex linguistic phenomena.

These are the main innovative aspects that the present investigation has brought to the fore. They indicate the quality and the measure of the contribution of this study to the discourse analysis domain.

4.5 Further Development of the Investigation

Since PhD research is considered a starting point in the investigation of a researcher and the subject of the current study is so vast, we can't consider that the present investigation is complete and closed. We would like to point out in this section of conclusions some further advances that could be made in the future in order to better document this domain of study.

We consider that in the future this investigation can be supported and improved as regards the following aspects:

- a) The corpus of analysis could be augmented and actualised over time in order to observe if the constant parameters of the genre we have observed during these years have registered variations and modifications.
- b) The corpus of analysis could also be contrasted with a control corpus which would represent a supplementary mechanism of validation of the conclusions of the present investigation. Since there are no multilingual or comparative corpora on the professional web forums communication, the control corpus has to be created. The principles of design used for its implementation should be different from the principles we have used for the construction of the corpus of the present analysis.
- c) The description of the *professional web forum* as subgenre of CMC knowledge communication can be completed by a study of the construction of the *title of the threads*, which may investigate the title-content relation in a thread as well as the discursive strategies involved in their construction.
- d) A multimodal approach to the professional web forum discourse can also contribute to the improvement of the description of the way knowledge is transmitted through Internet genres. In the present investigation we also make marginal references to and comments on the multimodal aspect of the communication. Our analysis has

allowed us to observe that the multimodal dimension of the communication on the professional web forum is a complex phenomenon and it is differently constructed across languages.

- e) In the end, we would also like to mention that a pragmatic and rhetoric insight into the web forum communication may complete the current study and may contribute to the completion of the description of the discursive strategies the Internet users employ in order to communicate knowledge.