

## Predominant Stylistic Features in Persuasive Discourse: The Case of Self-Help Texts

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**Resumen:** Los textos de motivación o autoayuda son un subgénero del discurso persuasivo. Dado que su público meta lo conforman personas con diferentes problemas emocionales, sociales o fisiológico, el autor de un texto de auto-ayuda procura emplear un estilo particular para transmitir sus ideas y lograr una mayor eficacia. El presente proyecto de análisis identifica y enumera las características propias del texto de autoayuda o de motivación con el fin de proporcionarle al traductor información práctica que le ayude a tratar y a solucionar dudas que puedan surgir a la hora de realizar su traducción. Se analizará la función que tiene el discurso persuasivo en la eficacia de la recepción del mensaje y la manera de conservarla o equipararla en el texto de llegada.

**Descriptor:** discurso persuasivo, el texto de autoayuda, estilo, forma, léxico

**Abstract:** Motivational or self-help texts are a subgenre of persuasive speech. Knowing that his audience consists of people with different emotional, social, or physiological problems, the author of a self-help text will use a particular style to transmit his ideas and ensure greater effectiveness. This analysis identifies and lists the characteristics of self-help texts to provide practical information to the translator to help address and resolve questions that may arise during the translation process. It will analyze the role that persuasive speech has on the effectiveness of the message and how to maintain it or reproduce it in the target text.

**Key words:** persuasive discourse, self-help texts, style, form, lexicon

### I INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the translation of several self-help texts for patients with addiction to alcohol and narcotics mainly. The booklets *King Baby*, *Denial*, *Releasing Anger*, and *Forgiveness* are the source of all the examples. These publications, produced and distributed by Hazelden Educational Materials, are tools used by rehabilitation centers in group and individual workshops called *bibliotherapy*. Through the assignment of short readings to patients, therapists promote reflection and awareness of the disease, and especially the desire to recover. The main objective of these documents is to provide the reader with a source of relief and guidance to solve a specific problem. Self-help manuals try to create awareness by using mostly short phrases that the addict can process and internalize. Testimonies and stories that narrate the experiences of addicts or former addicts, and especially the way these people have managed to overcome their

dependencies, are important components as well. To this end, the documents employ a colloquial register accessible to the average reader who has general knowledge of the language, and there is no delving into technicalities.

This analysis attempts to identify and list the characteristics of self-help or motivation texts to provide practical information to the translator to help him address and resolve questions that may arise when making a decision. It will analyze the role that persuasive speech has on the effectiveness of the message and how to maintain or reproduce it in the target text. The market has plenty of literature in the field of self-help and health, but there are few studies related to the translation process of this type of text. The general objective of this work is to identify and analyze the characteristic features in persuasive speech, specifically in self-help or motivation texts. However, due to the limitations of space, the specific objectives target the syntactic and pragmatic components only. This means that the lexical features will not be considered for this study. In addition to making an approximate list of the syntactic and pragmatic features of the texts, this research attempts to analyze the importance of maintaining an equivalent style in the target text.

## **II STYLISTIC FEATURES OF SELF-HELP TEXTS**

Motivational or self-help texts are a subgenre of persuasive speech. The self-help text, in its vocative function, is characterized by being written in a language that ensures quick and easy understanding by the reader (Newmark, 1992, p.65). Knowing that his audience consists of people with different emotional, social, or physiological problems, the author of a self-help text will use a particular style to transmit his ideas and ensure greater effectiveness. Several authors in the field of translation studies and linguistics have defined the concept of style. Among them are Mounin (1977), Crystal and Davy (1976), and Nida and Taber (1982) whose distinction of stylistic resources according to their function will be analyzed in detail.

Nida and Taber (1982) identified the stylistic devices of language. Their classification is based on the function each resource fulfils in the transmission of the message. According to this classification, four major classes of features may be observed in a written text, but only two are predominant in motivational or persuasive speech. The first feature is of a formal nature and refers to the arrangement of words, i.e., the syntactic constructs and organization of ideas within the discourse. The second is lexical and revolves around word choice. The characteristic they share is to provide significance with the least possible effort (pp.191-192). To this end, simple structures and known words with common and familiar combinations are used to allow the reader to understand (decode) the message with a minimum of energy and time. Using these strategies assures both the sender and the receiver maximum effectiveness in the communication process.

For the analysis of the syntactic and pragmatic features of the persuasive text or self-help that allow the conveyance of meaning with the least possible effort, particular cases, such as sentence construction, sentence length, and transitions, will be presented in the following sections. It has been necessary to make a thorough review of the possibilities of the Spanish language in order to find the nearest equivalent. These

specific cases exemplify the implementation of the techniques and methods of translation that were applied in the preparation of a Spanish version for the texts *King Baby*, *Denial*, *Releasing Anger*, and *Forgiveness*.

## 2.1 Formal features that seek effectiveness

### 2.1.1. *Simplicity in discourse structure and statements: the use of contractions*

The full document (the four booklets in the original language) is written in very natural, colloquial English, and one of the features to prove it is the frequent use of contractions. In the English language, economy is evident through certain constructs in which laws of agglutination, juxtaposition, parataxis and asyndeton are applied. López and Minett (1997, pp.72-77) and Vázquez- Ayora (1977, pp.196-200) discuss these phenomena. Similarly, there is in English a more semantic meaning in prepositions and a higher incidence in the use of contracted forms. Contractions in Spanish are limited to two cases in particular: 1) *a + el = al* and 2) *de + el = del* (prepositions *a* and *de* attached to the masculine definite article). However, there are other very common but not officially accepted phrases of regional character, characteristic of oral discourse, such as *pa'* (substituting *para*), *pos* (substituting *pues*), *vu'a* or *vo'a* (replacing *voy a*), and *'e* (replacing the preposition *de*; e.g., *vaso'e leche* or glass of milk). The use of these contractions is localized and limited to certain varieties of spoken Spanish and are not recognized within the standard of written discourse.

In written English, the use of contractions denotes a moderate degree of informality, and they are employed to establish a bond of trust and rapport between the author and the reader, which in turn increases the chances of greater satisfaction by the latter regarding the assimilation and understanding of the ideas presented in the text. In total, in the original text 269 cases of contractions have been documented. The English language has two main types of contractions: One resulting from the union of a noun or pronoun and an auxiliary verb (I'm, he'll, you've, etc.), and another one created by joining an auxiliary verb with the negative particle 'not' (isn't, haven't, didn't, can't, won't, etc.). There is also—and it does not belong to any of the above categories—the phrase 'let's' which in their entirety 'let us' only occurs in very formal situations. Eight appearances of this type were found in the text. The set of contractions used are summarized in table 1 in the annexes. The information in the table helps to observe the impact of such structure and to analyze the orientation of the text, be it present, future, past, and so on.

In the Spanish language there is no equivalent to the contracted forms of English, which is why the translator must compensate for this lack by resorting to other properties of the target language to ensure and maintain the level of familiarity and informality of discourse. For example, he may employ colloquial and currently, and commonly, used lexical units, while maintaining his structures simple.

### 2.1.2. *Use of the imperative mood*

According to Newmark (1988), vocative texts are characterized by the frequent use of modal or auxiliary verbs, the first person plural and the use of the imperative mood,

among others (p.64). The author uses these resources to make suggestions and to give the reader a chance to choose, but it does so through simple commands or orders. The goal is achieved when the receiver identifies the issuer's experience, ability, seriousness and understanding, which, in turn, provide the reliability needed to trust and accept what is proposed. Once this bond of trust is created, the author may suggest the steps to follow to achieve a goal; in this case, to overcome certain moral weaknesses that jeopardize a successful recovery from alcohol dependence or abuse. The examples below illustrate the use of the imperative in the TO and the way they were translated into Spanish.

• *Forgiveness* pp.10-13: Lists a series of exercises or routines that promise to help you forget and forgive resentments, and it does so through imperative sentences like the following:

Original Text	Translated Text
<i>Let go of resentment through the Twelve Steps</i>	Libérese del resentimiento con la ayuda de los Doce Pasos
<i>Use active imagery</i>	Utilice imágenes en movimiento
<i>Write letters</i>	Escriba cartas
<i>Pray for the person you resent</i>	Ore por la persona que le inspira rencor

Dr. Luis E. Sandí, director of Dr. Sandí Rehabilitation Clinic and author on the subject, explains that in the context of cognitive-behavioral therapy, and based on scientific knowledge of how addictions operate, the doctor, the therapist and other professionals working with drug addicts, make use of imperatives to very effectively modify specific aspects of harmful conduct in their patients. The message is conveyed in a clear, precise and direct manner and leaves no doubt in the recipient on the steps and decisions to make.

## 2.2. Indicators of cohesion within the discourse

The original texts use headings and subheadings to guide the reader through the message, indicating the beginning and end of each section and paragraph. This allows the reader to process information quickly, reliably and efficiently, which in itself is the main objective of this resource. Consequently, the use of lists and tables has remained in the same format in the TT, as this ensures the translator a text as effective in conveying the message as the TO.

*King Baby* is the booklet that employs more subtitles (24 in total, one of these with other internal divisions with individual titles), and includes five lists (on pp.5-7, 10-14, 20-21, 26, 27) of different elements. The author, Richard S., uses this format to contrast and compare attitudes and philosophies, presenting the reader with a clear and concise idea of the truths and myths, mistakes and solutions to this personality disorder, which themselves constitute the basis and main purpose of his message.

Dr. Sandí says the headings, subheadings, lists and tables are very useful to the writer who is working with the victims of drug addiction (not only the addict but also their families and friends), because by means of them discussion points may be organized quickly and efficiently, and as a result, you get a text in which the relationship between

paragraphs is clear and meaningful to the reader. He adds that the titles are even more practical when they are stated in interrogative manner, for the segment of the population who these brochures or manuals target are addicts who have a large number of questions. And the fact that paragraphs indicate self-doubt is attractive and at the same time, helps them save time and hassle as readers may consult and focus on areas or issues that concern them.

### 2.3. Indicators of relationship between statements and ideas

This resource is one that shows the connection between the various clauses and ideas of discourse, and in order to facilitate understanding it is important to indicate the type of connection that exists between the ideas (Nida, 1982, p.192). These can be causal, comparison and contrast, addition, illustration, exclusion, and so on. The first page of *King Baby* reveals the high incidence of this resource in the use of such phrases and conjunctions as ‘because’, ‘for’, ‘but’, ‘in other words’, ‘in doing so’. The author expresses preference for conjunctions that demonstrate a causal link and contrast (‘because’, ‘for’ and ‘but’—the latter is used three times on the same page), since the writer is trying to explain the reasons that cause an event or situation, and is, at the same time, contrasting the attitudes that make the difference between an individual who is in control of his impulses, and one who gets carried away as a result of an immature and insecure personality.

The Spanish version has retained all of the indicators used in the OT (*pues, ya que, pero, sino*—both equivalentes of ‘but’— *en otras palabras, y es así*), but has also assured an appropriate hypotactic level for the target language that will provide the translated text more naturalness and specification about the link and depth of ideas.

Original Text	Translated Text
<i>The term King Baby could just as well be Queen Baby, <b>because</b> we all probably have this infantile ego in our conscious minds.</i>	...término que bien podría ser la Reina Bebé, <b>pues</b> es muy probable que todos, sin distinción de género, carguemos con este ego infantil en nuestro inconsciente.
<i>In this pamphlet, we will learn to identify the infantile King Baby ego within us. Our childish personality traits must be surrendered before our disease can be fully arrested. The compulsive King Baby personality can accelerate addiction or lead to relapse.</i>	En este folleto aprenderemos a identificar al Rey Bebé que vive en cada uno de nosotros, <b>a fin de eliminar</b> los rasgos infantiles que impedirían detener exitosamente nuestra enfermedad, <b>teniendo presente</b> que la personalidad compulsiva del Rey Bebé puede acelerar la adicción o llevar a una recaída.

The second example in the table clearly shows how three separate sentences in the OT are constructed in one in the TT, using two connective elements (a prepositional phrase and a gerund) to join the propositions. However, more than simply reducing the number of sentences in the Spanish version, what the translator must keep in mind is to find ways

to make the relationships between the ideas of the OT more explicit, when in the target language a mere, literal translation would be unnatural and ineffective.

#### 2.4. Parallel constructions of subject and predicate

In both English and Spanish prevails SVO order (subject-verb-object), but in modern English this scheme is generally preferred, while in Spanish the variety of verb endings allows a greater degree of freedom in word order compared with English (López and Minett, 1997, pp.65-67). Typical examples of this versatility of the Spanish language is the omission of the subject pronoun, very rare in English, and the ability to place the subject after the verb, a situation that usually serves to emphasize, contradict or contrast any particular element in the sentence. Despite having more freedom, the Spanish language is still basically an SVO order.

Original Text	Translated Text
<i>This pamphlet <b>will show</b> ways to apply the principles of the Twelve Steps to help us express our anger directly. <b>We'll see</b> how denial of anger, not the feeling itself, is what undermines our relationships and serenity. (Releasing Anger 1)</i>	En este folleto <b>se expondrán</b> algunas maneras de aplicar los principios de los Doce Pasos con el propósito de ayudarnos a expresar el enojo directamente. <b>Veremos</b> que es la negación del enojo, y no el sentimiento mismo, lo que debilita nuestras relaciones y serenidad.

The above lines exemplify the inversion of SVO in the TT of the first statement of the TO and the omission of the subject pronoun in the second, as the Spanish verb, by itself, is capable of indicating the subject (first person plural), and the tense (future). García Yebra (1984) advises sticking to the order of the elements of the original when languages are syntactically and semantically similar. However, excessive uniformity of the structures should be avoided, for it results in a dull and unattractive translation for the target reader. He, likewise, urges the translator to be very cautious with fixed expressions of the source language, since they most likely exist in the target language with its own laws (pp.427-428).

#### 2.5. Short statements

Self-help texts in their vocative function, are characterized by being "escritos en un lenguaje de pronta comprensión para el lector" (Newmark, 1988, p. 65). The author of a self-help text knows his target audience is a particular group that mostly consists of people who need to resolve an emotional, social, or physiological problem. Thus, he strives to present to his audience ideas and suggestions through a friendly language of quick and easy assimilation, ensuring greater effectiveness. One of the resources that serve this purpose is the use of short sentences. While it is true that Spanish prefers subordination, leading to longer sentences, it is necessary to remember that sometimes the brevity of the statements is a stylistic feature of the type of speech, and it is prudent that the translator not make hasty decisions that might undermine the goal set by the

author and the effectiveness and impact of the message of the TO. It is advisable, therefore, to consult parallel texts that may guide the translator in the path to follow. The reader may consult the annexes for examples of specific translated passages.

### **2.6. Clear indication of participants**

According to Nida (1982), each language has its own system to identify participants in a speech and refer to them in the following statements; the more clearly identified the participants, the easier it is to understand (p.193). González Bedoya (1990) argues that the personality traits of the speaker that influence the effectiveness of persuasion are competence, honesty, credibility, prestige, authority and the similarity between speaker and audience (p.129) These are the factors that guarantee a greater or lesser degree of audience identification with the author and his ideas.

In the documents that have been translated, the readers are willing to admit the notions and arguments presented to them because they see in the authors people who have had their own troubles and difficulties; they are imperfect beings like them. By tapping the nominal use of the pronoun "we" and presenting themselves as victims of these moral weaknesses or as professionals with years of experience in the field, the authors earn the trust of their audience and lay the foundations for their ideas and judgments to be accepted and supported. It is thus clear that the discourse participants are people who are characterized by having faced the same situations in their daily lives, who have suffered or are suffering the same penalties, and who try to find a solution to their problems or other people's problems in the same way. The translation must attest to the relationships of affinity between author and audience reproducing the associations and situations that are established in the OT.

## **III CONCLUSION**

We can conclude that the main purpose of the translation of a self-help text is to maintain the predominant stylistic features in the source text when the intention of both is the same. The formal features, characteristic of self-help or motivational texts, seek efficiency and interest in the message. The features that were identified throughout this analysis are a simple arrangement of ideas, which may be observed in the clear transition between ideas (use of headings and subheadings, lists, etc.), predominance of subject-verb structures, mostly brief statements, an explicit identification of the participants of the speech, and simple language constructs. The translated version differs slightly from the original text in its use of somewhat more extended sentences and hypotactic structures, resulting from a more frequent employment of indicators. Since they constitute characteristics of Spanish, the translator must respect that.

The linguistic value of the audience in the self-help text is very significant because, as González Bedoya (1990) argues, the role of language as a means of persuasion (not just communication) determines the plasticity of many notions (p.96). This means that the audience of a text is as important as the author and the subject that is dealt with.

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**V ANNEXES**

**5.1 Inventory of the contractions in the OT**

TENSE	contrac. c/ not	contrac. c/ pron.	I	YOU	HE	SHE	IT	WE	THEY	wh- word	there	this/ that	TO- TAL	
PRESENT	do+not		9	20	3		10	16	3			3	64	
	be+not		1	1			8	3	5				18	
	can+not		4	5			1	4	2				16	
	should+not		1	2	1			3	1				8	
	have+not		1					1					2	
	ain't						4						4	
	needn't							1					1	
		be		18	10	3		43	13	4	5	3	3	102
		have+pp		2	4				6					12

<b>TOTAL</b>													<b>227</b>
<b>TENSE</b>	<b>contrac. c/ not</b>	<b>contrac. c/ pron.</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>YOU</b>	<b>HE</b>	<b>SHE</b>	<b>IT</b>	<b>WE</b>	<b>THEY</b>	<b>wh- word</b>	<b>there</b>	<b>this/ that</b>	<b>TO- TAL</b>
PAST	did+not				2		3	2					7
	be+not				1		1						2
	could+not		1	1			1						3
<b>TOTAL</b>													<b>12</b>
FUTURE	will+not		2		2		3	5					12
		will		1			1	5					7
<b>TOTAL</b>													<b>19</b>
CONDITIO- NAL	would+not					1							1
		would			1								1
		had	1										1
<b>TOTAL</b>													<b>3</b>
IMPERAT.		let's						8					8
<b>TOTAL</b>													<b>269</b>

**5.2. Examples of the length of statements in the TO and their translation**

Original Text	Translated Text
Titles, subtitles or statements included in lists or tables	
<i>Detach (Denial 22)</i>	Apártese
<i>Keep it simple (King Baby 16)</i>	No se complique
<i>Use active imagery (Forgiveness 11)</i>	Utilice imágenes en movimiento
<i>What angers us? (Releasing Anger 5)</i>	¿Qué nos causa enojo?
<i>Set limits (Denial 21)</i>	Póngase límites
Questions	
<i>What's underneath the anger? (Releasing Anger 12)</i>	¿Qué hay tras el enojo?
<i>But isn't acceptance better? (Denial 6)</i>	¿No es mejor la aceptación del problema?
<i>What's wrong with me? (Denial 1)</i>	¿Qué me pasa?"
<i>How do I feel right now? (Releasing Anger 8)</i>	¿Cómo me siento en este preciso instante?

The comparison between longer statements was not as simple since many of the equivalents became part either of the previous sentence or the latter statement. As a result, it was necessary to use more space in order to show the examples clearly.

- ◆ *If you are having a hard time detaching from a person or a problem, maybe you should consider Al-Anon. It helps. (Denial, p. 22)*

Si a usted se le ha dificultado mantenerse alejado de una persona o un problema, los grupos Al-Anon le podrían ayudar si así lo desea.

- ◆ *Strive for gentleness, clear thinking, and love in your encounters with people. Forget perfection.* (Denial, p. 22)

Esfuércese por ser amable, claro y cariñoso al tratar con otras personas y olvídense de ser o esperar que sean perfectos.

- ◆ *By being overfriendly and charming, we try to win friends. We may be clinging. We often try to control or dominate.* (King Baby, p.5)

Quienes nos dejamos llevar por este instinto intentamos ganar amigos a través de mucho encanto y simpatía; somos muy dependientes y con frecuencia tratamos de controlar y dominar.

- ◆ *Try composing your affirmations. Repeat them.* (Forgiveness, p.12)

Intente construir sus propios pensamientos positivos y repítalos.