

# Exploring Knowledge Dissemination Strategies in English and Italian Newspaper Articles for Children: A Focus on Legal Issues

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## *Abstract*

The proliferation of specialised knowledge inevitably leads to a growing need for dissemination among non-experts or experts in other fields. The speed of knowledge development requires more efficient communicative tools, which should be able to reach an ever-expanding globalised audience. This suggests studying the strategies of disseminating expert knowledge to different lay audiences. The case study proposed in this article focuses on addressees at a different stage of cognitive development: children. The aim is to analyse the strategies for successful transfer and effective dissemination of legal concepts in English and Italian online newspaper articles for children aged between 8 and 14. The adoption of a cross-linguistic perspective will contribute to identify the main (dis-) similarities in the knowledge dissemination strategies used to promote a better understanding of legal terms and basic legal concepts when translating adult knowledge and expertise into comprehensible knowledge targeted at children.

*Key-words:* knowledge dissemination strategies, legal knowledge, online newspapers for children.

## **1. Introduction**

In an era of increasing scientific specialisation, the proliferation of specialised knowledge inevitably leads to a growing need for dissemination among non-experts, or experts in other fields. In the past, knowledge dissemination (KD) used to play an ancillary role in research, not being directly involved in the processes of knowledge construction and development. It has been only relatively recently that KD actually started to be conceived of as a determinant process for the birth of new ideas, an obligatory step towards a more aware and in-depth acquisition of knowledge as well as a core element which lies at the heart of the intellectual debates within society.

In recent years, scholars have witnessed a surge of interest in the study of specialised knowledge dissemination between experts and non-experts investigating expert discourse vs. ‘popularisation’. A definition of this concept is provided by Calsamiglia and van Dijk (2004: 370):

Popularization is a vast class of various types of communicative events or genres that involve the transformation of specialized knowledge into ‘everyday’ or ‘lay’ knowledge [...] This means that popularization discourse needs to be formulated in such a way that non-specialized readers are able to construct lay versions of specialized knowledge and integrate these with their existing knowledge.

The way specialists communicate their knowledge to lay people has been widely discussed often in terms of “translating” (Gotti 2013: 13) otherwise exclusive knowledge into more comprehensible language. As Gotti (2013: 13) remarks, the popularisation process is a kind of redrafting that does not alter the disciplinary content as much as its language. In the process, information is transferred linguistically in a very similar way to intralinguistic translation.

The fact that popularisation has been compared to translation is not surprising because, as Garzone (2014a: 76) rightly points out, “like translation it involves a form of re-writing through which discourse presenting the complexities of science and technology is re-elaborated in order to make it accessible to the layman”. This view reinforces the idea developed by Calsamiglia and van Dijk (2004: 372) that popularisation involves not only a reformulation of specialised knowledge, but also a “recontextualization” of scientific knowledge originally produced in specific contexts to which the lay public has limited access. The drafting of popularising texts is therefore seen as an instance of the linguistic, textual and discursive re-elaboration of specialised knowledge in a way that is comprehensible and relevant for new recipients, in a discursive context which is predictable though different from that of the original source (Caliendo 2014a).

Within this field of study, substantial work has been devoted to the popularisation of specialised discourse<sup>1</sup>. However, as

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of critical discourse perspectives, see Myers 2003; see also

emphasised by Garzone (2006), little attention has been paid to the study of the language of popularisation. In particular, early studies focused on different issues in the terminology and lexis of specialised and non-specialised texts (Casadei 1994). Rhetorical strategies and forms of textual organisation have been approached more recently, shifting the focus from terminological choices to pragmatic and textual features, aimed at introducing the reader to the comprehension of complex contents (e.g. Giannoni 2008; Maci 2013).

Popularisation discourse has often been studied in relation to hard sciences that seem to require a strictly specialised knowledge and are most obviously obscure to the lay audiences, such as chemistry and physics. The issue, however, is also relevant for both humanities and social sciences (Bamford 2014; Mattiello 2014; Bondi 2015a), as well as for legal and institutional discourse (Engberg 2009a; 2009b; 2010), areas that are particularly important because they directly affect citizens' lives.

The recontextualisation of expert knowledge for various lay audiences necessarily affects several aspects of communication which range from lexico-syntactic patterns to different discourse strategies. This is particularly evident when children are the addressees of knowledge transmission and knowledge dissemination strategies are expected to be emphasized<sup>2</sup>.

The present study focuses on KD as a process of 'mediation' between experts and non-experts having a different stage of cognitive development: children. Within this approach, the aim of the present article is to analyse the linguistic-discursive strategies employed for successful transfer and effective dissemination of legal concepts in English and Italian online newspaper articles for children aged between 8 and 14. If KD is a form of 'mediation', texts targeted at children can be seen as a case of multi-layered mediation, in that the intended lay audience has limited cognitive skills and encyclopaedic knowledge.

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Bensaude-Vincent 2001; Calsamiglia and López Ferrero 2003; Ciapuscio 2003; Minelli de Oliveira and Pagano 2006; Kermas and Christiansen 2013; Garzone 2014a; Gotti 2014; Bhatia, Chiavetta and Sciarrino 2015; Salvi and Bowker 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting analysis of the popularisation of history for children, see Sezzi (2013).

The choice to analyse the dissemination of legal knowledge targeted at children derives from an increasing interest in exploring the way children develop their understanding of law. Why does a child need to learn about law? Law pervades everything we do. Legal issues such as human rights, immigration, tax, divorce etc. are part of the topics of the day on which public attention is constantly focused. Talking to children about those issues may provide them with a much richer picture of the community in which they live.

The field of law still remains, as far as I know, an under-explored area of inquiry in connection with popularisation. Only few studies have focused on the popularisation of legal discourse (Dossena 2008; Anesa 2012; Preite 2013; Williams 2013; Polese and D'Avanzo 2014) and on the impact of web genres on its dissemination (Chierichetti 2006; Garzone 2014b; Engberg and Luttermann 2014; Cacchiani and Preite 2015; Cavalieri 2015; Turnbull 2015). Even analyses of the dissemination of legal knowledge targeted at children are rare: in fact, only two are known to me (Sorrentino 2012; Luttermann and Engberg 2015).

The advent of the Internet has had a significant impact on the transmission of specialised communication between experts and non-experts (e.g. Garzone 2007; Caliendo 2014b; Scotto di Carlo 2014; Anesa and Fage-Butler 2015; Bondi 2015b). Blogs, articles in online newspapers, e-magazines and e-journals “provide an open space for specialised communication, where a diverse audience (with different degrees of expertise) may have access to information intended both for non-specialist readers and for experts” (Mattiello 2014: 2).

It is the aim of this research to disclose how legal knowledge is disseminated as scientific popularisation within online newspaper articles for children. As is well known, “picking up a newspaper is not something that many children do easily” (Whyte 2001). However, there are websites that offer news articles written for a young audience aimed at encouraging the younger generation to read and disseminating knowledge by using simple language. They introduce children to current events around the world, inform them of interesting facts and entertain them too. They also cover everything from science and the environment, home affairs and international news to sports, puzzles and entertainment.

The choice of the genre under examination – the online newspaper article for children – is linked to its very specific status in the field of popularising discourse. The newspaper article represents the most distinguished channel of dissemination/popularisation of scientific knowledge, as it originates from the re-elaboration, reformulation and re-use of pre-existing texts, in line with a consolidated tradition of attention for the professional aspects of journalism (Garzone 2014a). Investigating English and Italian online newspaper articles for children as texts addressing different levels of cognitive competence can be instrumental in understanding the dynamics of KD in a global and plurilingual context.

The next section provides a presentation of the corpora used for the study as well as the methodology adopted. The results will be reported in Section 3, followed by some concluding remarks in Section 4.

## 2. Corpus and methodology

The study is based on the analysis of two small comparable corpora of English and Italian online newspaper articles for children aged between 8 and 14 dealing with legal issues. The compilation of both corpora was conditioned by the fact that online newspaper articles for children addressing legal issues are quite rare. I consulted the most popular British/American and Italian websites for children's newspapers between January 2011 and December 2014<sup>3</sup>. Of these, only two online newspapers in both English and Italian were found to publish articles focusing on legal issues discussed in the 'Current events' section of the newspaper: *Youngzine* and *Dogonews* for English, and *Il mio primo quotidiano* and *Dubidoo* for Italian. From these, I took all the articles available, for a total of 10 and 7 articles in Italian and English respectively. Here are the issues found for both languages: "protezione dati personali" [data protection],

<sup>3</sup> The online newspapers for children considered are, for English: <http://www.dogonews.com/>, <http://www.youngzine.org/>, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/life-style/kidspost/>, <http://www.firstnews.co.uk/>, <http://www.pitara.com/>, <http://www.4kids.org/>, <http://www.studentnewsnet.com/>, <http://kidsstandard.org/>, <http://indy-kids.org/>, <http://press4kids.com/>; for Italian: <http://www.ilmioquodotidiano.it/>, <http://www.dubidoo.it/>, <http://www.bambini-news.it/>, <http://www.ilmacaone.it/>, <http://www.echino.it/>.

“licenziamento” [dismissal] and “tasse” [taxes] for Italian, and “data protection”, “income tax”, “fiscal cliff”, “illegal immigration” and “midterm elections” for English. Although the concept of ‘tax’ falls within the field of economics, I decided to include it in the analysis as taxation is a legal obligation.

The fact that legal issues have been included in the ‘Current events’ section of the newspaper seems to suggest that they are considered as ‘topics of the day’ reflecting what is actually happening in the world.

Both English and Italian articles are similar in length. Each article is between 400 and 500 words interspersed with images connected with the topic of the article. Although the presence of visual images is not surprising, given that their use is predominant in children’s books, their use is also prevalent in popular journalism where “they function largely to attract the reader to the article” (Miller 1998: 29).

The basic methodological framework of this study is in the area of discourse analysis providing instruments suitable for identifying and highlighting the popularising strategies associated with specialised scientific communication. To identify them, I made recourse to existing studies on the discursive practices that in the literature on popularisation are identified as being used to facilitate the layman’s access to specialised scientific knowledge. More specifically, I used Calsamiglia and van Dijk’s (2004: 372) classification, which includes the following five practices the two authors categorise collectively as forms of “explanation”.

The first is “denomination” or “designation”, which consists in introducing new terms, indicating their specialised denominations. Here is an example: “The gigantic DNA is composed of millions of small compounds *called bases*”<sup>4</sup> (381).

Closely linked to denomination is the procedure of “definition”, which involves the explanation of unknown terms by a brief description of some general and specific properties of the thing the term refers to, as shown in the following example: “DNA sequencing, *the process of determining the exact order of the 3 billion chemical building blocks*” (375).

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<sup>4</sup> In all examples emphasis is added.

Another procedure is “reformulation” or “paraphrase”, marked by appositions, parentheses, dashes, quotes, and metalinguistic expressions (e.g. ‘are called’). An example is: “Living beings are composed of thousands of microscopic machines (*the proteins*)” (383).

A fourth procedure is “generalization”, which draws general conclusions from specific examples or cases, as shown in the following example: “Reduced to the principle of things, all living beings, from worms to humans, share the same elementary organization, the same geometry, an exact tiny harmony” (384).

The last category is “exemplification”, which provides specific examples of general phenomena. Here is an example: “Alzheimer’s as one of the diseases that might be better understood now that the human genome has been sequenced” (383).

All the discursive practices described above work on the lexical and syntactical levels. There are other practices which instead work on a cognitive level. They are classified under the label “analogy or association” (376), and include similes and metaphors.

The data were investigated by taking Calsamiglia and van Dijk’s classification as the starting point for analysis. The aim was to explore whether these discursive practices were also present in both the English and Italian online newspapers under examination.

From a cross-linguistic perspective, looking at these practices has contributed to identifying the main (dis-)similarities in the knowledge dissemination strategies adopted to promote a better understanding of legal terms and basic legal concepts when translating adult knowledge and expertise into comprehensible knowledge targeted at children.

### 3. Results

The data collected highlight the tendency to introduce children to the legal concepts constituting the main topic of the article by encapsulating the legal terms (i.e. “tasse”, “dato personale”, “midterm election”, “fiscal cliff”) in the headline of the article through the use of questions (6 instances in the Italian corpus, 4 instances in the English corpus), as shown in the following extracts:

- (1) *Non pagare le tasse? Potrebbe capitare anche a me? Sai a cosa servono le tasse?* [Not to pay taxes? Could it happen to me as well? Do you know what taxes are?] (IT corpus)
- (2) *U.S. Elections 2014: What are midterms?* (EN corpus)

or in the opening paragraph of the article (4 instances in the Italian corpus, 3 instances in the English corpus), as illustrated in (3) and (4):

- (3) *Che cos'è un dato personale? Perché è importante proteggerlo? Quali sono gli strumenti che abbiamo per difenderlo?* Tutte queste domande hanno trovato una risposta in uno speciale diritto, quella alla protezione dei dati personali [...]. [What are personal data? Why is it important to protect them? What are the tools to be used to protect personal data? All those questions have found an answer under the data protection law] (IT corpus)
- (4) While thrilled at being given another four years to continue the path he had carved out for the country, President Obama's celebration was short-lived. That's because the day after being re-elected the President had to begin working on resolving what is being called a 'Fiscal Cliff' - *So what is this cliff* that has everybody in a tizzy and are things going to be as dire for Americans as predicted? [...] (EN corpus)

As exemplified in the extracts above, recourse to wh-questions suggests a didactic function reflecting the audience the article is designed for, i.e. children who need to be taught the basic notions of the topic discussed. By using this type of question, the journalist also tries to focus children's attention on the issue so as to arouse their interest and curiosity on that topic (Webber 1994).

Tentatively, one may speculate about the high incidence of this strategy on the basis of the function wh-questions express: "an imbalance of knowledge between participants" (Hyland 2002: 530). Hyland's argument is particularly convincing here in that it confirms how such questioning helps "to construct readers as learners, and learning as a one-way transfer of knowledge" (535) from expert to non-expert.

In both corpora, questions encapsulating legal terms were also used in the subheadings the article is structured in (4 instances in



the Italian corpus, 5 instances in the English corpus), as shown in the following extracts:

- (5) Senza tasse, cosa accadrebbe? [What would happen if there were no taxes?]  
Perché in questi giorni si parla degli evasori? Chi sono? [Why are people talking about dodgers these days? Who are they?] (IT corpus)
- (6) Who is an Illegal Alien? (EN corpus)

By structuring the article through a series of interrogative sub-heads, journalists “can not only generate interest in what follows but also create some sense of progression as writer and reader work together towards a greater understanding of the topic” (Hyland 2002: 543).

Another level of similarity can be observed in the use of specialised terminology in both language corpora. When legal terms are introduced, it was found that they are followed either by a “definition”, as one of the popularising practices described by Calsamiglia and van Dijk (2004: 379), as illustrated in the following extracts:

- (7) *Le tasse sono quello strumento* che dà modo a tutti di poter avere servizi dallo Stato. [Taxes are tools that allow you to receive public services] (IT corpus)
- (8) Coined by the Federal reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke last February, ‘*Fiscal cliff*’ is a wicked brew of tax increases, of existing tax breaks and cuts in government spending. (EN corpus)

or by a “paraphrase” (Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004: 383), aiming at explaining the meaning of the term through simpler language. This is exemplified in the following extracts, where the instances of paraphrase are introduced by the Italian adverbial ‘cioè’ and its English counterpart ‘that is’:

- (9) ... i dati personali. *Cioè* qualsiasi informazione che riguarda una persona identificata o identificabile – direttamente o indirettamente – grazie a un numero o ad alcuni elementi fisici e fisiologici ma anche economici, culturali o sociali. [...personal data. That is, any information concerning a directly or indirectly identified or identifiable person through a number or various physical, physiological, economic, cultural and social elements] (IT corpus)

- (10) Companies and organisations that would like to process your data need to do two things. [...] For instance, data must be obtained “fairly” – *that is*, at the point of collection it must be made clear what the data will be used for. It must be accurate and up to date and it must be held securely. (EN corpus)

The two language corpora reveal a degree of similarity in the frequency of the “definition” practice, whose incidence of occurrence is very high in both corpora: 97.87% in the Italian newspapers and 95.11% in the English newspapers. An explanation may derive from the fact that this type of strategy can be considered a preliminary form of dissemination/popularisation in itself, as it consists in the explanation of unknown words, which is a prerequisite to the access of more complex knowledge.

With respect to the use of paraphrase, however, the analysis points to some variation in the two language corpora as a significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of this practice has emerged in the Italian and English articles. Paraphrase has an average frequency per article of 3 occurrences in the Italian corpus (for a total of 30 occurrences in the whole corpus) in comparison with only two instances occurring in the whole English corpus. Even though a reformulation to define specialised terminology is a pivotal instrument for facilitating understanding, it is not used in the English articles, suggesting that English journalists do not feel that reformulations are needed, as if being sure the terms employed are going to be understood correctly.

Another popularising strategy identified in the Italian articles consists in encapsulating metaphors and similes (Calsamiglia and van Dijk 2004: 376) in the definition of the legal terms or concepts, as shown in the following examples:

- (11) Il *reddito* è un *salvadanaio personale* dove entrano lo stipendio, i risparmi, la casa o i terreni che si possiedono. [Income is a moneybox wherein you put your salary, savings, and property owned] (IT corpus)
- (12) *Come i contadini che coltivano la terra, anche lo Stato in primavera prepara il suo raccolto.* Chiede a tutti i cittadini di destinare una parte dei soldi guadagnati con il loro lavoro per far funzionare la grande macchina pubblica [...] Ogni italiano che lavora o riceve una pensione affida così allo Stato una fetta delle proprie entrate

e lo Stato restituisce questa somma mettendo a disposizione beni e servizi per la collettività. È a questo che servono le imposte, chiamate comunemente tasse. [Like farmers who cultivate land, in spring the State prepares its harvest. The State asks all citizens to allocate part of their money earned by working to make its system function. Every Italian who works or receives a pension gives the State an amount of her/his income and the State returns that money under the form of goods and services for the community. That's what levies, commonly termed taxes, are for.] (IT corpus)

These are two instances of metaphor and simile respectively. In (11) the meaning of “reddito” [income] is interpreted as that of “salvadanaio” [moneybox]. Recourse to the metaphor of moneybox – a gadget that is familiar to any child – helps him/her to come to terms with the complex meaning of the word “reddito”. This is also the case with the simile in (12), where taxes are described as the harvest. This strategy corroborates the general picture emerging from other studies that the metaphorical element “is cognitively familiar to the reader, being part of his/her background knowledge or everyday experience” (Garzone 2014a: 85). Thus, as observed by Garzone (85), “when metaphors are used in popularization the kind of knowledge that is usually presupposed on the part of the readers is simply a basic general socio-cultural knowledge ‘of the world’”.

As research has demonstrated, the use of metaphors serves a pedagogical purpose (Cameron 2003), because, as illustrated above, it often involves concrete and familiar concepts to help readers understand topics they may find abstract and difficult to grasp. This is particularly evident in the dissemination of knowledge targeted at children, as observed by Vosniadou (1987: 882), who suggests that metaphorical thinking plays “an important role in the child’s attempts to acquire new knowledge”<sup>5</sup>.

This can give rise to the expectation that the use of metaphors would be prominent in the corpora under investigation. However, only Italian journalists use metaphorical explanations of legal concepts (for a total of 17 occurrences in the whole corpus) with no examples at all in the English articles. Once again, one may

<sup>5</sup> For an interesting discussion on the use of metaphors in children’s picture books, see Rau (2011).

speculate that English journalists are far less inclined than their Italian counterparts to produce densely packed informational contents realised by metaphors in a textually highly elaborated prose (see ex. 12 above).

In addition to these practices, a recurrent strategy has been identified in both corpora: the use of the second-person pronoun ‘you’ and its Italian counterparts ‘tu/voi’. Their frequency is very similar in both corpora, with slightly higher figures in English than in Italian (39 occurrences vs. 31). This finding here echoes that of Giannoni (2008), who found that appeal to the reader is a popularising feature aimed at engaging the reader in the text and drawing him/her into the discourse. This is illustrated in the following examples taken from the two language corpora:

- (13) *You* might be seeing a flurry of activity among the adults in your family to get their taxes done. April 17th is the deadline for all U.S citizens and residents to file their annual income tax this year. [...] Governments, as *you* know, rely on taxes to keep them functioning – everything from a country’s defense, highways and justice system to schools, parks, libraries and even the subsidized lunch program at your school are services paid for by taxes. (EN corpus)
- (14) La scuola che *frequenti* è stata costruita con le tasse che ciascuno di noi ha pagato allo Stato. [The school you attend has been built with the taxes all of us paid to the State] (IT corpus)

The strategy of addressing children as readers directly foregrounds the highly interactive and reader-oriented nature of the newspaper article for children, whose main purpose is to involve its readership in the text and create a rhetorical effect of “closeness and involvement” as described by Breeze (2015: 16), who suggests that “the level of familiarity associated with the second person serves to involve the reader in the story”.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is generally believed that specialised knowledge, which children moving through schooling from primary to intermediate grades are expected to learn, is more complex and further removed from their daily experiences (Christie 1998) than ‘everyday’ knowledge.

The language that constructs such knowledge is often technical, abstract and complex. It is, thus, different from the language that is used to construct the commonsensical knowledge of everyday ordinary life (Fang 2006). This means that using such a language may pose comprehension challenges to children. Thus, translating information into words that children can understand is fundamental for managing their knowledge and information processing abilities.

The analysis has shown that popularisation aimed at a juvenile audience involves recontextualisation of expert discourse for the lay audience, in the same way as that targeting adults (e.g. Garzone 2014a; Gotti 2014; Mattiello 2014). However, given that its specific addressees have limited background knowledge and, arguably, cognitive abilities, concepts need to be made even simpler in popularisation for children than in popularisation for adults, though without being dumbed down to trivialisation or banality (De Marchi 2007), as the findings of this research have revealed.

Following a number of studies on the popularising strategies associated with specialised scientific communication, the results emerged from the study provide clear evidence that Italian and English journalists use similar strategies to communicate and recontextualise legal knowledge to children within online newspaper articles aimed directly at them. The strategies identified involve:

- a. adjusting information to children's knowledge through definitions and explanations,
- b. using linguistic features typical of dialogic interaction (i.e. 'you'),
- c. introducing features typically associated with science popularisation such as metaphors or similes.

However, as the findings from the corpora used in this study suggest, these strategies are achieved differently across the two cultures. For example, the English journalists show a general preference for defining the terms/concepts discussed, while the Italian journalists use both definitions and paraphrases in which the meanings of terms are often extended to a familiar context through the use of metaphors and similes. English journalists seem, therefore, to be more focused on the content of the term rather than on how the meaning is conveyed.

Because of the small corpora used in this study, there are of course limitations to the generalisability of the results. It would be useful to investigate the same strategies in books dedicated to

the dissemination of legal issues to children so as to collect further supporting evidence of the trends that have emerged from the present study as well as of other tendencies within and beyond those found above.

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