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THE LINGUISTIC AND STYLISTIC FEATURES OF SPOKEN NARRATIVE VIDEOGAME TEXT

The following article describes the results of linguistic and stylistic analysis of the in-game text that was selected from six video games of different game genres and narrative settings. It aims to define the stylistic, grammatical, and lexical features typical of spoken narrative videogame text, comparing it to written narrative text and interface text. The results reveal that spoken narrative text leans towards an informal style and, unlike the other types of texts, utilises colloquialisms, exclamations, and filler words more frequently. As a narrative text, it contains significantly more past and future temporal references, compared with the interface text, which mostly utilises present forms and imperative modality. A distinctive lexical feature of spoken narrative text is its wide use of character names, or virtualmythopersonyms. It also demonstrates a more regular use of phrasal verbs, which outnumbered their one-word equivalents by 3.1-3.7 times.

Keywords: video game; videogame discourse; discourse of video games; narrative text; narrative dialogue; stylistics; lexical features; grammatical features.

1. INTRODUCTION

Videogame industry is one of the most successful media businesses worldwide, whose market is expected to reach 257 billion US dollars by 2025 (Talevski). Such rapid growth attracts researchers' interest and gives rise to new academic fields, one of which is videogame discourse studies.

However, even the term "videogame discourse" does not have a universal definition yet. As A. Ensslin notes, "the discourse of games involves various layers of communicative interaction and multiple types of social actors" (Ensslin, 2015, p. 1). These could include players talking to one another in a multiplayer game; gamers talking to their audience during a stream or while recording a walkthrough; communication between industry professionals, game journalists, stakeholders, etc. (Ensslin, 2021, p. 2). As a result, despite a lot of research being conducted on videogame discourse in general, not all of it is relevant to translation studies and game localisation in particular.

The aim of this article is to aid in filling this gap by researching the linguistic and stylistic features of spoken narrative videogame text, which could become a valuable asset in training of localisation specialists.

2. RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research involved the following stages: 1) selection of six video games (see the "Materials") that belong to different game genres and narrative genres or settings; 2) creating a corpus of about 520,000 words based on the in-game spoken narrative text

(480,000), written narrative text (20,000) and interface text (20,000); 3) classifying the stylistic, grammatical and lexical features with the help of a data analysis tool (MaxQDA Analytics Pro 2020); 4) interpreting the results.

The key similarities and differences that can be explained by the type of in-game text are presented below with the help of Appendices A-D.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Stylistics of spoken narrative text

The majority of stylistic features that were highlighted in the spoken narrative text are those typically associated with informal style (85.3% of highlighted speech markers in total, as per Appendix A), which is explained by the origin of the text used for this research: it comes from narrative dialogue, which imitates spoken speech between the videogame characters.

Contractions of the copulative verb 'be' and auxiliary verbs make up 41.9% of all the speech markers found in this type of text (see Appendix A). For comparison, non-contracted forms represent just 3.7% of the markers. The frequent use of contractions in the narrative text that imitates spoken language reflects the fast pace of speech and features of English phonetics: the alternation of "stressed syllables at more or less regular intervals of time" (Kolesnyk et al., 2015, p. 90), while unstressed syllables often undergo elision.

Exclamation and filler words are the second largest group of informal speech markers that have been observed and account for 14.2% of speech markers noted. They are a distinctive feature of spoken narrative text, as they hardly appear in other types of in-game text (see Appendices B-C): the isolated examples that can be found in the formal written narrative text or interface text can be attributed to the rare imitation of spoken speech in these genres.

In spoken narrative text exclamations and fillers help to: 1) express the characters' emotions more authentically, e.g. "*Pfff, a witcher's compliments!"* – distrust; 2) create the artistic image of the character, e.g. *"Something's not right... Hmm..."* – pensiveness, reticence; 3) define the relationships between the characters, e.g. *"Heh, no, but seriously…"* – friendly relationship; 4) reflect the dynamics of action sequences, e.g.*"Whoa, someone's just fired an RPG!"*.

Phrasal verbs represent 11.6% of speech markers observed in spoken narrative text but are consistently found in all types of in-game text (as per Appendices B-C). The decision to attribute phrasal verbs to markers of informal style stems from what seems to be a consensus among linguists: "Phrasal verbs tend to be associated with spoken colloquial registers, not only in contemporary English, but also in previous stages of the language (Rodríguez-Puente et al., 2022, p. 1). The reason for that is that phrasal verbs "can be said to have a greater expressive force (than their one-word Latin equivalents) which written formal genres do not require" (Rodríguez-Puente, 2019, p. 283).

In the spoken narrative text selected for this study, phrasal verbs prevailed over their one-word synonyms, with the most commonly used phrasal verb being 'come on' (643 uses). It does not have a Latin counterpart and is context-dependent, used to encourage the players or a non-playable character to do a certain action. The frequencies for the next four most widespread phrasal verbs and their equivalents are given in parentheses as follows:

1) Come back (104), go back (69), get back (67) vs *return* (76) – summed up, the phrasal verbs prevail by 3.16 times;
2) Get out (290) vs *escape* (79) – a difference of 3.67 times;
3) Look for (248) vs *search for* (76) – a difference of 3.26 times;
4) Get in (62), get on (72), come in (66) vs *enter* (64) – a difference of 3.13 times.

Colloquialisms are another prominent stylistic feature of spoken narrative text, which accounts for 8.5% of all speech markers (see Appendices B-C for comparison). Even though colloquialisms are used just as regularly in informal written narrative text, they were barely used in formal written narrative text and interface text selected for this study.

Colloquialisms are often considered substandard language use, but as researchers point out, they can be used to "help create an atmosphere of more direct communication between the author and the reader [in this particular case, between the developers and players], invigorate the presentation of material, add vividness, expressiveness or an evaluative component" (Spiridonova et al., 2020, p. 198). However, there is no definite agreement as to whether the term "*colloquialism*" should include slang, jargon, argot, vernacularisms, dialectal variations or vulgarisms (ibid, p. 199). In this paper, slang, jargon, and vernacularisms were labelled as colloquialisms, while vulgarisms and derogatory or obscene lexis were assigned to a category of their own.

Derogatory and obscene lexis is the next high-frequency group of informal markers of spoken narrative text, which makes up 8.2% of all the features observed. This category includes any obscene lexis, vulgarisms and rude vernacularisms (e.g. *'hillbilly', 'hag', 'crone'*), animal metaphors, and, according to S. Formanova's classification (2013, p. 36), "words and collocations the meaning of which inherently contains a negative evaluation of someone's actions or behavior", e.g. *'coward', 'yellowbelly', 'dumb'* etc.

In fiction, vulgarisms and vernacularisms often play a part in linguistic characterisation and are "the main constructive elements in creating conversational style, employed to stylise the spoken, informal language in … character's speech" (Bumar, 2020, p. 21). Along with **contaminated speech**, which constituted 0.6% of all the spoken narrative speech markers, they help to describe the character's descent and lifestyle.

As for obscene lexis in particular, it usually aids in more realistic conveying of characters' emotions. It seems to be typical of action games, the stories of which are often based on dangerous, contentious situations.

Formal and literary speech markers account for just 13.4% of all the speech markers observed in the spoken narrative text, in comparison with the informal or colloquial style features. In this study, they include full forms of the copulative verb 'be' and auxiliary verbs, formal and literary lexis, and archaisms. However, the presence of the latter is best explained by the narrative setting of some of the games (medieval or Western) rather than the text type.

Non-contracted verb forms are rarely used in narrative dialogue, representing just 3.7% of all stylistic features. These were counted exclusively in contexts where a contracted form would also be accurate, e.g. *"Well, you are (you're) having quite the night!",* but not *"Time to see if you're really the man you seem to think you are"*, where "*you're*" would be ungrammatical. Therefore, the usage of contracted forms in the spoken narrative text prevails by almost 12 times (15477 vs 1351, as per Appendix A).

As for the stylistic use of non-contracted forms, in the corpus of this research, they were used to achieve the following: 1) emphasis (*"you are pretty drunk"*); 2) imitating formal speech (*"Greetings, Sandra. If you are conscious, assume recovery position now"*); 3) the pragmatics of threat, often in purposefully slowed-down speech *("You are nothing… and when the law catch up to you… you will die like nothing")*; this way the sender is both distancing themselves from the receiver and placing more emphasis on each part by enunciating it; 4) distinguishing a more educated or privileged character from the rest through the manner they speak.

Literary lexis comprises just 5.6% of all the marked stylistic features in spoken narrative text, which highlights once again that spoken narrative dialogue leans towards conversational style. In this paper, 'literary lexis' includes any lexis that: 1) has a connotation of solemnity and/or formality, or may be used in a scientific context; 2) is still

used nowadays; 3) has a more neutral equivalent, e.g. *'assistance'* versus *'help'*. As for archaisms, they were classified into a separate group due to their expectedly higher numbers in such settings as *medieval*, *fantasy,* and *western*, i.e. their presence or absence should be explained by the narrative genre of the game and not the type of in-game text.

Code switching and code mixing are also used in spoken narrative text, although not as frequently as other means, accounting for only 1.3% of stylistic markers. Examples of code switching and code mixing from this study's corpus helped achieve the following: 1) describe the character's descent, e.g. "*Órale. In that case, I'll head to All Foods. Hasta luego"* (Mexican Spanish); at the same time, authors can use cognates that are self-explanatory for an English-speaking player, e.g. *"Ay, careful, idiotas, it's his leg!"*; 2) to create a more authentic environment depending on the setting of the game, e.g. *"Excuse me, pardon… Messieurs, please…"* while the character is wading through a crowd in a virtual counterpart of the 19th century New Orleans; 3) code switching can help draw a sharp difference between the playable character's allies, who speak the same language, and their rivals, who speak a foreign language; 4) to create a distinction between what the playable character knows and what the player knows, e.g. a someone utters a line in a language that the protagonist does not speak, but the player understands the line anyway thanks to its translation through subtitles.

Although the use of passive voice was counted as a grammatical feature and not a formal stylistic device, it is worth mentioning that its frequency in the spoken narrative text is the lowest: 0.9% vs 2.1%, 10.6% and 7.5% in informal and formal narrative written texts and interface text respectively.

3.2 Grammatical features of spoken narrative text

In all the types of in-game text, the most prominent groups of grammatical features were the present and past time references and different means of expressing modality, as per Appendix D. The differences, however, lie in the variety of structures in each group depending on the in-game text type, as well as the representation of other structures, such as future time references and conditionals.

Means of **expressing modality** account for 32.3% of all the grammar structures highlighted in spoken narrative text, and they were further narrowed into groups by their function, such as means of expressing imperative modality (21.5%), ability (5.9%), probability (4.8%), permission (0.1%). However, the term 'imperative modality' needs further clarification, as researchers (Shylo, 2017; Pomazan et al., 2016; Potsdam et al., 2015) agree that the terms "modality", "inducement", "imperative" and "directive" do not have universal definitions and can mean a range of concepts: "In one use, imperative is a semantic modality. Imperatives are directives conveying an illocutionary force of commanding, prohibiting, suggesting, permitting, or requesting by the speaker… In another use, imperative is …a specific morphosyntactic structure restricted to conveying directive modality" (Potsdam et al., 2015, p. 1).

This study employs the first use of the term from the quote above, i.e. any grammatical or lexical device that encourages or forces the player to do a certain action. As a result, the following grammatical and lexical means of expressing imperative modality were revealed: 1) imperative mood, second person *("Gaz, go around the back")*; 2) imperative mood, first person *("Let's head for that watchtower"; "If you will, let us approach the map")*; 3) elliptical expressions with an omitted imperative verb *("[Get] Back to work then!")*; 4) modal verbs of obligation or necessity *("You must reach all snipers before Hanako-sama's float appears"; "We gotta move"; "We need to take him alive, so watch your fire"; "You should come with me"; "Oughta look around"*); 5) semi-modal 'had better' with a conditional meaning, subjunctives with pragmatics of command *("[You'd] Better get going"; "I suggest you try to keep Mr. Welles conscious"*; 6) use of the modal "*you can + bare infinitive*" with pragmatics of command *("You can*

keep your shotgun to yourself", meaning *"Do not shoot"*); 7) the verb *'want'* ("*[I] Want you to help me repel them"*); 8) interrogative forms, often rhetorical *("Would you shut up and kill these bastards?!"*); 9) fixed expressions *("Here we go"; "Off we go"; "Your call" etc*); 10) the more elevated form "*be so kind as to + bare infinitive*" *("Be so kind as to follow me"* or, for a comic effect*, "John, would you be so kind as to shut him up?")*; 11) noun phrases, often with the addition of "*please*" *("Less talk, more action, please");* however, some of them can be interpreted as elliptical expressions with an omitted verb (e.g.,*"Of course, just [give me] a moment, please"*).

As for expressing *probability*, it can appear in the spoken narrative text in the following ways: 1) lexically, by use of the adverbs *certainly, definitely, maybe; obviously; apparently; perhaps; probably* (*prolly*), or adjectives (*im)possible; (un)likely; bound to;* 2) grammatically, by use of modal verbs that describe different degrees of certainty (e.g. *may, might, must, can't,* etc: *"He may still be alive"*. To imitate spoken English in the game subtitles, the verb 'have' is often substituted with just 'a' in spelling, e.g. *"Musta left somethin'"*.

Regarding the time references, a distinctive feature of narrative texts overall compared to interface text is more prominent use of *past* and *future time references* (as per Appendix D). This should be attributed to the fact that the three types of in-game narrative text aim to explain the background events and the future plans of the characters, giving the player motivation to continue the game, unlike the interface text, which aims to help the player interact with the game and is highly directive in nature. However, despite a wide variety of forms found in spoken narrative text (past simple and continuous, used to, present perfect simple and continuous, past perfect simple and continuous, narrative present), it was observed that the most widespread forms to express past and future are undoubtedly *past simple* (14.4% out of 18%) and *will + bare infinitive* (7.8% out of 9.1%).

3.3. Lexical features of spoken narrative text

There are few distinctive lexical features of spoken narrative text, as these would be better explained by the narrative genre or the setting of the game rather than the in-game text type. However, one can observe more frequent use of proper character names, or *"virtualmythopersonyms"* – a term used by T. Varbanets (2020, p. 88). In the spoken narrative text selected for this research, virtualmythopersonyms accounted for 16.2% of all the marked lexical features, compared with 10.1%, 4.9% and 3.3% in informal and formal written narrative text and interface text respectively.

First and foremost, narrative dialogue suggests that characters address each other, thus using each other's names. Secondly, regular use of virtualmythopersonyms helps the player memorise the characters, getting a more thorough understanding of the story. Lastly, given that a lot of narrative dialogue in video games is a description of what events happened in the game and who caused them, this requires mentioning the characters in question using virtualmythopersonyms as well.

Given that a lot of video games nowadays make use of motion capture technology, their spoken narrative discourse is also rich in paralinguistic elements, both kinesic (gestures, facial expressions, character poses) and prosodic (pace, pitch, pauses, dialectal articulation features). This study, however, focused solely on verbal means.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SCOPE FOR THE FURTHER RESEARCH

The following conclusions can be drawn as a result of the analysis:

1) Spoken narrative mostly employs means of informal style (88.2% of all features marked).
2) The use of exclamations, filler words, and colloquialisms is a distinctive feature of spoken narrative text and, to some extent, of informal written narrative text. These features barely appear in formal written text and interface text.

3) Any narrative text displays higher frequencies of referring to past and future time compared to the interface text.
4) Spoken narrative text utilises virtualmythopersonyms more frequently than other types of text do, as their repetition helps the player memorise the characters.
5) Phrasal verbs tend to outnumber their one-word equivalents in spoken narrative text, showing a difference of 3.1-3.7 times in the text selected for this research. In comparison, in the interface text phrasal verbs and their one-word equivalents showed little difference in usage.

This research was based on the American English localisation of the six video games mentioned in the "Materials" section. Further studies could explore whether similar patterns prevail in videogame text adapted for a range of different cultures.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Stylistic features marked in spoken narrative videogame text

	Percentages	Numerical values
Formal speech markers	13.40%	4942
↳ Non-contracted forms	3.70%	1351
↳ Formal and literary lexis	5.60%	2059
↳ Archaisms	4.10%	1532
Informal speech markers	85.30%	31522
↳ Contracted forms	41.90%	15477
↳ Exclamation and filler words	14.20%	5260
↳ Phrasal verbs	11.60%	4299
↳ Colloquialisms	8.50%	3124
↳ Dialectal lexis	0.30%	100
↳ Contaminated speech	0.60%	237
↳ Derogatory and obscene lexis	8.20%	3025
Code switching and mixing	1.30%	498
Total:	100%	36962

Appendix B – Stylistic features marked in informal and formal written narrative videogame text

	Informal		Formal	
	%	Numerical values	%	Numerical values
Formal speech markers	11,70%	45	54,90%	192
↳ Non-contracted forms	7,60%	29	21,40%	75
↳ Formal and literary lexis	3,10%	12	16,60%	58
↳ Archaisms	1,00%	4	16,90%	59
Informal speech markers	88,20%	337	44,30%	156
↳ Contracted forms	52,90%	202	28,30%	99
↳ Exclamation and filler words	5,50%	21	0,60%	2
↳ Phrasal verbs	10,50%	40	10,00%	35
↳ Colloquialisms	8,90%	34	0	0
↳ Dialectal lexis	0	0	0	0
↳ Contaminated speech	3,10%	12	0	0
↳ Derogatory and obscene lexis	7,30%	28	5,40%	19
Code switching and mixing	0	0	0,90%	3
Total:	100%	382	100%	350

Appendix C – Stylistic features marked in the interface text of video games

	Percentages	Numerical values
Formal speech markers	80,00%	429
↳ Non-contracted forms	9,30%	50
↳ Formal and literary lexis	36,60%	196
↳ Archaisms	34,10%	183
Informal speech markers	19,00%	105
↳ Contracted forms	8,20%	44
↳ Exclamation and filler words	0,40%	2
↳ Phrasal verbs	9,10%	49
↳ Colloquialisms	0,40%	2
↳ Dialectal lexis	0	0
↳ Contaminated speech	0	3
↳ Derogatory and obscene lexis	0,90%	5
Code switching and mixing	0,90%	5
Total:	100%	539

Appendix D – The most prominent groups of grammatical features marked in the different types of videogame text

	Spoken narrative text	Informal written narrative text	Formal written narrative text	Interface text
Present time reference	37,70%	34,90%	32,60%	40,90%
Past time reference	18,00%	17,50%	39,80%	5,80%
Future time reference	9,10%	9,70%	6,10%	2,40%
Expressing modality	32,30%	33,60%	18,60%	46,90%

Анастасія Шаламай. Лінгвістичні та стилістичні особливості усного наративного тексту відеоігор. У статті наведено результати лінгвостилістичного аналізу внутрішньоігрового тексту, взятого з шести відеоігор різних ігрових та наративних жанрів, та зроблено спробу схарактеризувати стилістичні, граматичні та лексичні особливості усного наративного тексту у порівнянні із письмовим наративним текстом та текстом інтерфейсу. В результаті аналізу було виявлено, що усний сюжетний текст відеоігор тяжіє до розмовного стилю мовлення, та, на відміну від інших видів тексту, в ньому частіше вживаються колоквіалізми, вигуки та слова-філери. Як і письмові тексти наративного характеру, він містить значно більшу кількість форм на позначення минулого та майбутнього часів, відтоді як у тексті інтерфейсу частіше вживаються форми теперішнього часу та вираження імперативної модальності. Усний сюжетний текст також виділяється широким розповсюдженням віртуалміфоперсонімів та частішим вживанням фразових дієслів, що випереджають їхні однослівні еквіваленти в 3,1-3,7 разів.

Ключові слова: відеогра; відеоігровий дискурс; дискурс відеоігор; наративний текст; сюжетний текст; сюжетний діалог; стилістика; лексичні особливості; граматичні особливості.