

“Frequently Asked Questions”: A Genre between Centre and Periphery

Renáta Tomášková

University of Ostrava

Abstract

Drawing upon the Hallidayan functional approach to language and current methodology used in genre analysis, the paper focuses on the relatively newly established web genre of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). The study traces the position and function of the genre within the genre colony of university website presentations and attempts to define its core generic properties. The genre of FAQs tends to be shaped by the interplay of conventional and variable features, with the conventionality stemming primarily from the genre's recurrent pattern and the regular use of its name, and with the inner variability captured by four tentative scales spanning between interactivity and monologic character; continuity and discontinuity, script-like organization and random composition, and between the field-dominated and tenor-dominated genre profile.

Keywords: functional systemic linguistics; genre analysis; FAQs; university website presentations; field-dominated discourse; tenor-dominated-discourse

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1 Introduction

Providing an insight into the characteristics of Frequently Asked Questions as a specific genre, the present study aims to contribute to research exploring the distinctive features of genres in the vast and internally variable area of communication on the internet. The goals and scope of the study are closely related to a larger research project aimed at exploring the generic properties of university websites, particularly university presentations

targeting prospective students (Tomášková). Within the genre colony of university websites, especially the hypertext paths targeting prospective or current students, FAQs cannot be neglected as they form a regular (though not obligatory) section.

The analysis focuses primarily on two aspects of this genre: on the one hand the generic features of the FAQ section in general – in other words the significant features of its recurrent pattern – and on the other hand the extent to which the explicitly dialogical form of FAQs contributes to the interpersonal component of university web sites as a whole.

2 Methodological framework

2.1 Systemic Functional Linguistics and genre analysis

The methodology of the research is grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), and genre analysis, represented here mainly by Martin, Swales, and Bhatia.

Language is thus viewed as a socially and culturally grounded tool of communication, which is in principle multifunctional and fulfils simultaneously three metafunctions – or in other words, realizes three semantic components: the ideational component, as language reflects and represents reality; the interpersonal component, as language reflects but also shapes interpersonal, social relationships; and the textual component, as language represents an organized, structured, and cohesive form that enables it to fluently realize ideational and interpersonal meanings. The metafunctions correspond with three sets of contextual factors labelled by Halliday as the field, tenor and mode of discourse respectively. The interplay of all three components results in a contextualized choice and combination of linguistic devices termed register.

The concept of genre, similarly to the concept of register, is firmly embedded into the social context, which in SFL is viewed as a stratified system consisting of a hierarchy of levels: "Genre ... is set up above and beyond metafunctions (at a higher level of abstraction) to account for relations among social processes in more holistic terms, with a special focus on the stages through which most texts unfold. The relation of genre to register as complementary perspectives on the social 'content' of language (i.e. context) is thus comparable in some respects to the relation of discourse semantics to lexicogrammar as complementary perspectives on language's own content plane" (Martin 6).

Martin then defines genre as representing "the system of staged goal-oriented social processes through which social subjects in a given culture live their lives" (13). Besides the phases of unfolding mentioned above, the definition also emphasizes the fact that genres are always addressed to a certain audience and are closely tied to the producers' and receivers' culture.

Martin's approach towards genre within the framework of SFL corresponds in principle with the way in which genre is characterized by Swales and Bhatia: "Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value" (Bhatia, *Analysing Genre. Language Use in Professional Settings* 13). The only limit to the accord between these two accounts of genre could be found in Swales's and Bhatia's focus on genres in professional or academic settings, on genres seen

exclusively as reflections of organizational cultures and institutional practices (Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View* 23).

In his recent study on discourse and genre, Bax presents a multi-faceted overview of a range of approaches towards genre, attaining an ultimate synthesis of generic components when defining the concept within the cognitive theory of mental schemas. He sees genres as mental structures, mental representations which we apply when producing and interpreting discourse, mental constructs which are shared by members of a particular community. In harmony with other researchers (e.g. Martin, Giltrow and Stein), he considers genres to be abstractions that find their realization in a range of instantiations, and further specifies his view by describing genres – with reference to Rosch’s Prototype Theory – as fuzzy mental concepts revolving around a limited number of clear-cut examples (Bax 39). Fuzziness, as he argues, is indispensable in facilitating the flexibility of genre realization and use.

A fairly similar focus on the cognitive nature of the concept of genre can be found in Santini, Mehler and Sharoff’s methodological treatise introducing a series of studies exploring specifically web genres (4): “[genre] reduces the cognitive load by triggering expectations through a number of conventions. Put in another way, genres can be seen as sets of *conventions* that transcend individual texts, and create frames of recognition governing document production, recognition and use. Conventions are *regularities* that affect information processing in a repeatable manner”. The authors emphasize that, by identifying a text as belonging to a certain genre, the receiver is given the power and advantage of predictivity of the communicative purpose and the context, which thus helps us to understand the text.

2.2 Genres in evolution and the genre continuum on the web

Although all the definitions discussed above mention the recurrence of communicative events as a feature crucial to the existence of genre and cite conventionalized features as an important prerequisite for genre identification, none of the researchers deny the dynamic nature of the genre system. Genres can never be characterized as static; on the contrary, they continually develop and change – they are in constant evolution (Santini, *Interpreting Genre Evolution on the Web*).

As genres are anchored in social context and culture, their existence is to a large extent dependent on their compliance with the current communicative needs of users and their institutions. Thus genres appear on the scene when they are needed, and expire when the situation is not relevant any more (Giltrow and Stein). Even genres that inhabit the scene for long periods are susceptible to changes and adjustments. As early as 1995 Bhatia commented on a growing tendency towards genre mixing, and distinguished this phenomenon from genre embedding (Bhatia, *Genre mixing in professional communication – The case of private intentions v. socially recognized purposes* 191). Genre mixing refers to the penetration of features typically associated with one genre into a different genre, in which they were not previously expected. Genre embedding means the insertion of one generic form into another, conventionally distinct generic form, as for example when a letter or a poem is used within an advertisement. Both genre mixing and genre embedding are examples of genre hybridization (Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View* 10).

The general fluidity and pragmatic openness of the genre system is even greater in the case of web genres or cybergenres (Giltrow and Stein 9). The hypertext net of the world wide web has brought unprecedented opportunities and substantially shaped situational factors – such as time and space restrictions and channel/medium specifications – and has therefore multiplied the opportunities for realizing one’s communicative purposes, thus multiplying the range of genres.

Santini (Interpreting Genre Evolution on the Web, Characterizing Genres of Web Pages: Genre Hybridism and Individualization) presents the synchronic genre repertoire as a continuum, in which there are three forces interacting together: traditional genres brought from the past as they were (reproduced genres), new genres and traditional genres adapted to the new environment (novel genres and adapted genres), and forms that are going to emerge but are not yet fully formed (emerging genres).

Drawing upon her long-term research mapping the proliferation of new genre candidates on the internet by testing the ability of web users to identify them and choose a proper label to name them, she suggests that “we might suspect an emerging genre when there is a recurrent textual pattern without an acknowledged name” (Santini, Characterizing Genres of Web Pages: Genre Hybridism and Individualization 6). It should be added, however, that – as indicated by the use of the present participle as a pre-modifier – the emergence of new genres is to be viewed as a process, which does not develop abruptly but continuously. Considering the vast space of the world wide web, it can be expected that both the recurrence of an identical or similar pattern and the acknowledgement of its name will spread gradually, and the speed and nature of the process may be domain-specific or culture-dependent. The process of emergence may not proceed in parallel stages in different cultures, but is often highly asymmetrical.

Within the fluid environment of the internet, the inherent fuzziness of the concept of genre becomes even more exploited: “Genres are not mutually exclusive and different genres can be merged into a single document, generating hybrid forms”, and on the other hand, “... genres allow a certain freedom of variation, and consequently can be individualized” (6). These convergent and divergent tendencies are particularly powerful in emerging genres that are not yet acknowledged and that often show hybrid (mixing several genres) or highly individualized (with high authorial variation, high inner variability) forms and indistinct functions (6). Considering Santini’s research results, relatively recently emerged genres include e.g. home pages, blogs, and also FAQs.

2.3 Hypertext and the specificity of web genres

Considering the sophisticated technological background internet text producers may take advantage of and the emergence of genres that did not exist in pre-internet times, the question arises whether genre analysis methods rooted in non-electronic communication can be effectively applied to the system of web genres.

On the one hand, the answers suggested by researchers surveying the current genre repertoire on the web are positive. The methodology of their analyses is grounded in Swales’s and Bhatia’s definition of genre (Roberts, Askehave and Nielsen, Santini, Giltrow and Stein) and their research results show that the principles on which this definition is based are valid even within the electronic space. The rationale for this finding may lie

in the fact that the internet to a large extent encompasses electronic versions of traditional written genres, which preserve both their communicative purpose and formal structuring (electronic versions of research articles, magazine articles, course books, and other publications), and also in the fact that even many of the ‘novel’ genres are not completely new but could be associated with possible written or oral pre-electronic ancestors. Askehave and Nielsen trace the communicative purpose and structure of a home page back to the Aristotelian exordium or to a contemporary genre – the newspaper front page; Santini characterizes the web genre of Frequently Asked Questions as having “a very close antecedent in the paper world in the Troubleshooting section of technical manuals ... or FAQs can be seen as a written form of a help desk or information desk” (Santini, *Automatic Identification of Genre in Web Pages* 235).

On the other hand, though, traditional steps of genre analysis seem to fail to account for those generic features of web genres whose genuine novelty stems from exploiting the unique capabilities of the electronic medium. Ignoring these would deprive the web genres of their chief distinctive features. Rather than by their linguistic form, i.e. by a certain ritualized and expected store of linguistic markers, web genres are recognized and distinguished by the function they fulfil and by their hypertext form and organization.

Askehave and Nielsen attempt to benefit from the valid principles of traditional genre analysis and at the same time to compensate for the absence of consideration given by those traditional approaches to the specific features of the web medium. The model of analysis they propose respects the character of hypertext as “a system of non-hierarchical text blocks where the textual elements (nodes) are connected by links” (Askehave and Nielsen 14) by developing a two-dimensional approach, which reflects the generic properties of the text blocks (the reading mode) as well as the generic properties of the links between them (the navigating mode). The modal shifts between reading continuous texts and zooming out of them to follow a link, which readers need to do when negotiating their way through websites, are thus seen here as the key difference between traditional genres and electronic hypertext genres (17). Askehave and Nielsen distinguish two types of links according to the function they fulfil: structural links, which organize the information on the website into a hierarchy, and associative links, which reflect readers’ potential interests and chain the texts on the web in an associative manner. Secondly, considering the realization of links, they define generic links based on a general expression referring to a global topic, and specific links, providing thematically contextualized ‘appetizers’ for the destination texts.

3 Material

The corpus for analysis consists of the websites of 13 universities including 6 British universities (University of Bristol, University of Edinburgh, University of Oxford, University of Brighton, University of Sheffield, and Leeds Metropolitan University), 3 North American universities (University of California, Los Angeles; University of Central Oklahoma; University of West Alabama), and 4 Czech universities (Charles University, Masaryk University, Palacký University, and University of Ostrava). The corpus as a whole provides 347 adjacency pairs published in FAQ sections.

All the data from the university websites surveyed within this research project were downloaded between January and July 2011.

Whereas eleven of the university websites analyzed employ the genre of FAQs, albeit in different locations and of different structures, two of them do not include such a section, not even in a modified form. As not only the presence of a genre but also its absence within a corpus represents a significant research result, the two universities have not been excluded from the corpus presented here.

The institutional websites of universities are part of the world wide web, which means that they are part of, and at the same time they themselves build, a hypertext net consisting of a hierarchy of hypertexts, which in turn consist of sets of e-texts, i.e. electronic texts. The classification used here comes from Jucker, who develops the typology suggested by Storrer (Storrer in Jucker). University websites represent a discourse colony, as defined by Hoey, and a genre colony, as defined by Bhatia (*Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*): in other words, the website could be seen on the one hand as a set of independent but related textual components framed for their interpretation by the university as the home institution, while on the other hand the website could be viewed as a complex of closely related genres and sub-genres working towards a common communicative purpose.

As the hypertext net of university websites comprises an array of hypertexts and electronic texts unified by a common communicative goal yet shaped by a variety of fields and target readers, the corpus compiled for the current study is inevitably selective and – to preserve its consistency – consists of electronic texts chained along the hypertext paths aimed at prospective and current students of the universities included.

4 FAQs: the position of the genre within university website hypertext

The genre of FAQs is unique among genres in general due to its dependence on or relatedness to other genres, mostly genre colonies (Bhatia, *Worlds of Written Discourse. A Genre-Based View*). A genre colony, as defined by Bhatia, stands in principle very close to the notion of discourse/text colony as defined by Hoey, and represents a set of genres, distinct and independent in themselves, but working in a joint venture for one common communicative purpose, which – together with lexico-semantic cohesive devices – gives the colony its sense of unity.

FAQs thus do not appear on the web as an independent website, but instead play the role of a discrete unit, a sub-genre, within a larger genre set.

FAQs typically form a regular component of institutional websites, but their position and location in the hypertext hierarchy is highly variable. The FAQ section is signalled either by a generic link in the upper or lower bar of the homepage, i.e. a link having a general, topical status, like a library catalogue entry (Askehave and Nielsen), or it can be found along the line of different specialized paths through the web: as a generic link compiling various queries addressed to the institution, or as a specific link, i.e. thematically contextualized and often introduced by a specifying leading paragraph, related to a specialized e-text in the lower parts of the hypertext.

The introduction of the FAQs link in the upper or lower bar of the homepage is rare; the majority of the universities in the corpus prefer to encourage direct, authentic contact

with visitors through a “Contact (us)” link, whereas FAQs are effectively used within specialized paths chaining e-texts on related topics (see example 1 below).

Example 1:

– a generic link in the upper/lower bar of the homepage:

FAQ	Kontakty	Budovy	Mapa stránek
(FAQ)	Contact	Buildings	Site map)

(University of Ostrava)

– a direct, authentic contact with the visitors through the “Contact (us)” link:

[Home](#) | [Accessibility](#) | [Help](#) | [Site map](#) | [Contact us](#)

(University of Brighton)

– a specific link down the path to e-texts:

bristol.ac.uk → prospectus → undergraduate → 2012 → moneymatters →
[Tuition fees and funding FAQs](#)

(University of Bristol)

5 The generic features of FAQs: recurrent pattern versus inner variability

The genre of Frequently Asked Questions is characterized by the contrast between the firmly established and easily recognizable surface structure built of question-answer adjacency pairs and the substantial variability of their semantic macrostructure and microstructure and lexico-semantic realization.

The analysis of the corpus surveyed has revealed four significant qualities, which could be viewed as scalar in nature and which contribute considerably to the dynamic and variable character of the genre. The variables can be presented by means of four tentatively defined scales.

5.1 Scale I: interactive FAQs versus non-interactive FAQs

Firstly, we can place the individual FAQ sections on a scale ranging between interactive and non-interactive Frequently Asked Questions series, by which I mean the distinction between genuine adjacency pairs – where the question and its answer are closely related not only semantically but also by means of grammatical cohesive devices such as ellipsis or reference in Halliday and Hasan’s terminology (Halliday and Hasan). which makes the answer dependent on the question for the interpretation of its meaning – and pairs in which the answer is both formally and semantically independent of the question.

Whereas in the former adjacency pairs the answer is inseparable from the question and the dialogue thus effectively simulates the interactivity of authentic exchanges (see example 2), the answers in the latter could easily stand alone – they actually remind the

reader of paragraphs from a continuous text, in which the questions may either serve as sub-headlines or can be seen as dispensable (see example 3).

Example 2:

What do I need to bring when I see an advisor? (Academic Advisement, UCO)
Copies of any transfer transcripts, your current schedule, and a list of questions you have
for your advisor...

(University of Central Oklahoma)

Example 3:

Can I study on a part-time basis?
Studying for a degree is a big commitment and we understand that you may not
have time to study full time. Part-time study enables you to study on a more
flexible basis...

(University of Bristol)

There are of course cases which fall in between the two poles of the scale: the intermediate positions are occupied by exchanges in which the question and answer are inter-related not by grammatical cohesive devices but by the thematic development realized in the adjacency pair. The question here introduces a topic which is further developed in the answer: the question and answer are tied together by the linear thematic development. The answer is not dependent on the question for the primary meaning interpretation, but it would sound inappropriate if isolated due to the impaired informative structure (see example 4).

Example 4:

What is Clearing and can I apply?
Clearing is a service run by UCAS highlighting any places still left on programmes
after August ...

(University of Bristol)

More than 50% of the adjacency pairs analyzed in this study lie towards the right end of the scale, i.e. between the intermediate pairs and non-interactive pairs. This finding indicates that the question-answer pattern serves here as a structuring principle shaping the genre into a text colony framed by the interpersonal, dialogical form and facilitating quick and easy scanning by the readers, rather than as a tool for the imitation of authentic dialogical communication.

5.2 Scale II: continuous dialogue versus discontinuous string

Secondly, attention could be paid not only to the relations within the individual adjacency pairs but also to (possible) relations between them; in other words, we can draw a distinction between FAQs whose adjacency pairs form a continuous dialogue and FAQs that are

built of a series of adjacency pairs which form a discontinuous discourse colony, i.e. the meaning of the individual pairs does not stem from their position within the string, and thus they could be read in a more or less arbitrary order.

Understandably, most of the FAQs belong to discourse colonies, which facilitate quick and easy reading – or more precisely, quick and easy scanning for the information required, moving forwards and backwards according to the reader’s needs. Strictly ordered stretches of dialogue, as illustrated here by example 6 below, are rare and do not exceed the sequence of two or three exchanges.

Example 6:

Q1: What documents do I need to send you in order to obtain an I-20 form from UCLA?

A1: The I-20 is the “Certificate of Eligibility” form that schools issue to admitted students who have accepted an offer of admission so they can apply for their F-1 Student Visa. In order to process the I-20, please access our I-20 request site and follow the instructions there. You may also need to release your SEVIS record and send us official records (transcripts, exam results). Please review the page for admitted international students carefully, and contact us if you have any questions.

Q2: When do I need to do this?

A2: We strongly recommend that you send your documents as soon as possible.

Here, to be able to understand question 2 as well as answer 2 we need to read question 1 plus answer 1 first.

(University of Central Oklahoma)
(highlighting added)

The reliance of the referential expressions and general lexical items underlined in the Q2-A2 exchange on their antecedents in the Q1-A1 exchange for interpretation lends the sequence of the two exchanges the ordering of a continuous dialogical text.

5.3 Scale III: script-determined organization and general→specific organization vs. random collection of questions in a random order

Even though the discontinuous structure of FAQ colonies is obviously desirable and should not be challenged by unnecessary formal links, there is apparently an effort to support the coherence of the colony as a whole and to endow the string of question-answer adjacency pairs with an underlying logical structure, in an effort to build a macrostructure.

The FAQ structures vary from highly organized chains reflecting the scripts of typical situations (see example 7), through a simple structuring following the line from general information to more specific items (example 8), to random collections of queries presented in a haphazard order, framed only by their location within the hypertext, e.g. as part of the prospective students section, which includes questions regularly asked by applicants (example 9).

Example 7 below presents a series of questions from an Open Day FAQ section at the University of Sheffield website. The choice of the queries as well as their ordering mirror the structure and the chronology of an Open Day programme as it is introduced at

the above-mentioned website and as it is generally realized at universities in Britain and elsewhere.

Example 7:

Open Day FAQs

Do I need to book?
What time does the day start and finish?
Where can I park?
Can I attend more than one departmental talk?
How long do the departmental talks last?
I've booked a place on a departmental talk. Can I change my booking?
How long do the general talks last?

(University of Sheffield)

When the Frequently Asked Questions relate to a variety of aspects of a particular issue rather than to an event or process, the underlying script is replaced by the general-specific ordering principle.

Example 8:

What is the Leeds Met Bursary?
Do I have to repay the Bursary?
Will the bursary have any affect on other financial support I might receive?
How much is the Bursary?
What are the criteria for eligibility?
...
How is my Bursary paid?
When will the payment be made?

...
I am repeating a year of study, am I still eligible for the bursary scheme?

(Leeds Metropolitan University)

Generally, the way in which FAQ sets are ordered tends to be influenced considerably by their position and location within the website. Whereas FAQs tied with the more specific and specified sections or e-texts in the deeper parts of the hypertext often manifest sophisticated organizational patterns, FAQ sections accessible directly from the principle gateways – the university home page or the prospective students home page – exhibit a rather random ordering, within which the questions are recognizably unified only by the target audience of the home page in which they are anchored. The following extract (example 9) shows sample questions from the prospective students home page of the University of Sheffield.

Example 9:

Will I be eligible for a bursary?

I don't yet have a formal English language qualification. Can I still apply for a post-graduate course?

When will I receive my Open Day pack?

I have been made a conditional offer of a study place on a postgraduate course. What are the conditions of my offer?

What are the living costs in Sheffield?

(University of Sheffield)

It may be the case that the order in which the questions are published is based on their relative frequency within the corpus of questions the university needs to deal with; however, this is an assumption that cannot be proved from the audience's point of view.

5.4 Scale IV: field-dominated, official register vs. tenor-dominated register of partnership and advertising

The final distinction suggested by the present research results reflects the variability in the tenor, i.e. the extent to which the genre includes and manifests interpersonal meanings. The scale here spans between the field-dominated, official register of administration, focused on mediating the essential factual information or sometimes only the necessary minimum of information guiding the visitor to a relevant source, and the tenor-dominated register in FAQs, seen as an opportunity to come into contact with the target audience and complement the institution's enquiries service through an effort to develop a relationship between the website visitors and the university.

The interplay of field-dominated and tenor-dominated discourse within the institutional discourse of university website presentations may be also viewed as a reflection of the aspects of *shouldness* and *enablement* as defined by Iedema (73): "institutional discourses can be typified as concerned with the realization of constraint, or 'shouldness', on the one hand, and with the construal of levels of institutional enablement and power on the other". The co-presence of the shouldness elements (requirements and duties) and the enablement elements (offers and partnership), bringing a certain tension as well as harmony into the discourse of university presentations, appears to be a highly significant feature of current university website presentations.

The following examples illustrate the inner variability of the genre registers, demonstrating brevity and matter-of-factness (example 10), the development of a more personal relationship of familiarity within the academic community (example 11), and compliance with the advertising goals of attracting prospective students (example 12).

Example 10:

I am a part time student, am I eligible for the Bursary?

No. The Bursary is only payable to students on full time courses who meet all the criteria.

I am an international student, am I eligible for the Bursary?

No. The Bursary is only payable to UK students who meet all the criteria.

(Leeds Metropolitan University)

Example 11:

Mohu žádat o děkanský termín?

...Právo na druhý opravný termín neznamená, že Vám ho vyučující vypíše, kdykoli budete potřebovat...musíte se do nabídky “vejít” i s druhým opravným termínem...

(Can I apply to the Dean for an extra examination retake?)

...The right to the second retake does not mean the teacher will offer you an exam date just according to your wish...you are supposed to “fit” the second retake into the standard offer of dates...)

(Masaryk University, my own English translation)

When will I hear a decision on my application?

We want to tell you of our decision as soon as we can. ...

(University of Bristol)

Example 12:

Do you do courses in journalism?

Oxford is a great place to pursue an interest in student journalism, with two well-regarded student newspapers – Cherwell and Oxford Student. Many leading journalists began their careers at Oxford. The Faculty encourages the widest possible range of writing experience.

Whilst there aren't specific courses or papers on journalism, the Faculty runs a prestigious series of lectures by the News International Visiting Professor of Broadcast Media. The Faculty also has strong links with News International and runs a yearly work experience programme, offering students the opportunity to spend three weeks working on a News International publication.

(University of Oxford)

As the examples show, there is very little tenor-related variability in the register of the questions. They are neutral, usually simple in structure and modestly polite: they mostly avoid ‘you’ as a means of address (example 12 represents a rare example), instead opting for an impersonal structure (see e.g. example 8) or the first person singular pronoun (see examples 2 – 7 and 9 – 11).

It is the answers that exhibit a certain variation along the field-dominated – tenor-dominated scale. Whereas the exchange in example 10 is firmly anchored in the register of administration with strict impersonality in the answer, the answer in example 11 builds a more informal, personal relationship between the administration and the students,

enhancing the contact by using the pronominal form of address (second person pronoun) and by colloquial features in both the lexis and the structure. In the case of the Masaryk University example the use of the verb 'vejít se' ('fit in', or 'squeeze in') attracts attention, as it lends the text a flavour of oral rather than written discourse production. The inverted commas framing the verb reveal that the authors are aware of the marked character of this stylistic inconsistency. These features of familiarity, however, do not suspend the status difference between the university administration and the students: on the contrary, the informality of the answer in combination with the strictness of the deontic modality used ('musíte' – 'you are supposed to') reinforces the power of the institution.

A different stylistic effect of informality features can be traced in the Bristol sample (example 11 again), where the choice of 'want' rather than e.g. 'would like/wish' and the repetition of 'we' build a closer and a more equal producer-receiver relationship of rapport based on shared interests and shared needs.

Finally, the Oxford example (12) provides an illustration of yet another strategy in the choice and combination of lexico-grammatical and discursive means. While the text preserves impersonality of expression and avoids addressing the reader, it is still highly persuasive. A series of verifiable credentials supported by a selection of positively evaluating adjectives effectively background the answer to the question asked (which is actually negative – "there aren't specific courses or papers on journalism") and attracts attention to the University's offer. Here the genre of Frequently Asked Questions serves a promotional purpose.

6 The variable conventionality of the genre and beyond: final remarks

The four tentatively sketched scales attempt to provide a framework within which the inner variation of the FAQ genre can be possibly viewed. The tokens of the genre surveyed, occupying different positions on each of the scales, bear witness to the fact that in spite of the obviously recurrent textual pattern, the genre of FAQs is still subject to individualization and authorial creativity. It is important to note that the position of individual samples of FAQs on each of the scales may differ even when the samples in question belong to different parts of the same hypertext – the same university website.

Nevertheless, the FAQs in nine out of the eleven university websites analyzed can be clearly recognized as tokens of the same genre presented under the same name – Frequently Asked Questions. If there is a different link used (e.g. Questions and Answers, Ask Sheffield), the name FAQ appears later in the introduction to the question-answer string.

Two university websites represent an exception, with a realization of FAQs that does not meet the expectations generally related to the genre – namely Charles University and the University of Ostrava, where the FAQs are accessible through a generic link directly from a home page (targeted at prospective students) and their function is confused with the 'contact us' link; the e-text presents all personal questions sent ad hoc to the administrator, at one occasion even including the authentic names as found as signatures in the e-mail enquiries.

The use of the genre in the Czech environment has obviously been inspired by the English versions found on foreign websites. In the present corpus the level of the genre's domestication and of the functionality of its employment within Czech university

websites is eloquently reflected in the translations of the genre's name, which accompany the regularly used English abbreviation 'FAQ'. Whereas the Charles University and the University of Ostrava stick to a word-for-word translation (Často kladené otázky/dotazy), the Masaryk University website offers a more communicative, idiomatic Czech version: Na co se nás nejčastěji ptáte (literally: What you most frequently ask us about – my own working translation).

Out of the four Czech university websites surveyed, only one – Masaryk University – can be said to use the genre of FAQs appropriately and effectively.

7 Conclusions

Frequently Asked Questions represent a specific sub-genre of the university website genre colony, and in spite of the inner variability they manifest – individualization and authorial creativity – they are recognized as a genre used under a conventional name.

The nature of the discursive and lexico-grammatical features of the genre oscillates between interactivity and a monologic character, continuity and discontinuity, script-like organization and a random collection, and between a field-dominated and tenor-dominated genre profile.

Whilst relatively standardized within British and American university websites, FAQs still belong among the emerging web genres in the domain of Czech university websites, where the acceptance of the genre is at a different stage.

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<http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/>

Address:
University of Ostrava
Faculty of Arts
Dpt. of English and American Studies
Reální 5
701 03 Ostrava 1
Czech Republic
Renata.Tomaskova@osu.cz