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Languages for Specific Purposes on YouTube: a cross-cultural and cross-linguistic analysis of English and Italian makeup tutorials

Since its launch in 2005, YouTube has become the hosting platform of many virtual communities, including makeup lovers. A few of them have achieved such popularity that they are referred to as ‘makeup gurus’. Thanks to their notoriety and influence, these YouTubers have been able to make a profession out of makeup video posting and are often recruited as digital influencers by cosmetic brands. In order to appear as makeup experts (thus generating revenue from their videos), these so-called ‘gurus’ typically adapt the specific language of makeup and cosmetics to the new Internet video medium, leading to the creation of a new Web genre, the YouTube makeup tutorial.

Inspired by the success of English-speaking ‘makeup gurus’, Italian YouTubers have emulated them, thus bringing this relatively new genre into the Italian ‘makeupsphere’. In spite of the potential borderlessness of the Web, this process entailed a degree of linguistic and cultural adaptation which this study investigates by focusing on the generic, rhetorical and linguistic practices of English- and Italian-speaking ‘makeup gurus’ and highlighting how these languages and their associated discursive strategies are used in different cultural contexts, albeit within the same virtual platform and utilizing the same generic resources. Starting from the assumption that it represents an instance of language for specific purposes (LSP) largely unexplored so far, the verbal component of makeup video tutorials is examined and a comparison is drawn between the rhetorical, discursive and lexical preferences in the language in which this genre originated (English) and within a new linguo-cultural environment (Italian). Analysis suggests an ongoing tension between the global and the local dimension of YouTube makeup culture, as highlighted by the frequent phenomena of language contact and interference described in the chapter.