

14

Language and Text Studies

Edited by

Alexander Brock and Annette Schiller

Peter Schildhauer

The Personal Weblog

A Linguistic History



PETER LANG
EDITION

0 Introduction

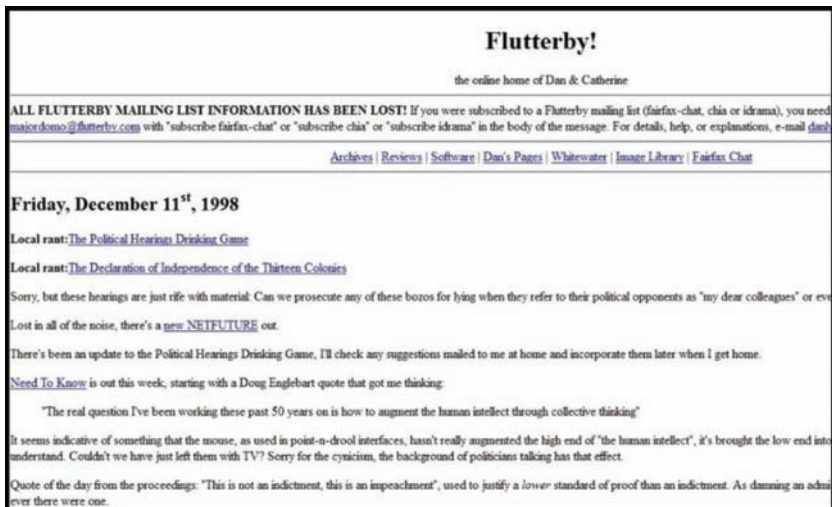
0.1 The Right Time for a History of the Personal Weblog

In 1995, blogging pioneer Dave Winer states:

Imagine being able to find out what's *really* going on in anyone's life. What if everyone wrote about their issues. We could all learn from each other. Friendship would mean a lot more. We could grow more quickly, accomplish more in our lives, live more richly, have more fun. (Dave Winer 1995 in Rosenberg 2009: 53)

No one in Winer's personal environment could believe back then that this vision might turn into reality only a couple of years later. At that time, it was simply impossible to imagine that millions of Internet users worldwide would keep their own websites in order to make their thoughts and experiences public and exchange their views with others. After all, the World Wide Web (WWW) of 1995 – only initiated a couple of years before by Tim Berners-Lee – was mainly a playground for enthusiasts who were excited about new developments and informed each other whenever they found something new. And there was something new literally every day – more and more users got involved in investigating the exhilarating potentials of the WWW. Eventually an abundance of new forms of communication emerged: Chats, discussion forums, personal and corporate websites, FAQ-sites – and *blogs*.

Example 1: Flutterby (1998) - Weblog of the 1990s



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Flutterby! weblog. At the top, the title "Flutterby!" is displayed in a bold, serif font, with the subtitle "the online home of Dan & Catherine" underneath. A horizontal line separates the header from the main content. Below the line, a notice states: "ALL FLUTTERBY MAILING LIST INFORMATION HAS BEEN LOST! If you were subscribed to a Flutterby mailing list (fairfax-chat, chia or idrama), you need maierclomo@flutterby.com with 'subscribe fairfax-chat' or 'subscribe chia' or 'subscribe idrama' in the body of the message. For details, help, or explanations, e-mail dan@flutterby.com". Below this notice is a navigation bar with links for "Archives", "Reviews", "Software", "Dan's Pages", "Whitewater", "Image Library", and "Fairfax Chat". The main content area begins with the date "Friday, December 11th, 1998". Two "Local rant:" entries are listed: "The Political Hearings Drinking Game" and "The Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen Colonies". The text continues with a paragraph: "Sorry, but these hearings are just rife with material. Can we prosecute any of these boros for lying when they refer to their political opponents as 'my dear colleagues' or even 'my dear friends'?" This is followed by a link to a "new NETFUTURE" article. Another paragraph states: "There's been an update to the Political Hearings Drinking Game, I'll check any suggestions mailed to me at home and incorporate them later when I get home." Below this is a link to "Need To Know" and a paragraph: "The real question I've been working these past 50 years on is how to augment the human intellect through collective thinking". The final paragraph reads: "It seems indicative of something that the mouse, as used in point-n-drool interfaces, hasn't really augmented the high end of 'the human intellect', it's brought the low end into understand. Couldn't we have just left them with TV? Sorry for the cynicism, the background of politicians talking has that effect." The page concludes with a quote: "Quote of the day from the proceedings: 'This is not an indictment, this is an impeachment', used to justify a lower standard of proof than an indictment. As damning an admission ever there were one."

Blogs, still called *weblogs* back then, emerged in the second half of the 1990s. A typical weblog of these early days is shown in Example 1. However, what comes to mind first when reading the term *personal weblog* is probably more similar to Example 2. This example shows a *personal weblog* and therefore a form of blogging that developed several years after the first weblogs of the mid-to-late 1990s. The personal weblog is probably “the best known, perhaps the prototypical representative of the species [blog, P.S.] in public awareness” (Mauranen 2013a: 7) and can be defined as follows:

Example 2: Cheré Takes on the World (2008) – Personal Weblog

The screenshot shows a personal weblog interface. At the top, a dark blue banner contains the title "Cheré Takes on The World" in a light green font, with the subtitle "Reinventing Life" below it. Below the banner is a light green sidebar containing the date "SATURDAY, MAY 24, 2008" and a post titled "BEWARE OF HOME INVASIONS....BY KIDS". The post text reads: "Summer time is here. Kids are out of school. Roads are less crowded because no school buses are parked for the summer. So, what now?" followed by "When you thought that summertime would come with stress free days and no traffic, you would have never have thought of the negative aspects that come with this long break for kids. Now children are turner to burglary as a pass-time during those long summer days of nothing to do. That's just great. First, we have to worry about people". To the right of the text is a cartoon illustration of a child with a red and white striped shirt and a yellow star, holding a blue box with a green 'X' on it. Further right is a green sidebar with the heading "About Me", a globe icon, and a link "View my complete profile". Below that is the heading "Ask Cheré" and a short paragraph of text: "Ask Cheré is the advice and information portion of this blog. If you need advice or have questions you would like to here my take on,".

The personal weblog is a weblog that typically deals with the everyday life and personal matters of the author. It can also be about a specific hobby or dedicated to expressing the author’s opinion, if this entails an element of self-reference and/or self-disclosure. Further, the personal weblog has an intimate, sometimes confessional, style where the author provides the readers with subjective representations and reflections on the topic discussed. Finally, the personal weblog can be more or less densely networked with other weblogs, and through the author’s self-disclosure and intimate style, it facilitates rather symmetrical communication with the readers and commentators. It is particularly supportive of strong ties in the sense that the relations between the author and the readers are more than just informational. (Lomborg 2009: n.p.)

The fact that many reading these lines have probably already encountered a website that could, according to Lomborg (2009), be labelled *personal weblog* shows

that this genre has had significant impact on the genre landscape of the WWW. In addition, the personal weblog looks back on a history of roughly 15 years at the time of writing this book – even close to 20 if the weblog-beginnings of the mid-to-late 1990s are also counted. On the web, this is a very long time. Personal weblogs have seen many developments come and go, they were *Web 2.0* before the concept even existed (Schildhauer 2015: 194) and later, most importantly, have successfully competed with rivals such as Facebook and Twitter. What makes the genre even more interesting are its manifold relations to other established genres: The diary, which has been proposed as *the* ancestor of the personal weblog,¹ is, in fact only one of many – both on- and offline. This turns the personal weblog into an interesting subject for everyone affiliated to research in genre, genre relations and genre change. Most intriguingly, the personal weblog provides us with the rare opportunity of documenting not only genre change but also genre birth.

Of course, there are numerous studies which investigate blogs (and personal weblogs in particular) from various angles. However, since Herring et al. (2006), there have been no linguistic studies on the history of blogs. If blogging history is mentioned (e.g., by Miller & Shepherd 2009; Mauranen 2013a: 13), it's usually the history as told by bloggers themselves (e.g., Blood 2000). While this *view from within* is certainly important, and is also taken into account in the present book, we should not neglect the actual blogs themselves, investigating *what* bloggers do on personal weblogs, *in what way* and *how this changes, or doesn't change, over time*. Certainly a lot has changed as far as Examples 1 and 2 are concerned – but much also remained stable and is not apparent at first glance.

After 15 (or 20) years of blogging, then, this is the right time for a *linguistic* history of the personal weblog. The genre has many interesting stories to tell and this book would like to share at least some of them – from a media linguistic point of view.

0.2 Outline of the Book

This book is based on my PhD thesis, which I defended in summer 2014 at Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg (Schildhauer 2014). However, I planned the present book not only as a translation of that thesis but also saw it also as an opportunity to provide a more readable, concise, revised and updated account of the history of the personal weblog. With this in mind, I took several

1 For a critical view, see Bündgens-Kosten (forthc.: 4.2.1).

shortcuts and also left aside much of the methodological argument provided in my PhD thesis; this was aimed at satisfying the requirements of a committee, not the curiosity of a reader merely intrigued by the subject. Where appropriate, I will reference relevant passages in Schildhauer (2014) for those interested in a more elaborate argument.

This book is divided into three parts. Part A introduces the background of the study presented here and gives an outline of its theoretical framework, method and research corpus. Chapter 1 approaches the concept *genre* from several angles. As genres are complex phenomena, this chapter introduces the descriptive dimensions *communication form, situation, function* and *multimodal structure*, which will be used later to describe several aspects of the personal weblog in a structured way. This chapter also develops a model suitable to describe genre change and introduces several *types* or *patterns* of genre change as necessary tools for the linguistic history of the personal weblog. Many of the considerations in chapter 1 are illustrated with examples from the research corpus this book is based on. This corpus is called DIABLOC (*diachronic blog corpus*) and is described in detail in chapter 2. Chapter 3 closes part A with some general remarks concerning methodology. This chapter is rather short as I provide only an outline of the *general* methodology here. Each chapter of the main part is introduced by a section entitled *What I Did* | *What I Read*, which reviews research relevant to the topical section and methods leading to the results presented in the respective chapter.

Part B addresses each of the descriptive dimensions introduced in chapter 1 in turn. It opens in chapter 4 with an account of the blog communication form (that is, technology and software which blogs are based on). Chapter 5 addresses several parameters of the communicative situation of personal weblogs such as authorship (5.5 and 5.6), the bloggers' ideas about their audience (5.7), communicative maxims guiding the production and reception of blog posts (5.8) and others. Chapter 6 then turns to structural concerns, for instance layout and design (6.3.1), language use (6.4.2), image types (6.4.3) and language-image links (6.4.4). The results from chapters 4 to 6 are fused in chapter 7, which deals with the purposes of blogging. This chapter first describes several types of blog posts (7.2 to 7.5) and then moves on to investigate their frequencies (7.6).

Part C provides a synthesis of the results from two different perspectives. Chapter 8 draws on the previous chapters to provide a concise history of the personal weblog, including the weblog as its online-ancestor. While the chapters 4 to 7 are, in fact, separate histories of several related aspects of the personal weblog, these are brought together for a coherent account in chapter 8. Chapter 9 addresses issues of more theoretical concern. 9.1 turns to the question of *why* genres change and shows how Keller's (1990) *Invisible Hand Theory* can be applied to

some phenomena of the history of the personal weblog. Chapter 9.2 broadens the view to stability and change of web-based genres in general and situates the present book in the respective research landscape. Chapter 10 closes this book with a summary and questions for further research, as much remains to be done both regarding the personal weblog and the history of web-based genres in general.