

# Dissertation: “Finnish Technical Communication: You- and We-attitudes as Domestication Strategies in User Instructions for Household Appliances from 1945–1995”

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## 1 Introduction

User instructions are everyday texts that give information about technical devices and systems and help people use them. This dissertation examines the ways Finnish household appliance manufacturers domesticated their products through the use of domestication strategies in the user instructions in the period 1945–1995 (Suojanen 2018). “Domestication” refers to the ways people start using new technologies and eventually integrate them into their everyday lives (e. g. Suominen 2003: 9 f., Lie/Sørensen 1996: 17 f.). Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, many new household appliances entered the Finnish market (Huokuna 2010), and these required a variety of domestication strategies to help users “tame” technology (Pantzar 1996) and integrate it into their daily routines.

The first domestication strategy examined in the dissertation is called the *you-attitude*, which refers to strategies used to persuade users and prioritize their needs in the user instructions (e. g. Jameson 2004, Rodman 2001). The second strategy that is studied contains elements that are used to build a relationship between the writer, the company and the user. For this purpose, the concept of the *we-attitude* is created as part of the study. Thus, domestication is used as an overarching concept, incorporating elements of the you- and we-attitudes. In addition, the dissertation explores changes that have occurred in the domestication strategies and their connection with the development of Finnish society and technical communication.

The research material analyzed in the dissertation consists of 132 Finnish user instructions for household appliances produced by different companies. Furthermore, user instructions created by two well-known Finnish companies, Helkama and Upo, are compared. The material is analyzed by adopting a mixed methods research design with an emphasis on qualitative research.

This is the first Finnish-language dissertation in the field of technical communication. It adds to our understanding of Finnish technical communication and its history, as well as to the role of user instructions in Finnish society. The dissertation also opens up new viewpoints for technical communication professionals, teachers and researchers as well as ideas for the translation processes of user instructions and user-centered translation, UCT (Suojanen/Koskinen/Tuominen 2015).

## 2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the study is multidisciplinary. In addition to technical communication, it incorporates elements from rhetoric, new rhetoric, genre studies as well as cultural, social and feminist technology studies. Rhetoric and new rhetoric, especially logos, pathos and ethos proposed by Aristotle (1984), provide a foundation for the analysis of the domestication strategies. This is supported by the strong rhetorical tradition in technical communication

research, which also serves as background to examine the relationship between the users and writers (e. g. Campbell 1995). The you- and we-attitudes are treated as manifestations of pathos and ethos, respectively.

Beside rhetoric, another pillar of the study is genre studies, through which user instructions are characterized as a text type. In accordance with the rhetorical approach, the study argues in favor of seeing user instructions not simply as instrumental texts but also as persuasive documents (cf. Moore 1997). The role of user instructions in Finnish society during the period under study is discussed particularly with the help of social and feminist technology studies. The development of Finnish society is examined from the viewpoint of gender roles, as the research data concerns household technology, a traditionally feminine area of life (e. g. Cowan 1983, Wajcman 1991, 2004, Cockburn/Ormrod 1993). Devices themselves in general, as well as their user instructions, contain inscribed users – whether they have been produced consciously or unconsciously (Akrich 1992: 208 f.) – and often this inscription also entails a gender representation.

### 3 Data and methods

The 132 Finnish user instructions comprising the material for the dissertation were collected from the ephemera collection of the National Library of Finland. The material covers instructions for various types of household appliances, including those for cooking, refrigeration, cleaning, and clothes care. A major challenge in the instructions was the absence of their year of publication. Sometimes it was necessary to rely on the library's archival system, but even then, the dating of the instructions is an approximation, and thus, the material itself raises issues of the validity of the results. The data consists of the following material subsets:

- Systematic material (different companies) 1945–1965 (N=58)
- Helkama material 1945–1995 (N=37)
- Upo material 1953–1995 (N=37)

The aim was to gather as much old material as possible, which would provide a contrast to what we generally know about present-day user instructions. On the other hand, to discover change in the user instructions, the material needed to be as extensive as possible within the selected timeframe. Thus, the emphasis is on material from 1945–1965, which was named as the systematic material, and the more recent findings then rely on the instructions of Helkama and Upo.

The mixed methods research design was selected as the method to analyze the material, and methodological triangulation was used (Denzin 1978), incorporating qualitative and quantitative analysis. On the continuum of mixed methods research, this study focuses on qualitative analysis (Johnson/Onwuegbuzie/Turner 2007: 123 f.). On the one hand, the aim was to ascertain how users and writers are present in the user instructions in terms of both content and language. For this purpose, the theoretical background of genre studies and new rhetoric provide the necessary background. This part of the study is qualitative. On the other hand, the aim was to study the diachronic change in the domestication strategies during the research period, for which a quantitative approach was used. The number of occurrences was calculated as simple percentages, which is sufficient to show tendencies in the change that has taken place in the domestication strategies (cf. Mauranen 2000).

#### 4 Findings

The analysis of the material reveals that the you-attitude is a strong domestication strategy in the user instructions: in other words, users are taken into consideration extensively. For example, users are addressed directly with imperative verb forms and they are profiled in different ways (*customer, user, housewife*). The analysis confirms the manifestation of gender roles: they demonstrate the important input of women in the home as users of household technology in Finnish society particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. They also support the idea that user instructions do indeed contain inscribed, gendered users.

The analysis also reveals various means of persuasion and strategies to motivate the user to act in a certain way. The instructions motivate users through empowerment and by boosting their self-confidence. Users are given advice how to read the instructions; the use of the product is said to be easy and safe, and users are encouraged to get to know the appliance through practice. In addition, users are motivated by showing the relevance of task performance to their personal needs and goals by introducing the rewards or threats that would result from certain actions (cf. Steehouder 1997).

Elements of the we-attitude were also discovered in the analysis. These elements include the pronoun *we*, the use of the indicative first person plural, the name of the company, and different writer roles, which are visible through certain means of motivation. While boosting the self-confidence of the users, the writer takes on the role of tutor or manufacturer (cf. Steehouder 1997): writers use face-saving strategies, different kinds of metacomments, such as encouragements to the user to continue reading, and they congratulate the user and promise that life will become better, and that the user will be much happier. These types of elements represent ethos but at the same time they contribute to pathos, building the relationship between the writer, the company and the user.

In addition to the qualitative manifestations of the you- and we-attitudes, clear changes were detected in the domestication strategies. The core finding supports the research hypothesis: the you-attitude echoing the pathos dimension is stronger and more wide-ranging in the material than strategies connected with the we-attitude. This result follows the user-orientation that is typical in user instructions and technical communication. However, logos, ethos and pathos are intertwined, so that elements of the you-attitude also tend to represent ethos, because they reveal the writer's perception of the audience (Kakkuri-Knuuttila 1998, 233 f., 238 f.).

Instances of the you- and we-attitudes are stronger and more wide-ranging in the material up until around the 1970s than in the newer material. The early instructions aim to convince the user on the rationality of acquiring a new appliance; they help users accept and tame new technology and persuade them to believe that learning to use an appliance is not difficult. The results suggest that the newer the user instructions, the more impersonal and the more detached from the users and their contexts they are. In other words, they tend to resemble a "spectator" manual (Pirsig 1974).

In addition to these findings, the creation of the concept of the we-attitude is a central result of this study, and it provides a tool for future technical communication research. It is argued that user instructions do not function only at the level of logos, by namely emphasizing the content. They also exploit elements of pathos, as they pay attention to the user's tasks, affects and use contexts. Moreover, it is suggested that they should increasingly contain elements of ethos, namely exploit the we-attitude, where the writer and the company are visible,

which promotes interaction between the user and the writer as well as the achievement of a maximum user experience.

## 5 Implications

The change in the domestication strategies from user and writer participation to “spectatorhood” means that the function of user instructions as genre has changed. The persuasive function played a markedly important role in the older user instructions. When users acquired brand-new household appliances, they needed ways to give the new technology meaning and tame the product, and the manufacturer had to remove the aura of mystery to turn it into a socially desirable object. However, domestication strategies were present throughout the material, and it is argued that user instructions continue to serve an important social and rhetorical function, particularly because we continue to encounter new technology. Technical documents are deeply rooted in various social, institutional and technological processes, bringing together people and technology.

The dissertation demonstrates that the you- and we-attitudes are complex phenomena, and this offers many further avenues for research. For example, there is a need to further develop and study the concept of the we-attitude that was created as a result of this study. The field of technical communication would also benefit from a study into the you-attitude and particularly user profiling by exploiting a more modern and extensive set of data reaching to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The results of this dissertation offer a limited perspective, as the older material focuses only on two companies, Helkama and Upo. Future research might also focus on the domestication strategies of different fields of technology.

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