Conventionalizing Business Writing: Implications for Theory and Practice

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This paper is a report of a preliminary analysis of the annual reports of twenty local public listed companies. On the basis of our findings we tentatively put forward the hypothesis that the business community has evolved a conventional schema that facilitates both production and interpretation and suggest that the imitation of this propensity towards conventionalizing communication may have important implications for pedagogy.

Theoretical framework

In analysing our data we had four basic orientations. The first of these related to the currently much-avowed position among language theorists that 'Language is a social instrument' and that investigations into language must involve studying 'how it is instrumental in social processes and how it is shaped by those processes' (Clark, 1987). This approach to language looks at texts as 'vehicles of human activities' and evaluates their effectiveness from a systems perspective, where a system is defined as 'a unity of mutually relevant ELEMENTS whose FUNCTIONS are determined by their respective contributions to the workings of the whole' (de Beaugrande, 1980: 2). We sought to find empirical warrants for this hypothesis by looking at whether and how the writing of the business community mirrors the goals, beliefs, constraints and other features of the business community at large.

An important meaning of the term 'genius' relates to a collective quality. The Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary defines it as an outstanding quality or character which makes something distinct from everything else'. It cites as an example of this use the expressions 'the genius of the capitalist system' and 'the British genius for compromise'. One question that we sought to answer was: "What is the 'genius' of the business world and in what way does this genius express itself in its communications? It is, for example, generally believed that time is a scarce resource in the community; that maintaining the company image is a great priority and that rationalising (cutting off all redundancy) is a must for corporate efficiency and well-being. Do these attributes shape the way the business community expresses itself? How?"

Our second orientation related to current practice and the presuppositions that underpin it. 'Business English' is big business these days. It is big in the dollars it rolls in to the coffers of the English teacher now packaged anew with more up-market and more glamorous names like 'language

consultant', 'communications expert' or simply as 'trainer'. But it is also big in the reach of the theoretical and empirical questions that it poses for people involved in the business of learning and teaching. Firstly, it raises the epistomological question: what is 'Business English'? One answer subsumed in the practice of those purportedly teaching 'business English' is a register difference. By selecting business letters, excerpts from business journals and textbooks, and focusing on the distinctive features of the language found in these genres, those concerned with English for Special Purposes seem to be implying that 'business English' is that which exhibits the linguistic features manifest in such texts. Is such an assumption about the nature of 'business English' valid? We sought to find a limited answer to this question by looking at the register aspects of the various parts of the annual reports to see if there was sufficient linguistic congruence between different parts of the annual report, the argument being that if there is something called 'business English', it should by definition manifest itself in every business communication and in all parts of every communication.

Our third orientation was pedagogic. Current practice among teachers of English For Special Purposes (ESP) is to prepare custom-made courses by collecting detailed information about the needs of the potential students: how old they are, what their previous learning experience has been, what their communicative needs are, etc. This kind of 'learner-centredness' has often caused teachers to ignore, or at least downgrade, the need to find out about the characteristics of the various types of writing the student is expected to do. We feel that this is a grave omission especially in view of the fact that most teachers of English are not themselves bona fide members of the discourse community. They do not in the normal course of their jobs or lives write business reports or engage in business correspondence. One job we set ourselves in this study was to see what kind of information we can get if we look closely at any one type of writing and what implications our findings would have for the teaching/learning scene, as well as for the business community itself.

Our fourth theoretical orientation pertains to the question of addressor (the writer/speaker) - addressee (reader/listener) relationship. Audience awareness is an important principle in effective speaking and writing. A writer who does not accurately assess and fulfill the communicative needs of his audience, it is thought, is doomed to failure, The Annual Reports of public-listed companies, it seemed to us, are particularly interesting in this respect. In its contacts with its shareholders the business community has to use forms of written communication that will be received, processed and used by a motley audience. For example, the annual reports that each company puts out for its investors includes in its readership both economic analysts who are investment consultants for banks and other large investors, accountants of parent companies where the company putting out the annual report is a subsidiary of a holding company or a branch of a multinational as well as 'lay' investors with little business sophistication or expertise in interpretation of business figures. The company needs to maintain its credibility with all these investors with a written interface that is accessible and acceptable to this varied audience. If it cannot forge a written instrument that can successfully negotiate this tricky social process of convincing its investors of its credibility and continued liquidity, then the company could face the possibility of mass dumping of shares, and consequent financial crash. A pivotal question for the writer of the Annual Report and the 'genius' of the business community to answer, it seemed to us, was just how communication can be maintained simultaneously with an audience in which different segments had such disparate levels of expertise and need for information. In our analysis we sought to discover this answer operationalized in the text.

Findings

Teun van Dijk (1986) discovered in his analysis of newspaper discourse that the constraints of time involved in news production and processing had led to the evolution of a conventional way of structuring and ordering news categories which ensured easy production and efficient processing. We found that the business community's solution to the problem of curtailing production time, without sacrificing communicative efficiency, was also to evolve conventional form with more or less fixed content categories; more or less fixed ordering of categories; more or less formulaic language and a fairly fixed structuring of rhetorical moves within each content category.

Of the categories of content contained in the annual reports only the following categories are verbally presented: the Chairman's Report, the Operations Review, the Corporate Diary, the Directors' Statement, the Auditors' Statement, the Notes to the Accounts, and the Statutory Declaration. It is with these categories that we concerned ourselves in this study. We felt the categories that were primarily numerically presented were outside the purview of the study as they did not seem to be relevant in getting answers to the research questions we posed ourselves.

We found very little variation in the selection and categorisation of content in the twenty reports we looked at. The following table gives the quantitative data on the categories we found. Column 1 lists the categories in the rough order in which they occurred in the 20 annual reports we investigated. Column 2 gives the percentage of annual reports that contained these categories. We present deviations in or conflations of categories in the discussion that follows the table.

Table 1: Conventional Categories in Annual Reports

MAIN CATEGORIES OF CONTENT	FREQUENCY
Notice of Annual General Meeting	90%
Board of Directors	55%
Group/Organisational Structure	50%
Financial Highlights	80%
Operations Review	100%
Chairman's/Chief Executive's Statement	100%
FINANCIAL STATEMENTS	
Directors' Report	95%
Profit and Loss! Distribution Statement	100%
Balance Sheet	100%
Changes in Financial Position	100%
Notes to Accounts/Notes to and Forming Part of the Accounts	100%
Directors' Statement	90%
Statutory Declaration	90%
Auditors' Report	100%
Statement of Shareholdings/Shareholding Statistics	95%

List of Properties! Holdings	75%
Proxy Form	90%

The data above shows that most content categories are deemed mandatory and some, like the information about the Board of Directors and organizational structure are common, though apparently not absolutely necessary. And in extraordinary circumstances, some apparently mandatory categories are omitted. In the corpus we looked at, for example, the Property Trusts did not have the notice for the Annual General Meeting and hence there were no Proxy Forms either. This is rare. What is more common is for some categories to be subsumed under others. For example, the category Operations Review remains a separate category in on1y seven out of the twenty reports studied. The rest appear as a sub-category of the Chairman's Statement. Alternative presentations of the same category are also possible. The category Financial Highlights appears as the highlights of a single year in six of the reports while twelve present a five-year highlight. There are other categories that seemed optional. The reports put out by the property trusts, for example, contained information on the Malaysian economy and the Malaysian Property Market. Other kinds of information in some other annual reports include reports on community relations, and welfare activities of staff; review of the Stock Market and the KLSE index (found in stockbroking and securities companies) and details about crop acreage (often found in plantation reports). Mission statements were other optional inclusions. We suspect that the inclusion or exclusion of these optional features have either to do with the nature of the business or with the professional judgement of the writer of that specific year's report concerning what it takes to present a good image of his company. Or it may well be part of a company's concerted policy regarding the kind of information it wishes to present to its shareholders. Further work, which we unfortunately could not undertake, needs to be done to compare annual reports of like companies as well as several years' reports of the same company to ascertain if our intuitions are correct.

Even within each sub-category we found a high degree of conformity in the kinds of information presented. Below we present the information categories we found in the Chairman's Report and the Directors' Reports in the twenty annual reports we looked at:

CONTENTS OF DIRECTOR'S REPORT

1. Principal Activities
2. Financial Results/Accounts
3. Dividends
4. Share Capital
5. Reserves and Provisions
6. Bad and Doubtful Debts
7. Current Assets
8. Valuation Methods
9. Contingent and Other Liabilities
10. Change of Circumstances
11. Items of an Unusual Nature
12. Significant Events
13. Directors
14. Directors' Benefits
15. Directors' Interests

16. Auditors
17. Share Options
18. Audit Committee

CONTENTS OF CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT/REPORT

1. Financial Performance
2. Operations Review
3. Dividend
4. Corporate Development
5. Prospects
6. Acknowledgement/Appreciation

All items on the list of categories cited above, except Share Capital and Significant events in the Directors' Statement were found in almost all the reports we looked at. Items 6 to 12 in the Directors' Statement, however, were sometimes reported under a single category: Other Statutory Information. In some reports, the Chairman's Statements Operations review and Corporate Development are conflated.

We found that there was also fairly great uniformity in the rhetorical moves within each category and in the linguistic realisations of these moves. On the next page we present in tabular form the structure of a Chairman's Report as we found it in most of the exponents contained within our corpus:

CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

CHAIRMAN'S STATEMENT

RHETORICAL MOVE	TYPICAL LINGUISTIC RELIZATIONS
1 Introduces report	On behalf of the Board of Directors, it gives me great pleasure/ I have great pleasure/ I'm pleased to present/ to you the Annual Report and Accounts of (name of company) for the year ended....
	On behalf of the Board I present the results of ...
	Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf...
	It is my pleasure, on behalf ...
	It gives me great pleasure to ...
2 Presents and rationalizes results of Company's financial performance. Often deals with the following domains: a. Group's pretax profit;	The Group recorded a pre-tax profit of XX, an increase of XX compared to XX in 1991. The increase is principally attributed to .../ reflecting XX increase over the preceding year
	The profits achieved represented a decrease of ...
b. the profit attributable to shareholders;	The profit attributable to shareholders is ...
c. profits at company level	At company level, your company recorded ...... and was mainly due to ...
3 Reviews operation of company and its subsidiaries	For the year under review, X continued to contribute significantly/ continued to be profitable/ still incurred a loss/ moved in tandem with ...
	X and Y were adversely affected by...
	Although regional economies were buoyant, X did not perform well.
	I am happy to announce that all divisions of the group have performed satisfactorily.

4	Presents details about Corporate Development	a contract was signed ...
		The Bank entered into an agreement with ...
		The Group has acquired ...
		... a rights issue ... was made
5	Announces dividend payments	The Directors' have agreed to recommend a dividend payment of ...
		The Board does not recommend a dividend
		The Board is not in a position to ...
		Your Board is recommending the payment ...
6	Considers prospects of the company	Barring unforeseen circumstances, the future's indeed encouraging/ we expect 1992 to be another year of growth
		The Board believes X will contribute positively to ......
		The Board is optimistic
		The future seems uncertain
		... is expected to perform satisfactorily
		The prospect is likely to be disappointing.
		The outlook is clouded by ...
	Welcomes new directors and thanks out-going ones	I take this opportunity to extend a warm welcome to ...
		I wish to welcome ...
		I take this opportunity to announce the appointment of..
	Records thanks to employees and shareholders	I would like to thank the management and staff for their invaluable services
		On behalf of the Board I would like to thank our employees
		Our gratitude also goes to our shareholders
		... and as appreciation to our shareholders

There was, understandably, some degree of lexical variation in the language used in the reports. This variation reflected the difference in the domains they reported on. Syntactically, however, a closed set of syntactic types seemed to realise many of the functions. This can be seen from the table.

As for linguistic congruence between sections of reports, we found little to substantiate the view that there is an identifiable phenomenon called 'business English'. The four excerpts below reflect some of the variety of register we found in the reports:

1. I ... the Director primarily responsible for the financial management of..., do solemnly and sincerely declare that the accounts set out on pages..., are, to the best of my knowledge and belief, correct and I make this solemn declaration, conscientiously believing the same to be true and by virtue of the provisions of the Statutory Declaration Act, 1960. Subscribed and solemnly declared by the abovementioned

   ....

   at .... on ....

   (signature)

   before me,

   signature of witness

   (Excerpt Statutory Declaration)

2. Commodity trading recorded a profit of ... million for the year as compared to a loss of... in 1990 due to the improved performance of the Company's rubber marketing subsidiaries.

   (Excerpt from Chairman's report)

3. The Directors have pleasure in presenting their report together with the audited accounts...

   (Excerpt from Directors' Report)

4. In sports, ... is a major sponsor of the two-year programme organised by the National Sports Council geared towards the participation of the Malaysian Hockey team at the Barcelona Olympics. During the year, ... also contributed substantially to numerous charitable and social causes.

   (Excerpt from Operations Review)

Implications

Theoretical implications

The data we obtained proves nothing. Our corpus by itself and the data it yielded provide too fragile a scaffolding to bear the weight of any theory we may wish to build upon. However, we believe that when this data is added to other data already collected by scholars (van Dijk, 1983, 1986; Tannen, 1986; Dudley-Evans, 1987; Swales, 1981), it does seem to corroborate the validity of the theoretical position that 'language is a social instrument'. The evolution of a convention in the writing of these reports, we feel, is evidence of a successful and elegant solution to the needs and constraints of a business milieu. It is the result, we feel, of the accumulated wisdom of the business community and reflects its concerns and strength as a community.

The existence of a conventional framework and predetermined content categories serves both the businessman-writer and his investor-reader.

It serves the busy businessman-writer in at least three ways. Firstly, it saves him time by obviating the need to waste time thinking of what to include and how to organise the things that need to be included.

Secondly, the existence of the convention provides his choice of content with the weight of the entire business community's traditional wisdom because the existence of the conventional or institutionalised form renders the individual writer a mere executor of traditionally-determined content and style. It frees him from all the doubts that the individual writer is heir to. It gives him a clear indication of what is minimally 'sufficient and necessary' and it provides him with a basis for an evaluation procedure for well-formedness of structure and acceptability of content. This transfer of accountability from individual .to community-based wisdom, allows even relative newcomers to be assigned the job of preparing the annual report.

Thirdly, the automaticity that convention achieves in the selection and structuring of content leaves the writer with greater cognitive space for creative thinking. Being assured that following convention he would have covered all expected elements, he can turn his attention to the finer points and additional features that would give his company an edge over others. In the twenty reports we looked at, these 'finer points' included choice of quality of paper for reports, the visual layout of information, and the inclusion of graphics and photographs. Some of these 'finer points' reflected the individual writer's professional judgement about what would best serve the company image. In one report, for example, the writer chose to precede figures about the company's performance with a quick rundown on the world economy although this did not seem common practice.

But it was good practice. It prepared the shareholder to receive the information about the company's poor performance with greater equanimity and understanding. This seemed to us to be in the best business tradition, particularly the tradition that informs rationalisation. Creative human potential which is the most expensive resource of business has been freed from dealing with repetitive elements through the establishment of a convention so that it can more profitably engage itself in high-powered decisions for which human initiative, imagination and judgement are required. Fourthly, and peculiarly, in places where English is a foreign or second language and where commerce itself is a fairly new domain, the existence of conventional language and structure provides the necessary crutch. It ensures that at least minimum adequate standards are maintained.

A form that does not take into account the needs of a customer is not only poor writing, it is also poor business. The conventionalised annual report, we believe, also benefits the shareholder. It does this in two ways.

Firstly, it provides the means for efficient processing in much the same way as known terrain facilitates easy negotiation of routes. The shareholder, because he gets the same categories of information year in and year out, knows where to look for what kind of information. This serves him in two ways. One, it enables him to read top-down, to plan what he will and what he will not read. Two, it creates expectations in him and these expectations sensitize him to any missing information or deviation from norm and then to draw the necessary expectation-driven inferences and evaluative judgements based on the reader's 'special knowledge' about the world of business.

The fact that an annual report has preceded the report on company performance with a report on the world economy becomes visible as a deviation and the gap between expected data and the data given causes the reader to remember that this is the competitive world of business and that he needs to decide whether the writer's inclusion of world economy particulars is an honest explanation of company performance or simple 'salespeak'.

One of our orientations in this study was also to investigate the issue of addressee - addressor relations in a document that had addressees with different levels of expertise and varying needs for information. Rathbone (1985) claims that a technical report is organised rather like a menu, with different parts fulfilling the needs of different members of the organisation. He showed that while the abstract provided the highlights and professional opinions necessary for decision making, the information in the appendices provided the detail sought by accountants and scholars interested in replicating the study or evaluating the conclusions. We found this menu-like presentation in the annual reports as well. The Chairman's Report provided the highlights, the information necessary for an ordinary shareholder to find out how his shares were doing. The Board of Directors Report provided legal assurances that all that should and could have been done was done and provided the statistics that were necessary for the more sophisticated to decide for themselves to what extent the claims of the Chairman were valid. This structure is again further proof of the theoretical position that language is a social instrument and that functional discourse evolves in the direction of maximum efficiency within the contexts in which the discourse is to be used. Within an institutional setting, efficiency could and often does, demand the development of socially-shared systems of rules, norms or strategies; in short, the development of a genre to reflect its own 'genius' and to further its own ends in the most economical way.

Our findings on register fail to corroborate the claim for a 'business English' distinct from other Englishes. Rather, it seems to give further credence to the view that language is an instrument of social process. A corporate body has a life much as an individual has a life. It needs to deal with all kinds of people for all kinds of purposes. It needs to persuade; to make statutory declarations; to invite; to describe the social activities of which it is a part. If, like the individual, it is subject to different communicative demands in its multifarious activities, how then can it have a language distinctly its own? It seems more plausible and persuasive to claim that, like the individual, it uses different registers for different purposes. It seems tempting, though at this stage we do not have the data to validate such a hypothesis, that it is human activities and social processes, and not domains, that have registers. When it needs to make a statutory declaration, it uses the legal register; when it needs to politely invite someone to one of its functions, it uses the social register; when it needs to talk about transactions, it uses the business register, and so on,

Implications for pedagogy

For pedagogy again our data proves nothing. While we know that a convention exists, we do not know how this convention is acquired and whether it is used consciously or unconsciously. Text study does not provide the information necessary to draw such conclusions. Extrapolating from our data, however, we could perhaps suggest that it may be worth identifying the conventional elements in business writing so that these may be described sufficiently clearly for the description to become the basis of informed prescription. Another possibility is to replace teaching of these forms with the provision of models for students to study and imitate. A third pedagogic implication pertains to an important distinction that Bikram Das (1984) draws our attention to:

> Most of us tend to view language as a fairly monolithic activity. We view language
> learning in terms, essentially, of competence. Language is assumed to have been learnt
> only when the 'creative construction' process has been activated - in other words, when
> the learner has begun to 'crack the code'. It is accepted, of course, that there may be
> different degrees of success in operating the code, once it has been acquired; but the
> essential requirement for success seems to be the ability to use language generatively.

> This is no doubt essential for the 'general' learner, for whom it is impossible to predict the exact tasks that will have to be performed. At the other extreme from the general learner is the kind of learner who uses language for highly restricted and predictable tasks. Is he really required to 'learn' language? Does he learn in the same way as the general learner? ...Our observation seems to confirm that people can learn enough language to 'do' certain things by just being made to do them repeatedly, it may not be necessary to 'teach' them the language through a separate programme. This suggests, in turn, that doing things that involve the use of language may, after all, be the most economical way of learning language, if not the most efficient.
>
> (Das, 1984: 8/9)

With about a decade of experience in using 'communicative' methodology in schools in Malaysia, few educators would, without reservation, accept the claim that the best way of learning a language is by doing things with it. The possibilities of early fossilization are a real threat. We share some of these reservations. However, Das's caveat on the contention that operational knowledge may be all that is required for 'the learner who uses language for highly restricted and predictable tasks', makes it a more plausible and attractive proposition. We feel that identifying the 'restricted and predictable tasks' (like the writing of annual reports) and starting the learner with these has at least two advantages. One, the task is almost writer-proof and the company image cannot be damaged by the inadequacies of the learner-writer. Two, success in these easily accomplished tasks may be the confidence booster the often diffident learner needs before he confronts those that are more creative and demanding. Thus task predictability and restriction can form an integral part of course grading.

Implications for the company

One implication that we feel companies have already acted on, is the possibility of saving typing and composing time by creating computer templates for documents such as the annual report. A secretarial level staff member could then be assigned to put in the figures and facts for the relevant year. High-powered staff can then be asked to use their professional expertise and business sense to vet the document and creatively manipulate it to present the best image that it is possible to give the company.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that the annual reports of companies appear to follow a conventional schema which 'has variables that in any particular instantiation may be filled with constants' (van Dijk and Kintsch, 1983: 47). Iii our study we have not merely sought to add to the growing corpus of texts which are analysed for various purposes, particularly for informing pedagogic decisions regarding the teaching and learning of these genres in L2 and FL situations. The study is also intended to provide empirical warrants for a theory of discourse development based on a view of language as part of social process.

Our study has not been based on an extensive corpus. So the views we have fielded in this paper should be taken as suggestive rather than conclusive. More work, obviously, needs to be done before more stable hypotheses can be drawn. Firstly, annual reports in Malaysia need to be compared with annual reports in other countries in which English is a second or foreign language.

This would be needed to validate our hypothesis that the conventional form found in the reports we studied may be one of the ways the business community has devised to overcome too much dependence on that increasingly unreliable resource - the writer's English language proficiency. Secondly, a study of annual reports written in countries in which English is a first language and which have been 'advanced' in commercial matters for a longer period than Malaysia - U.S.A and UK for instance - would indicate whether language proficiency and business expertise have been criterial, or at least relevant, in the evolution of the annual reports to the state they have evolved to today. Such a study would be necessary to decide whether the direction of the specific discourse conventions discussed in our paper has been fashioned by the international business community at large or has been the specific modification that entrepreneurs faced with a communication problem have made. Thirdly, more psycholinguistic data needs to be collected to determine more precisely the ways in which the conventional schema is and can be used by writers and readers: Do readers ignore some parts and concentrate on others? Do they read selectively? Which readers read which sections? How do they read the sections they select? Is the schema evident in these annual reports an accident of chance or the result of an efficiency-driven evolutionary process of the business community at large? If this is part of a natural evolutionary process, can this process be speeded up by language planning? Can description of texts usefully lead to prescription?

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