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## ***The Notion of Reader Orientation in Business Texts***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

'In business you don't get what you deserve, you get what you negotiate' And for effective negotiations to take place, whether internal or external, competence in spoken and written skills is essential. Distortions and misunderstandings would occur if messages are not spoken or written succinctly; and, external communication presents the special difficulty that the person at the other end of the communication channel is often somebody one knows little about and whose communication methods one has no control over.

Of greater concern for most people in the business discourse community, is that a considerable demand is made on communication skills in writing. Whether in short or long written documents, one has to express oneself clearly and unambiguously and at the same time put forth succinctly a convincing argument to persuade one's audience. It is with much difficulty that most writers, even the good ones, achieve this level of interaction. Also, a lot is at stake for companies whose writers fail to "deliver the goods" because of the writers' linguistic deficiencies or their inability to write concisely and persuasively. And for writers who have deadlines to meet, their writing task becomes even more formidable and stressful because of the need to write effectively within a given time frame. It is important therefore for a writer at all times to have as his target "a crisp and economical style, well suited to its purpose, and therefore good" (Little, 1983:15).

Training in improving writing skills or business communication skills should therefore cater to meet the specific needs as discussed

above and it is against this backdrop that the present study is undertaken.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

Over the years there have been several approaches to discourse analysis of written texts. Early works on discourse analysis concentrated on distributional analysis of syntactic structure and the like. This investigation was essentially based on the sentence, as proposed by Harris (Philips, 1989). Harris held the view that syntax could be established through distributional analysis at the morphemic level. It follows then that the structure of discourse could be understood by a distributional investigation of syntactic structures.

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) however, speak of a hierarchy of levels of organization. They argue that it is not possible to predict from the nature of a syntactic category precisely what its role will be at the level of discourse. A hierarchy of levels is postulated because the categories at each proposed new level of organisation would be made "available for recombination in ways peculiar to the higher level to create new categories which are different in kind" (Philips, 1989:10). The underlying assumption to this approach is that linguistic events, spoken or written, are interactive in nature. Sinclair himself states that "Discourse Analysis is emerging as a body ... that places centrally the interactive aspect of linguistic events" (1980:253). It has also been argued by Tadros whose work was on linguistic prediction in economics text that certain interactive features are "inescapable aspects of the structure of textbooks" and need attention in any investigation of discourse.

The view that the written text is interactive in nature has been adopted by a number of analysts. Sinclair (1981) posits that learners are required to reconstruct that very nature of interaction and can only do so if given an adequate knowledge base of how these interactive features operate within a text. He stresses that interaction is present in written discourse to the extent that there exists two participants – the writer and the reader, who are overtly or covertly engaged in communicating ideas. Sinclair's theory that attempts to bring together both spoken and written discourse is based on the assumption that a piece of language can be described at one and the same time on two lanes of discourse – 'interactive' and 'autonomous'. While the first plane of discourse is concerned with liaisons between

the writer and reader, the latter deals with the recording of experiences.

Other writers, such as Widdowson (1979) and Tadros (1985), support the view that written texts have obvious interactive features that should not be ignored. According to these researchers, the writer assumes both the roles of the addresser and the addressee and incorporates the interaction within the encoding process itself. Interactive features of discourse were also examined by Cooper (1982). Two of these are discussed by Tadros (1985). The first example of interactivity is 'commitment'. Every proposition made in a piece of text is a committed one, unless expressly stated otherwise by the writer. This commitment is accepted by the reader who then makes certain predictions based on this interaction. 'Orientation', the other interactive feature, is discussed in terms of both the message and its reception. The writer is said to orientate the reader towards the rendered message by means of 'Instructing', 'Informing' and 'Reporting'. The reader is oriented towards the reception of the message by the writer through 'Focusing' and 'Glossing' (ibid. 3).

However, research with regard to the interactive nature of written texts has thus far merely attempted to explain the nature of the interactive relationship that exists between the writer and the reader. Tadros (1985: 3) argues that these approaches fail to "deal with the mechanics by which the interaction is produced". Furthermore, no attempt has been made to recommend any precise 'categories' for interaction in discourse. Tadros suggests a hierarchical model which makes precise the notion of interaction and identifies several signals in a written text that interact with the reader using the notion of "prediction". Six categories of prediction which are 'enumeration', 'advance labelling', 'reporting', 'recapitulation', 'hypotheticality' and 'question' were identified in the selected corpus (ibid. 14).

Tadros makes the assumption that the written text is interactive since there is more than one participant, namely, the reader and the writer (ibid: 3). Another assumption that underlies the notion of interactivity in written texts is that the writer is in agreement with the propositions expressed in the text, unless he signals otherwise by using specific devices such as 'reporting', 'hypotheticality' and the other categories suggested by Tadros as described in the preceding paragraph. The notion of prediction thus involves a commitment at one point in the text to the occurrence of another subsequent linguistic event. It is binding

to the extent that the writer is committed to what he has said he would do by the signals he uses. It is by virtue of these signals the writer uses that the reader recognises the commitment made.

Although Tadros offers evidence that texts transcend the mere organization of propositional content, that the writer does not simply present facts and ideas to the reader, but is concerned with what should be understood and accepted, she fails to provide evidence of how a reader may be oriented towards a certain thought expressed by a writer. The nature of the interaction established between the reader and writer has received very little explanation. In her attempt to explain the nature of interaction, she outlined some interactive features that are present in texts which she calls "predictions" of texts that signals that the writer is committing himself to a proposition. The fact that a reader can interact with a text without being overtly cued in has largely been underestimated. Tadros's evidence was furthermore based on a corpus of a full-length Economics text book. This is evidence derived from within an academic setting which is not representative of the business discourse community. To this end, this study aims to study business reports and in particular company profiles written as part of business proposal reports, to elicit information on the notion of "orientation" in such texts and to identify aspects of its interactive features to make precise the notion of interaction for pedagogical purposes.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This is a preliminary study on the notion of "orientation" (Cooper, 1982) as an interactive feature in written business texts. "Orientation" involves two essential aspects of interaction. The first, is the intended "message" and the second is the reaction to it, that is its "reception". In other words, the means by which the writer orientates his reader toward his message and toward the reception of the message are the key considerations of the nature of interactivity under investigation here. However, since the study is merely a preliminary investigation on the notion of "orientation" in business texts, it focuses mainly on how 'adjectives' create interactivity between the writer and reader in business texts. It also aims to suggest some categories for the interaction produced by the adjectives identified in the corpus. In addition, some typical features and patterns of the lexical items under

scrutiny are identified to offer pedagogical insights into the teaching of writing of business texts.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Four 'company profiles' of a foreign-owned IT company (Information Technology) form the corpus of this study. The company profiles are a sub-section of proposals written for the promotion of the company's products. The company deals with computer equipment ranging from PCs to very large mainframes. It has several service centres in Peninsular Malaysia, such as K.L., Pulau Pinang, Johor Bahru and other strategic business centres in the country.

The four 'company profiles' were scanned and a frequency count of all the adjectives used in the texts using computational analysis, was carried out. The corpus yielded a collection of some sixty-four (64) examples of adjectives that were found relevant for this study. For the purpose of this study these adjectives would be referred to as "interactive adjectives". These adjectives retrieved from this corpus were analysed for common characteristics, if any, in terms of semantic patterns. Each "interactive adjective" was studied to see if similarities of semantic patterns in relation to the interactive nature of the adjectives under scrutiny, could be established.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

An initial inspection of the role of the "interactive adjectives" in creating reader orientation reveals that there is more than one pattern inherent in the texts. Three broad categories of "reader-orientation" created by the adjectives are observable in the selected corpus. This classification is of course not entirely exhaustive. Neither can the adjectives identified fall neatly into the suggested categories. There would indeed be some overlap but each example has to be seen in relation to the context in which it is used. In other words, each word has to be analysed in terms of the effect it has on the reader.

The Collins Cobuild English Grammar (1990) identifies two main types of adjectives. "qualitative adjectives" and "classifying adjectives". "Qualitative" adjectives, as defined by the dictionary, identify a quality of someone or something while "classifying" adjectives group words according to the class they belong. "Qualitative" adjectives are gradable, which means that "the person or thing referred to can have more or less of the quality

mentioned" (ibid: 65) and the way you can indicate the amount of that quality someone or something has is by using either submodifiers such as "very" or the comparative or superlative forms. "Classifying" adjectives are not gradable since they merely place a certain word in a class. As such these group of words do not have comparatives or superlatives and are not normally used with submodifiers such as "very" or "rather"

"Classifying" adjectives, as defined by the Collins Cobuild English Grammar, are not investigated in this study and therefore not part of the corpus material in this study. These groups of words merely identify the function of the adjective and therefore are regarded as words that do not interact with the reader. The adjectives that form the corpus of the study are the "qualifying" adjectives (Table 1) – adjectives that orientate a reader toward a particular notion that a writer intends to convey

**Table 1**

|                 |                  |                  |                  |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| firm (29)       | major (8)        | well-known (7)   | full (28)        |
| appropriate (4) | vital (25)       | paramount (15)   | active (18)      |
| unique (3)      | positive (3)     | limited (16)     | fundamental (5)  |
| latest (10)     | proven (19)      | immediate (6)    | only (17)        |
| wide (18)       | highest (27)     | first (19)       | best (28)        |
| greater (22)    | high (24)        | widest (10)      | third (4)        |
| most (20)       | entire (14)      | large (28)       | largest (37)     |
| second (16)     | vigorous (24)    | every (27)       | extensive (13)   |
| great (18)      | almost (17)      | maximum (25)     | significant (22) |
| each (13)       | rapid (26)       |                  |                  |
| advanced (15)   | changing (22)    | flexible (28)    |                  |
| improved (4)    | leading (19)     | adaptable (5)    | proposed (9)     |
| increasing (13) | different (4)    | committed (18)   | booming (6)      |
| specific (3)    | well-managed (3) | decreasing (13)  | continuous (29)  |
| assured (3)     | expanding (25)   | competitive (27) | matured (2)      |
| expert (12)     | expected (7)     | dependable (24)  | dedicated (10)   |
| responsible (9) | responsive (13)  |                  |                  |

The "qualifying" adjectives (adjectives of interaction) in this corpus reveal some variations in the semantic patterns and can broadly be categorised under three main categories. The three categories of reader orientation observable in the corpus are:

|              |                     |
|--------------|---------------------|
| Category I   | Emphasis            |
| Category II  | - Degree and extent |
| Category III | - Value-judgement   |

### **CATEGORY I**

The first category of orientation is that created by adjectives that indicate "emphasis". Quirk et al (1985: 447) classify some adjectives as 'emphasisers' and see them as different of degree because they "add to the force" of the word modified. Adjectives have been classified as adjectives of "emphasis" in this study, based on two important criteria. The first is where the structure has the identified node which demands either a singular or plural noun that it emphasises, followed by a prepositional or linking device. For example, the adjective "firm" followed by the noun "supporter", as in the lexical structure. "ABC Co. is a firm supporter of .." The second criteria is where the writer makes a non-detached proposition which not only emphasises his point but requires a commitment from him to offer evidence for the point made, as in this citation

"ABC currently employs over 100 people in Malaysia and is a very *firm supporter* of the NEP (National Economic Policy). Our customers number over 100, among whom are *well-known* names such as. Dewan Bandaraya, Universiti Utara Malaysia, and ITM. " (company profile, 4:1)

The two adjectives (firm and well-known) in the citation given above satisfy the criteria given to qualify as adjectives of "emphasis". The adjective "firm" for instance indicates the strength of company's support of the NEP. The writer then provides evidence of this by enumerating the names of local companies and institutions which provide evidence of the company's adherence to the policy. The adjective "well-known" also qualifies as an adjective of "emphasis" as the names of the firms and institutions mentioned as the company's customers are indeed "well-known" to most Malaysians and especially to readers of this particular kind of document.

Adjectives of "emphasis" found in the data are listed in the table below. (Frequency counts are given within parentheses)

*Notion of Reader Orientation*

Table 2

|                 |              |                |                 |
|-----------------|--------------|----------------|-----------------|
| firm (29)       | major (8)    | well-known (7) | full (28)       |
| appropriate (4) | vital (25)   | paramount (15) | active (18)     |
| unique (8)      | positive (3) | limited (16)   | fundamental (5) |
| latest (10)     | proven (19)  | immediate (6)  | only (17)       |

Below are further citations of adjectives of "emphasis" identified in the corpus.

1. ABC's customers in Malaysia are users of the full range of ABC equipment from PCs to very large mainframes.
2. ABC's headquarters are located in London, England. Its principal manufacturing and development centres are in Europe and the USA.
3. With R&D expenditure of R\$215 million in 1990, we are a major contributor to Europe's technological base and our research and development and manufacturing facilities are among the most advanced in Europe.
4. In 1986, ABC embarked on its quality programmes by putting a continuous improvement process into practice across the whole company, one not limited to the manufacturing function

Looking at the above sentences, we find that the writer has orientated the reader towards his message through his own evaluation of his proposition. The writer then gives authenticity to his proposition by providing evidence. The reader, therefore, is not required to evaluate because the evaluation has been done. Neither is the reader required to predict any information because the information given is authenticated by the writer himself. More importantly, one needs to look at the overall effect these adjectives of "emphasis" have on the intended reader. The desired effect the writer wishes to have through the use of these adjectives are twofold. Firstly, the writer wishes to convince the reader about the strength of the company's involvement in or commitment to this particular business activity, as seen in the use of words such as "firm", "only", "active", etc. Secondly, the writer wishes to convince the reader that the company is a major player in the world of computers, showing that they do not have a "limited" but "full-range" of products that they are dealing in.

**CATEGORY II**

The second category of orientation is the notion of degree. To a large extent these words are gradable and can take on either the comparative or superlative form. The criterion used to classify adjectives of degree is that of the personal commitment the writer has to his ideas. He does not detach himself from the proposition expressed. In fact he makes his assertions based either on facts or his own assessment of the propositions made. The following table lists the adjectives of degree or extent identified in the corpus.

**Table 3**

|                  |              |             |               |              |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| wide (18)        | highest (27) | first (19)  | best (28)     | greater (22) |
| high (24)        | widest (10)  | third (4)   | most (20)     | entire (14)  |
| large (28)       | largest (37) | second (16) | vigorous (24) | every (27)   |
| extensive (13)   | great (18)   | almost (17) | maximum (25)  |              |
| significant (22) | each (13)    | rapid (26)  |               |              |

The adjectives of degree can either be exact such as 'first', 'third', 'second', 'every' or inexact, such as 'a large number', 'extensive', 'almost', 'wide'. They can also take a superlative form as in 'largest', 'widest', 'highest'. Below are some citations from the corpus which illustrate "reader orientation"

**Table 4**

- a. ABC's customers in Malaysia are users of the full range of ABC equipment from PCs to very large mainframes. More than 30 DR5600s and DS3000s, our flagship UNIX systems, are now installed in Malaysia since June 1990.
- b. ABC has hardware service agreements with third party service organisations to service ABC clients throughout the country. This ensures nation-wide coverage of ABC installed sites in Malaysia.
- c. We have been honoured in 1990 with the award of the NCC gold medal, one of the highest awards offered in the training world.
- d. These are derived from our strategy of focussing on specialist markets, a policy of acquisition and joint ventures value-adding partners, a total open systems approach together with vigorous growth of our service business...
- e. ...we are the third largest supplier of information systems.
- f. ...we are the first information technology company in the world to offer open systems on our entire range of processing systems from personal computers main frame servers.

In the examples cited above, each of the adjectives denote some degree either exact or inexact. In (a) above, the adjective 'large' modifies the noun 'mainframes', but it orientates the reader by assuming the reader has some knowledge about computers. The use of the word 'large' in this context informs the reader that the company deals in powerful high-end computers. Further evidence provided by the writer, such as the naming of the computer system, 'Unix' merely confirms the use of the word "high-powered" computers.

Similarly in (h), the reader is orientated towards the writer's message by the use of the word "nation-wide" This gives the extent of the "coverage" and therefore falls within the category of adjectives of degree. Here again, the collocate "nation" assumes that the reader accepts the writer's view that the coverage is indeed 'wide' The writer merely glosses over these propositions by shifting his ideas onto the reader. The onus is not on the writer to confirm his propositions, but as in examples (d) to (f) above, is on the reader who might have two options to consider. First, the reader could accept the proposition as fact. The other option is for the reader to validate the proposition by confirming it with another source. Most often, however, these propositions are taken as facts presented by the writer based on the assumption that the writer would have authenticated his facts before making the assertions. Thus the use of these words within the context mentioned have subtle orientations on the reader.

### CATEGORY III

This final category of orientation is that rendered by a group of adjectives that offer are essential for this. The first is that the writer makes a preemptive quality judgement of the proposition put forth by him. The reader is therefore orientated towards his message because the reader has to rely on the judgement rendered by the writer, as in 'flexible management', 'well-managed company', 'high-value business', etc. The writer has qualified his ideas and has therefore preempted the reader in making judgements in relation to the proposition made. The second criterion is that the writer does not specifically detach himself from the ideas presented. In fact there is a qualitative judgement embedded in the proposition expressed without a need to provide evidence about the stand taken.

The qualifiers are of three types. The first is the set of adjectives that describe a state of change or process. Most of these adjectives end with a group of adjectives that are active and not static in nature. For example, adjectives like 'a changing market', 'the leading technological company', 'booming business', 'declining/increasing profits', 'expanding', etc.

The second type is the group of adjectives that are formed from verbs, such as 'improved', 'proposed', 'established', 'advanced', etc. The third type is the group of adjectives that are also formed from adjectives but do not end with an "-ed". They can also be formed from nouns. They also reveal that they are dynamic and active in nature. Most of these words normally are preceded by submodifiers to emphasise the adjective, such as 'readily adaptable', 'most flexible', 'very successful', 'quite consistent', 'very strong', 'most active', etc.

Here is a list of adjectives that orientate the reader by offering value-judgements.  
(The frequency is given within parentheses)

**Table 5**

|                  |                 |                  |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| advanced (15)    | changing        | flexible (28)    |
| improved (4)     | leading (19)    | adaptable (5)    |
| proposed (9)     | increasing (13) | different (4)    |
| committed (18)   | booming (6)     | specific (3)     |
| well-managed (3) | decreasing (13) | continuous (29)  |
| assured (3)      | expanding (25)  | competitive (27) |
| matured (2)      |                 | expert (12)      |
| expected (7)     |                 | dependable (24)  |
| dedicated (10)   |                 | responsible (9)  |
|                  |                 | responsive (13)  |

### Notion of Reader Orientation

Each of the following sentences demonstrates the points mentioned above

Table 6

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- a. Our focus on vertical industries and dedicated locally concentrated resources combine to give us maximum flexibility in our ability to meet changing market requirements.
  - b. Our TQM programme aims to create a company culture in which customer care and continuous improvement are of paramount importance.
  - c. Completion of the merger of ABC and Nokia Data, the leading information technology company in Scandinavia... formation of Sorbus joint venture company with Bell Atlantic Business Systems INC. of the USA to provide total managed services in western Europe.
  - d. In February 1991, ABC acquired a &%% shareholding in CFM, a leading facilities management company.
  - e. Both plants make extensive use of just-in-time and flexible manufacturing techniques which help to raise the company's competitiveness and make it more responsive to market needs. ABC's advanced manufacturing facilities, particularly at Ashton, have been recognised through a number of awards.
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### CONCLUSION

This preliminary study has demonstrated that the writer, in presenting his facts and ideas to his reader, tries to orientate the reader towards understanding and accepting his points of view. The writer does this by informing through persuasive arguments and in turn winning the reader to his side. To note of course, is that this study focussed on the use of adjectives by the writer to achieve the goal of reader orientation. Further studies should be carried out to provide ample evidence of how writers persuade, cajole and convince readers. Research can be further based on other interactive lexical items, such as adverbs, verbs etc., that orientate the reader in written texts. This study focusses mainly on the use of adjectives in business texts at a textual level only. Further research needs to be directed towards analysing the social impact these words have on the reader and the business community as a whole.

The notion of reader orientation also has some pedagogical significance and potential. It is important for any language teaching programmes, especially writing programmes, to develop in their learners the skills of orientation that would help both their

reading and writing. Many writers simply present their facts and ideas without knowing how to exploit the interactive features of texts. They fail to argue convincingly simply because they are unable to distinguish between what a writer feels and thinks and what he says to win others to his side, when making propositions. Although this study looks at only one section of business proposals, mainly 'company profiles', the evidence gathered signals the importance of making learners aware of the interactive features of texts and the notion of "orientation" in texts. Further research should be carried out on other business texts, such as progress reports, feasibility studies and the like to offer greater insights into this area for learners to use in their own reading and writing tasks.

With computer analysis of texts, the study of language behaviour has become more feasible, where large texts can be studied for its distinctive features. It opens the door to a study of real language in use, where instances of use are not based on intuition but on the availability of objective evidence

These findings have interesting implications and potentially important applications. It is imperative, however, to ascertain how genre specific these findings are and to what extent these suggested features throw light on the notion of interactive lexis in the target genres. It is also necessary to study in detail the nature of the interactive relationship of the lexical items identified and to what extent this analysis of texts contribute towards the facilitation of writing for specific purposes. Traditionally, linguistic investigation has been limited to short texts and what individuals themselves can experience and remember. However, with the advent of the computer and the provision of effective software for text analysis, large quantities of data can now be systematically processed. The examination of large texts corpora presents a quality of evidence once not available. The evidence compiled objectively from large text corpora is huge and reliable and provides instances that can be offered as genuine instances of language in use (Sinclair, 1991). Any instance of language in use should be represented in its surrounding context. Examples must be viewed within its textual 'naturalness', in other words, care must be exercised not to present as an instance of a language in use, "some combination of words which cannot be attested in usage" (Sinclair 6)

Finally, it would be interesting to replicate the present investigation on other genres to find out whether the categories

of "orientation" based on this study of adjectives are generally applicable.

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