

SENTENCED TO WRITE
A Survey of Attitudes to Written Discourse Styles
in Manufacturing & Construction Industries

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1. The Study

This paper reports on a study which investigates and analyses some of the features of written language favoured by managers in a group of construction and manufacturing companies in the U.K. The study takes a critical linguistic perspective, drawing on work in Britain (Clark et al 1987; Fairclough 1989; Fairclough & Ivanic 1989; Ivanic 1988, 1989) and in Australia (Fowler et al. 1979; Kress 1982; Martin 1989). It arose from practical problems encountered on workplace written communications programs for trainee managers. Program trainers consistently found that the language features they encouraged in their programs appeared to be at odds with those favoured in reports by trainees and middle management.

The methodology used is semi-ethnographic and the findings are therefore more qualitative than quantitative, giving insights into discourse patterns in industry rather than constructing generalisable rules. Below I will briefly cover the sociolinguistic perspective taken before discussing in more detail the language features investigated, the methodology and findings of the study.

2. The Sociolinguistic Perspective

Mainstream linguistics has not always taken full account of the central place of social context in the production and interpretation of language. From the perspective of critical linguists, the distinction made by Saussure, between “langue” (a code which exists prior to language use) and “parole” (language use) has underwritten a fundamental misconception about how language works, implying an ideal, neutral system which is simply operated in the appropriate circumstances by an individual.

In this study I will argue that this misconception also underwrites much of the advice on writing customarily given on business communications courses and, in part, explains resistance to this training.

2.1 Language as social practice

Language and society are inextricable and mutually reinforcing (Fowler & Kress 1979:185). From a critical linguistics perspective, sociolinguistic analysis should go beyond description and discussion of a linguistic and communicative competence viewed only in terms of “appropriacy” to context, to investigate the institutions and social structures which impose those “appropriate” discourse styles on the individual. These analyses will expose the power relations operating in society as they are maintained through language and can then be used to increase awareness among practitioners in a wide variety of settings. (For details of some of these applications see Fairclough 1989.) Some critical linguists maintain that individuals have little room for creativity in the way they use language, so great is the mutually reinforcing link between language and society: “The rightness of the syntactic and lexical choice for the particular meaning is a gift of the writer’s society, not a creation of his own.” (Fowler & Kress 1979:194). Others are less deterministic. Fairclough (1989:1) argues that individuals may use the discourse conventions of society either normatively (by complying) or creatively (by not complying completely). (Fairclough 1989:1). Individuals who are aware of the way power relations work through language can therefore be in a position to be creative with or change discourse conventions and thus the forces in society which have shaped them.

Since language users are both “creators” of discourse and “created” to the extent that discourse is imposed by the culture within which they are operating, language use is “not just a matter of performing tasks, it is also a matter of expressing and constituting and reproducing social identities and social relations.” (Fairclough 1989:237). The view of language which emerges is less of a code in which a definite and separate “something” is encoded, and more of “a meaning which exists in a vague, non- or pre- linguistic form being expressed through the “meaning potential” of a given language.” (Kress 1982:5). Learning how to write, therefore, becomes almost learning what is “writable”. This obviously has important implications for professional communications trainers whose own “culture” is often that of a humanities background involved in writing training in industries rooted in other more scientific “cultures”.

In this view, ideology, in its broadest sense of systems of thought, is contained integrally and used automatically and subconsciously in language. People’s world view “is facilitated and confirmed for them by a language use which has society’s ideological impress.” (Fowler & Kress 1979:185).

An interesting concept here is Fairclough’s (1989:8) “common sense”. The assumptions that an individual brings to the production or interpretation of a spoken or written text are “taken for granted”. These unexamined assumptions constitute an “invisible” aspect of ideology which is all the more powerful for being unrecognised. Any type of discourse is not “natural” in a situation, but has been “naturalised” to become so much a part of normal life that we no longer question its basis.

Critical linguistic analysis seeks to expose this “common sense” aspect of language use to increase awareness of whose discourse styles have been “naturalised”, why these discourse styles are considered appropriate and how the power relations that lie behind them are being maintained through language. (Fairclough 1989:8).

Since discourse styles codify knowledge within a society and organise how information is communicated to others, then learning them involves socialisation into the structures and value systems of society. Although these may only be weakly implicit in each discourse style, nevertheless, taken as a whole they exert a powerful influence. It follows, then, that the teaching of style in writing has the potential to either perpetuate the status quo and thus constrain what is written, or to encourage a critical look at the way in which how something is written affects the whole content of what we are communicating.

One danger, according to Kress (1982:125), is that the effective teaching of discourse style may lead to its intuitive and unreflective use, and then it will then dominate the user. This study attempts to address some of the dilemmas facing language trainers: what are the writing styles appropriate to the company, why are they considered appropriate, and how far should communications trainers go in socialising their trainees into these styles?

2.2 The corporation as a linguistic community

In any society, language is one of the mechanisms which binds and demarcates. It is a means of “achieving co- ordination and commonality of practice in respect of knowledge and beliefs, social relationships and social identities” (Fairclough 1982:75). Different organisations and groupings within society can be considered as linguistic communities to the extent that different ways of writing and speaking are fostered by them.

The metaphor of an organisation as a culture has been current in business theory for some time and has been argued in the field of linguistics more recently (see Harrison 1987). Both critical approaches to linguistics and writers in the new rhetoric stress the social construction of reality (see Harrison 1987), and reject the classical notion of an objective reality

maintaining that knowledge is, at least in part, constructed by the community. One such community is the culture of an organisation.

Organisations have more than simply a work ethos; as a culture they can develop discourse patterns which reflect and reinforce their way of viewing and operating in the world. They are communities of thought “that can establish standards for determining what counts as knowledge and thus define reality for their participants” (Harrison 1987:8). The conventional forms of technical and business writing used within them provide cognitive “frames” that readers can use to process the information within them. They will also form the basis for decisions and action (see Van Dijk 1980).

Morgan believes that organisations seek to encourage the myth of rationality: “a comprehensive frame of reference, or structure of belief, through which we can make day to day experience intelligible” (Morgan 1986:134). Such a framework helps managers to see certain patterns of action as normal, and this helps them to avoid the wrangling and uncertainty that would result if they were to acknowledge the “basic uncertainty and ambiguity” (Morgan 1986:134) which underlie many of their values and actions. We would therefore expect these values to be expressed and reinforced through the discourse fostered in the organisation.

In her study of writing in organisational contexts Harrison found: “meanings that reduce uncertainty and enable the organization to achieve goals are likely to be retained by the organisation” (Harrison 1987:12).

Since language plays an important role in communicating the key ideas, values and beliefs which guide action, the discourse of a company will therefore, in Fowler & Kress’s terms, reveal its “ideological impress” (Fowler & Kress 1979:185). In this study I wanted to investigate the meaning systems being perpetuated in the language features preferred by managers and consider the implications for writing training.

3. The Language advocated on Report-writing Courses

On in-service communications courses in the group of companies in this study, the following advice is given on writing “style”, that is, of discourse features below the level of the sentence:

trainees should use the active voice with personal agents wherever possible, they should chose uncomplicated lexicon, concrete nouns in preference to abstractions and use main verbs to carry meaning rather than densely packed noun-phrases.

These general principles were routinely advocated on writing programs in the companies and had been drawn over the years from numerous business communications manuals. Those I surveyed for this study (see Bibliography 2), agree broadly on their approach to the language features described above, but show considerable variety in their motivation and intended audience. Some advocate a simple, albeit still rather literary, English, arguing that a writer observing these principles will achieve greater clarity and keep closer to the intended message (Gowers 1986). Others specifically address the task of writing in scientific disciplines (Kirkman 1980) or commercial settings (Joseph 1981). Significantly, however, the view of language projected is that of an empty vehicle which must convey content with clarity:

‘ABOVE ALL REMEMBER: Language is just a transport system for ideas - nothing more - a means to an end, not an end in itself... Your purpose is to convey to your reader as much information as possible, as clearly and accurately as possible. That is the only reason you write. It is the only reason cultures create language’

(Joseph 1981:2)

In contrast, the publications of the Progressive Literacy Group, who, along with other groups, campaign for the use of plain English in official documents, also link discourse patterns to patterns of thought and control (Progressive Literacy Group 1986:12). However, the in-house writing training in the companies involved in my study did not have this radical perspective.

As we shall see below, the data of this study indicate that this advice does conflict with the expectations managers have for reports written in the companies investigated. In the following sections I will outline the methodology used to collect and analyse the data and discuss why such advice should be resisted by writers on in-house writing programs.

4. The Study

4.1 Method

A questionnaire¹ was used to collect data from a total of 21 managers selected from higher and middle management (see Appendix 3 for details) in the companies involved in the study.² Of the 14 higher level managers contacted, 12 responded; 7 out of the 7 middle managers contacted responded. The 6 communications trainers in the companies were also approached: 4 of the 6 responded. The questionnaires were administered by post. I also interviewed two managers, one who had completed the questionnaire and one who had not.

4.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed in 3 sections to elicit both free comment on writing in the company and to focus on the features under investigation. These features were identified in a preliminary unpublished study undertaken during in-house communications courses in the companies. They represent areas of apparent conflict between the advice commonly given on such courses and anecdotal reports of writing styles preferred by managers. I list them below:

- the passive
- impersonal constructions
- nominalisations as main meaning-bearers dense and complex noun phrases
- formal vocabulary
- abstract nouns.

In the first section I invited free comment on what writing style respondents felt was effective in a report at work. In the second section I offered respondents two texts, one constructed according to the principles offered on in-service writing programs (a), and one constructed using the sentence level features listed above (b) (see Appendix 2). In the third section I invited comment on specific statements relating to report-writing.

Great care was taken in the second section that the two passages cover the same content as far as possible. They were introduced as extracts from a report on a fire, and respondents were invited to think about the language used in each, to make any modifications they liked and to

¹ I decided against a purely ethnographic approach for practical reasons. From past experience in the companies I knew that managers were unlikely to respond to a request for samples of writing because they deeply suspicious and possibly rather defensive of their writing. Their reports were also often confidential. I also had also found managers reluctant to comment on writing in an abstract way: this is not something that people other than teachers and researchers feel confident to do. In addition, I was interested in their reactions to specific the language features advocated in training courses. I therefore decided on a questionnaire as a compromise between free solicitation of data inviting response to specific items (see Appendix 1).

² The companies were part of a large construction and manufacturing group based in the north-west of England.

comment on what they like or disliked about any sentence or section. They were then asked to say which extract they would prefer to see in such a report and indicate why. The intention was to use the texts as a springboard to help respondents unused to metalinguistic comment to discuss the language they liked or did not like to see in reports, and examine the reasons for this preference.

4.3 Discussion of data

In studies of this kind it is difficult to separate data from discussion since the very process of selecting the data for presentation implies some organisation on the part of the researcher. I shall therefore include analysis and discussion of the questionnaire and data together.³

5. Managers' Preferences and Comments

From figure 3 it is clear that the majority of managers preferred text (b). Of a total of 19 managers who expressed a preference, only 3 preferred (a), one in each of the three groups. Of the trainers, however, 4 out of 6 preferred (a), although one of these had reservations.

Below, I shall use the managers' comments on the questionnaire to outline some of the reasons why they prefer one text over the other. From all sections of the questionnaire I shall develop a broader picture of the language features or "style" they prefer to see in reports and consider some of the reasons for this preference. I shall conclude with some implications for workplace-based writing programs.

Six of the 16 managers who preferred (b) also felt that it could be improved and the modifications they suggested will be used to build up a picture of the language features they favour.

In figures 1-5 (Appendix 1) I tabulate the respondents' negative and positive comments on the two texts as a whole. Figure 2 illustrates the opinions of those 3 managers who preferred (a), figures 3 and 4 give the comments of managers in construction and in manufacturing respectively, and figure 5 shows the comments of company trainers. From these comments we can see several interesting trends which I will outline below under the headings of *Flow and structure*, *Content*, and *Impression of competence*. These trends will then be investigated in greater detail later in section 5 *Preferred Language Features*.

5.1 Flow and structure

Several managers did not think that (a) read very smoothly. They used words like "disjointed" or "clumsy". There seems to be an impression of rambling" or "story-telling". It seemed "vague" and this caused some readers to have to re-read and "waste" time.

One manager expressed a similar feeling that text (a) had "too many words" in (a). In fact, (a) contains fewer words (148 words as opposed to 171 in (b)). One manager said he preferred (b) because it had better structure and clearer, shorter sentences. In fact (b) does have 2 more sentences than (a) which gives an average of 21.37 words per sentence for (b) as opposed to an average of 24.6 for (a). It has the shortest sentence (9 words), but also the longest (38). The sentences were designed to contain roughly parallel information in the same order. If we examine the texts sentence by corresponding sentence (or sentences in the case of the extra 2 in (b)), we find that they are longer in (a) only 50% of the time. In other words, although (a) seemed rambling to several managers, the actual difference in terms of sentence length and number of words is not significant. However, the *perceived* difference is.

³ Various complex factors which affect the interpretation of data collected in studies of this kind, including the nature of a questionnaire, the size of the sample, the relationship of the researcher and the respondent, and the difficulty of using language to talk about language (see Yates 1990).

One reason for this perception could be the percentage of content-bearing words in each clause. There is no significant difference between the % of lexical and grammatical words in each text (see figure 6 - Appendix 1). However, if we look at the number of high-frequency and the number of low-frequency words per clause in each text, (where words are intuitively assigned as either high or low frequency according to their frequency with which they appear in everyday spoken English) we see a greater difference. Passage (b) not only has more words and fewer clauses, but also almost twice as many low-frequency lexical words per clause than (a).

The implication here is that managers seem to find clauses of high lexical density more organised, shorter and easier to read. The majority of trainers, on the other hand, seemed to feel that the use of these words made text (a) easier to understand. I shall return to this preference under the heading *Intricacy and lexical density* below.

5.2 Content

Six managers in the study reported that (b) contained more information than (a). In fact, (b) does contain one additional detail (that the tiles were PVC-backed), but only two managers mentioned this. Rather, the feeling seemed to be more generally related to comments such as “(a) doesn’t establish responsibility”, is “sloppy reporting” which contrast with comments on (b) such as “technically descriptive” and “more technical terms and content”. I shall discuss some of the reasons why (a) seems to be less informative under *Perceptions of content and the noun phrase* below.

5.3 Impression of competence

An apparently related impression is that the writer of (b) is more “competent”. Comments on (a) such as “amateurish”, “rambling” and “Readers’ Digesty” give the impression that the discourse of (a) would not inspire confidence at work. One manager reported (b) as “better English”, another preferred its technical flavour, a third found that (a) “creates the impression that the writer was not competent.” To summarise, in my study managers seem to find that the passage written in a lexically dense, highly nominalised and more formal way (see section 6) signals clarity and competence to them. They mostly reject the more “popular” alternative in (a) as unclear, and signalling not only a lack of organisation but also a lack of ability, while at the same time professing to like “simple, straightforward language” or “plain English”, and advising report writers to “call a spade a spade” and to “avoid jargon and unusual-sounding words”.

Clearly, to return to the aim of the study, what was plain English for the managers was not the same plain English advocated by the report-writing manuals discussed above.

One of the managers explicitly stated why a formal style should be used in reports: “(reports) should appear to be written from an unbiased, factual viewpoint which comes over better when written in a formal manner.” He seems to be arguing that a certain style promotes a certain attitude to reality, If we take the view that the relationship between discourse patterns and linguistic communities is mutually re-enforcing (see above), then this manager is also arguing for a certain view of reality. From a critical linguistic perspective we need to ask why these sentence level forms have become “naturalised” (Fairclough 1989:9 1) as appropriate for reports.

In sections 6 and 7 I will analyse in greater detail the language features that managers appear to favour, before discussing the wider social motivations for these preferences in section 8.

6. Preferred Language Features

The language features under investigation which I included in text (b) were the passive, impersonal constructions, dense and complex noun phrases, nominalisations as main meaning-bearers and the use of formal vocabulary and abstract nouns.

These are interdependent and therefore difficult to consider in isolation. The passive encourages impersonality and nominalisation which means fewer active, content-bearing verbs. Abstract nouns and non-finite verb forms are part of the tendency towards investing meaning in nouns, and all this encourages complex noun phrases. However, the managers' comments and reworkings of the two texts reveal something of their views on each of the above.

6.1 The Passive

As you will see from figure 7 (Appendix 1), 94.11% of finite verbs are in the active voice in (a), whereas 42.85% are active in (b). By choosing (b) in preference to (a), managers are therefore choosing a discourse pattern high in passives. This bias is also evident in their alterations to the texts. Five converted some of the active verbs in (a) to passive verbs while only one manager amended (b) to include some active verbs.

6.2 The Impersonal

Seven managers specifically commented that they disliked the use of personal pronouns in (a). Responses to section 3, reveal that 10 managers support the use of personal pronouns in certain types of report, 2 felt they were inappropriate in the texts supplied and 1 supports their use only in recommendations sections of reports. Five think that they should never be used in reports.

Only 1 manager objected to the use of the dummy subject to avoid personal pronouns in (b): "it was decided that". He did not comment on the other uses of the passive which avoid the use of the personal pronouns, and he preferred (b) overall "If a more formal style is thought appropriate".

Thus of those who commented at all on the use of the impersonal or personal approaches in the passages, most preferred the impersonal.

In an interview one manager explained this preference: he felt that pronoun use focussed too much on the individual so that it seemed that the people who did the research were "blowing their own trumpet". This feeling seems to be the result of the thematic structure of the clauses in (a) which more closely resembles that of speech than does the clause structure of (b). In speech the Theme is most typically a pronoun whereas in writing this is more typically a nominal element (Halliday 1985b:73). The manager did not accept this structure in technical reports.

6.3 Dense and complex noun phrases, and using nouns in preference to verbs

Their comments on the texts and their overall preference for (b) indicate that the managers favour the use of noun phrases. Four managers disliked the italicised section of the opening phrase of (b): "Prior to the initiation of the investigation". One preferred "on commencement" to "prior to". However, these objections seem to be to the particular noun phrase used rather than to the fact that it was a noun phrase.

As far as amending (a) is concerned, three replaced the simple, high-frequency time clause "before we started" with a more formal version using "prior"; one also substituted a non-finite clause "prior to starting". These changes involve replacing an active main verb with a noun phrase. From their preference for (b) with its many passives and investment in noun phrases, and from their alterations I conclude that managers like to see information conveyed through noun phrases.

6.4 Perceptions of content and the Noun Phrase

As we saw above, managers seemed to find text (a) less clear and less informative than text (b), although (a) follows more nearly the advice given by manuals in report writing.

One manager felt that (b) “explains why steps were taken and conclusions drawn”. He feels that paragraph 3 “gives more reasons why the large-scale test was done.” This indicates that he found that the explanation in (b) was more like an explanation than that in (a). Compare: (b) “a considerable increase in the spread-rate of the fire was observed. It was therefore decided...” and (a) “the fire spread rapidly. We therefore decided...”

Both texts relate how large-scale tests are undertaken because the test described in paragraph 3 showed that the fire spread more quickly than in the tests in paragraph 2. However, in (a) the idea of comparison, that “rapidly” marks a change in the behaviour of the fire, comes from the contrast with “burn slowly” in the last sentence of paragraph two, i.e. it is spread out over two sentences. In (b) this comparison is expressed in a single noun phrase: “a considerable increase”.

Other comments supported this idea that (a) somehow contained less information than (b). Two other managers specifically stated that (b) offered more explanations than (a). One wrote that Text (b) “gives reasons for why test at Cardington was necessary”, (by implication (a) did not). The other commented as follows on paragraph 3: “To the technical trained person the tests are beginning to offer reasons why the burning is being accelerated.” These comments appear to support the idea that “a considerable increase in the spread-rate of the fire” is more “informative” than the parallel section of (a). Another claimed (b) had “more technical terms and content.” Yet another criticised (a) for not establishing responsibility.

Similarly, two managers felt that text (b) “tells more about how materials were tested”. This could perhaps be because the information that materials were tested “in isolation and in combination” was not presented in a dense noun phrase in (a) the way it is in (b). In text (a) this information is conveyed in the word “individual” (2) which contrasts implicitly with the information about the test described in the third paragraph. In other words, it is spread across sentences rather than compressed into a noun phrase.

Four managers found that “No material” in (a) (paragraph 2) was not informative enough, but felt the need to add “individual” or “tested”. This seems to indicate that “individual” in the previous sentence did not signal this information clearly enough to them. However, in (b) this information is given in the post-modification of material: “tested in isolation”. The complex noun phrase that this produces was not criticised by any respondent. (Managers seem to find information expressed through noun phrases more acceptable than the same information expressed over several clauses.)

Although some managers felt that (b) is more informative than (a), none noticed that there is a clear a difference in meaning between the two texts in the first sentence of the third paragraph. In (a) the seat is lighted before it is placed against the wall; in (b) this is done after it is in position.

At one point (a) actually contains more detail than (b). While (b) uses generalities to explain that individual materials did not cause the fire to spread so quickly, (a) is more specific. Compare “No material., behaved in a way that could have been the cause of the...” with (a), “No material ignited quickly enough or burned fiercely enough to have caused...”. Again, no respondent noticed this.

Since each passage contains similar information in virtually the same order in each paragraph it would seem that the impression that (a) does not contain as much information as (b) has

more to do with the way the information is expressed through syntax and with the readers' perception, than the actual content of the passages.⁴

This is compatible with the critical linguistics view that syntax carries meaning and that reading is an active reconstruction of reality.

6.5 Intricacy and lexical density

According to Halliday, written language is characterised by lexical density, that is by packing information into noun phrases. Spoken language, on the other hand, is lexically sparse but intricate in that it expresses more content in verb groups. These have to be organised into clause structures. Thus he argues that writing has more complex noun phrases and speech has more complex clause structure. (Halliday 1985b:61-82).

Passage (b), as we saw in section 5 (and figure 6), shows a density of 4.2 low frequency words per clause, compared to a density of 2.35 for similar words in text (a). As you will see from figures 7 and 8 (Appendix 1), not only are there more active, finite verbs in (a) than (b), but these are also much higher in lexical content than the verb groups in (b).

Although it is not straightforward to decide exactly which words are "high" or "low" in lexical content, it is nevertheless striking that so many of the verb groups in (b) are what Kirkman calls "colourless general purpose verbs" (Kirkman 1980:42). These do not bear the main lexical content of the message but come, instead, with abstract nouns onto which the focus and message of the text is thrown. Consider, for example, "slow combustion did take place" (5) from (b). Here the content comes mainly in the nominalisation "combustion" rather than "take place". Compare this with the parallel section of (a): "burned slowly". Thus when verbs of low lexical content are chosen, much of the meaning of a text is carried by the noun groups.

Text (a) has more clauses, more high content verb groups and fewer words overall. Text (b) has fewer clauses and these contain verb groups which are mostly low in content. The message is therefore largely carried by the noun groups. This corresponds to Halliday's distinction between texts which are intricate (a) or lexically dense (b). Of course, these are positions on a spectrum: (a) is not a spoken text, but it exhibits more characteristics of the "spoken" end of the spectrum, while (b) is closer to the other extreme of lexically dense, written language.

So managers seem to prefer discourse patterns with content carried in dense and complex noun phrases rather than in lexically sparse clause arrangements. This may be partially because of the pressures in English towards nominalisation "in order to exploit the full potential of the language for mapping any transitivity structure - any configuration of process, participants, and circumstances - on to any desired message structure." (Halliday 1985b:75). Other aspects of the relationship between discourse and society will be discussed later under section 7 *The hidden meanings*.

6.6 Formal vocabulary

Text (b) has more formal vocabulary than (a). This comes partially as a consequence of the other features of (b), as we saw above. Since most managers preferred (b), it seems reasonable to assume that they approved of the lexical choices on the whole. This general tendency was corroborated by responses to section three.

⁴ It should be noted that in a study with a sample of this size I was unable to control for the effect of presenting the texts in a particular order. Future research on a larger scale should take this effect into account.

6.7 Overall picture of preferred sentence-level features

The overall impression from reading managers comments was that the sentence-level features of (b) were on the whole acceptable provided that the report was structured into sections.

This general preference was reinforced in the samples of writing that two construction managers sent to me: one was a re-working of my passage (a)/(b) and the other was an actual report. These showed many of the features I was investigating.

The “real” report contained long noun phrases (e.g. the upper deck is constructed of *insitu reinforced concrete through slab supported via shallow beams on 250 square insitu concrete columns*). Nouns were used to carry meaning rather than verbs (e.g. *slight water penetration is taking place*). Out of 55 verb groups, 26 were passive.

The other sample of report writing, the re-working of the passages, involved a change of structure and lay-out (headings, sections and numbered listings), but was written using the sentence level language features characteristic of passage (b).

The two interviews with managers from the manufacturing sector also confirmed a basic preference for these language features. When asked which versions of various sentences they preferred to see in the reports, the two managers I interviewed consistently chose the passive version over the active, the impersonal over the personal and the use of a noun to bear meaning rather than a verb.

Despite the advice of writing manuals managers in these companies seem to find reports written in the style of passage (b) (that is using the passive, impersonal constructions and heavy nominalisation with formal, abstract lexis) clearer, easier to read and more informative. This discourse style inspires confidence and is more easily believed. Some of the reasons for this - message structure and the tendency of written language in general towards nominalisation - have been mentioned above. In the next section I will discuss some of the other reasons why these features might be valued in reports of this kind, and will go on to consider some of the wider social context which encourages and maintains these managers in their preferences.

7. The Hidden Meanings

As we have seen above, the features favoured by the managers fall towards the “written” extreme of what Halliday calls the continuum spoken-written, from high lexical density and investment in nouns to a lexically sparse pattern in which verbs carry more of the meaning (see Halliday 1985b: chapters; Martin 1989: chapter 3).

Such features are often typically characteristic of “scientific language”. I will discuss some of the reasons why this discourse style has become “naturalised” (Fairclough 1989:8) under the headings of *Hiding relations*, *Objectifying*, *Synopsis rather than process*, and *Science and rationality*.

7.1 Hiding relations

7.1.1 The Noun Group

A dense noun group derives from an underlying clause: it is a kind of short-hand for a longer stretch of language in which the relations between the items is more clearly shown. Thus in text (b) we have:

“an ignited, damaged seat” (= we damaged a seat and then lit it)

We do not, however, know who lit or damaged the seat or why. The agents, the time and the reason why things are done are obscured. Attitudes to actions are not exposed.

Similarly when adjectives are incorporated into noun phrases rather than used predicatively they are more difficult to challenge. The noun complex becomes a unitary, “whole” lexical package which seems more like a classification than an evaluation and is therefore more difficult to take issue with. Consider, for example the following excerpts from text (b):

“a thorough examination”

“was attributable”

In the second, whether or not the building had contributed to the fire is under discussion and so “attributable” can be expressed predicatively. In the first, however, “thorough” is placed before the noun where it is less easily challenged. This information is a “given” and whether or not the examination was thorough is not open to question, it is presented as fact. (See Fowler & Kress 1979).

7.1.2 The Verb Group

This use of complex noun phrases also robs the verb of its content, as we saw above. This means that meaning is carried in noun complexes which compress ideas and therefore obscure some of the relations which formed them. The result is that verb groups which expose time, modality and responsibility are devalued: they are less important as far as content is concerned. The message becomes less tentative and accessible and less open to refutation: it appears to be more certain, opinion becomes fact.

Furthermore, if those verb groups which are used are passive, the agent is deleted and responsibility and agency are obscured. The information in (a) is presented much more through clauses containing agents, actions and affected. In other words, people act on things. For example:

“we examined the remains” (1)

“We then tested individual materials” (2), and so on.

In (b), however, these agents have disappeared and the inanimate affected becomes fronted and therefore the focus of attention:

“a thorough examination of the remains of the club was made”

“Individual materials..., were then tested.”

The verbs are predominantly non-modal which present information in a categorical way. (Fairclough 1989:129). These two tendencies of using dense noun phrases and the passive mean that the people, reasons and attitudes which underlie the forms are hidden, objects are more in focus. Thus the use of the passive also goes hand-in-hand with what Fowler et al. (1979:200) call “thematization” and “lexicalization”.

7.2 Thematization

When an agent is deleted, an affected participant - the thing that is affected - can be put into subject position. The writer can then emphasise this topic and, by association with this sentence-initial position usually reserved for the subjects of verbs, these passivised objects may seem to be agents. The overall impression is of the importance of things and the absence of people and opinions.

7.3 Lexicalization and objectifying

The choice of “nominal expressions of concepts for which an expression using a verb or adjective would have been available to the writer” (Fowler & Kress 1979:207) also increases this impression of the importance of objects.

Furthermore, ideas expressed through nominalisations appear neat and tidy, easy to deal with, more certain. As we have seen this tendency is common in (b). This process of lexicalization “fixes the object-as-process as a single habitualized entry” (Fowler & Kress 1979:208).

7.4 Synoptic vs process

Where relations are hidden, people are replaced by things and processes become objects the view of the world which is presented is synoptic. Phenomena are represented as products and the processes, the dynamics and therefore the uncertainty and the doubt are not shown. This predisposes the reader to take a synoptic view, to accept the text as a tableau spread out before her. (Halliday 1985b:81).

7.5 Science and rationality

The language features which contribute to the synoptic view of the world discussed above have become naturalised as the “appropriate” discourse for scientific disciplines. “Objectivity” is paramount; the self is negated and attention is focussed on the object and its properties:

“The genre itself encodes a view of writing which negates the human producers of knowledge, and indeed reifies knowledge as a timeless, universal category, independent of the human subject/producer.”
(Kress 1982:114).

Thus the linguistic conventions which govern how physical phenomena are reported, what constitutes a result or a fact, are not natural to science but have been naturalised to reinforce a certain way of regarding phenomena and the world. Such discourse patterns are motivated by, and in turn reinforce, a view of the world “as transparent - as if it signalled its own meaning to any observer, without the need for interpretation and representation.” (Fairclough 1989:129).

This discourse style is inaccessible because of its distance from spoken discourse. The language features discussed above and the formality of its vocabulary have connotations of education, prestige and status. It is “cultural capital” for those competent in its use; it excludes those who are not initiated or who do not make the grade.

Managers in the construction and manufacturing companies studied here seem to prefer the language features of “scientific” language to more “popular”, and from communications trainers’ viewpoint, more accessible language. Below I would like to consider some of the wider social context which maintains these preferences.

8. The Wider Social Context

In western society the status of science as fact is less open to conjecture than is the status of other disciplines. This is particularly so in the less theoretical branches of science.

Construction engineers and electrical engineers in the U.K. have largely been trained in disciplines maintained by discourse styles which encourage quasi-objectivity. They maintain a belief in “facts” which have a separate and verifiable existence, rather than in systems of knowledge through which we understand and construct the world.

Below I will consider some of the reasons why managers in these industries retain a preference for these discourse styles.

8.1 The company culture

The companies in the study draw majority of their managers from scientific disciplines. Their allegiances are therefore to “scientific” knowledge systems and the discourse styles which perpetuate them. Not only the companies, but also the industries themselves are interested in

maintaining this “scientific” view of the world. By “companies” and “industries” I mean, of course, the people whose career, self-image and financial security are invested in them.

In particular, industries based on applied science gain in prestige by association with the discourse of science. They will, therefore, perpetuate the discourse styles of the scientific disciplines which spawn and legitimise them.

In addition to these pressures, the companies studied are hierarchical and paternalistic. In this atmosphere, managers are less likely to experiment with “new” discourse patterns.

8.2 Officers and men

In the two companies studied there also seem to be what I call an “officers and men” attitude to relationships at work. I use this intentionally sexist term because the attitude seems to parallel the legitimised distinction in the armed forces between those of privileged officer status, and those who are merely men. In this case the “officers” usually have tertiary or further education and are sent on in-house communications training programs. The “men” are employed by the hour, do not usually enjoy any job security or company benefits and may often have only a basic literacy.

Written language is instrumental in this divide. The formal written discourse patterns discussed above not only reinforces an object-oriented, “factual” view of phenomena, it also perpetuates the gap between those who control this world, who can talk and write about it, and those who cannot. The use of what Fairclough calls “emancipatory discourse” at work would endanger this divide and the social attitudes which underlie it.

8.3 The status of engineers in Britain

However, engineers, themselves, do not have the same high status in the U.K. as they do in other countries, (France, for example). Engineering is not a high status subject at school where “pure” disciplines are still valued. From my conversations with managers I have the impression that they have never really recovered from the legacy of a negative self-image from their school-days. Although their skills had now been acknowledged and they were in positions of power at work, they still seem to suffer from the feeling that they are “only engineers” or that engineers “don’t know how to write”.

Brown and Herndl (1986:17-18) report a similar feeling among the employees they interviewed. One whom they had designated as a “high nominaliser” began by talking in a way that was very “formal and hypercorrect” but after an hour was speaking in a way that was “informal and lucid”. They suggest that, by the end of the interview, he had realised that he was not “meeting his old English teacher” and that his current skills were being acknowledged.

Managers who feel defensive of their position in society are less likely to give up the discourse traditions in which they have been trained and more likely to opt for the safer, the “hypercorrect” language features which they believe give testimony to their education and their prestige. In fact, one manager and one trainer in my study selected (b) as being “safer” for technical/academic readers.

8.4 Exclusion and solidarity

The power of language to demarcate members of a group can serve to exclude those whose “cultural capital” does not include mastery of the discourse style (Fairclough 1989:57). It can also be a mark of solidarity.

Writing at work can have a powerful influence on job prospects. Those who do not write “appropriately” may be excluded from promotion. At the same time writing “appropriately” brings the rewards of “belonging” to the group. A person’s mastery of forms “shows that he or she is a bona fide member of the culture of the workplace; a person who cannot use these

forms may appear to readers to be generally unqualified.” (Anderson 1985:12). This view seems to be supported by my data in which managers made judgements about a writer’s competence on the basis of the language features they employ.

In their study of language and status in a corporation, Brown and Hemdl investigated why certain employees resisted all attempts by their bosses and language trainers to adopt the principles of “clear” writing similar to those advocated on writing training courses in the company studied. One of their major conclusions was that the language features they studied (heavy use of nominalisation and the inappropriate use of narrative structure) “had acquired such powerful and favourable significance as signs of group affiliation that writers lost sight of their effects on readability.” (Brown & Herndl 1986:13) This powerful effect of language as a sign of solidarity can isolate the language trainer from the groups she is training because the function of language as a sign can override for her delegates its transactional and communicative function.

If the trainer appears to attack features of discourse which delegates feel comfortable with and which mark for them the grouping to which they owe their allegiance, then she will only succeed in polarising the two positions of language professional and construction professional. In these circumstances, the engineer can very easily dismiss the trainer’s advice as out of touch and irrelevant. This is particularly easy in a society which polarises the arts and the sciences.

When managers reject certain discourse patterns as inappropriate they are objecting to another way of structuring and perceiving knowledge. Any challenge, to the patterns that they have used to reinforce their view of the world is also an attack on their views and on what they do. Language can therefore serve to keep out those with “unorthodox” views.

8.5 Initiation

Newcomers to the club must learn how to write in the “appropriate” way. Since most have already been trained in the language features which characterise the naturalised discourse style that they will need at work, a greater problem for writers seems to be what Brown & Hemdl (1985:18) call “hypercorrection”. They over-use these features.

In their study, they note that employees tend to use more formal language the higher up the hierarchy their reader or interlocutor. Thus formality seems, in part, to be a function of difference in status. The more at ease an employee is, the less formal do they seem to need to be. They noted that formality also, therefore, seemed to be related to job security. The more insecure an employee, the more she seems to need to fall back on formality.

9. Conclusion and Implications

The managers in the study, then, preferred to see language features which reinforce the “factual” view of the world which underlies the scientific disciplines in which they were trained and which legitimise their industries. This helps them maintain their position in society and maintain their unequal relationship with their operatives.

Finally, since research from a critical linguistics perspective aims to feed into practice, I will briefly outline some of the implications of my study for in-service workplace programs in writing.

9.1 The trainer’s dilemma

The communications trainer needs to be aware of the role language plays in a company as a cohesive and a divisive element which legitimises and confirms the dominant realities in its culture.

What is perceived as good, clear writing will differ from culture to culture. A trainer may have investments in a particular “brand” of clarity and must be wary of advocating one way of writing, because she has no culture-free basis from which to make her judgements.

The dilemma is how far to go in socialising trainees into a particular “brand”, a particular discourse style. This socialisation brings with it the possibility of rewards: acceptance, approval, promotion; but also imposes the constraints of the way of thinking that underlies the style.

Pedagogies with a critical linguistics perspective (Clark et al 1987; Fairclough 1989; Ivanic 1988/89) argue that mere training in what writing is “appropriate” simply perpetuates the status quo. A more empowering approach to education is to introduce trainees to the role that language plays in maintaining culture, and to develop in them the skills that will enable them to be creative and created, that is, to be aware of the norms of their culture but to be able to use them both normatively and creatively.

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APPENDIX 1

Figures 1-8

FIGURE 1: Number of Managers and Trainers who Prefer (a) and (b) with reservations and without

		<i>Passages</i>		<i>Totals</i>	
		(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)
<i>Construction</i>					
Higher managers	without	1	4	1	6
	with	0	2		
Middle managers	without	1	4	1	5
	with	0	1		
<i>Manufacturing</i>					
Higher managers	without	1	2	1	5
	with	0	3		
				Total	3
					16
<i>Trainers</i>					
	without	3	1	4	2
	with	1	1		
				Overall Total	7
					18

FIGURE 2: Reasons given by Managers who preferred (a)

Construction Manager	“Easier to read, but less informative”
Construction Middle Manager	“Clearer”
Manufacturing Manager	“Good logical flow”
	“More conversational construction and less use of quasi- technical phrases”
	(b) was also “very acceptable”

FIGURE 3: Comments by Construction Managers who preferred (b)

	<i>negative on (a)</i>	<i>positive on (b)</i>
Managers	“clumsy”	“uses more technical jargon and is more easily read”
	“difficult to read, disjointed”	“details set out more clearly and report flows better”
	“rambles, amateurish, had to read it more than once”	“well structured, logical approach easier to understand” “creates impression that writer is competent”
	criticised structure, content, punctuation, personal phrasing	“clearly written with more factual factual description”
Middle Managers		“clearer, shorter sentences” “better structure”
	“rambling, vague, a bit Reader’s Digesty”	“better written. More technical terms and content”
	“does not run smoothly, are too long and one has to keep going back to get the feel of the story”	“better English. Runs a lot smoother”
	“tends to ramble on”	“very clear report written in clear language”
	“213 of report just describes that the materials and construction methods were investigated”	“easy to read and extract information without re-reading”

NB. No manager who preferred (b) made a positive comment on (a).

FIGURE 4: Comments of Manufacturing Managers who preferred (b)

<i>negative on (a)</i>	<i>positive on (b)</i>
“lacks clarity” too intimate, therefore sloppy reporting	more rigorous and therefore “a safer safer bet” as we don’t know who it is for. Can be improved.
“too much like a once upon a time story” “tells reader story of how the problem was approached and reader is not interested in that”	“better introduction. Tells more about how materials were tested. More logical story”
“too much time wasted reading this report” “too many words”	“better. Still not punchy enough”
this manager made a positive comment on (a): “Generally in favour of content and ease of understanding”	prefers “impersonal flavour” “more technical” but “conscious of the danger of drifting into jargon”

NB. Only one manager who preferred (b) made any positive comment on (a).

FIGURE 5: **Trainers' comments on texts (a) and (b)**

<i>text (a)</i>	<i>text (b)</i>
+ve "sentences are shorter, language is more up-to-date"	-ve "written as if someone has swallowed a dictionary"
"easier to read, more informal"	"Too formal. Jargon unnecessary"
+ve "plain, simple words. Good"	-ve "posh words, longer than need be. More formal"
-ve "structure is questionable"	?-ve "would appeal to a more academically-minded reader"
+ve "modern and easy to read. Flows naturally." Prefers the active and personal approach	+ve "much better. Punchy"
+ve "slightly better." But likes neither	-ve "needs headings"
-ve "wordy. Needs sub-headings"	+ve "easier to read. Better sentence structure. Logical flavour."
-ve "too many words. Complex sentence structure."	

FIGURE 6: **Lexical density of clauses in Texts (a) and (b)**

	<i>Text (a)</i>	<i>Text (b)</i>
No. of words	148	172
No. of clauses	17	14
Average no. of words per clause	8.7	12.28
No. of grammatical words	77	85
Total no. of lexical words		
per text	71	87
per clause	4.17	6.2
No. of high frequency lexical words		
per text	31	28
per clause	1.8	2
No. of low frequency lexical words		
per text	40	59
per clause	2.35	4.2

FIGURE 7: **A comparison of the verb forms of texts**

	(a)	(b)
Total no. of verb groups and non-finites	26	25
no. of finite verb groups	17	14
no. of active verb groups	16	6
no. of passive verb groups	1	8
Total no. of non-finite forms	9	11
of which to + verb	5	2
verb + ing	0	1
verb + ed (pre-modification)	1	6
verb + ed (post-modification)	3	2
% of finite verbs in text	65%	56%
% of finite verbs which are active	94.11%	42.85%

FIGURE 8: Classification of finite verb groups as high or low in lexical content

	(a)	sent.	(b)	sent.
High	started	1	were tested	2
Lexical	examined	1	was set	6
Content	tested	2		
	ignited	3		
	burned	3		
	had (spread)	3		
	(did not) ignite	4		
	(did) catch light	4		
	burn	4		
	were damaged	4		
	set light	5		
	spread	5		
	(could) build	6		
Low	had caused	1	was made	1
Lexical	had been	2	was	1
Content	found	5	behaved	3
	decided	6	could have been	3
	resulted in	4	were performed	5
			it was found	5
			did take place	5
			was observed	6
			was decided	7
			were carried out	8
			offered	8

Total High Lexical Content for (a) = 13

Total High Lexical Content for (b) = 2

APPENDIX 2
Writing Effective Reports
Questionnaire on style

NAME: _____

POSITION: _____

Thank you for agreeing to complete this questionnaire.

My aim is to find out what kind of writing style *you* think is most effective for reports written at work.

Section 1

Please write down a few thoughts on what makes an effective report and what you consider to be good style for use in a report. It would help me if you could be as specific as possible.

Section 2

Below are two extracts in which a fire research team report on an investigation into why a fire in a night club spread so rapidly. Which version is more effective and why?

Please spend a little time thinking about the language used in each and indicate exactly what it is that you like or dislike in any sentence or section. You may do this both by circling, underlining, crossing out or improving any part, and by writing your comments at the end of each extract.

(a) Before we started our investigation we examined the remains of the club thoroughly to eliminate the possibility that the construction of the building had in any way caused the fire to spread so rapidly.

We then tested individual materials which had been present in the club at the time of the fire. No material ignited quickly enough or burned fiercely enough to have caused the flames to spread as rapidly as they had in the nightclub. Although chairs identical to those found in the club did not ignite during tests ,they did catch light and burn slowly if their covers were damaged.

When we set light to a damaged seat placed against a wall covered with carpet tiles we found that the fire spread rapidly. We therefore decided to mount larger-scale tests at our Cardington test site where we could build a replica of the appropriate size.

(b) *Prior to the initiation of the investigation a thorough examination of the remains of the club was made to eliminate the possibility that the rapid spread-rate of the fire was attributable to the construction of the building.*

Individual materials present in the club at the time of the fire were then tested in isolation and in combination. No material tested in isolation behaved in a way that could have been the cause of the rapid spread-rate of the fire. Tests on chairs identical to the originals resulted in the seating remaining unignited. When tests were performed on chairs with damaged covers, however, it was found that ignition and slow combustion did take place.

In tests where an ignited, damaged seat was set against a wall covered in pvc-backed carpet tiles, a considerable increase in the spread-rate of the fire was observed, it was therefore decided to mount larger-scale tests. These were carried out at the Cardington test rig which offered sufficient space for the required replica size.

Section 3

Please comment on the following statements about report-writing

You should never use “I or “we”.

Your language should be formal.

You should use short sentences.

A short report is a good report.

Managers tend to dip into reports rather than read them from beginning to end.

Thank you.

APPENDIX 3

List of Respondents

Managers in the construction sector

- A Area Manager, Building Central Unit (no reply)
- B Director and Unit Manager, Northern Construction Division
- C Unit Materials Engineer, Northern Construction Division
- D Training Manager, (construction)
- E Training Manager, (construction)
- F Quality Assurance Manager, (construction: building)
- G Southern Construction, Division
- H Director of Personnel, (manufacturing)

Managers in the manufacturing sector

- I Director of Personnel (refused)
- J Director of Engineering, Cables & Wireless Division
- K Internal Audit Manager, Cables
- L Manager, Cables & Wireless Division
- M Quality Manager, Elastomeric Cables
- N Materials Manager, Elastomeric Cables

Middle Managers

- O Projects Manager, (construction)
- P,Q Sub-Agent, (construction)
- R - U (Junior positions in construction)

Trainers

Director of Training Centre
Training Manager (Manufacturing)
4 Management Trainers

Total trainers =6.