Linguistics and the Structure of Business Narrative Documents

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This is a summary report to the Enterprise Business Documents Subcommittee of the OASIS DITA Technical Committee.

As a subcommittee, we have looked at document types that are identified as such (that is, as belonging to or representing identified document types) in many organizations, and we have analyzed them do disclose the internal constitution of each given type of document. We are now concluding duly diligent research into the bases for a metamodel that provides a rational, organized framework for carrying out future extensions of DITA in an orderly way. As the linguist on the team (degrees in linguistics from Penn 1968, 1970, and 1998) I have been asked to find relevant research that has been done in the subfield of discourse analysis.

I have been asked to find research in the field of linguistics that bears on this work, hopefully. The implicit mission is to corroborate and perhaps extend our work, and to help give the ring of authority to our results. The comparison has been made to the research that was done in the design of DITA. We note that the universe of document types considered then was the closed set of the relatively small number of types found for technical and user assistance documentation, but we are now concerned with uses of the specialization capacity of the architecture to accommodate the open set of document types that business enterprises employ and may employ in the future.

The methods of linguistics are indeed relevant to business narrative documents, as we have identified them. We have in fact applied some of those methods. We call it content analysis. This mode of analysis, which was pioneered and developed to a high degree of semantic sensitivity by Zellig Harris (e.g. *The form of information in science*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989) has not been taken up by other linguists.

Off and on during the past 2009-2010 year I have conducted a review of the literature in the field of discourse analysis (a subfield of linguistics). This included a query to linguists world-wide through the Linguist List http://linguistlist.org/, a general forum and resource platform in which the great majority of members of the profession participate.

The results demonstrate that work in discourse analysis has not escaped the self-reflexivity that characterizes so much scholarship since post-modernism. Narrative and discourse are studied not for their informational structure, but for their rhetorical, constitutive function in helping to forge the identity of business organizations and to sustain their organizational integrity. Branding, motivation, negotiation, and the like are of interest. Matters of concern to us--the structural-semantic constituents of a proposal, specification, or policy, for example--are not considered as such. Characteristics of the language within such documents may be considered, but most work is on communication, persuasion, inspiration, and the like, rather than on information. The types of documents typically considered include email messages, announcements, press releases, mission statements, and so forth, which are not good candidates for reuse, structured management, and machine processing.

Discourse studies encompass a variety of investigations into the constitutive functions of the language used not only in individual documents but also in email and in transcripts of conversations, phone calls, and meetings. In the words of one book description quoted below, this research "concerns the ways language mediates and shapes our interactions with each other and with the social, political and cultural formations of our society". These studies make little or no reference to document types per se, but instead employ other typologies, such as genre theory.

Here are two typical example titles:

Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini and Catherine Nickerson. 1999. "Business Writing as Social Action". In Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson (eds.) *Writing Business : Genres, Media & Discourses*. NY: Pearson Longman.

Koller, V. (2009). "Corporate self-presentation and self-centredness: A case for cognitive critical discourse analysis". In: H. Pishwa (ed.) *Language and Social Cognition: Expression of the Social Mind*. Berlin: de Gruyter, pp. 267-87.

Books that seemed to show promise

I did find a few titles that seemed at first glance to hold some promise but on closer investigation do not. Here they are, each followed by the descriptions (from the publisher and an in-house[?] reviewer) that are reproduced in the amazon.com listing. The first item in particular, a comprehensive handbook surveying the field of business discourse analysis, should be expected to include some glimmer of what we want. It doesn't. I provide URLs so you can inspect online copies to verify this for yourself.

Bargiela-Chiappini, Francesca (ed.). 2009. *The Handbook of Business Discourse*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

http://books.google.com/books?id=wOTcr9mrtEUC&pg=PA13&dq=Bargiela-Chiappini+The+Handbook+of+Business+Discourse#v=onepage&q&f=false

The discourse of business, and about business, is now at the centre of contemporary culture. While many authors offer partial insights into business discourse, Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini has made a heroic effort to collect many such insights together in this impressive Handbook. She has also managed both to discipline the contributors and give free rein to their creativity; an achievement considering the variety of cultures and research fields that they represent. The result is a rich volume that will become indispensable to those students and scholars in social sciences and humanities who are interested in contemporary phenomena. -- Barbara Czarniawska, Professor of Management Studies, University of Gothenburg, Sweden 'Those researchers interested in understanding and applying the various disciplinary perspectives and approaches used to study discourse in the context of business will not be disappointed by The Handbook of Business Discourse. This much needed and welcome resource, provides an authoritative set of up-to-date contributions from an impressive line-up of distinguished as well as emergent scholars.' -- David Grant, Professor of Organizational Studies, University of Sydney The discourse of business, and about business, is now at the centre of contemporary culture. While many authors offer partial insights into business discourse, Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini has made a heroic effort to collect many such insights together in this impressive Handbook. She has also managed both to discipline the

contributors and give free rein to their creativity; an achievement considering the variety of cultures and research fields that they represent. The result is a rich volume that will become indispensable to those students and scholars in social sciences and humanities who are interested in contemporary phenomena. 'Those researchers interested in understanding and applying the various disciplinary perspectives and approaches used to study discourse in the context of business will not be disappointed by The Handbook of Business Discourse. This much needed and welcome resource, provides an authoritative set of up-to-date contributions from an impressive line-up of distinguished as well as emergent scholars.'

[This] is the most comprehensive overview of the field to date. It offers an accessible and authoritative introduction to a range of historical, disciplinary, methodological, and cultural perspectives and addresses many of the issues facing a growing, varied, and increasingly international field of research. The collection also illustrates some of the challenges of defining and delimiting a relatively recent and eclectic field of studies, including debates on the very definition of "business discourse." Part One includes chapters on the origins, advances, and features of business discourse in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Part Two covers methodological approaches such as mediated communication, corpus linguistics, organizational discourse, multimodality, race and management communication, and rhetorical analysis. Part Three looks at such disciplinary perspectives as sociology, pragmatics, gender studies, intercultural communication, linguistic anthropology, and business communication. Part Four considers cultural perspectives across a range of geographical areas including Spain, Brazil, Japan, Korea, China, and Vietnam. The concluding section reflects on future developments in Europe, North America, and Asia.

Definitions (from the editor's Introduction):

1. Discourse as a metaphor for dialog

2. Business discourse as a verb: "traveling across disciplines, methods and cultures".

3. The researcher as a composer

View the TOC and search the contents for yourself at http://amzn.to/cEfMsO.

Alamargot, Denise, Patrice Terrier and Jean-Marie Cellier (2007): *Written Documents in the Workplace*. **Oxford: Elsevier.**

Divided into three parts, the first of which provides a linguistic definition of professional documents, describing their different types and genres. This definition necessarily takes into account both the formal characteristics of these types of document (e.g. nature of linguistic units involved) and their functional goals (the way these linguistic units are used to fulfill the text's communicative aim). The second part focuses on the mental mechanisms involved in written production in the workplace. One of the aims of a professional writer is to compose a text which can be understood. Text composition involves specific processes and strategies that can be enhanced. One way of doing this is to give the writer suitable instructions, while another is to provide him/her with a suitable writing environment. This last aspect leads us to devote the third and final section to the comprehension of written documents in the workplace. Awareness of the strategies implemented by different readers (with more or less domain expertise) in order to

understand technical and professional documents can enhance the latter's readability.

*Contributions from linguists, psychologists and ergonomists from various countries ensure international scope and comprehensiveness

*Bridges the gap between fundamental research into writing and reading and the issue of the efficiency of written communication in the workplace

*Enables better content creation for professional writers

View the TOC. Limited content access: http://search2.barnesandnoble.com/BookViewer/?ean=9780080474878.

Chapter 1, "Linguistic markers of lexical and textual relations in technical documents" has some relevance for the discovery of structure in documents. http://amzn.to/cEfMsO

Bargiela-Chiappini, F. and C. Nickerson (eds) (1999): *Writing Business: Genres, Media and Discourses*. **New York: Longman**.

Writing Business: Genres, Media and Discourses offers an analysis of the genres and functions of written discourse in the business context, involving a variety of modes of communication. The evolution of new forms of writing is a key focus of this collection and is only partly attributable to the ever increasing application of technology at work. Alongside machine-mediated texts such as electronic mail and computer-generated correspondence, the contextualised analyses of both traditional genres such as facsimiles and direct mailing, and of lesser studied texts such as invitations for bids, contracts, business magazines and ceremonial speeches, reveal a rich complexity in the forms of communication evolved by organisations and the individuals who work within them, in response to the demands of the social, organisational and cultural contexts in which they operate. This rich textual variation is matched by a discussion of a range of methodological approaches to the development of business writing skills, including rhetorical analysis, organisational communication analysis, social constructionism, genre analysis and survey and experimental methods. Using authentic data and benefiting from a fresh, interdisciplinary approach, the volume will be of interest to students and researchers of business communication, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and sociolinguistics.

Koester, Almut. (2004): *The Language of Work*. **London: Routledge.**

[This book] examines how language is used in business and the workplace, looking at a range of situations and data: from meetings to negotiations, official reports to emails between colleagues. The book explores representations of work in job adverts, TV programs and advertising and looks at the way people in business interact through small talk, politeness, customer care and management-employee relationships.

It is illustrated with lively examples taken from the real world and includes a full glossary and features a useful section on entering the world of work, including advice on CV writing, job interviews and developing 'transferable skills'.

Koester, Almut. (2006): *Investigating Workplace Discourse*. **London: Routledge.**

[This book explores] the characteristics of different types of workplace conversations, including decision-making, training, briefing or making arrangements, [and] pays

particular attention to interactions with a more social focus, such as small talk or office gossip.

Presenting a range of approaches to analyzing such workplace discourse, Almut Koester argues for a combination of quantitative corpus-based methods, to compare specific linguistic features in different genres and qualitative methods involving a close analysis of individual conversations, to explore such issues as politeness, power, conflict and consensus-building. A corpus of conversations recorded in a variety of office environments both in the UK and the USA is used throughout to demonstrate the interplay between speakers accomplishing tasks and maintaining relationships in the workplace.

Koester, Almut. 2010. *Workplace Discourse*. **New York: Continuum**

[This book] provides an overview of the rapidly developing field of spoken and written workplace interaction, taking a fresh perspective on research methods and key issues in the field. It examines discourse in a wide variety of workplace contexts using both genre analysis and a corpus-driven approach. The book draws on Koester's previous research, but examines the current state of workplace discourse more widely. It provides a descriptive account of the linguistic characteristics of workplace discourse within their social and organizational contexts, with illustrative extracts from real texts and naturally occurring spoken interactions. It showcases specific issues at the forefront of current research and practice in this area: the use of English as a lingua franca, the importance of relationship building and the teaching applications of research. Discourse is one of the most significant concepts of contemporary thinking in the humanities and social sciences as it concerns the ways language mediates and shapes our interactions with each other and with the social, political and cultural formations of our society. "The Continuum Discourse Series" aims to capture the fast-developing interest in discourse to provide students, new and experienced teachers and researchers in applied linguistics, ELT and English language with an essential bookshelf. Each book deals with a core topic in discourse studies to give an in-depth, structured and readable introduction to an aspect of the way language is used in real life.

Conclusions

The negative result of my literature survey demonstrates that no one in the field of linguistics has shown our results to be wrong.

We cannot boil the ocean of all narrative business documents. Nor should we try. The research leading to DITA focused on technical documentation and user assistance documentation. Adopters will specialize beyond those limits. The universe of business narrative documents is not closed.

To almost-quote Gregory Bateson (himself mauling Browning):

> Our reach shall e'er exceed our grasp
> else, what's a *meta*- for?

Any metamodel encompasses more than the data that were investigated to build it. A requirement to ground our metamodel exhaustively in examples would be misguided.