

REPRESENTATIONAL CHOICES OF SOCIAL ACTORS IN LETTERS OF APPLICATION

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INTRODUCTION

The letter of application can be referred to as a genre, inasmuch as it “can only be realized in completed texts or texts that can be projected as complete, for it (...) specifies conditions for beginning, continuing and ending a text”. (Couture, 1986: 82). It being a genre we can, therefore, think of the letter of application as displaying recurrent features, which correspond to an underlying pattern that is usually maintained, though features of the register may vary (McCarthy & Carter, 1994: 26).

Letters of application belong to a specific discourse community, and are used by its members, since these share both the communicative purposes and the discursive expectations of the genre, that is, appropriate use of topics, form, function, and the role this and related subgenres play.

The concept of discourse community can in fact be mapped onto Hymes’s concept of speech community. Letters of application play a specific role within the institutional setting, more precisely belonging to the context of the workplace, where the letter form, function, purpose, and possible topics are restricted by the institutional setting itself, and where the social structure of the institution calls for structured and standardized contributions in terms of their positioning, form and functional value.

To situate the letter of application in its discourse community we have to start from the workplace, from institutional communicative praxis within the workplace, with two sub-genres branching from the overarching genre of business correspondence, namely commercial correspondence on the one hand, and promotion letters on the other hand. Letters of enquiry, orders, replies to orders, letters of complaint, and letters of adjustment would typically partake of the subgenre of business correspondence, whereas the other sub-genre labelled as promotion letters would be embracing two text types: sales promotion letters, where a service or product is promoted, and

job applications, where the language user promotes him/herself as a prospective employee.

This hierarchical relationship is embedded in the institutional context of the workplace. In fact, the purpose of the genre is shared by the participants of the discourse community, who relate to each other for precisely this communicative event, representing a specific, institutional role-relationship: the addresser plays the role of an applicant for a specific social role within the community, the addressee represents a social role which gives him/her the power to grant or not the social role requested by the applicant. The letter of application places both addresser and addressee within a role-relationship of employer - prospective employee. The underlying goal pursued is the recruitment of workforce, where the letter of application stands as a response within a specific exchange structure: it is the employer who, seeking to cover a position, places a job advertisement, whereby this genre would represent the initiating move. The prospective employee responds to the job advertisement, completing the exchange structure with a letter of application. This exchange structure can be paralleled with an adjacency pair of request-offer, following ethnomethodologist criteria (see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974).

As anticipated above, the generic characteristics of letters of application turn these into a standardized tool for communication within the discourse community to which they belong. The language users resort to this genre for recurrent instances of communicative behaviour of a specific communicative purpose, to implement a likewise specific institutional activity. It being a standardized activity, produced in a conventional situation, we can think that the role-relationship between employer-applicant, their shared communicative purpose, has an effect on the textual construction of the letter of application. The standardized communicative event translates into recurrent linguistic and rhetorical choices which are triggered off by the ritualised occasion. "A genre is, within variable degrees of freedom, a structured and standardized communicative event...in terms of positioning, form and functional value" (Swales, 1986: 13). This loose pattern of choices can best be seen when tracing the generic moves of the letter at issue.

Move 1: Acknowledge job advertisement

I saw your advertisement in the Guardian...
 I am writing to you to apply for the position of...
 I would like to be considered for the position of ...

Move 2: Express willingness to apply for job

I am an experienced English Language Teacher and I would like to put this experience at your service.

As an English teacher looking for new opportunities I am interested in taking up a position at your school.

I am very eager to get a job here in Valencia in order to finance my stay and, if possible, I would like to remain here for longer.

Move 3: Reasons for applying for the job

I am looking for a challenging job that provides a first class education.

I find teaching pupils of all ages and abilities rewarding and I would very much appreciate the opportunity of an interview...

As well as experiencing a new country with different cultures, I am interested in learning Spanish and contributing my experiences to another educational environment such as your school.

Move 4: Professional experience/academic background

I have been very active in teaching at GCSE level...

I am in my fourth year at Kirkley High School...

Before teaching at Briar, I stood in for the head of the physics department...

Move 5: Teaching philosophy

I believe I am a good role model for the pupils I am in contact with...

I consider myself to be a responsible, enthusiastic and organised person...

I often use pattern, symmetry and humour to engage the children...

I do not believe that education is all book learning...

Move 6: Leavetake

Looking forward to hearing from you...

Please do not hesitate to contact me...

I hope to hear from you soon...

We can think of letters of application developing alongside a rhetorical pattern that comprises six generic moves: In the first place the applicant expresses acknowledgement of the job advertisement, stating his/her knowledge of the source of information which gives rise to a letter of

response, that is, the letter of application. In the second move the writer expresses his/her willingness to apply for the job, followed by a move where the reasons for applying are stated. The function of moves four and five are to explain both the professional and academic background, and the teaching philosophy. The last one is a leavetaking move, where the writer signals the end of the letter. We have to note that move five is determined by the nature of the job at issue: it being a response to a job advertisement to cover a teaching position, the letter of application is required by the advert itself to account for the applicant's teaching philosophy.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Starting from the role-relationship between employer and applicant, the latter can be said to stand in a somehow contradictory position: on the one hand he has to meet certain requirements imposed on him: he has to make his discourse match the formal and functional expectations imposed by the institutional genre. On the other hand he has to be convincing, has to offer a good image of himself, but has to adjust his contributions to a given format, to what is actually beforehand established as relevant information. The applicant is required to be both an institutional self inasmuch as he has to respond to what the institutional social structure requires from him, and he has to be a private self: he/she has to account for his teaching philosophy, presenting a convincing image of himself as a candidate with possibilities. Furthermore he has to be private within further institutional restrictions: sound convincing yet expressing modesty; while accounting for a teaching philosophy, it is required, to some extent, to correspond to the social and cultural expectations of what is accepted as a good teaching philosophy. In other words, the writer has to make a series of choices within certain formal and functional restrictions imposed by the nature of the genre, which would enhance his possibilities of success.

The somewhat contradictory position in which the applicant stands while construing the letter of application lies in the need for building up a promotional discourse in an endeavour to "sell" him/herself showing excellence in his/her abilities and skills, and simultaneously express modesty, adapting to conventional requirements of politeness: the applicant has to be self-enhancing and self-effacing at the same time.

Considering the pressures and the requirements imposed on the individual, it is interesting to see how the applicant presents him/herself, or rather, how he/she unfolds throughout his/her text construction. Especially starting from the special position in which the applicant stands, as stated above. I considered it interesting to study how the self as a social actor is

created, maintained and/or developed in the discourse practice corresponding to letters of application.

To trace this dynamic unfolding of the representation of the self as a social actor I have relied on the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, and followed Van Leeuwen's (1996) categorisation of the principal ways in which social actors can be represented in discourse, looking into the representational choices that are made throughout text construction, these being tied to specific linguistic and rhetorical realisations.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis allows for a multifunctional approach, where the text is understood as a multi-modal expression of meaning relations. A principle underlying Critical Discourse Analysis (see Fairclough, 1989) is that it allows for an insight into texts as acquiring their meanings by the dialectical relationship between the texts themselves and the social subjects. All speakers and writers operate from specific discursive practices originating in special interests and aims which involve inclusions and exclusions. We are allowed not only to interpret texts but also to explain them.

The explanatory power of Critical Discourse Analysis is illustrated by Janks (1997) when referring to the discourse practice in terms of sociocultural practice: a text is embedded in its context at three different levels, embracing the immediate situation involving participants in a particular setting in the first place, the wider institution or organization in the second place, and the level of society in the third place. The role-relationship holding between employer and applicant, the restrictions imposed on the text construction that are determined by the institutional context, and the social expectations the participants share about how to behave in an appropriate both linguistic and cultural way, are withheld and retrievable by the analyst from the actual text construction.

Fairclough (1995a: 57) also views texts from a multifunctional perspective, where any sentence in a text is analysable in terms of the articulation of three functions, which he refers to in terms of Representations, Relations and Identities. The text is an expression of particular representations, inasmuch as it carries particular ideologies and in its potential for recontextualising a social practice; it is as well the expression of a particular relation holding between writer and reader, as it corresponds to a particular construction of writer and reader identity. Fairclough's framework for analyzing a communicative event considers on the one hand the analytical focus of the text, focusing on the realisations of the functions of relations,

representations and identities, as mentioned above. To these he adds the dimension of discourse practice, which establishes the link between society and culture on the one hand –that is, the extra-discursive dimension– and discourse, language and text on the other –that is to say, what relates to the linguistic construction proper of the text itself (Fairclough, 1995b: 58-59).

The link between discourse, society and culture is well established from the studies done by social psychologists, who see discursive practice embracing all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities (see Davies & Harré, 1990; Wetherell, 2001). The discursive practice involves the construction of identity and subjectivity, whereby the discourse itself allows to trace how social actors are constructed, i.e. how people tell stories about themselves and how they present themselves in talk and writing. This dynamic creation of identity is seen as a set of culturally available performances sanctioned through power relations. This is an interesting point to highlight: we expect the social actor's representation in the construction of letters to be biased through the asymmetrical power relationship holding between his/her social and cultural role and position as applicant and the employer, who is culturally and socially given the power and entitlement to recruit the prospective employee, depending on the discourse practice of the applicant.

Construction of discourse, in fact, implies active selection. Accounts 'construct' reality. This is where the interest of social psychologists lies: in the study of attitudes. The expectation is not of a discourse to be consistent and coherent but, rather, of the discourse itself to unfold the individual's account of himself as a social actor, through the way it is organized and through what it is doing. As stated by Davies & Harré (1990), the discursive practice refers to all the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities. This is possible, they argue, because of the multiplicities of the self: the self partakes of categories (e.g.: male, female, father, daughter, etc.) which include some people and exclude others; the self positions him/herself in terms of belonging to one category and not another (e.g.: being good, bad, nice, etc.). In addition, the self has a recognition of having the characteristics that locate him/her as a member of various sub classes of dichotomous categories and not of others –i.e. the development of a sense of oneself as belonging in the world in certain ways and thus seeing the world from the perspective of one so positioned.

The discourse practice then, as Potter & Wetherell (1987) point out, has to be seen as an attitude of choice, where particular kinds of formulations emphasize either good or bad features. People use their language to construct versions of the social world. The principal tenet of discourse analysis, they argue, is that function involves construction of versions, and is demonstrated

by language variation. It is this language variation which will account for the purpose of the discourse construction. Following Billig's (2001) remark, one view of the social actor is as a relatively rational information processor, where the social actor is engaged in rhetoric, in organizing accounts and versions into 'winning arguments'. This end-goal orientation of discourse construction represents an interesting starting point when tracing the representation of the self as a social actor in the discursive practice of composing letters of application: while presenting him/herself as a social actor, the writer is engaged in self-promotion. Gergen (1994), therefore, proposes a relational interpretation of self-conception, viewed not as an individual's personal and private cognitive structure but as discourse about the self: self narratives are seen as forms of social accounting or public discourse, which act as cultural resources which serve such social purposes as self-identification, self-justification, self-criticism and social solidification.

Van Leeuwen's (1996) study of the representation of social actors provides an interesting characterisation of the principal ways in which social actors can be represented in discourse through specific linguistic and rhetorical realisations. The author's research shares the basic assumptions of the field of Social Psychology: his way of understanding the creation of social actors in the discourse practice corresponds as well to a dynamic perspective, which involves the construction of identity and subjectivity starting from a relational view of self-conception. The self-promotional attitude of the applicant constructing his/her persuasive discourse of letter of application can be retrieved from the text while tracing how linguistic and rhetorical choices are made, starting from the multiplicities of self-presentation, which allow for an attitudinal interpretation of the dynamic construction of the self. As Van Leeuwen (1996:32-34) observes, the interest lies in identifying the ways in which a social actor can be represented in discourse, and the choices the English language gives us to refer to people. He goes on to claim that sociological agency is not always realised by linguistic agency, starting from the assumption that meaning belongs to culture rather than to language and can therefore not be tied to any specific semiotic. Van Leeuwen's observation is interesting inasmuch as he starts from a multimodal approach to meaning construction in discourse. Unlike other linguistically oriented forms of Critical Discourse Analysis, he does not start from linguistic operations or categories, but instead seeks to "draw up a *sociosemantic* inventory of the ways in which social actors can be represented" (1996: 32), and then turns to the question of how they are realised linguistically.

Van Leeuwen's sociosemantic inventory for the representation of social actors allows us to trace how the applicant presents himself or rather unfolds

throughout his/her text construction, in an endeavour to promote him/herself through the letter of application as discourse practice. The representational choices are categorised in terms of role allocation, where the self presents him/herself as the agent, that is the *actor*, or the *patient*, that is, the goal of an activity; *generic vs. specific reference*, where the self is referred to as belonging to a class or as a specific individual; *individualisation* versus *assimilation*: the self is presented as an individual or as a group; *association* versus *dissociation*, whereby group alliances and dissociations from this alliance may be formed and unformed for a specific purpose as the text proceeds; *indetermination* versus *differentiation*, which means that the individual may refer to the self by indeterminate reference or differentiating him/herself, and *nomination* versus *categorisation*, which allows for the social actors to be represented in terms of their unique identity, typically realised by proper nouns, or categorised through *functionalisation* as opposed to *identification*. Through functionalisation, the social actor is referred to in terms of an activity, what he/she does, his/her occupation or role. Through identification, the social actor is referred to not because of what he/she does but because of what he/she is, in terms of a more or less permanent, unavoidable characteristic.

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

In order to trace how the self unfolds throughout his/her text construction, while construing the letter of application, the syntagmatic constructions where the “I” is involved have been studied, and their correspondence with the sociosemantic categories, as outlined by Van Leeuwen (1996), have been analysed for each generic move, so as to be able to highlight which representational choices are more salient in terms of rhetorical choices, depending on the rhetorical function of the generic move at issue.

A total of twenty-six samples of letters of application were studied, all of them representing letters of application that were written in response to one and the same job advertisement, which offering an academic position as a teacher in a British school set up in Spain. Twenty-one of these samples would satisfy the requested profile for the position, while four would not match the requirements.

Only the first four out of the six identifying moves of the letter of application have been studied. Move five, where the self exposes his/her teaching philosophy, was left out, as it represents so complex a move, that it deserves a study in its own right. The last move serves the purpose of finishing the letter, and displays, for this reason, very routinized leavetaking

formulas, which do not contribute to the dynamic creation of social reality by the self.

I have narrowed down the scope of the analysis to four rhetorical functions: the acknowledgement of the job advertisement, the expression of willingness to apply for the job; the reasons for applying for the job, and the account of the professional and academic background. The following results for each of the four studied moves ensued from the analysis:

Move 1: Acknowledge job advertisement

e.g.: I saw your advertisement in *The Guardian*...
I am writing to you to apply for the position of...

All the examples containing explicit reference to the self have been analysed, to find out that the “I” appears always as the actor, i.e. the agent of the expressed activity, state or process. In all the cases we find specific reference, individualisation, group dissociation, differentiation, and as to categorisation, we find all the samples to display preference for identification of the self, instead as functionalisation.

Move 2: Express willingness to apply for job

e.g.: I wish to be considered for the post of...
I should like to be considered for...

Within this move, all the representational choices coincide with the first move, with the exception of the category ‘role allocation’: the “I” appears here in a higher proportion as a patient in a beneficiary role.

Only in the four samples of letters of application which do not comply with the job requirements, were significant differences found, where the self tends to present him/herself as an associated (versus dissociated) subject, resorting to assimilation (versus individualisation), and refers to him/herself generically (not through specific reference).

e.g.: We have a strong commitment to living in mainland Europe...
We are seeking positions in an established school with a good reputation.
Finding ourselves with an empty nest, my husband and I are looking now to quality of life...
My husband and I are very keen to settle in Spain.
We are writing to enquire about the possibility of...

We would embrace the opportunity to relocate to Spain.
Both our children are keen to move to another country...

The self resorts to the plural personal pronoun reference or to noun phrases that group and associate him/her with his/her family, referred to as a group (we), as a partnership (my husband and I) or associating with the children (both our children).

Move 3: Reasons for applying for the job

With this move, the self appears again as the actor/agent of the expressed activity, state or process. And as happened with the two previous moves, the rest of representational choices stay the same as in the first move. With the exception of the sociosemantic category of *categorisation*: while in the two previous moves this categorisation was done through explicit identification, here we do rather find a tendency to functionalisation, where the individual prefers to present him/herself in terms of what he/she does instead of what he/she is.

e.g.: I am working on a full-time temporary contract...
Where I teach both French and...
I am an experienced English language teacher and...
As an English teacher looking for new opportunities, I am interested in...

Move 4: Professional experience/academic background

As to the fourth move, all the samples that have been analysed show the same occurrence of representational choices as in the third move, including the presence of the category of functionalisation, instead of individualisation.

e.g.: I am in my fourth year at Kirkley High School...
Before teaching at Briar, I stood in for the head of the physics department...

CONCLUSIONS

While tracing how the applicant constructs him/herself as a social actor, starting from the fact that he is engaged in a self-promotional discursive practice, we find that we can highlight changes in what concerns representational choices of sociosemantic categories. The self does, in fact, present himself as a dynamic self. Billig's (2001) proposed view of the social actor as a relatively rational information processor, where the social actor is

engaged in a rhetorical practice of organizing accounts and versions into 'winning arguments', finds here proved evidence, and allows a view of the writer as a social actor engaged in self-promotion.

Some categories are stable throughout the four generic moves that have been analysed: the self presents him/herself through specific reference, individualisation and group dissociation throughout the discourse practice. We can claim there to be a strong tendency on the part of the applicant towards individualistic self-references. The change in attitude as what concerns these three representational choices does only take place when the writer is aware of not complying with the requested profile; by presenting him/herself in association, assimilation and referring to him/herself generically, that is, instead of a dissociated, individualised subject, with specific reference, the applicant can be said to resort to a strategy of group presentation, behind which he/she disguises a too personal, individualistic involvement.

It is also interesting to find the self appearing as an actor, i.e. as the agent of the expressed activity, state or process when it comes to acknowledging the job advertisement, to explaining the reasons for applying for the job and to accounting for both the professional experience and academic background. It is only in the second move, where the self expresses willingness to apply for the job, that the applicant appears in a higher proportion as a patient, representing a beneficiary role. This change in the choice of role allocation can be accounted for in terms of politeness. The rhetorical function that lies behind the expression of willingness to apply for the job at issue, implies a strong personal involvement by definition: while stating that you want to have a specific post you are conveying a face threatening act that intrudes on the decision-taking realm and responsibility allocated to the employer. Adopting the role of a patient, this intrusive agency of the active role is muffled at this point of the discursive activity.

Another representational choice worth analysing is that of categorisation. While acknowledging the job advertisement and while expressing willingness to apply for the job, the self categorises him/herself in terms of what he/she is instead of what he does, which is in turn, the type of categorization chosen while giving an account of the reasons for applying for the job and for referring to both the professional experience and academic background. The writer makes this choice of what he/she is (instead of what he does) when acknowledging the job advertisement and when expressing willingness to apply for the job, as this "being" conveys a stable categorisation; the self is thereby allowed to present him/herself as embodying certain characteristics by nature. When writing about both his/her professional background and the reasons for applying for the job, the applicant changes from referring

to him/herself in these stable terms of what he *is* to a dynamic view of the self in functional terms of what he/she *does*. While adapting this dynamic categorisation the applicant does in fact present him/herself as a dynamic employee, open to the different functional roles to play at the workplace. Likewise, presenting him as a doer rather than as what he is, the applicant introduces him/herself as an active workforce rather than as a fixed identity.

The self does present himself throughout the discursive practice corresponding to letters of application, in a dynamic way. We can't say that the self is always projected as the same self, but rather observe that the self adapts his self presentation to the rhetorical function at issue, to the functional role he chooses to represent and/or is required from the rhetorical structure of the genre.

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