# Professional Communication and Client Care: literacy implications for vocational and professional adult education

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the professional and vocational higher level literacy education implications of a comparative study looking at communication practices in the domain of professional services, specifically legal business practice. Equally, the discussion impacts on curricula for personal advocacy and community development. The interlinked literacy and language findings develop communication skills as part of professional or advocacy practice by identifying the linguistic framing of a client in reference to pertinent features of a situation, assessment of risk, agency and action and the relationship established between client and professional.

The small-scale study utilises Systemic Functional Linguistics in genre and register analysis, while models of discourse analysis interpret the literacy implications of results. Seven social stages of a client communication are extrapolated, and include functional guidelines and associated language features which contribute to exceptional client care. These pedagogical meta-findings support the wider socio-cultural development of ‘discursive competence’ as part of ‘professional expertise’; and mirroring advocacy implications.

## Introduction

The domains of professional services are a growing market (World Bank, 2000), as is the aspirational client care of other industries. These may include legal, financial, technological, HR, marketing, property, to name just a few. Decisive factors in client or project management and problem resolution include:

* the framing of a client in linguistic terms, such as in what ways they may be agentative, in reference to key features of a situation;
* a professional's representation of that situation, such as critical items, risk factors or avenues for action; and
* the relationship established between client and professional, such as acceptable forms of communication and response to queries.

There is increasing pressure on education to groom learners for highly competitive economies. Appropriate client care and prompt problem identification and resolution remain at the heart of quality preparation for any future career. This paper explores some of the key discoursal features and guidelines in literacy practices, ranging from text to word level. These have been extrapolated from comparative research in negotiations within the legal domain. Professionals may use these in communication to improve the care they provide to their clients. Equally, the findings provide curriculum input for individual advocacy needed throughout the life course, and around high investment life processes, such as interacting with legal, financial or property services or other business activity.

Most professional domains, their discourses and procedures, are obscure to the average individual. Yet, we instruct professionals to advise and act for us, almost entirely mediated by language and written practices. Where a client is dependent upon a professional’s representation of a situation from a specialist perspective, and implicit guidance in order to identify the most appropriate solution(s), the detail of this representation and interaction can be crucial to the outcome of significant decisions. From a personal advocacy point of view, having read up, discussed and informed oneself as well as possible in respect of a given project, in each of the areas outlined, it is meaningful to ask oneself if the professional's representation makes sense in the context and according to one's general world knowledge. Significant discrepancies in understanding give reason to educate oneself further; and to make judgements regarding how worthwhile any given course of action appears to be. This paper outlines key areas for attention.

Communicative features within literacy practices which may contribute to poor understanding include uncertainty and lack of clarity regarding agency, action and risk as well as an inexplicit sense of rudeness. For example, that necessary information does not inform choices presented, that you have not authorised a line of activity that has gone ahead as if you had, being referred to mainly indirectly, negatively, or finding reasonable requests are not responded to.

Whole text-level features of successful communication include generic stages in the structure and functional content; while register features at word- and sentence-level are found in the style and vocabulary used (in particular in respect of agency and risk) and interpersonal techniques. For example, in English, confusing modal forms (will should may certainly) across future, politeness, risk assessment or desirability of action; or 'interpersonal grammatical metaphor' such as whether a declarative (congruent statement) is acting as a 'command', 'question', 'offer' or a simple statement.

This exemplifies both the universal and context specific nature of effective communication practice, and considers the impact on higher level literacies education provision and teacher training.

## Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics

Recent years have seen a flourishing of international research into specialised language and communication in workplace and professional contexts, often through lenses of inter-cultural and business negotiation and foreign language teaching for specific, usually business, purposes (Bhatia and Bremner, eds, 2014; Gee and Handford, eds, 2012). This appears to build on Fairclough's (2014) seminal Critical Discourse Analysis. In work on business and professional communication, Bhatia develops a model of Critical Genre Analysis (CGA), and conceptualises ‘professional expertise’ (2004, p.146) as disciplinary knowledge, professional practice and ‘discursive competence’, namely “the ability to understand and produce discourse in concrete situations”. In particular, Bhatia offers generic competence as,

“the ability to respond to recurrent and novel rhetorical situations by constructing, interpreting, using and often exploiting generic conventions embedded in specific disciplinary cultures and practices to achieve professional ends.”

(Bhatia, 2004, p.141)

It is facility with these professional communication resources we explore in this paper; with some reflection on the potential for conflict with social competence which,

“incorporates an ability to use language more widely to participate effectively in a wide variety of social and institutional contexts to give expression to one’s social identity, in the context of constraining social structures and social processes.”

(Bhatia, 2004, p.144)

Bhatia suggests that some poor performance may be associated with attempts to express social identity in professional culture in ways which conflict with, or at least do not contribute to, functional professional practice. These interpersonal factors can lead to conflict with clients, where a preoccupation with social performance may mask poor performance for the client, or go so far as to undermine professional performance.

To address potential weaknesses in the analytical frameworks, incorporation of forms of triangulation such as ethnographic components and comparison across stakeholders are suggested (Widdowson, 2004), including in the determination and interpretation of exemplar texts. In this study, three independent data collection methods corroborated fully in respect of exemplar texts (A) versus those offering seriously poor service (Y). As well as linguistic analysis, these included institutional peer assessment of performance, and client recounts. This triangulation is open to utilising the ‘professional cultures’ of Bhatia’s Critical Genre Analysis to contribute to locating texts as problematic or exemplar and in interpreting, contextualising and applying, the findings. The client recounts were an early aide to identifying problem areas and focussing in the research on limited aspects of 'field' (ideational representation) and a broad 'tenor' (interpersonal representation) analysis in systemic functional linguistic analysis (SFL).

The study reported in this paper derives its findings from genre and register analysis via a Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday and Matthissen, 2014; Martin, 2010) and discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2014; Coffin et al, 2010, 2009) of professional written communications negotiating new client relationships and associated project activity. These theoretical frameworks and associated analytical tool sets were chosen as in combination they provide a detailed and thorough method of interrogating the relationship between choices in the forms and structures of language, meaning-making and social functions. They enable interrogation of this interplay between forms of ‘ideational’ and ‘interpersonal’ meaning and how these build over texts in interaction with their environments, contributing in combination to effective client care.

There were indicators of problems with the realisation of the ‘angle of representation’ in SFL's ideational metafunction and with social roles and status, social distance and speaker writer persona in SFL's interpersonal metafunction. The study therefore looks at participants and processes; and a broad modality analysis. Modality was of particular interest because of its multiple roles in representing the future, negotiating 'interpersonal grammatical metaphor', communicating probability and desirability of avenues for action and therefore risk management. Equally, 'open and closed stance personas', which indicate high and low commitment. These are all critical information in professional advice.

## Findings

The research findings generated seven social stages of a client communication in the structure and accompanying content of a text, features of the style and vocabulary used (in particular in respect of agency and risk) and interpersonal techniques. These include differences in representation between the greeting and leave-taking stages of a communication and the central body of advisory content. Meaning for clients is determined by how 'participants' are represented in relation to 'processes' (forms of the way things are or who is doing what); via framing statements or offers to communicate, or use of acknowledgement or contradiction to interact to name a few; pronoun and possessive usage can construct subtle but significant shifts in meaning. Critically, modality has a decisive and easily confusing role to play both in communicating risk and negotiating relationships. Detailed description of these areas is outside the scope of this paper.

Seven stages were identified, each with a clear social and functional purpose, which broadly move through opening routines, input and action to closing routines. The exemplar, A, moves sequentially through all generic stages in each communication. In long communications, where there is a large amount of input, the input and action stages (3 to 5) are cycled through for each topic which is clearly demarcated with a heading and paragraph structure. On the other hand, the poor example, Y, shows less consistent generic structure at first. The exemplar structure is moved towards across texts hand-in-hand with growing conflict with the client.

#### Genre Stages

1 – Formulaic greeting

2 – Polite starter, with reference to client/ past

3 – Supporting Response/ confirmation and relevant input

4 – Further input including pre-emption of client concerns/ questions

5 – Closing routine with offer/ action/ reference to future in respect of matter and client

6 – Leave taking including reference to future contact

7 – Formulaic signoff

#### Simple Short Written Communication

Stage Content

1 Dear C

2 Thank you for your \*\*\* enquiry.

3 I confirm that this is likely to be a matter with which I am able to assist.

4 I have a number of cases, similar to your own, that arise from \*\*\* of the \*\*\*.

5, 6 Please feel free to give me a call on the number below in order to discuss the matter further.

7 Yours sincerely,

#### Exemplar Long Written Communication

Available online <http://designingfutures.uk/communication/profcommexemplars_2009.html>

In the exemplar, A, there is a tangible difference in register features between the interactive stages at the open and close of a communication; and the explanatory or advisory content in the body of the letter. The open and close stages (1, 2, 6 and 7) act to reduce social distance and make the professional accessible through a range of formulaic polite language. There is a focus on the professional and client, communication between them and who is undertaking which actions, which creates a relationship trajectory of past and future contact and agreement on actions. The advisory stages (3, 4 and 5) act to interpret and represent specialist matters and advise the client. Short, formal sentences aid clarity. Even arcs of meaning when communicating probability and desirability through modal forms ensure clear risk assessment.

Example: even arcs of meaning in modality

A: “Your \*\*\* **will broadly** consist of:

1. Your \*\*\* costs

2. The \*\*\* costs to the extent you are responsible for them

3. The increase in \*\*\* between the date of the \*\*\* this year, and the first date that you **are able to** \*\*\*. This **will necessarily** be the subject of expert evidence in due course.”

A's three modalised clauses in bold give clear, even arcs of high commitment probability. These are located in a bed of unmodalised sentences, which are equally clear in their meaning. Certainty is expressed about the future.

Y: “a)… If not, then I **would not recommend** that we raise this issue. In any event, I **expect \*\*\* may** obtain a \*\*\* for attaching to the \*\*\* and which **will only** deal with the \*\*\*. If so, this **might cure** the problem.”

Y gives no ummodalised statements in this example; and they swing and juxtapose between high and low commitment. Overall, meaning is very unclear, as is any idea about the future.

Overall, A makes linguistic choices which represent he and his firm as a service provider. While the client initiates overall, as might be expected from a senior professional, A initiates the majority of clear, focussed, structured input, encourages and responds positively to the client in a range of ways. A provides information, makes offers, and uses grammatical metaphor and lexical items to interact with the client politely. Communication is softened by high and low deontic modality as a politeness strategy in the opening and closing stages, which communicates indirectness and moderates power (Coffin et al, 2009, p353) without compromising high commitment modality around input in the body of communications. Modality functions to generate comprehensive arcs of risk assessment in advice; and high commitment future statements. A is politely formal but encourages interaction with the client through some informality in opening and closing sequences and the inclusion of direct dial numbers.

A portrays an umwelt where the client takes a more agentative role, as much as the professional and ‘the rest of the world’. This indicates clearer role allocation and a focus on actions the client may take. A represents their understanding and mental constructions of the world, as might be expected from professional advice, but uses clause constructions (ellipsis, non-finite clauses) which reduce the focus on the professional and maintain it on the information being given. A states who he is and emphasises communication. A realises a relationship with the client through appropriate pronoun and possessive use which clearly denote acting for the client in respect of the matter. These factors contribute to creating professional formality, polite service and accessibility while agency, action and risk are clearly communicated. These specific literacy practices can be explored in significantly more detail.

Y’s responses to the client, particularly the manipulation of interpersonal grammatical metaphor, discrepancies in framing of himself versus the client, and the occasional inappropriate familiarity through 'literary language', could be perceived as a threat to the client's face (Coffin et al, 2009, p352) while input and advice is ambiguous at times to the point of meaningless. Particular warning signs are where modality around risk assessment and advice see-saws between high and low modality, and there is little high commitment reference to the future, giving no clear indication of meaning or certainty. Equally, it is frequently not clear who is initiating, responding or agentative on any given theme. This would be avoided through different linguistic choices, which in turn need to be underpinned by clear professional knowledge and competence. The performance may also be interpreted as an attempt by the professional to construct their identity within a notional ‘professional culture’ in a way which is in conflict with functional ‘professional practice’.

## Conclusion

This paper interprets and reports on linguistic analyses of professional communications negotiating the early stages of client professional relationships and project considerations. It extrapolates findings which contribute to literacy curricula, and which incorporate personal advocacy. These integrate the framing of a client in reference to (a) pertinent features of a situation (b) assessment of risk, agency and action and (c) the relationship established between client and professional.

Seven distinct social stages of a client communication are derived, which indicate functional content and associated language features which contribute to providing exceptional client care. They highlight areas for attention whether in professional performance, or a client's advocacy. While these pedagogical meta-findings are applicable across professional domains, to be applied fully they require contextualisation into any given profession. This requires the development of ‘discursive competence’ hand-in-hand with disciplinary knowledge and professional practice to form ‘professional expertise’.

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