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## ***A Study of the Macrostructure of Written Proposals by Professionals from the Malaysian Business Community***

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A genre is a class of communicative events whose members share some set of communicative goals which are recognised by expert members of a particular discourse community. Hence exemplars of a genre which exhibit similarities in structure, style, context and intended audience will be viewed as prototypical by the parent discourse community. These exemplars need to be examined and *a posteriori* categories developed based on empirical investigation and observation. Such an investigation would focus on a study of discursal development of the genre and by comparing rhetorical similarities and differences, seek to establish a model which could be exploited for pedagogical purposes. Attention also needs to be given to the genre nomenclature created by those who are most familiar with and most professionally involved in these genres. (Swales, 1990)

This study will seek to explore the discursal development of a particular genre by examining the macrostructure of exemplars produced by active members of the discourse community. A study of the macrostructure of a discourse is an effective way of examining discursal development as the macrostructure essentially reflects the communicative message of a text.

Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) suggest that macrostructures were designed to capture the intuitive notion of the "gist" of a discourse. While a textbase represents the meaning of a text in all its detail, the macrostructure is concerned only with the essential points of the text. Coherence within a discourse is hence examined at a global level dealing primarily such as topic, theme, gist and point of discourse. An examination

of these elements would provide valuable insights on how a particular discourse is structured.

This paper proposes to examine the macrostructure of business proposals. Six proposals obtained from local companies together with an interview with a key informant, provided the research material for the study. The working hypotheses for this analysis are

1. clear regularities can be found in the macrostructure of the corpus examined.
2. in the corpus examined the macrostructure of the Executive Summary consists of a specific set of macropropositions which do not vary

The Executive Summary was selected for detailed analysis as both primary and secondary sources confirmed that it is one of the most important elements of proposals.

#### **MACROSTRATEGIES**

Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) suggest that macrostructures are conveyed to the reader through a series of **STRUCTURAL**, **SYNTACTIC** and **SEMANTIC SIGNALS**, each helping the reader to draw inferences about the topic of the discourse. **Structural signals** would include the following:

1. Titles
2. Subtitles, headings, captions
3. Initial appearance of sentences
4. Summaries

**Syntactic strategies** draw attention to global thematic importance only indirectly via cumulative inferences, for example, by means of repetition. If a lexical item is repeated regularly throughout the discourse one could provisionally assume that the item would certainly feature in the macroproposition of that discourse.

**Semantic strategies** rely on the meaning of words, phrases and sentences to provide clues at the macrolevel. Since an examination of the macrostructure of proposals essentially entails a top-down approach, this study will rely mainly on the use of

structural signals and to some extent semantic strategies to examine the macrostructure of the discourse.

### **FORMAT OF PROPOSALS**

A proposal, according to Brinegar and Skates (1983), is a plan submitted for approval. It may be a proposal to promote a product, secure a contract, or obtain funds for research. Regardless of the type of proposal that is written, the objective always remains the same, i.e. to persuade the audience that a specific job should be done in a specific manner. In order to do this the writer must convince his audience that the proposal is sound, valuable and sensible. Since his audience may range from the Chief Executive Officer of a company to the evaluating officer, the report has to be brief and clear so that readers, operating in a world where time is of the essence, will not be put off by long-winded prose. At the same time the report has to include sufficient detail to impress his readers. Roy Meador (1985: 11) in his study on proposals, highlighted the following points:

**“In preparing your proposal, identify very clearly what your idea is. Provide a clear explanation that will persuade a very knowledgeable person your idea will work, that you have an achievable goal...”**

Brinegar and Skates (1983), Meador (1985), Trzyna and Batschelet (1987), Damerst and Bell (1990) suggest that regardless of the length, most proposals contain the following elements.

- A. Cover Letter/Letter of Transmittal
- B. Cover and Title Page
- C. Table of Contents
- D. List of Illustrations
- E. Summary/Abstract
- F. Statement of Research Problem/Programme
- G. Review of the Literature/Background of the Problem
- H. Purpose/Objectives and Expected Benefits of the Project
- I. Description of the Project/Procedure/Methods
- J. Time Schedule
- K. Key Project Participants (Facilities, Personnel)
- L. Capabilities and Experience
- M. Project Budget/Cost Analysis
- N. Administrative Provisions and Organizational Chart

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- O. Alternative Funding
- P. Post Project Planning
- Q. Appendices and Support Materials
- R. Bibliography and References

In the corpus examined only the following elements were common to all the Proposals, hence only these areas form the basis of analysis

- A. Letter of Transmittal
- B. Cover and Title Page
- C. Table of Contents
- D. Summary or Abstract
- E. Statement of Research Problem/Programme
- F. Objectives and Expected Benefits of the Project
- G. Issues Crucial to the Project
- H. Description of the Project/Procedure
- I. Capabilities and Experience
- J. Project Budget/Cost Analysis
- K. Appendices
- L. References

The elements A-L with the exception of G have been documented and referred to by Brinegar and Skates (1983), Meador (1985), Trzyna and Batschelet (1987), Damerst and Bell (1990). Element G however is a new element introduced in this study as it was found to be present consistently in the proposals examined.

### **RESULTS**

This section will briefly analyse the macrostructure of the elements of a proposal

#### **A. Letter of Transmittal**

This element is looked upon as a persuasive tool in a proposal. An examination of its macrostructure reveals that the Letter of Transmittal has the following macrofunctions.

1. It introduces the purpose of the report.
2. It briefly summarises the contents.
3. It urges acceptance of the proposal.

### **B. Cover and Title Page**

The title expresses the top level of the macrostructure of any discourse as it immediately captures the gist of what the discourse is about. It provides the topic of the proposal.

### **C. Table of Contents**

The Table of Contents is the next level in the macrostructure of the Proposal. It is immediately macrorelevant as it can be regarded as a list of subtitles which identifies the topic in each section. It provides structure and organisation to the proposal. Hence the macrofunction of this element is to provide subtitles in the order in which they appear in the discourse

The Table of Contents not only allows the reader to grasp the scope of the report at a glance, it also informs the reader exactly what the writer perceives to be pertinent to the report, by including certain headings and omitting others. The reader, therefore, can decide whether the proposal is going to be helpful to him just by perusing these high-level macrostructures. It is for this reason that we often return a book to its stack after a quick glance at the Table of Contents, deciding from this list of brief and concise phrases that what we are looking for will not be found within the pages of the book or does not provoke additional interest.

### **D. Executive Summary**

The Summary can be considered one of the most important elements of the Proposal. For many readers the summary helps them decide whether or not to read the document (Burnett, 1990). According to a key informant, the busy Chief Executive Officer or his representative often has only a few minutes to read a particular report. The Executive Summary, therefore, is often the first element to be read. If The Summary has been successful in arousing the interest of the officer he will then pass the report on to his second line officers for a more detailed reading. In order to get past the first stage, proposal writers will have to structure the Summary carefully adding enough information to persuade the Executive Officer that the proposal might be worth looking into.

The Executive Summary therefore is structured to impress and usually includes the following macrofunctions.

1. Introduces the company for whom the report is written and states problem in general terms.

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2. Introduces main concern of the proposal.
3. Outlines current situation
4. Outlines proposed solution
5. Emphasises standing of the firm as an expert in the field.
6. States benefits if proposal is implemented.

In the corpus examined, the Statement of the Research Problem is dealt with in The Summary and not as a separate section, therefore the next section to be analysed is the Objectives of the Proposal.

#### **F. Objectives and Expected Benefits of the Project**

This element introduces the objectives of the proposal. In order to impress the reader these objectives should materialise in concrete and attainable results. Therefore this section ends with a brief projection on Expected Benefits of the project.

#### **G. Issues Crucial to the Project**

This element is introduced in this study as "new" as it has not been documented or referred to by Brinegar and Skates (1983), Meador (1985), Trzyna and Batschelet (1987), Dameris and Bell (1990). However, Issues Crucial to the Project has appeared consistently in all the Proposals examined. The element does not exhibit the characteristics associated with any of the elements listed under the section on Format of Proposals.

Hence, one could tentatively assume that, Issues Crucial to the Project, a name given to this element in this study, has risen out of a need, by the writers of the proposals examined, to include information that is considered crucial to the proposal. The element is strategically positioned between the elements "Objectives and Expected Benefits" and "Description of the Project". It is almost as if the proposal writer is signalling the fact that "Issues Crucial to the Project" is not strictly a part of the Objectives of the Proposal nor does it belong in the main description of the project itself. It is in fact

crucial issues pertaining to the project and it is only after such issues are given due consideration that the reader can fully appreciate the nature of the proposed project.

This element does not seem to fit under "Background of the Problem" which is mentioned in Brinegar and Skates (1983). In the Proposals examined "Background of the Problem" is dealt

with in the Executive Summary Issues Crucial to the Project seeks to highlight issues or priorities that have to be considered before procedures in the proposal can be outlined. This element hence considers priority areas under the subtitle *Priorities/Requirements/Issues*.

#### **H. Description of the Project/Procedure**

This element is significant as it explains the methods or procedures used to achieve the goals of the proposal. It could be regarded as the central element of the proposal (Meador, 1985). Everything before this, builds towards the information found here and everything after this supplements the information found in this element. It comprises the following macrofunctions:

1. introduces the procedure,
2. outlines the procedure,
3. highlights the benefits of the procedure

#### **I. Capabilities and Experience**

This element establishes trust and credibility (Brinegar and Skates, 1983). The writer highlights the relevant experience of the firm. The desired effect is to inspire confidence and create an excellent impression. This element was found to have the following macrofunctions.

1. It establishes the standing of the firm as an expert in the field.
2. It evaluates past performance.
3. It reiterates benefits of adopting the proposal.

#### **J. Project Budget/Cost Analysis**

This element aims at clarity, accuracy and easy interpretation. As such, the macromoves tend to be brief and precise. It lists expenditures anticipated in the project. The information is often presented in the form of tables and charts. This element.

1. introduces the budget,
2. provides a summary of the cost,
3. provides miscellaneous cost considerations.

#### **K. Appendices**

The Appendices contain a straightforward listing of titles to

introduce supporting documents, for example, some proposals include personnel resumes, detailed charts of statistics or product brochures.

#### **L. References**

This device enhances credibility and establishes academic verification of the Proposal (Meador, 1985). Hence this element comprises a list of references usually with the most impressive references heading the list.

### **THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This section will examine what was found to be one of the most important elements of the proposal, i.e. the Executive Summary also known as the Introductory Summary. Damerst (1972) points out that some executives leave close reading of reports to the technical specialists, they themselves read just the summary.

This is reinforced by Damerst and Bell (1990) who regard the Executive Summary as the most meaningful of all abridgements. The summary not only represents the whole report. It also includes enough detail, along with the writer's conclusions and recommendations, to enable the reader to make a decision.

According to one key informant the Executive Summary has to successfully capture the attention of the top level management executive almost immediately. If the summary fails to impress the executive, he may not want to waste company time by passing the report on to his second liners. In short, the proposal gets 'shelved' and the proposal writer has in effect failed to achieve his objective.

The above clearly indicates that the executive summary is a crucial element in the proposal. Hence it would benefit the learner if he could understand what essentially comprises an effective executive summary. The first step in this process would be to look at the macropropositions that are conveyed in the discourse of this element.

An examination of the corpus has shown that the kind of macropropositions that appear in an executive summary are consistent. The summary seeks to capture the attention of the client in a brief and effective manner.

According to a key informant, the proposer uses language that presents his company and project in the best possible light. His claims are aimed at drawing attention to his company's

ability to meet the needs of his client.

In the proposals examined the first paragraph identifies both the proposer and the client. The proposer then provides information which indicates that he has extended knowledge about the client's needs. He does this either by referring to previous knowledge about the company or by referring to research carried out on the company, by the proposer, which is immediately relevant to the proposal that is being submitted.

This section is immediately followed by one that briefly outlines the objectives of the proposal. In this section the proposer seeks to outline the objectives as clearly and as accurately as he can. According to a key informant if the objectives of the proposal are not in line with the needs of the client, then the executive may not see much point in reading further.

The objectives are usually summarised into one or two sentences. They usually comprise two parts:

1. The client's primary objectives.
2. The primary benefits of implementing the proposal.

The proposer then outlines the campaign or the description of the project. In doing so the proposer seeks to highlight unique benefits of the proposal, i.e. one proposal mentions conducting the project in a 'cost effective manner' as this is one of the client's primary concerns. The description of the project then proceeds to focus on this.

Next, the summary draws attention to the proposer's experience and ability to carry out the project. This is done by mentioning names of previous clients. The proposer seeks to establish credibility and trust. Then the proposer's expertise in the field is highlighted.

The above analysis shows that the Executive Summary is really a shorter version of the whole proposal. A proposal writer would only have to expand on the macropropositions contained in the executive summary in order to obtain a complete version of his proposal. Furthermore, the macropropositions outlined above appear consistently in the corpus examined. This has important pedagogical implications. If proposal writers set out to convey a specific and consistent set of macropropositions in order to achieve a desired effect, then learners have to master these macropropositions if they want to write an effective proposal. This can also have implications for material design as materials must focus on teaching the pragmatic effects of a discourse.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the corpus has shown that *clear regularities are present in the macrostructure of proposals*. The regularities are reflected in the macropropositions used to structure the argument in each element of the proposal. These macro moves have a clear pattern which is strictly adhered to by the writers of the Proposals examined. This study could be the first step towards setting up a model for Proposals. This model should be set up based on the findings that there are clear regularities present in the structure of proposals written by Professionals in the Malaysian Business Community. Hence armed with the corpus from the target discourse community, a model can be set up to provide specific macrofunctions and their sample linguistic realisations for each element in the proposal. Such a model would furnish the learner with the necessary tools to help him become a member of this particular discourse community. The target learner that this study has in mind is one who may already be an expert in his field but lacks the necessary language to effectively communicate his ideas in the form of a report. This learner would then greatly benefit from being taught to recognise a specific set of macrofunctions, found regularly in the discourse of proposals and to produce the linguistic realisations of these functions.

Finally, it would seem that Professionals in the local Business Community seem to have made certain decisions on the format of proposal writing. At times they choose to deviate from the format proposed by researchers in the United States. A clear indication of the above is the element "Issues Crucial to the Project". This element is found in the Proposals examined for this study but it does not appear in the list of elements proposed by Brinegar and Skates (1983), Meador (1985), Trzyna and Batschelet (1987), Damerst and Bell (1990).

This element clearly satisfies a need to express new information which is integral to the proposal. Whether this element is culture specific or one that signals an additional element in Proposals, can only be determined by future studies. Another study which would be of interest, is one that determines similarities or differences between Proposals written by Professionals in the Malaysian Business Community and their counterparts overseas. This would help us to gain valuable insights on just how culture specific a particular discourse community can be.

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