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A textlinguistic and genological approach to the letters of application.

Abstract

In this article we analysed a corpus of letters of application that received an evaluation by the recruiters. We investigated whether there existed a correlation between the structural and linguistic characteristics of the letters and the positive or negative evaluation by the recruiting officers. For the rhetorical structure of the letters of application, we adopted the genre approach by Bhatia (1993); for the persuasiveness of the style we used the metadiscursivity classification of Louhiala-Salminen (1999). Both the move structure and the metadiscursivity seem to play an important role in the appreciation of the letters of application by the recruitment officers. There is a significant correlation between the evaluation by the recruitment officers on the one hand and the rhetorical structure and the use of metadiscursive elements on the other hand.

As persuasive texts, letters of application aim at a certain effect: the reader should invite the applicant to an interview. Without an effective letter, there is no interview and thus no job. In reality of course, the matter of applying for a position is much more complex. Not only has the Internet introduced other forms of initiating contact between an applicant and a recruiter, but the recruiters have, at least in Belgium, also responded proactively by recruiting on the student campuses or writing recruitment letters to graduates or last year's students.

Thus, the importance of the letter in the soliciting process has to be put into perspective. Nevertheless, for the more generalist jobs, the letter of application still has a role to play. In education, the letter of application is still part of the curriculum. For the student writing these letters, the letter may be an inspiring exercise since he is prompted to take the reader

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seriously and has to find a match between his abilities and preferences and the demands and needs of the market place.

Inspired by the American research of Harcourt & Krizan (1989) and Spinks & Wells (1987, 1993), Verckens (1994) conducted a survey in which recruitment officers were asked to give examples of what they believed to be good and bad letters. More precisely, they were asked to provide letters with a good and a bad opening sentence, with a good and a bad tone or style, depending on the errors against orthography, lexicon and syntax.

We took a selection of the material Verckens obtained from the recruiters in order to investigate the possible effectiveness of the letters. Unfortunately the recruiters did not always indicate why they considered a letter good or bad. Apparently, it was not so easy for them to motivate their choice without taking the contents into account. They agreed that the form plays an important role in the evaluation of the letters, but what kind of role exactly, they found it more difficult to describe. Neither the advertisements nor the curricula vitae were always available, so it was virtually impossible for us to assess the persuasive quality of the letters, since persuasiveness is also a matter of contents.

1. Aim and method of investigation

Because of these limitations and also because of the interesting field material¹, we tried to find another way of capturing the persuasiveness of the letters by looking at the structural and linguistic form of the letters. What we have tried to investigate then is whether there existed a correlation between the structural and linguistic characteristics of the letters and the positive or negative evaluation by the recruiting officers.

The following two research questions were selected:

1. Is there a correlation between the evaluation by the recruitment officers and the rhetorical structure described in the handbooks for business communication and in genre literature?

¹ For more information on the survey, see Gillaerts & Verckens (1999). I would like to thank J. Piet Verckens for the use of the material he collected.

2. Is there a correlation between the evaluation by the recruitment officers and the use of metadiscursive elements in the letters of application?

For both questions we allowed for a possible difference between solicited and unsolicited letters.

For the rhetorical structure of the letters of application, we adopted the genre approach of Bhatia (1993) who, in line with Swales (1990), distinguishes between several moves in this type of letter. Bhatia found an identical rhetorical structure for letters of application and sales letters. Both share a common communicative purpose: to sell a product, service or capacity for work. According to Bhatia, this type of text consists of seven moves which are aimed at serving the communicative purpose.

As Louhiala-Salminen (1999), among others, has indicated, persuasive business letters can also be characterized by their use of metadiscursive elements. The amount of metadiscursivity may tell something about the persuasive capacity of the letters, although the contents, especially the argumentation remains important.

2. Corpus

From the 169 letters of the survey, we selected 40 letters according to the following criteria:

- a reasonable spread in time (from 1993 to 1998);
- comparable in length;
- an equal number of positively and negatively evaluated letters;
- an equal number of unsolicited and solicited letters.

Our corpus consisted of 10 positive unsolicited letters, 10 positive solicited letters, 10 negative unsolicited letters and 10 negative solicited letters.

Firstly, we analysed these letters structurally.

3. Structural analysis

3.1. Analysis of the moves

Bhatia (1993) distinguishes the following seven moves in the rhetorical structure of letters of application:

1. Establishing credentials
2. Introducing candidature
 - a. Offering the candidature
 - b. Essential detailing of the candidature
 - c. Indicating the value of the candidature
3. Offering incentives
4. Enclosing documents
5. Soliciting response
6. Using pressure tactics
7. Ending politely

The second move is the most important one, with the third submove of the second move being crucial.

Compared to American literature on the structure of the cover letter, Bhatia's analysis seems more refined. Thill & Bovée (1999), Lehman & Dufrenne (1998) and Ewald & Brunett (1996) all use four steps, following the AIDA formula for sales letters: attention, interest (introducing qualifications), desire (presenting evidence) and action. Looking a bit more closely at their descriptions of the different steps, however, their structural analyses are very much alike. They even introduce a step not mentioned by Bhatia: justification of salary requirements.

The Dutch literature (Elling 1994, Verrept 1991, Steehouder 1992) resemble the American literature without adding much. In this study, we follow Bhatia's analytical framework because it is the most articulated, based on corpus research and without prescriptive aims.

Below is an example from the corpus with indication of the different moves (the more or less literal translation of the Dutch letter is mine; the abbreviations are explained on p.7).

Example 1: Job application letter

Dear Mrs,
Dear Sir,

(Move 2a)

Concerning (EM): Vacancy

(Move 1)

As you may know (FM/RM), the BP Group has world wide undertaken deep reorganisations. Consequently (LC) also BP Belgium, for which I

first (O) worked as a secretary and later (O) as an expatriate tax administrator, has adapted their policies. The diminished perspective (EM), the living-working distance Zoersel/Brussels, together with the favourable conditions of the restructuration offered to me, have brought me to (H) the decision to resign.

(Move 2a/b)

At the moment (LC/FM), I am looking for a job in my own region, part-time if possible (H), in which I can develop my professional capacities (E) further and complement them with new knowledge and experience.

(Move 2a)

From this point of view (FM), I apply (E) for the function of indoor employee in your company. Besides the organisation and execution of the usual secretary or administrative tasks, I would (H) be glad to be responsible for the autonomous handling of specific topics (E). (Move 2b) Given my background (E), a function in the personnel administration would be possible (H).

(Move 4)

The enclosed curriculum vitae gives you a first (H) idea of my knowledge and experience (E). (Move 5) If your company has vacancies, following this profile, I would (H) appreciate (EM) to be invited for an intake interview.

(Move 7)

Most (AM) sincerely

In the first move (Move 1) the applicant tries to gain credibility by referring to his most important quality and/or the needs of the organization for applications, expressed in the advertisement. In the second move (Move 2 a/b) the applicant offers his candidature, details it and tries to convince his reader of its quality for the application. The third move of Bhatia's scheme does not play a role in this letter since incentives resemble the value the candidature is attributed to. You do not find it in this letter either. Normally there is a résumé (curriculum vitae) as an enclosing document, constituting the fourth move (Move 4). The fifth move (Move 5) clearly indicates the purpose of the applicant: to be invited to an introductory and/or selective interview. The sixth move may be considered as inappropriate in the context of an application because the recruitment officer and the applicant are not in an equal position. So, the applicant is not able to use strong pressure; the sixth move is absent in our example. The seventh and last move (Move 7) is typical of all business communica-

tion because it refers to the goodwill element which guarantees future contacts. Usually a more or less fixed formula is used here.

3.2. Results

All 40 letters were analysed in accordance with the move structure developed by Bhatia, with the following results.

Table 1: The move-structure for the 40 analysed letters

| Letters (neg-unsoll) | Moves | Number of moves (paragraphs) |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1: | 1 2b 2c 3 3 5 7 | 7(3) |
| 2: | 1 2a 2b 2c 1 5 7 4 | 8(5) |
| 3: | 1 2b 2c 2b 2c 5 7 4 | 8(4) |
| 4: | 1 2a 2c 4 2c 5 7 | 7(4) |
| 5: | 4 1 2b 2c 2b 2c 2b 2c 5 4 7 | 11(5) |
| 6: | 2a 4 2c 2c 2a 5 7 | 7(5) |
| 7: | 1 2c 2a 4 5 7 | 6(5) |
| 8: | 2a 1 2a 2b 5 7 4 | 7(2) |
| 9: | 1 2a 2b 1 5 7 | 6(4) |
| 10: | 2a 1 2b 4 5 7 | 6(3) |

| Letters (neg-soll) | Moves | Number of moves (paragraphs) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1: | 1 4 5 7 | 4(3) |
| 2: | 1 2a 4 2b 2c 7 | 6(3) |
| 3: | 1 1 1 2c 5 7 4 | 7(3) |
| 4: | 1 2c 3 5 4 | 5(3) |
| 5: | 1 1 2a 2b 4 2c 4 5 7 | 9(5) |
| 6: | 1 1 2c 2b 2a 5 7 | 7(4) |
| 7: | 1 1 2a 2c 5 7 4 | 7(3) |
| 8: | 1 2a 2c 5 7 | 5(9) |
| 9: | 1 1 2a 2b 2c 2b 2c 2b 2c 5 7 4 | 12(8) |
| 10: | 1 2a 1 4 5 7 4 | 7(2) |

| Letters (pos-unsoll) | Moves | Number of moves (paragraphs) |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1: | 1 2a 2a 1 4 5 7 | 7(5) |
| 2: | 1 2a 2c 4 5 7 4 | 7(7) |
| 3: | 2c 1 2a 2c 2c 5 4 7 | 8(4) |
| 4: | 1 1 2a 2c 5 7 4 | 7(4) |
| 5: | 1 2a 1 2c 2c 5 7 4 | 8(4) |
| 6: | 2a 1 2c 4 5 5 7 4 | 8(5) |
| 7: | 1 2a 2a 2b 4 5 7 | 7(4) |
| 8: | 1 2a 2c 5 4 7 4 | 7(4) |
| 9: | 1 2a 2b 2c 2a 5 4 5 7 3 | 10(3) |
| 10: | 1 2c 2c 2c 4 5 7 | 7(4) |

| Letters (pos-soll) | Moves | Number of moves (paragraphs) |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1: | 2a 1 1 2c 3 5 7 | 7(4) |
| 2: | 1 2c 1 2c 2c 5 7 | 7(5) |
| 3: | 1 2a 4 2c 2b 2c 5 7 | 8(4) |
| 4: | 1 1 2a 2c 4 5 7 4 | 8(3) |
| 5: | 1 2a 2b 5 4 | 5(4) |
| 6: | 1 2a 1 2a 2c 4 5 7 | 8(3) |
| 7: | 1 2a 1 2b 2c 2c 1 2c 2c 2c 3 5 7 4 | 15(8) |
| 8: | 1 2a 2b 2b 2b 1 2c 5 7 | 9(7) |
| 9: | 1 2a 2b 2c 2c 7 | 6(4) |
| 10: | 1 2a 2b 2a 2c 4 5 5 7 | 9(8) |

I summarize the most important findings.

1. The negatively and positively evaluated solicited letters show an important difference in the number of moves: on average 6.9 vs. 8.2. The more moves the applicants use, the more positive their evaluations are.
2. Some moves prove to be more important than others. The importance of the second move is manifest in all the letters. But here there is also a difference between the negative and the positive letters: more second moves lead to a more positive response. Especially, the crucial move 2c occurs more frequently in the positive than in the negative letters. The first move (Move 1) is present in all positive letters, which affirms the importance of a good opening sentence shown in the interviews.
3. As far as the order of the moves is concerned, a lot of variation appears to be possible. Thus, reference to the curriculum vitae may occur

everywhere, although there is a slight preference for mentioning the curriculum vitae at the end of the letter in the positive letters. In the solicited letters, there is a clear preference for using the first move (move 1) at the beginning of the letter.

4. All the letters have less paragraphs than moves. This means that in one paragraph several moves may be used. In other words, the paragraph does not follow the rhetorical structure of the letter. Also the opposite occurs: more paragraphs than moves; thus, in one negative solicited letter, one particular move is scattered over several paragraphs. But normally there should not be too many paragraphs in the letter. There is no difference in the recruiters' evaluations with respect to the relationship between the moves and paragraphs in the two different letter types. Here, an average of 1.6 and 1.82 was obtained, respectively.

5. It is remarkable that there are relatively more repetitions of moves in the positively evaluated letters than in those negatively evaluated. We assume that this means that, in the view of the recruiters, the letters should be rhetorically well-designed.

4. Metadiscursivity

4.1. Analysis of the metadiscursivity

We also investigated the degree of metadiscursivity in the job application letter. In line with Halliday's (1973) distinction between the three "macrofunctions" of language use, the literature on metadiscursivity generally distinguishes between textual and interpersonal metadiscursive elements. For both kinds of metadiscursivity, the writer gives extra (meta) information for the benefit of the reader. According to Louhiala-Salminen (1999), the metadiscursive elements indicate how the writer assesses the appropriate interpersonal and intertextual relations. For both types of metadiscursivity she uses four specifications:

Table 2: Classification of metadiscourse

Textual metadiscursivity:

1. logical connectives (LC)
2. frame markers (FM)
3. organizers (O)
4. explanatory markers (EM)

Interpersonal metadiscursivity:

1. hedges (H)
2. emphatics (E)
3. attitude markers (AM)
4. relational markers (RM)

Louhiala-Salminen's classification is based on Van de Kopple (1985), Crismore (1989) and Hyland (1998) and differs only slightly from their approach.

By using textual metadiscourse, the writer makes explicit his preferred interpretation of the text and strengthens the cohesion of the text. The explicitness is essential and implicit metadiscourse is left out.

The first instance of textual metadiscourse in Table 2 mainly relates to conjunctions with a metadiscoursal (not merely a syntactic) purpose, the so-called logical connectives.

The second category of textual metadiscourse, frame markers, focuses the reader's attention, introduces a new topic or connects the message to previous events or messages. Thus, in a solicited letter of application, e.g., there normally is a reference to the advertisement. The category "organizers" refers to the so-called sequencers (like "first", "next", "finally") and endophoric markers (Hyland 1998) like "noted above", "see below". Also, subtitles, numbering, punctuation and typographical means belong to this category.

The last category of textual metadiscourse consists of explanatory markers which indicate to the reader that additional information is given to help him to interpret the text. Typical markers would be "for example", "such as" and illocution markers (Crismore 1989) (e.g. "I confirm", "I promise" etc.).

With respect to the second type of metadiscourse, "interpersonal metadiscourse" involves the tenor of the discourse. The first two (hedges

and emphatics) refer to the writer's commitment to the truth-value of the proposition, the third category (attitude markers) covers the attitude of the writer towards both the content and the reader, while the fourth one (relational markers) covers, more or less emphatically, the reader-writer relationship.

For an illustration of what is meant by these terms, see the corpus example (Example 1) above in which the different metadiscursive elements are indicated.

Like with the moves, we asked ourselves whether there is a certain regularity or pattern in the use of the eight metadiscursive elements and whether there are differences between the solicited and unsolicited letters, and between the successful and the unsuccessful ones. In this research we took a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. This means that we did not count all the instances of the eight types of metadiscourse, but tried to concentrate on the main tendencies. Subjective interpretation is unavoidable. Not only do certain categories overlap to some extent, but a linguistic unit may also have different functions and may be categorized differently by different researchers. Both Louhiala-Salminen (1999) and Hyland (1998) have pointed at this methodological problem. I too am fully aware of this, but believe that a methodologically well-designed analysis by an experienced researcher can somewhat minimise this problem. A quantitative approach would suggest objectivity, but will mask the many interpretational choices underlying the numbers.

4.2. Results

Positively evaluated letters are characterized in the following way:

1. The logical connectives and the organizers are in general more manifestly present in the positive letters; the temporal coherence may e.g. be dominant.
2. The emphatics and the hedges are both present, but on a reasonable scale as illustrated in the following fragment:

Example 2

I am nevertheless fully aware of the fact that the given information may still be too limited in order to come to an actual 'partnership'. So, I am ready to offer you all further information, be it written or by means of an individual interview.

Negatively evaluated letters show:

1. less logical connectives and organisers
2. too many emphatics or too many hedges
3. too few emphatics or too few hedges
4. emphatics or hedges both at the beginning and the end of the letter.

The following example (again in a literal translation) is from a letter with too many hedges:

Example 3

I have always intended to keep on applying for a job that interests me or that could mean an improvement. Moreover my present job is endangered by economic reasons.

I would rather defend this spontaneous application in a personal interview. Hoping and waiting for a positive reaction I sign with the most sincerity (sic, the underlining is not mine).

As far as the use of emphatics is concerned, we find instances of lexical boost in the first move. There is a significant difference between the positive and negative letters, the former making use of more emphatics (intensifiers), e.g. giving specific reasons for the application, detailing the circumstances of a dismissal. These additions can also be classified as explanatory markers.

In most letters, the frame markers occur at the beginning of the first move. Only one letter is without a first move and a frame marker and - not surprisingly – obtains a negative evaluation.

For the relational and attitude markers we did not detect any correlation with the evaluations. Only for the last move (ending politely) did we find a rather impressive variation in formulae in the positive letters. There was a tendency to enforce the formality, as if the applicant attempts to create a distance between himself and the evaluator by indicating his lower social position. In general the evaluators seem to like that.

Summing up, we can conclude that good letters become more credible by using a well-balanced mix of hedges and emphatics and by using more textual metadiscursive elements to show rationality and argumentation. In this respect there is an ideal equilibrium between the textual and the interpersonal metadiscursivity of the text.

5. Conclusion

Both the move structure and the metadiscursivity seem to play an important role in the appreciation of the letters of application by the recruitment officers. There is a significant correlation between the evaluation by the recruitment officers on the one hand and the rhetorical structure and the use of metadiscursive elements on the other hand.

As for the moves analysis, we find that a considerable number of different moves is important to obtain a positive evaluation and that applicants benefit from giving sufficient attention to the value of their candidature (move 2c). It appears that the use of textual metadiscursivity should not be underestimated and a balanced mix of hedges and emphatics seems to be required.

Since rhetorical structure and metadiscursivity both have an influence on the judgment of the recruiters, it is advisable to pay more attention to matters of form and strategy in education and training. Not only does the content-oriented argumentation deserve attention. The metadiscursive and rhetorical aspects of this type of text are equally in need of consideration.

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