Workplace texts: do they mean the same for teachers and business people?

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Abstract

Although in recent years there has been an increase in the research and development of resources for workplace English, work in this field is still rather limited. This article reports a study which combined a text analytical approach with a social perspective to consider the ways in which certain thematic choices construe different meanings for different types of reader. The study analysed Theme in two sample workplace texts, and contrasted this with informant interpretations drawn from focus group interviews with 12 business people and 15 EFL teachers. The findings not only identified some of the functions that Theme performs in workplace texts, but showed that the differing interpretations of Theme from the perspectives of teachers and business persons respectively are due to the interpersonal meanings carried by the texts. The findings concerning Theme, especially how thematic choices create different interpretations in workplace genres, could be used to inform and improve the pedagogy of writing in the workplace.

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1. Introduction

For many in the workplace, English is seen as an important element for conducting successful business (Charles & Charles, 1999; Davies, Forey, & Hyatt, 1999; Forey & Nunan, 2002; among others). In Hong Kong, where the data for the present study were collected, the competitiveness of the business community depends greatly on the quality of its professionals and their ability to communicate within the global economy. Improvement in the quality of communication, and in particular raising
the standard of English in the business world, is viewed as one of the main factors to help maintain and enhance Hong Kong’s status as an international finance centre.

While efforts are made in many countries to provide language training for employees, there have also been many calls from government and educationalists in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia for the language of the workplace to be better integrated into mainstream English language pedagogy in schools and universities. The calls for better English language resources to aid the teaching of genres related to the workplace have been voiced by those involved in primary, secondary and tertiary education (Alexander, 1999; Berry, 1995, 1996; Carter, 1990; Martin, 1985, 1997).

The impetus for this study is from the classroom where according to Brown and Herndl (1986), Williams (1988), Berry (1995, 1996), Barbara, Celani, Collins, and Scott (1996), Crosling and Ward (2002) and others a ‘gap’ exists between the workplace and pedagogic resources. When piloting workplace material as part of in-service training, it became clear that the students’ interpretations often diverged substantially from the researcher/teacher’s and from those of the material writers. The students were full-time business people attending an in-service course. It seemed that the business people who are familiar with such texts in their professional lives, could be given a voice and that their voices should be reported and compared with the voices of EFL teachers, who are involved in developing and using pedagogic material. This paper continues the argument that there is a mismatch between what teachers/trainers are trying to teach and the language business people identify with. In the context of an EFL classroom, teachers are often involved in using business texts as exemplar texts and in some, possibly many, cases the teachers themselves may have had only limited exposure to the business world and its texts. In addition, a number of studies undertaken emphasise the need for an analysis of authentic texts, and recommend that commercial materials which have been constructed and which bear little resemblance to the real language used in the workplace, should be reviewed and replaced (Charles, 1996; Louhiala-Salminen, 1996; Williams, 1988).

In recent years an increasing number of studies related to workplace English has been conducted in the field of applied linguistics. Although this body of knowledge into the language of the workplace is growing St John (1996), Swales (2000) and Hewings (2002) point out that it is still rather limited compared to many other well-researched applied linguistic areas of study. The analysis of workplace texts has proceeded from different starting points, for instance, the selection of a range of texts within a single organisation (Iedema, 1995, 1999, 2000; Nickerson, 1998, 1999) and of particular types of texts (Bhatia, 1993a, 1993b; Carter, 1990; Davies et al., 1999; Ede & Lunsford, 1985; Forey & Nunan, 2002; Gimenez, 2000; Harvey, 1995; Mulholland, 1999; Nickerson, 1998, 1999; Santos, 2002; etc.). Intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication have also been the starting points for many studies of English in the workplace, for example, by Bee-Leng (1992), Connor (1999), Du-Babcock and Babcock (1995, 1996), Nickerson and Van Nus (1999) Scollon and Scollon (1995), Smart (1998), and Rogerson-Revell (1999). Ethnography has also been an entry point to the study of workplace texts (Brown & Herndl, 1986;

Some studies focus particularly on spoken texts. For example, negotiation skills are ranked high on the list of needs in the business community according to Charles and Charles (1999), Peres de Souza (1994), Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997) and Bilbow (1997, 1998) analyse business meetings, focusing on different aspects of the discourse of the meetings. Iedema (1999, 2000) points out that written texts are often outcomes of spoken interactions. Thus although the focus in the present study is on written texts, it is understood that these texts are part of a greater intertextual relationship between other forms of communication both spoken and written (Devitt, 1991; Iedema, 1995, 1999, 2000).

This study builds on earlier work on workplace English and specifically on research undertaken in the project Effective Writing for Management (EWM) (Davies & Forey, 1996; Davies et al., 1999), the project Communication in the Professional Workplace (CPW) (Nunan & Forey, 1996; Forey & Nunan, 2002) and by Forey (2002). This paper sets out to investigate the linguistic choices made in a text, and the ways in which texts, and specifically Theme in a text, are interpreted by different stakeholders. The aim is to reach a clearer understanding of how EFL professionals and business people view the meaning making going on in texts. Two sample business English texts are discussed from a linguistic and also a social perspective in order to examine whether a gap exists between what teachers and business people judge as being appropriate language in written English workplace texts.

The present paper analyses written workplace texts, focusing specifically on the choice of Theme, and incorporates the social perspective of informant interpretations of a text in its analysis in order to understand how certain meanings are made. As Iedema points out:

To appreciate the constructive power of administration and its language, we need to ‘unpack’ the discourse, i.e. go into the grammar and show how the features of administrative language contribute to its power over social organisation.

(Iedema, 1995, p. 134)

The ‘unpacking’ in the discussion which follows incorporates two levels; namely, linguistic analysis and informant interpretations.

2. The theoretical perspective on meaning making

The model of language used in any study is, according to Berry (1996), dependent upon the models of language which are relevant for the “intended users of one’s work” (Berry, 1996, p. 4). With this in mind, the rationale for selecting Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a model for analysing the texts is that it incorporates the notion that the language is a social phenomenon, and in dealing with language it works at the level of the text as a unit of meaning.
One of the analytical tools of SFL is the analysis of Theme/Rheme. In English, the Theme, the ‘point of departure’ for the clause, is also one of the means by which the clause is organised as a message. In English, Theme is realised by what is placed in initial position in the clause and this initial position gives the Theme a ‘special status’ in the clause. The special status given to the initial position in English is not a universal trait. Other languages have different ways of marking the Theme of a clause (Halliday, 1967a, 1967b, 1994; Martin, 1983; among others). Theme is the ‘glue’ that structures and binds the ideational (‘what the message is about’) and interpersonal meanings (‘who is involved in the message’) (Halliday, 1994). Theme is part of the textual metafunction and is an important tool to help understand ‘how the message is organised’.

In studies of Theme, the choice and representation of Theme is seen as a crucial element related to the success of a text (Berry, 1995, 1996; Martin, 1985, 1992b, 1993; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & Rothery, 1993; Stainton, 1996, among others). While Theme has been investigated in a range of genres, only limited research has been carried out into authentic workplace texts, the few examples being Davies (1994, 1997), Berry (1996), Iedema (1995, 1997), Stainton (1996) and Forey (2002). The belief that an understanding of the way in which Theme works can be usefully incorporated into pedagogy is the motivation behind this and many other studies of Theme.

In a typical clause pattern, the Theme is conflated with the Subject. Such a Theme Halliday refers to as ‘unmarked Theme’, and a Theme that is not the Subject as ‘marked Theme’ (Halliday, 1994, p. 43).

**Example 1. Unmarked Theme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>China</th>
<th>Started its massive programme of tax reform as part of an overall economic restructuring in January 1994.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Rheme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Example 2. Marked Theme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In January 1994, China started its massive programme of tax reform as part of an overall economic restructuring.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Forey, 2002, p. 157)

In the present study, following Davies (1994, 1997), Berry (1995, 1996) and Martin and Rose (2003), Theme is analysed to comprise everything up to and including the Subject of the main clause. The question as to whether a Theme can be ‘marked’ arises then as Theme will always include the Subject, and the Subject as Theme is said to be ‘unmarked’. Martin and Rose (2003) overcome this
problem by identifying the marked Theme and the Subject/Theme of the main clause separately, as shown in Example 3:

Example 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marked Theme</th>
<th>Subject/Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In January 1994, China</td>
<td>Started its massive programme of tax reform as part of an overall economic restructuring.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Stainton, 1996) demonstrates the importance and relevance of marked Theme in workplace texts by showing that texts which are viewed as more successful by specialist informants carry a higher number of marked Themes in the introduction and conclusion sections compared to texts viewed as less successful. Goatly (1995), Thompson (1996), Davies (1997), Gouveia and Barbara (2001), Green, Christopher, and Mei (2000) and Martin and Rose (2003) all believe that marked Themes occur at important points in the text to ‘frame’ certain features in the text.

3. Data and methodology

The data consists of two parts, interview data collected from informants in a focus group interview where they discussed two texts and the two texts as data. Stressing the need to look outside the text and suggesting that the researcher should elicit information from specialist informants is a viewpoint shared by a number of researchers, among them Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993a), Gibson (1993), Poynton (1993), Stainton (1993), Berry (1995, 1996), Davies et al. (1999) and Louhiala-Salminen (2002). As suggested by Poynton, the inclusion of informant interpretations of a text incorporates “personality into its grammar” (Poynton, 1993, p. 8). The two types of informants i.e. business people and teachers, the interviews and the texts are briefly discussed below.

3.1. The business informants

The 12 business informants were fully employed middle to junior managers from a variety of different organisations in Hong Kong. They included the following job functions: librarian, business unit manager, associate license operation administrator, assistant manager (retail sales), deputy manager, executive officer, executive, teacher, nurse, administrator and human resource manager. Most worked in international, medium-sized organisations (101–500 employees) to large organisations (more than 500 employees). Cantonese was the first language of all of the informants and all had at least a Bachelor’s degree.
3.2. The teacher informants

Of the 15 teacher informants, four were native speakers of Cantonese, three of Putonghua, seven of English and one of Hindi. They were all employed full-time as EFL professionals and all non-native English speakers appeared to be fluently bilingual. The group had an average of more than 16 years of professional involvement in EFL, and thus a great deal of experience upon which to draw when discussing texts which were similar to those used in their classrooms.

In this paper the teacher and business informants are identified as TI and BI respectively, followed by a case number to help identify individual informants.

3.3. The focus group interviews

In the present study, the focus group interviews involved between three to five participants in each group, (four business informant groups with three participants in each and four teacher informant groups with two groups of three, one group of four and one group of five participants). All informants volunteered to participate and each focus group interview lasted a maximum of 40 min.

The procedure was to focus on one text at a time. The informants were asked to read the first text once and share their initial reactions to this text. Then they were asked to read the same text again, this time underlining features they felt signalled a relationship between the writer and intended reader. The group then discussed what they had underlined and what they felt was either important or interesting about the language used in the text. A more detailed discussion about the language of the text ensued. Although the researcher was present she only participated in the discussion either to clarify a point, to ask a probing question, to facilitate, or to conclude the discussion. The interviews were transcribed, sent to the informants for confirmation and below is a discussion of the findings which emerged from the data.

It was envisaged that by focussing on different interpretations of a small sample of two texts, detailed information might be obtained and a consensus, or some shared understanding of the way in which a text makes meaning, might be reached. As pointed out by Plum and Candlin (2002), a key feature of the voices of participants involved in focus group interviews is “the degree of diversity between individuals on some issues and unanimity across entire groups” on other issues (Plum & Candlin, 2002, p. 240). Listening to the two groups of informants, business people and EFL teachers, revealed a number of interesting insights into how similar or different their interpretations of the same texts were.

3.4. The texts

As recommended by Perrett (2000), when intending to analyse texts, it is important to ‘plan’ which texts will be used and compared. The two texts were ideal choices as the field (i.e. what the memo is ‘about’) was almost identical, so the key variables leading to different meanings being made were the language choices and the layout of the two texts. The bias in the selection of these two texts could then be used
to explore features related to language and the meaning construed through the thematic and interpersonal choices. The texts were short, and general in nature; thus they would not overwhelm the informants.

One text, Memo A, is an authentic text taken from a corpus of workplace texts (Forey, 2002); the other text, Memo B, is a constructed text taken from pedagogic material developed in Phase II of the CPW project (Aldred & Offard-Gray, 1998).

Memo A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date: 11/14/96</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To: All Staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC: Mr Chui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From: Emily Leung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RE: Time Sheets</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I have spent a lot of time on time sheets because you have not properly filled them in and in some cases none were submitted by the due date.

You should not delegate responsibility of your timesheet to somebody else. If you are expected to be on leave on the due date, you should prepare one before you go on leave. If you are at the client and are not able to submit one by hand, you should fax the completed time sheet to the office no later than 1:00 pm on the due date. All time sheets should be submitted or faxed to the attention of Amy. Please note that she is not responsible for filling in timesheets over the phone and she has been instructed not to do this in future. Time sheets should contain complete information especially engagement codes. All columns and rows should be cast downward and across. It should also be signed on completion. The due date for submission is 5:30 pm on the 15th or 30th/31st of each month.

For those reviewers who are using Cabs pro, you are expected to ensure that your time sheets are correct and complete. A copy of the unconfirmed time sheet should be submitted in accordance with the above. On the next working day after the due date, you are expected to transfer the time sheet yourself or at least make available your computer in order that your time sheet can be confirmed and transferred to the system. Please ensure that Amy has your password if you are not in the office.

I would expect members of the department to fully comply with the above procedures especially for those who have been with the firm for over one year. Any incorrect or incomplete time sheets will require more of my time and your inefficiency within the department will be noted. A record will also be kept in future in order to assess your efficiency in this respect and will be discussed as part of the staff appraisal meeting.

I sincerely hope that I will not have to repeat the above to you again during the busy season (January–March).

[signature]

(Forey, 2002, p. 218)

Aldred and Offard-Gray (1998) reworded and restructured Memo A to make it, according to their interpretation, appear more ‘business-like’.
Both texts include a statement that acts as a ‘command’ (Iedema, 1995), which in this instance is an instruction to the reader to take some form of action to ensure that time sheets are submitted by the appropriate date and completed accurately. Informant interpretations of the two texts were very different and the differences may be assumed to be associated with textual and interpersonal choices.

4. Findings

4.1. Initial reactions of informants to Memos A and B

The teacher informants’ initial reaction to Memo A indicated a high degree of consensus. On a number of occasions during the initial reading, Memo A induced
laughter and sniggers from the informants, followed by outbursts such as: *Screw it up, put it in the bin! How rude!* (T12), even if she’s *God, you still can’t speak like that!* (T15), grumbling, *she’s grumbling a lot* (T14). They felt that in Memo A there was an overuse of *you should*. The teachers’ general feeling about the text was that this memo would invoke a negative reaction from the intended reader, causing the reader to be alienated. One informant summed this up by saying that *on one hand, you have to assert your politics and at the same time what makes people feel OK, comfortable with you, so I think this is not a very good memo. It’s a bit too negative, it’s too authoritarian, and it’s not very easy to read* (T112). Another informant added that *she’s threatening people just like when you are a little boy, threatening somebody to do something* (T113).

The business informants’ initial reaction, however, was not as clear-cut. Some participants in three of the four business informant groups pointed out that Memo A was more personal and even a little friendlier. In some cases, they thought Memo A was *too mellow* (B16); *that the writer was trying to make them not feel bad about the memo* (B15); *that she [the writer] is just giving us the suggestion but not an order* (B15); and that *the tone is better [in Memo A] than the first one [Memo B], so more useful, sounds like the writer can be approached if there’s a problem* (B13). They added, that Memo A was not as strong as Memo B. However, one of the business informants agreed with the teachers and stated *if I was given this kind of memo [Memo A] I’d laugh* (B10). A majority of business informants thought that although the tone of Memo A was more positive, they preferred Memo B because it was more business-like, more formal, and less time consuming. On the whole, the business informants believed that the procedural listing in Memo B created a serious impression.

By contrast, the teacher informants on a number of occasions remarked that the tenor of the two memos differed and they thought the writer of Memo B appeared to be more *friendly*. For example, one teacher informant commented:

> Well it’s much improved…you know a lot of the accusing and threatening text is taken out. You know… even though the content has not changed essentially, but the tone you know…is much more, you know just err…much more, you know…it’s not friendly yet but it’s at least business-like, you know…it’s just more proper. (T16)

This was summed up by another teacher informant, who stated that *the writer [in Memo B] seems to want err . . . to signal a friendly relationship* (T17). The two memos obviously elicited quite distinct reactions from different readers.

In summary, the general opinion of the teachers was that Memo A was written in an inappropriate manner for a workplace memo, whereas the business informants on the whole thought that it attempted to be friendly and that while it might take them some time to read, generally they did not have any problem with it. However, some of the business informants changed their views when focusing on the language of the memos in more detail in subsequent readings and discussions. Memo B on the other hand was seen to be more business-like by both groups although some of the
business informants pointed out that they thought it sounded angry. Generally it appeared that the two texts evoked different impressions in the informants’ minds, which begs the question as to what linguistic choices caused the messages to be interpreted in different ways.

After commenting on and discussing their initial reading of the memo, the informants were asked to read the text for a second time and to consider the way in which the relationship between writer and intended reader was established through the linguistic choices made in the text; and they discussed in detail the way in which they interpreted specific features of the texts.

4.2. How meaning is made: informant interpretations

As noted above, the field of the two memos is very similar in that both memos concerned the processes and procedures that staff need to follow to achieve an administrative goal. However, the memos vary dramatically in the language they use to realise their purpose, in their presentation of the information, in their layout of the memos and in the reactions they produced in different readers. The presentation and discussion of the analysis of both thematic choices and informants’ interpretations will lead us to an understanding of the way in which different meanings are made.

The initial stages of the two texts are quite different, with Memo A beginning with a negative tone expressing the purpose for writing, as shown in Example 4. In comparison, in Memo B the writer starts by drawing attention to the particular issues, as shown in Example 5. These initial stages in the structures of the two memos appeared to strongly influence the informants, who considered the opening sentence in each an important interpersonal resource. The informants’ reactions to the opening sentence is a response to what Martin (1992a) and Martin and Rose (2003) call ‘hyper-Theme’, defined as “an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interaction among strings, chains and Theme selections” (Martin, 1992a, p. 437). The hyper-Themes in the two memos are:

Example 4

I have spent a lot of time on time sheets because you have not properly filled them in and in some cases none were submitted by the due date.

Memo A, clause complex 1

Example 5

I would like to draw attention to the correct procedure for submitting time sheets and remind staff of the importance of submitting them by the due date.

Memo B, clause complex 1

The hyper-Theme was seen to establish ‘a particular pattern of interaction’ for the information which followed. As one business informant stated, Memo B starts with

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1 A clause complex refers to a combination of two or more clauses, at least one of which is independent.
drawing attention to the correct procedure (BI2). On the whole, Memo B is seen to be more distant and less personal than Memo A, which was viewed as construing a tenor where you are in the wrong. It is argued that the particular Theme realised in this first clause complex construes an interpersonal relationship which predicts the pattern of interaction which is developed throughout the text. One teacher informant noted that the memo writer communicates I have the power here and you have mucked up! It’s very clear right from the start the ‘I’ and ‘you’ right through, it’s actually telling people right from the start what level of power they have in this relationship (TI5). Another teacher informant commented that in Memo A everything is building up from the first sentence (TI11) and a business informant stated that maybe due to the effect of the introduction I know the writer is very angry (BI11).

The comments made and the informants’ continuing discussion suggest that the informants’ reaction to the text was initially produced by the hyper-Theme and then reinforced by the linguistic choices made throughout the text, including of course the choice of Theme.

4.3. Informant interpretations and choice of Theme

The analysis of Subject/Theme and marked Theme in Memos A and B, shown in Tables 1 and 2, shows that the personal pronouns I and you predominate in Memo A, and although they are also present in Memo B, they are less numerous.

The personal pronouns you and I realise 44.4% of all Subject/Themes in Memo A, whereas in Memo B you does not realise a Subject/Theme at all, and I only realises 18.8% of all Subject/Themes, including one ellipsed realisation. The writer of Memo A chooses to thematise you whereas the writer of Memo B thematises institutional factors. Modal responsibility, usually held by the person or thing responsible for carrying out the actions, is thereby moved in Memo B from a real (identifiable) person, you and I, onto institutional entities, such as anyone, all staff, engagement codes and reviewers. It is this linguistic perspective provided by a lexico-grammatical analysis of the texts which helps us understand the way in which Memos A and B gain the different kinds of resonance with the informant readers.

Iedema (1995, 1997, 2000) argues that such choices are used to realise control. Iedema (1995, 2000) refers to this process of shifting the responsibility as ‘demodulation’, explained as:

Demodulations have the following features: there is total linguistic suppression of the commander, as well as of the controlling nature of the controlling process. The interpersonal imposition of control is recoded as an (ideational) state of affairs, and the implication of this having to do with one person commanding another is entirely suppressed.

(Iedema, 2000, p. 51).

It is precisely the choice of responsibility focussing on the personal I and you in Memo A which is perhaps one of the main causes of alienation felt by some of the readers. Some informants interpreted Memo A as a personal attack, where the
choice of *you* was signalling that the reader was put in a position of wrongdoing. On the other hand, those who held such views believed that the demodulation in the choice of Theme in Memo B allowed the information to be presented in an

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marked Theme</th>
<th>Subject/Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>If you are expected to be on leave on the due date, you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>If you are at the client and are not able to submit one by hand, you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>All time sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Please note that she and she</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Time sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>All columns and rows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>It</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>The due date for submission you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>For those reviewers who are using Cabs pro, you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>A copy of the unconfirmed time sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>On the next working day after the due date, you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Please ensure that Amy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Any incorrect or incomplete time sheets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>A record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>and (this)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>I sincerely hope that</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Thematic Choices: Memo B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marked Theme</th>
<th>Subject/Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>and (I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Please (will you) note the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(Please will you note) (i) The due date for submission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>(Please will you note) (ii) Engagement codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>(Please will you note) (iii) All columns and rows</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>(Please will you note) (iv) Anyone who is visiting a client</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>(Please will you note) (v) Anyone who is going to be on leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reviewers [[using Cab Pro]]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>[[Reviewers using Cab Pro must ensure that]] time sheet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>[[Reviewers using Cab Pro must ensure that]] Amy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>All staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Efficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>I would remind staff that inefficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>and (inefficiency)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Finally, please note that Amy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I trust that I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
un-emotive manner and the intended reader would not feel as though they were necessarily in the wrong. The demodulation in Memo B leads to two of the groups referring to a lack of emotion compared to Memo A, with one informant saying that the relationship un, between the writer and intended reader is much better, because um, um, no more factors of that kind of emotion are included (BI10). It is in institutional texts, Iedema (1995) argues, that the ‘must-ness’ of a text is ‘backgounded’ through a number of linguistic devices and that demodulation is one method where power is realised.

Memo A was felt to be a little too personal by the teacher informants generally due to the inclusion of the explicit ‘must-ness’ realised by the personal pronouns and modal finites mainly in the form of you and should in initial position. As pointed out by a number of teacher informants, along with the you there is also the repeated use of should so the two together, “you should” makes the writer sound veryerr…aggressive and authoritative (TI8) or, as one informant said, You should do this, you should do this is like pointing the finger, very directly accusing people (TI4). The informants on a number of occasions pointed out that there were other choices available to the writer: It’s weird, people in the workplace seldom use the term you should do this (BI10). However, as noted previously, some of the business informants believed that the use of you and should was an attempt to reduce the distance between the writer and intended reader and that the writer was trying to be more friendly. Referring to the use of you should, one business informant stated that Memo A was not as strong and clear [as Memo B] (BI4).

Both groups of informants suggested that the writer could have used passive voice, for example, or displaced the modal responsibility away from an individual to the company or to procedural elements, and that such choices of Theme would have improved Memo A. The informants here are expressing a preference for demodulation in this context. Those preferring demodulation, it could be suggested, are happy when assuming a reader’s perspective to take a compliant role, following, as Iedema (2000) calls it, “procedure and control”. Presenting information in this manner allows for texts which impart procedures to be read and acted upon speedily. Whether the readers are aware of the notion of ‘control’ is an issue which perhaps needs to be investigated further. A discussion of such linguistic features in workplace language pedagogy would help readers be aware of such methods of control, as well as illustrating to writers ways in which control could be construed within the text. Perhaps linguistic features such as demodulation have never been introduced to the writer of Memo A, who is a non-native speaker of English, and this is perhaps one reason why she construes her message in this manner.

A closer look at the use of the references to you in Memo A – a plural you meaning all staff – shows that it even includes the staff who usually complete and submit the time sheets on time. The choice of you appears to be over-used and perhaps contributes to what one informant called a nagging feeling found in this text. The choices of you and I would be the unmarked choices of Theme in Memo A, a (pseudo) dialogic text. Many of the informants’ comments as to why Memo A was interpreted as being unfriendly, clumsy, etc. could be due to the choice of you and I. In addition, the fact that these features were found in thematic position suggests that
the you and I represented the ‘point of departure’ for Memo A. This is inferred in the comments from both groups of informants who believed that you and also the use of I is very inappropriate (TI9), with another adding that if you are representing the company it is not that common to put I in a sentence (BI7). They felt that although the Subject here has interpersonal meaning due to its realisation as you and I, for this particular context the use of personal pronouns was too familiar, which resulted in a negative feeling where the you (the reader[s]) was being reprimanded.

The choices of Theme and process (realised by the main verb) reflect a hierarchical relationship between writer and reader. The recipients of Memo A have expectations placed upon them in the form of mental processes, e.g. the writer is expecting, noting, ensuring and hoping. The writer here is doing all of the mental processing and the intended reader is required to comply with the writer’s demands. The mental processes are related to the writer and the material processes are related to the reader, as if stating ‘I’ll do the thinking and you do the work’. By contrast, the writer of Memo B places no expectations on the reader, and instead chooses rather demodalised linguistic features which are also depersonalised. As summed up by one teacher informant when referring to Memo A: The writer seems to be assuming a lot of power in terms of relationship, perhaps she thinks that she is higher above, she has all the authority to command, I mean to threaten people and to instruct people (TI7). Theme is thus seen to be pivotal in the development of the relationship between writer and intended reader.

In Memo A, negative forms of words are chosen to emphasise wrong actions and who is to blame, e.g. a copy of the unconfirmed time sheets (clause 12) and any incorrect or incomplete time sheets (clause complex 16). These nominal groups construe some form of negative meaning, which reflect a negative evaluation by the writer. One business informant also pointed out that she believed the writer in Memo B appeared very angry (BI6), while another said that he thought this memo was very strict (BI4). Although the majority of informants believed that Memo B developed a better relationship with the reader, a minority – who were nonetheless highly vocal – did not.

4.4. ‘Please’ and interpersonal meaning

The informants suggested that the tenor of the texts was probably strongly influenced by elements such as please, a Modal Adjunct (Halliday, 1994, p. 49). This was evident in the extensive debates over the interpretations of please, found in the marked Themes of the two texts.

For example, the majority of the teacher informants felt that please in Memo A was empty and possibly sarcastic. It was suggested that perhaps the writer of Memo A had added a please to try and temper her text: Probably when she’s writing she suddenly realises she is very, very tough, and trying to be nicer, she puts in a “please”. But this really doesn’t help at all because she’s been scolding you for a long time, and the please is coming too late (TI4). However, in Memo B please was seen to be purely formulaic, please was viewed as an empty attempt to be polite, and that rather than being polite, it was seen to be inconsequential. This interpretation was exemplified by
one business informant who stated that even though in the first memo there are some ‘pleases’ I suppose they are kind of an angry please, but in the second one umm... due to the building up of the paragraphs the writer wants to draw our attention... therefore I think it is a neutral please (BI11). Thus the discussion of similar linguistic items in both memos, and how these items combine with other items in the clause and beyond to make meaning, shows that different interpersonal meanings are established by the choices made in the lexico-grammar.

4.5. Marked Theme and meaning

The choice of marked Theme in the two memos appeared very influential in determining the way in which the informants construed interpersonal meanings. Both texts have a number of marked Themes, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, with 31.3% (Memo A) and 25% (Memo B) respectively of all clauses/phrase complexes having a marked Theme. However, it is the role played by the marked Themes rather than their number of occurrences which makes a difference in the two memos.

The most significant role in the construal of meaning in the two memos is played by the projecting clauses, which are of interest for their expression of modality. Modality is said by Halliday to refer to the ‘area of meaning that lies between yes and no’ (Halliday, 1994, p. 356). The projecting clauses in both memos, namely please [will you] note that and please [will you] ensure that (Memo A), and please [will you] note, I would remind staff that, finally please note that and I trust that (Memo B), incorporate some form of modality; for a more detailed explanation of projection see Halliday (1994) and Thompson (1996). The modal operators ensure, note, would, will and trust construe meanings of obligation (Halliday, 1994, p. 357). These projecting clauses project the writer’s opinion that it is the reader’s obligation to carry out the required actions.

Generally, the projecting clause I trust that usually realises positive modality. However, in this instance due to the context where this projecting clause is immediately followed by a negative clause, I trust that I will not have to remind staff, the projecting clause I trust that was seen to carry a high negative modal meaning, an emphatic choice, as illustrated by one teacher informant who stated that ‘I trust’ sounds like, you bunch of blithering idiots I don’t want to have to tell you again (TI3). The word trust was also likened to a head master telling a school boy off (TI2) or, in the words of a business informant, the use of trust is probably stronger or even ruder (BI4) than the linguistic choices in Memo A.

In addition to the projecting clauses, Memo B also has clauses/phrase complexes that could be interpreted as having an ellipsed Theme. As shown in Table 2, clauses/phrase complexes 4–8 and 10–11 were analysed with an ellipsed Theme of [please will you note] and [reviewers [using Cab Pro] must ensure that] respectively. Ellipsis is major resource in spoken texts (Eggins, 2000), it is uncommon in written workplace texts (Forey, 2002) and the position taken in the present paper is that ellipsis is a marked Theme choice in written workplace texts.

As pointed out by Tadros (1985, 1994), listing or ‘numeration’ are linguistic resources which do not necessarily look interpersonal but in fact, as they involve
prediction and ellipsis, they involve the reader and increase the interpersonal nature of the text. In Memo B, a colon is used to introduce a list of things that should be noted or what must be carried out; and these interpersonal modals noted and must are being projected onto the realisations in the list that follows. The combination of projection, predication and ellipsis all add to interpersonal meaning in the text. Memo B also has a far greater number of ellipsed Themes, represented in Table 2 by being enclosed in parentheses, than Memo A. It is perhaps these ellipsed Themes, where the writer chooses to omit a Theme, which create the less direct and less personal feel of Memo B.

Two of the marked Themes in Memo A are realised by ‘if’ clauses, namely if you are expected to be on leave on the due date and if you are at the client and are not able to submit one by hand. In both of these clauses the writer is pointing out that if you are aware of these conditions, then you should still be able to submit on time. Again repetition, this time if you, is perhaps what reinforces the teacher informants’ view that Memo A sounds as if it were nagging.

A third marked Theme in Memo A is realised by a Circumstance of time on the next working day after the due date; for a detailed discussion of circumstances, see Halliday (1994, pp. 149–161). It could be suggested that the writer is placing the precise time in thematic position to emphasise its importance and unequivocally establish the time for the submission. If the reader then forgets to submit their form by the due date, it is their own fault because the date of submission has been emphasised in part through the special status assigned to it, i.e. through being Theme. However, the informants did not comment on these particular features.

4.6. Informant interpretations of text layout

All informants agreed that the layout of the two texts played an important role in aiding their understanding. Even though a few of the business informants, as noted above, thought the relationship between writer and reader was more friendly in Memo A, when asked which version they would prefer to receive, all said they preferred Memo B. This memo was seen as being far more business-like, providing the reader with a tick list to follow, and easy to read (BI5); the informants commented that if the reader needed to refer to it, information could be found quickly. Memo A, on the other hand, attracted fewer complimentary comments: you’ll get lost (BI3), takes time to interpret (TI14), you have to read it again and again (BI1) and it’s more like a personal letter (TI6). As many have pointed out, in business ‘time is money’ and clarity and conciseness are essential characteristics of workplace writing (Davies et al., 1999). Thus the informants’ preference for a bulleted, point-form style, with the information presented in note form rather than in a complete clause/clause complex was fairly predictable. Many of the informants suggested that Memo A appeared dense and is really not what is expected in workplace correspondence today, saying that the layout doesn’t make it accessible (TI8). However, one business informant added that in Memo B the way she presented the bullet points, it’s like rules...and the second one [Memo A] is like a letter, the tone is a little bit milder.
There are a number of other issues which could be explored with respect to layout; however, space does not permit.

To sum up, the choice of Theme and especially the choice of the Subject/Theme effect the relationship between writer and reader. Certain thematic choices have the potential to shift the modal responsibility from the writer or institutional entity on to the reader or other institutional entity. This helps explain why the teacher informants see Memo A as being aggressive and accusatory. On the other hand, thematic choices are the reason why a few business informants viewed Memo A as friendly and seeking sympathy. On the whole, the business informants tended to be less concerned with the interpersonal meaning of the Themes and viewed the texts in a more pragmatic manner. While Memo A triggered a varied and lively discussion with opposing interpretations of the texts, Memo B, due to a greater degree of demodulation in the choices of Theme, was thought to be less aggressive by the teachers and more neutral and straightforward by both the teachers and the business informants.

5. Discussion

These findings suggest that there is a great deal to be learnt by combining text analysis and specialist informant interpretations. One of the most revealing findings was that the business informants viewed the texts far more pragmatically as a directive than the teacher informants. Although the business informants believed the interpersonal features of the text were important they appeared to be responding more directly to the ideational rather than the interpersonal features of the texts. In addition, perhaps the fact that the teacher informants are responsible for teaching and establishing ‘good’ writing practices, and that the language of a memo is the ‘content’ of their lessons, could explain why the teachers were so adamant that Memo A was an inappropriate text. However, there is still an anomaly since a few of the business informants believed that Memo A represented a writer who was trying to adopt a friendly style. As pointed out by Scollon and Scollon (1995), the intended meaning of a text can never be fully controlled and ethnic and/or cultural factors may be less important than others such as gender and organisational culture. This small study emphasises issues raised by SFL, which maintains that language cannot be understood without including an acknowledgement that cultural issues are an integral and implicit feature of the system of language as meaning (Painter, 2001). The findings begin to illustrate that there are differing views held by two distinct groups of informants. This raises concerns for the applied linguist and highlights the fact that the audience may interpret the text differently from what the author intended because a text “is jointly constructed by participants in communication” (Scollon & Scollon, 1995, p. 6).

This paper contends that generally the informants’ comments illustrate a consensus that the language that aided their interpretation of the texts was directly linked to thematic choices. Firstly, the hyper-Theme in the two texts established a very different tenor. Secondly, the use of you and I as opposed to institutional entities such as engagement codes, all columns and rows, etc., reinforced the tenor established
in the hyper-Theme. This in part explains why Memo A, where the writer opens with a personal statement, was by many seen to be both a blaming and nagging text. In comparison, the hyper-Theme in Memo B was seen to be more business-like, drawing attention to correct procedure. The two texts construe the interpersonal very differently.

Marked Theme was also seen to contribute to the interpersonal nature of the text in other ways. The enhancing clauses in Memo A, at a more delicate level of analysis, reflect the negative interpersonal relations developed throughout this memo. In addition, the one example of a prepositional phrase e.g. circumstance of time mentioned previously, (Circumstantial Adjunct, Halliday, 1994, 166) in the marked Theme may also be viewed as creating a situation where there is no room for mistakes or questions.

The findings from this small study go some way to support Berry (1996), who asserts that the “most frequent judgements of professionals in business and industry have to do with (a) (im)personality and (b) clarity of text structure” (Berry, 1996, 9). The discussion in this section has shown quite clearly that the informants in this study were highly motivated to discuss the feature ‘personality’ inherent in the language of the texts. However, although their discussion illustrated their depth of understanding and concern with the interpersonal, ultimately their concern of being able to get the job done was paramount. Related to the pragmatic need to do the job, was the clarity of text structure and readability of the text, as this influence how much time it would take to comprehend a text.

The amount of time it takes to comprehend a text is considered closely related to the length and layout of a text. In general, there was a consensus that all informants preferred the layout in Memo B as it allowed quick scanning, partly through providing the reader with a step-by-step procedure to follow. As pointed out by Tadros (1985), listing is inherently interpersonal in nature. The types of text readers prefer in a workplace context especially regarding layout and style is perhaps one area which deserves further research.

Informant interpretations of texts would appear to verify the researcher’s interpretations and to add credibility to a detailed lexico-grammatical analysis of a larger corpus. The views of the informants helped to relate the findings to the intended use of such texts in the context of the workplace. The informants continually stressed the way in which the language of one or the other memo is appropriate or inappropriate in the workplace. The discussions with informants demonstrate that there are a variety of linguistic choices available to a writer and that different choices will resonate differently with different readers.

The findings have also raised the disparity between the extent and range of differences in the way teachers and business people interpret messages. The teachers’ and the business informants’ interpretations differed at certain points. Teachers and others outside the workplace, such as researchers, perhaps tend to be overly sensitive to linguistic choices whereas the business informants, who are directly involved in producing and receiving such texts, appeared to take a far more practical view of the way in which language construes meaning. Their concern that a text should be quick-and-easy to read, and their preference for a
demodalised form of communication, should be considered when developing pedagogic material.

A more detailed approach to collaborating with members of the workplace, for example, understanding the processes involved in the construction of texts, the extent of on-the-job training, including taking a longitudinal approach to understanding the way in which ‘good’ writers become ‘good’, may prove to be useful in the development of further research and pedagogy related to workplace English.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shed some light on the different linguistic concerns of teachers and business people about written communication. It has also demonstrated the need for researchers to consult with business informants in order to contextualise a researcher’s understanding, a point also made by Stainton (1993). Finally, this paper has demonstrated that both teacher and business informants were able to discuss the linguistic choices made in the two sample texts, despite lacking a metalanguage to do so.

The informant interpretations of the texts reflect the way in which authentic users would interpret the meaning of texts (Lynch, 1996, p. 55). In addition, this paper also suggests that there is a need for further research, for example, for a more qualitative analysis of individual texts. Further qualitative research could take into consideration the importance of hyper-Theme, what factors informants believe are important for ‘readability’ in a workplace context, the way in which layout and presentation influence a reader’s interpretation of a text and what detailed lexico-grammatical analysis at a clause level could contribute to a better understanding of workplace English texts.

In this paper, two sample texts were analysed with reference to informant interpretations. Due to the small number of texts it was possible to discuss in detail how different linguistic choices by a writer construe different meanings for the reader. The study has focused specifically on Theme, the key system focusing on how the message is organised. It has incorporated how interpersonal meaning is construed through the choice of Theme. Furthermore, the systems of – the ideational (‘what the message is about’), the interpersonal (‘who is involved in the message’) and mode (‘how the text is organised’) reveal important linguistic choices and help us to understand the meanings construed in workplace texts. Informant interpretations of the texts have also raised questions about the extent and knowledge required to effectively translate understanding into informed pedagogy. If pedagogy is developed, it should take informant perceptions into consideration, something that will only be achieved through further collaborative research with the workplace.

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