Stodgy writing in the technical workplace
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Background considerations: What is meant by ‘stodgy’?
‘Stodgy’ is the adjective a bid writer used to describe the writing style of her engineer colleagues, adding that their sentences were ‘tortured’ and ‘torturous’. These may not be technical linguistic terms, but they are apt, nevertheless. They convey the idea of writing that is (using her words again) ‘indigestible’, by which she means difficult to understand and onerous to read. Example 1, below, is fairly typical of the kind of writing to be found in proposal documents produced by her company.

Greater need for applied linguists in the workplace
More applied linguists’ expertise needs to be available in technical work environments. My involvement as a sort of English language consultant ‘in residence’ amongst engineers at work has revealed a growing need for in-house applied linguists in the commercial workplace. Momentum in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that built up in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, and concomitant knowledge and expertise, seems to have faded. There is, in the non-academic work place generally, a lack of awareness about language and communication, and a clear need for an informed approach to communication tasks, which seems inadequately catered for by our profession.

Unrealistic expectations of L1 language ‘training’ in the business sector
Managers and Human Resource departments tend to expect quick results from any training they commission. Personal Development Plan (PDP) programmes have been instituted in some companies (and Higher Education Institutions), the implication of PDP being, beginning as it does with ‘Personal’, that a long-term view should be taken of the educational needs (and aspirations) of employees. This would be sympathetic to our own view, as educators and researchers in applied linguistics, about how best to foster an individual’s intellectual development. On the contrary, however, PDPs in the workplace seem to involve achieving short-term goals that will show clear benefit to the business as quickly as possible. This is hardly remarkable, considering the commercial driving force underpinning the business sector and continual changes in demand being made upon it. It would seem that training, rather than longer-term education, tends to interest companies more, so that a more accurate representation of actual practice would be if PDP stood for ‘Professional Development Plan’, no matter what government policy makers would like us to think.

Company managers acknowledge there is a problem with the standard of written proposals, and documents generally, but seem to believe the solution lies in short training courses, standardized templates (no matter what the genre), text models, and snappy 10-point plans (‘Give us ten bullet points to follow’, they often say). Writing guides tend to perpetuate this attitude, giving the impression that if certain rules are followed, crystal clear, elegant writing will be the result. A typical example of the kind of advice dispensed by self-help books and short company training courses can be found in the book by Stull and Baird (1993), ‘Business Communication’, which is a well liked example of the genre amongst engineers. Stull and Baird extol their readers to think about the seven ‘C’s to improve their writing, which means they have to make their writing clear, concise, concrete, correct, coherent, complete, and courteous. Brief explanations and examples of each ‘C’ are provided (a format which goes down well with engineers). To be clear, for example, they are advised to use ‘simple’ words, avoid the passive, and write shorter, simpler sentences. The problem with such advice is that, when looked at more closely, it comes across as over-simplistic, rather glib, and not helpful in addressing engineers’ writing problems.

If applied linguists wish to offer more effective help, though, they need to listen and respond directly to the needs identified by the engineers and their managers. In spite of prevailing ideological thinking in our field, it isn’t always the best policy to sit on the fence of descriptivism, when the clamour is for prescription. The linguist has to tread warily the fine line between the two.

Proposal writing - a major preoccupation and bother
Usually competitive and written for external agencies and organisations, these usually cause stress and mayhem throughout the time they are being written. Proposal writing is a highly creative activity for the engineers designing the solution, and for the writers who have to present it in large volumes of text and diagrams (Sales 2006:123-135). However, the difficulties engineers face when writing them are compounded by their ambivalence towards any hint of needing to be persuasive, doubtless connected to Van Nostrand’s (1997:137) and Sales’ (2006:18) observation that they consciously avoid using certain personal pronouns in corporate documents.

There are others in the scientific field with the same burden of having to write proposals, to ensure the continuation of their professional practice and livelihoods. Myers, for example, mentions some of the constraints placed upon biologist researchers in their attempts to bid for funding:

There is a paradox in the rhetorical strategy of the proposal, because the proposal format, with its standard questions about background and
goals and budget, and the style, with its passives and impersonality, do not allow for most types of rhetorical appeals; one must persuade without seeming to persuade. (Myers 1990: 42)

Since engineers have not been traditionally associated with such rhetoric, little help is available in the literature, either within engineering or applied linguistics, even though there is a fine and established body of writing within the ESP domain, including that for Scientific and Technical Purposes (Woolley 1957, Hicks 1961, Weisman 1962, Pauley 1973, Fear 1977, Houp and Pearsall 1980, Huckin and Olsen 1983, Turk and Kirkman 1989, Kirkman 1992, et al). In the main, engineers are portrayed as writers of factual, information-conveying texts, producing text-types more usually associated with, for example, engineering instructions, specifications, and reports. A few, including Dobrin (1989), Winsor (1996), Van Nostrand (1997) and Sales (2006), put forward another more complex view; however, it seems the traditional view has endured to the present day within the engineering discourse domain, with engineers receiving little or no training in rhetorical expression, and continuing to be unhappy about having to be persuasive in proposals. They feel uncomfortable about it, and generally view themselves as being inept as persuasive writers. Winsor (1996:12) reports similar observations:

As a profession, engineers frown on persuasiveness and find it suspect (ibid:12). ... The primacy and purity of data are an ethical as well as a functional concern. Thus engineers may believe they let the facts speak for themselves and abstain from any obvious persuasion because that is a useful fiction in the world of engineering. (Winsor 1996:99)

Engineers tend to associate persuasive language with salesmen, and overtly ‘selling’ language is somewhat offensive to them. One design engineer described an instance when he and the marketing member of the team did not see eye to eye about a technical description intended for a proposal:

The customer said he wanted it green, and so I wrote: “It will be green.” But Michael [responsible for marketing] wanted it to say: “You asked for green and you shall have it. You will have a beautiful shade of green. We love green at Matrix Industries. We have a whole range of greens for you to choose from”, and I thought: “I can’t write that!” (Sales 2006:136)

Key features of stodgy writing
Kirkman describes the ‘traditional’ writing style produced by engineers as being ‘heavily unreadable’:

... when I suggest that passive, impersonal, turgid expression is a millstone that the technical content need not carry, I am told that papers written in any other style would be unacceptable: ‘It would be thrown straight back’; ‘My boss wouldn’t have it’; ‘You must make your work sound impressive’. ... Always there is anxiety that other engineers and scientists would not accept a departure from ‘traditional style’. (Kirkman 1992:2)

At the beginning of this paper, the following sentence, Example 1, is mentioned as being typical of the kind of stodgy writing that engineers produce:

Example 1: TTM have been operating a shore integration facility at Clydeport to support upgrade to the TRAFALGAR Class external communications capability for the last two years and have recently established a fully operational replica Wireless Telegraphy (WT) Office with construction of the Communication Shore Integration Facility Enhancement, CSIF(E), that enables live communication links and transmission capability to support capability upgrade.[Company name (TTM) and facility (Clydeport) are pseudonyms]

Most obvious features contributing to this sentence’s stodginess are:

- **Its length**, which would be considered overly long by most standards. The sentence comprises 58 words that form a complex-compound structure, which is unsuccessful in conveying the main message intended by the writers (this was part of a collaboratively written/multi-authored document), for reasons described below.

- **Uninformed punctuation usage**, which hinders fluent reading. Commas have been inserted unnecessarily before and after the acronym ‘CSIF(E)’, and have been omitted where they would have been helpful, like, for example, to demarcate the first section of the compound sentence, i.e. after ‘last two years’.

- **Inconsistent use of acronyms and initials**, which contribute significantly to the stodginess of the sentence. Acronyms are a natural corollary of a dynamic and industrious work environment, and are a distinctive feature of engineers’ writing (Sales 2006:174). However, their misuse and overuse are key ingredients in stodgy writing, as is the ambiguous and unnecessary tendency of engineers to capitalise individual words, or to use initial capital letters for words that do not require them.

- **A tendency to nominalize and to write in ‘a nominal style’** (Halliday 2004:108), so that, for example, ‘upgrade’ and ‘construction’ are used rather than verb equivalents, and a cumbersome sentence is constructed to accommodate two prepositional-phrase qualifiers: ‘to the TRAFALGAR Class external communications capability’ and ‘of the Communication Shore Integration Facility Enhancement, CSIF(E), that enables live communication links and transmission capability to support capability upgrade’.

- **A tendency to place the most important information in final position**, in that engineers are generally predisposed to putting the most important information, the nub of the matter, at the end of sections or long sentences. In the case of Example
1. the main message, and in this case the key selling point of the proposal, is positioned (‘buried’) at the very end. By the time most readers reach this part of the sentence, its import will have escaped them. A closer examination would probably show the need to reposition (and rework) the final defining relative clause ‘that enables live communication links and transmission capability to support capability upgrade’, and the embedded non-finite purpose clause ‘to support capability upgrade’, especially as these are the key points.

- **Complex noun phrases** - Halliday’s notion of complex noun phrases in scientific writing impedes comprehension for ESL and EL1 readers (ibid:159) is amply illustrated by Example 1, which contains five complex noun phrases, the longest of which comprises twenty words: a shore integration facility at Clydeport; upgrade to the TRAFALGAR Class external communications capability; the last two years; a fully operational replica Wireless Telegraphy (WT) Office; construction of the Communication Shore Integration Facility Enhancement, CSIF(E), that enables live communication links and transmission capability to support capability upgrade.

In fact, complex noun phrases abound in technical texts, and so it is natural that these should feature in proposals, to which engineers contribute technical descriptions. They are exhorted by their managers to write simply and clearly, but this is no easy task, as results from my own investigations have shown (Sales 2006:86:89). These lend support to Halliday’s observation about the ‘often professed ideal of “plain, simple English” ’. Engineers tend to write sentences with clausal structures that may be categorised as ‘simple’, exemplified by Example 2.

**Example 2:** The combat system designer will incorporate a low risk electro-optical tracking system compatible with displays, weapons and a range of sensors via any ship’s highway.

but which contain noun phrases comprising several nouns strung together. So, a sentence like Example 2 would be deemed simple because, according to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973:166), they do not have embedded clauses as constituents. However, such sentences may contain structurally complicated noun phrases at S and O positions, or, as Halliday more aptly puts it: ‘a pile up of nouns’ (2004:159).

**References**


**Herman Weisman.** 1962. *Basic Technical Writing.* Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc.

