

Biodata of conference presenters: Empowering and Disenfranchising Features

Subra Govindasamy

International Islamic University, Malaysia

Maya Khemlani David

Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia

Members of a discourse community who have attained status perpetuate their dominance by using language as both product and process (Mumby & Stohl, 1991) The biodata of paper presenters for conferences, like most other genres of texts is socially embedded and serves a social function. This research sets out to investigate whether presenters are aware as to how, through creative dovetailing of their biodata, they can empower themselves in the eyes of both conference organizers and participants. Discursive practices based first on a categorization of local and international presenters and later on a re-categorization of novice and experienced paper presenters are discussed. To validate the findings ten raters who are also experienced conveners of conferences were asked to choose five categories that are most beneficial to conference organizers as well as participants and to rank them in ascending order. They selected the following categories: publication of books, articles, presentation of papers, research interests and academic qualifications.

Collectively, the raters selected features which many of the experienced presenters had also prioritized. This verification exercise appears to confirm the hypothesis that experienced presenters use this discourse practice, i. e. the biodata, to enhance their position in relation to those who are not enabling themselves to achieve higher prominence.

Pedagogical applications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: discursive practices, power and discourse, conventions of discourse, academic discourse community, the writing of biodatas.

Fecha de recepción del manuscrito: agosto de 2001

Subra Govindasamy, International Islamic University, Malaysia.

Maya Khemlani David, Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Malaysia, correo electrónico: mayadavid@yahoo.com

Los miembros de una comunidad discursiva que llegan a tener estatus perpetúan su dominio al utilizar el lenguaje como producto y como proceso (Mumby & Stohl, 1991). Al igual que la mayoría de los géneros textuales, la presentación de datos curriculares realizada por ponentes en conferencias está determinada socialmente y cumple con una función social. Este trabajo busca investigar si los ponentes están conscientes de cómo, al amoldar sus datos biográficos, pueden presentarse ante organizadores de conferencias y participantes como personas de mayor importancia. Se discuten las prácticas discursivas con base primero en una categorización de ponentes locales e internacionales y luego en una recategorización de ponentes novatos y experimentados. Para validar los resultados, se pidió a diez evaluadores con experiencia en la organización de conferencias que escogieran cinco categorías útiles para organizadores y participantes y las clasificaran en orden ascendente. Seleccionaron las siguientes categorías: publicación de libros, artículos, presentación de ponencias, área de interés en la investigación y datos académicos. Colectivamente, los evaluadores seleccionaron rasgos que muchos ponentes experimentados habían considerado también prioritarios. Este ejercicio de verificación parece confirmar la hipótesis de que los ponentes experimentados utilizan esta práctica discursiva, i. e., la presentación de datos curriculares, para realzar su posición en relación con aquellos que no se permiten lograr un mayor reconocimiento. Se discuten algunas aplicaciones pedagógicas a estos resultados.

1. Introduction and aim of study

Any text that is produced by a writer has, in general, some underlying social functions which give the text its structure. In the case of biodata submitted by conference presenters, the intent is to convey as much information as possible about their academic position, achievements, and research pursuits within the constraints of a particular word length. As regards this pursuit, Fairclough (1995), explains that discourse practices include ways texts are produced by institutional writers in given settings and the way they are distributed and received by audiences.

The motivation for studies on the impact of discursive patterns comes from two sources -the effect such patterns have on consumers; and, the end product power holders derive from the practice. As regards the effect on readers, Kress, Garcia & Leeuwen (1997) offer the view that texts are embedded in realism and factualness and indirectly establish the social positioning of readers in a community. In other words, consumers are conditioned by the ideology. As regards the end product, Van Dijk (1998) suggests that the power of discourse belongs to the power holders who often promote themselves, gain status, image and authority. Power is after all integral to discourse. Those members of a discourse community who have attained status perpetuate their dominance by using language as both product and process (Mumby & Stohl, 1991) and have access to specific meanings and routinized kinds of interaction (Iedema & Wodak, 1999). Deetz (1982) furthers this concept by saying that writings are “thus much more than the means of explanation of individual meanings: they connect each perception to a larger orientation and system of meaning.”

This research focuses on a conference setting where researchers from many parts of the world congregate and disseminate their findings. The paper presenters have to submit their biodata. The biodata contains information, which the conference organizers believe, will enable them to assemble the best list of academic personalities at the conference when it is convened. The biodata of presenters are included in the program book which is given to all participants at the conference with the intention that such information may help match participants' interest and needs with those of the presenters. This practice is especially useful to participants in enabling them to select presentations that would be most useful to them especially when many presentations are taking place simultaneously. That the biodata of presenters, like most other genres of texts is socially embedded and serves a social function, cannot be refuted.

Van Dijk says that people do many things with discourse that they are not aware of, that they do not intend, that is beyond their control, or that is only interpreted as such by others (Van Dijk 1997:9). This research sets out to investigate whether presenters are aware as to how, through creative dovetailing of their biodata, they can empower themselves in the eyes of both conference organizers and participants. It must be noted at this juncture that paper presenters had to exercise their discretion when assembling their biodata as they were only given a 50-word length slot. Wodak explains “ Important conventions of discourse are established by prohibition, for example it is not possible to

speak about everything. ... Every discursive setting is limited by rules” (Wodak 1996:25). Therefore, bound by this constraint they focussed only on those features that they considered most salient.

The biodata of paper presenters is analysed to determine discourse features and information structures that consistently provide the presenters with a positive image and thus empower them. After all, power in society is not coercive, but rather mental (Van Dijk 1997:17). In this study, the specific meanings of the features of a biodata is in focus, not as an end in itself, but as a means of indicating how those who have been inducted in the discourse community have a headstart over novice writers and presenters.

2. Procedure and findings

As the purpose of the present study was to ascertain the discursive patterns in texts that empower paper presenters at conferences, the data gathering process is basically textual analysis. The texts used in this study are the biodata of all the paper presenters at an international English language conference convened by the Malaysian English Language Teachers’ Association in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia in May 2001. At this conference, there were altogether 132 paper presenters, almost two thirds of them Malaysians and a third international participants. Since the biodata of two sets of presenters (Malaysian and international) were available (see Table 1), the researchers initially were of the view that a simple comparison would reveal some underlying differences between Malaysian and international presenters.

Table 1: Number of national and international presenters

Presenters	Number
Malaysian	92
International	40
Total	132

The next step in the analysis of the data involved studying the biodata and developing categories of information. The researchers scrutinized the information given by the presenters and delineated 16 such categories of information. It must be emphasized that these categories were not imposed on the presenters by the conference organizers. The categories are data-driven and were obtained from the information given by the presenters. These included:

- academic qualification,

- books published,
- articles published,
- papers presented at conferences,
- overseas qualification (this applied more to the Malaysians than the others),
- special talents, awards received such as the Chevening and Fulbright,
- full-time position held,
- other important positions held,
- positions held in the past,
- academic positions held such as associate professor or professor,
- years of teaching experience,
- overseas teaching stints,
- place of work,
- pursuit of higher qualification, and
- research interests.

The special talent category deserves further elaboration as some presenters have mentioned these talents besides teaching/lecturing. Such special talents include:

- expertise in storytelling,
- children's literature,
- web-based pedagogy,
- creative drama.

The responses were tallied and the percentage of response to each category recorded. What international as well as Malaysian presenters chose to highlight is shown in Table 2.

Some differences exist between the two groups of presenters especially that regarding overseas teaching stints (0% for Malaysians as opposed to 50% for international presenters). However, there appear to be more similarities than differences. The percentage points for 9 of the categories are very close and the mean percentage (34.2 for Malaysian presenter and 36.1 for international presenters) differs by a mere two points. It is not surprising that the finding indicates that the two groups are not statistically different ($t = -0.424$, $df = 15$, $p < .678$). One reason could be that there are experienced presenters and new presenters in both groups and such a spread could nullify any real differences that may exist. If we are hoping to find those features that empower presenters from the analysis of biodata of Malaysian and international presenters, we will certainly draw a blank. The research procedure to compare the biodata of Malaysian and international presenters was not altogether a very rigorous one. The international presenters cannot be lumped together as one entity because they may have national and

Table 2: Categories mentioned by Malaysian and international presenters

Categories	Malaysian presenters (n=92)		International presenters (n=40)	
	Mentioned	%	Mentioned	%
Academic qualifications	91	99.0	29	72.5
Books published	9	9.8	8	20.0
Papers presented	9	9.8	10	25.0
Articles published	9	9.8	10	25.0
Overseas qualification (UK, USA, Australia...)	28	30.4	13	31.0
Special talent	8	8.7	6	15.0
Awards	3	3.3	2	5.0
Full-time positions	91	99.0	35	87.5
Other positions	33	35.9	13	31.0
Positions held in the past	19	20.7	3	7.5
Academic positions (Associate Professor/Professor)	7	7.6	3	7.5
Years of teaching experience	27	29.3	18	45.0
Overseas teaching stints	0	0.0	20	50.0
Place of work	88	94.6	33	82.5
Pursuing higher studies	10	10.9	3	7.5
Research interests	72	78.3	26	65.0
Mean		34.2		36.1
Standard deviation		36.5		27.9
Paired Samples Test: Std Error of Mean 4.41 t-.424 df 15 sig. (2-tailed) .678; p<0.05				

regional discursive practices different from one another and such practices have not been considered in the analysis. Table 3 provides a summary of the regional affiliation of the participants:

Table 3: Regional distribution of paper presenters

Malaysians	International participants	
	UK, USA Australia	22
	Southeast Asia (Singapore, Indonesia...)	4
	East Asia (Japan, Taiwan, LKong...)	6
	South Asia (Sri Lanka, ...)	3
	Middle-east (UAE, Turkey, Iran...)	3
	Other areas (Italy, South Africa...)	2
Total: 92		Total: 40

The 40 international presenters come from at least 5 regions; topping the list are the native speakers of English from the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia conveniently clustered as one region. It would be safe to assume that when analysis is carried out, some differences would surface as regards discursive practice. It would also be safe to assume that data obtained on regional and national practices may lack generalizability based on the small sample per group available at this conference. The data from very small groups cannot be subjected to any statistical scrutiny. This consideration prompted the researchers to abandon any attempt at assessing regional discursive patterns, and, instead focus attention on discursive practices based on a re-categorization of paper presenters into those who have sufficient experience and those who do not. The former category comprised assistant professors, associate professors and professors, as well as those who have presented papers, published articles in journals and published books. This group of professionals, either to retain tenureship or to market their books, has to be familiar with the demands of presenting themselves positively to

the public, hence their inclusion in this category. The vast majority of new presenters at this conference may not have had the privilege of knowing the effect their construction of biodata could have on others. If this assumption has any validity, then the features that are highlighted by the two groups should be different; and, by implication, the discursive pattern of those more experienced presenters more successful. This idea was formalized into a working hypothesis: the analysis of biodata of experienced/novice presenters will be a better gauge of successful discursive patterns than the analysis of biodata of local/international paper presenters.

The reconstituted grouping (see table 4) has highlighted some very obvious differences between the experienced and novice presenters.

Some categories are non-present in the novice presenters' data. These include publications, previous presentations and academic positions. Where other categories as 'research interests' and 'overseas qualification' are concerned, the experienced group overwhelms the other in terms of not only numbers but also by their longer listing within each category.

Three categories demands immediate attention, namely those concerned with publication of books, publication of articles and presentation of papers at other conferences. All the 15 presenters who have published books, the 17 who have presented papers previously and the 19 active writers for journals fall under the experienced presenters' group. And they have highlighted these aspects of their achievements in their respective biodata. For example, one presenter states (in third person, of course) *She has co-edited five books and co-authored with...* (names of famous co-authors listed) and *Her most recent book is...* (publisher's name included). Others have drawn attention to their contribution in the following way: *He has also written articles and essays in these areas for both local and international publications.* Another presenter who has not mentioned his academic qualification tops his biodata with a list of books he has written and the names of the respective publishers, which are given more prominence by being placed before the book titles: *As an author he has published books with OUP...* (name of book), *with CL¹/³...* (name of book), *with Longman ...* (name of book). Having books published by reputable publishers is a measure of true academic success. So it is not surprising that this presenter emphatically draws attention to this category. Another author highlights the current relevance of his publications by also including the year of publication: *His publications include a number of articles in international journals and four edited books, ...Pinter 1988; ...Pinter 1993, ...Pinter 1995; and ...Benjamins 1999.* There is a point being made -that he is a very prolific writer. Such credentials, resulted in participants prioritizing their attendance in favour of this select group of presenters.

Another category that is highlighted by presenters is their academic position, that of being an associate professor or a professor. In the world of academia, these positions are the most coveted and therefore receive some measure of prominence. As table 4 indicates, all those who have attained these positions are also experienced presenters and writers. The experienced group seems to have the edge in all four categories, i.e.

Table 4. Categories mentioned by experienced and novice presenters

Categories	Experienced presenters (n=52)		Novice presenters (n=90)	
	Mentioned	%	Mentioned	%
Academic qualifications	48	92.3	74	82.2
Books published	15	28.8	0	0.0
Papers presented	17	32.6	0	0.0
Articles published	19	36.5	0	0.0
Special talent	7	13.5	4	4.4
Awards	4	7.7	2	2.2
Full-time positions	48	92.3	78	86.7
Other positions	19	36.5	27	30.0
Positions held in the past	8	15.4	14	15.6
Academic positions (Associate Professor/Professor)	10	19.2	0	0.0
Years of teaching experience	17	32.6	25	27.8
Overseas teaching stints	12	23.0	9	10.0
Place of work	48	92.3	72	80.0
Pursuing higher studies	0	0.0	12	13.3
Research interests	39	75.0	22	24.4
Mean		39.9		24.9
Standard deviation		30.9		30.6
Paired Samples Test: Std Error of Mean 3.93 t 3.80 df 15 sig. (2-tailed) .002; P<0.05				

academic position, publication of books, publication of journal articles, and presentation at conferences.

In contrast, the novice presenters have only one category that outperforms the other group -the pursuit of higher academic qualification-. The 12 presenters who are either pursuing a masters or a doctoral qualification must have assumed this to be a feature that could empower them. The fact that the other 78 candidates in this group as well as another 12 in the experienced group have not mentioned this category may not mean that they are not pursuing higher studies. It also has to be pointed out that the 12 candidates from the novice group who mentioned their pursuit of higher degrees, in contrast with others from both groups, have very little to say about themselves and have not maximised the 50-word length of their biodata. It can be deduced that, since others have not prioritized their pursuit of higher studies, the novice group members must have felt a need to mention this feature as they may not have anything else to say. But, the fact is they have much to convey! For example, other novice presenters have mentioned their involvement with the Education Ministry's projects, or the fact that they are master teachers, or the heads of the English departments in their schools, or the projects that they are engaged in the school districts, or their research interests. That the 12 less experienced presenters have not mentioned any of these activities, in some ways, appear to make them quite powerless.

The category of 'full-time position' deserves a deeper pragmatic and linguistic analysis from the perspectives of both groups. Most of the presenters from the two groups have mentioned their full-time positions. This is to be expected as most presenters can be reached more easily at their place of work than elsewhere. Most correspondences are directed via the work-place too. As such, the work place is heavily featured in almost all the biodata except for those who are pursuing higher studies on their own and those who are freelancers. Therefore difference in content is not a moot point for this category; however, there is a noteworthy difference in style. While experienced presenters have mentioned that they teach/lecture in a particular institution, some of the new presenters shy away from such direct statements and they often resort to vague statements, e.g. (name of presenter) *is attached to* (name of institution). Readers are often left without a clue as to whether the presenter is a teacher or an administrator. Their presence at the conference is therefore of little relevance if they do not specify the nature of their profession. For example, one presenter connects with the audience by stating the name of the institution and the courses she teaches: *Dr. (name) is a lecturer at (Name of institution) and has been involved with teacher training for the past 12 years*. Others have been even more explicit: *Dr. (Name) is a lecturer in the (name of department/institution). She is currently teaching Language and Gender, Psycholinguistics and Language in Society*. The effect of such a forthcoming manner is very much an aspect of a literate style, moving away from the implicitness expected in societies still bounded by oral traditions. An explicit, literate style that exhibits audience awareness is definitely a feature that empowers presenters.

Another category, that which outlines the research interests of the presenters, is unquestionably the most important feature of the biodata. The category indicates the

breadth of the presenter's undertaking and accords a setting to the presentation. The larger the interests of the presenter, the more assured the participants are in terms of academic support for the presentation from a broader perspective. While experienced presenters have, in general, mentioned at least a few broad areas, the new presenters have failed in this aspect. It is interesting to note how two international presenters, both colleagues, have presented this category. The experienced presenter states: *His research interests include EL/EAP (especially academic writing), second language acquisition, interlanguage, pragmatics, lexicography and sociolinguistics.* His colleague merely mentions: *...has 15 years' experience teaching English as a second language in urban and rural schools...* Certainly, conference participants will judge the former as a person more capable of providing a broader perspective than his colleague. It appears that only 24.4% of the less experienced presenters in contrast to the 75% of the experienced presenters show any awareness of the benefit of indicating their areas of interest!

Overall, the experienced group's mean percentage point is very much higher than the other group's (39.9, and 24.9 respectively). Generally, this indicates that the experienced presenters have more to say about themselves than the less experienced ones. This is confirmed by statistical analysis -there is a significant difference between the two groups (t 3.80; df 15; $sig.$.002; $p < 0.05$). In other words, what this recorded difference between the experienced and novice presenters indicates is that the difference is not accidental; there are valid reasons for its occurrence. Any reason that is postulated to explain this occurrence, however, must be assumed to be subjective and needs to be verified.

For this reason, the researchers enlisted the help of 10 raters (all Malaysian academics) who are also experienced conveners of conferences to first choose five categories that are most beneficial to conference organizers as well as participants and to rank them in ascending order. They selected the following categories: publication of books, articles, presentation of papers, research interests and academic qualifications. The results of their choice and ranking is shown in table 5.

Collectively, the raters have selected features which many of the experienced presenters have also prioritized: publication of books, presentation of papers/publication of articles, research interests, academic qualification and full-time positions. This verification exercise appears to confirm the hypothesis that experienced presenters use this discourse practice, i.e. the biodata, to enhance their position in relation to those who are not enabling themselves to achieve higher prominence.

3. Pedagogical Applications

It is clear then that a teacher must put an emphasis on rhetoric in the writing task. Audience, purpose and setting all play a vital role and must be considered when learners are involved in a writing task. Any assignment or piece of work must spell out:

Table 5: Raters' choice and ranking of categories

Rank	Categories
1	Authored books
2	Presented papers
3	Published articles
4	Research interests
5	Academic qualification

- why one is writing
- who one is writing for and
- where the product will be read.

The written product must fulfill the writer's intentions or aims and at the same time meet the needs of the target audience -the reader.

If one is constrained by external requirements, for instance limitation on the number of words used, as in this study of biodata, then the learner-writer will have to make major decisions on what is relevant or irrelevant information for the audience. After this decision is made, he will have to consider the correct sequencing of such information. Correct sequencing can also empower one. Apart from sequencing the issue of being explicit or implicit must also be considered. Again, the target audience must be considered. An educated literate audience expects and demands explicit information especially in a biodata.

Writing helps to clarify one's thoughts and consequently such a metacognitive approach to writing must view writing as a recursive rather than a linear process where all three stages of the writing process (pre-writing, writing and revision) overlap and intertwine.

The learner-writer must constantly keep in mind the questions why is he writing and who is he writing for and be prepared to write a number of drafts until he is pleased that the final product displays him well, and that as in the case of a curriculum vitae or an application letter, that he is projecting himself positively to a specific audience.

In short, the written product, be it an application letter, a curriculum vitae, a biodata, a letter, a report, etc. can be written in a powerful or powerless style. The learner-writer must be consciously made aware of discursive patterns that empower or disenfranchise one in the eyes of others. Learner-writers must be made aware that it is "...usually the perspective and interpretation of the other(s) that prevail: discursive activity becomes socially "real" if it has real social consequences." (Van Dijk1997:9).

4. Conclusion

The researchers started on the premise that the discursive pattern in conference biodata empowers some and disenfranchises others. The study showed that it is impossible to discover features that empowers presenters by merely comparing the biodata of local and international presenters. The presence of experienced and new presenters in both these groups appear to nullify any existing differences. The reconstituted grouping comprising experienced presenters and novice presenters held more promise as some difference between these two groups did surface. The hypothesis that experienced presenters are often able to maximise certain categories of information that endows them with some measure of prominence, while novice presenters appear unaware of the accruing benefits of presenting themselves more equitably in their biodata, has to be accepted, as the difference was statistically significant. Hanak (1998) states that a powerless style is one in which a practice signals deference or a lack of confidence. In the case of the novice presenters, it is their implicitness that is not promoting their presence. There is thus a need for this group of presenters to highlight and explicitly state their achievements, research works, positions and contributions to the discourse community as a way of empowering themselves.

Reference:

DEETZ, S. (1982) "Critical interpretive research in organizational communication". *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 46, 131-149.

FAIRCLOUGH, N. (1995) *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.

HANAK, I. (1998) "Chairing meetings: Turn and topic control in development communication in rural Zanzibar". *Discourse and Society*, 9 (1). 33-56

IEDEMA, R. & WODAK, R. (2000) "Introduction: Organizational discourses and practises". *Discourse and Society*, 10 (1), 5-20

KRESS, G., GARCIA, R.L. & VAN LEEUWEN, T. (1997) "Discourse semiotics". In T.A. Van Dijk (ed) *Discourse as structure and process*. London: Sage publications. 257-291

MUMBY, D.K & STOHL, C. (1991) "Power and discourse in organization studies, absence and the dialectic of control". *Discourse and Society*, 2 (3). 313-332

WODAK, R. 1996. *Disorders of discourse*. London: Longman.

VAN DUK, T.A. (1998) "Critical discourse analysis" (<http://www.hum.uva.nl/~teun/cda.htm>)

VAN DUK, T.A. (1997) *Discourse as social interaction*. London: Sage.