

Analysis of Official Letters Based on Applied Genre Analytical Model

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Abstract—Nowadays letters play a significant role in the realm of communication in general and in official or business occasions in particular. With the advent of emails, the function of letters is diminishing but in official contexts, letters have kept their value. The main concern of this paper is to show the interrelationship between different layers of official letters which are called *textual*, *contextual*, and *social* layers. Sixty authentic letters were analyzed according to the purpose of the authors. Through this investigation, five specific categories were found: Informative, Prescriptive, Appointment, Acknowledgment, and Invitation. Each category then was investigated according to Bhatia's model of *applied genre analysis* in three domains which were mentioned above. It was found that there is a direct and positive relationship between these three layers. The direction is from social domain towards textual one in that the characteristics and features of social context affect the contextual domain and the context influences textual domain in respect. This study is a multi-faceted one in that all the five types of official letters are studied in accordance to three layers and the relationship between them is explained. This exploration shows that in official situations, 'social identities' are of paramount importance which have a remarkable influence on both conventions of the genre and textual features. This study is also helpful for those EFL students and all who need to write English official letters to avoid undue mistakes and to represent their thoughts clearly and fluently.

Index Terms—official letters, genre analysis, social power, textual features, correspondence

I. INTRODUCTION

As the realm of human relationship has increased, communication among individuals has become much more sophisticated and the rules as well as the expectations governing official and business societies have become much stricter. Letters, as a means of communication, have often been, in a literate society, a useful and impressive instrument in order to connect oneself to the outer world and to reveal the thoughts. With the advent of internet, most of the transactions are done through e-mails and the era of letter writing is going to diminish gradually. However, in official societies, since there are hierarchical structures and many persons are responsible for a piece of work to be done and letters are to be *signed* or *sealed*, formal correspondences are still a thriving domain. Furthermore, to increase the validity of a letter and to show that what has been written is from a reliable source, letters rather than e-mails are used in official situations. The hierarchical structure of official societies makes it distinguishable from other types of contexts such as commercial or personal occasions, to name a few. For instance, the head of a faculty is going to dismiss or assign a person; because of the hierarchical structures, orders must be followed and one can vividly see the role of this power and obey in official letters in contrast to other types of letters.

Since the importance of official corresponding is apparently known to everyone, many authors have tried to write textbooks about how to write letters properly. However, the books which are available in the market for official letter writing is one dimensional in that they have just considered the textual structure of these letters. "What constitutes an appropriate text is determined not only by general standards of good writing, but by specific demands and constraints of the writer's disciplinary community" (Pecorari, 2006, p. 5). Swales (1990) presented that "Communicative effectiveness is far more important than stylistic appropriateness" (p. 3).

Writing official letters is most often a demanding job for individuals, for it is not just a matter of mechanics of writing and many facets should be kept in mind while writing official correspondence, namely, discourse community, conventions of the genre, and its audience expectations (Ding, 2007). Attention to audience and context has been the concern of many approaches and methods throughout history such as Whole Language. As Rigg (1991) mentioned, "both speakers and writers are urged to consider their audience, the person(s) they are addressing; both are reminded to consider the setting in which their messages will be received" (p. 525). It has been said that the purpose of a text helps to shape the text (Kinneavy, 1971) and, as a result, equal attention should be given to purpose and setting too. It does

not mean that one should forget knowledge of the text all together but a *multifaceted* analysis is necessary in order to take into account different aspects of a specific genre.

Throughout the academic writing history, many researchers have approached and scrutinized various genres (Abbasian & Tahririan, 2008; Badger, 2003; Ding, 2007; Dudley-Evans, 2000; Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Samraj, 2005; Santos, 2002) but little is known about the generic and social features of official letters. As Dudley-Evans (2000) said, "every text which is used in particular specialist environments, has particular characteristics that distinguish it from other texts" (p. 4). Therefore, to find the relationship between different layers of official letters, it is necessary to examine official letters in order to pave the way for those who are not familiar enough with the discourse community and audience expectations of this specific genre. Writers should balance their concern about textual, contextual and social layers of official letters.

With the publication of '*Genre Analysis: English in academic and research setting*' by Swales (1990), so many researchers have applied CARS model in order to find regularities of different genres through establishing specific moves and steps (Flowerdew & Wan, 2006; Habibi, 2008; Kanoksilapatham, 2005; Martin, 2003; Ozturk, 2007). The purpose of these researchers is mostly to find the regularities that distinguish a particular genre or to define the rhetorical variation of different parts of academic articles. Recently, there has been a great deal of valuable studies on different genres of letters. In an exploratory study, Flowerdew and Wan (2006) investigated the tax computation letters of an international accounting firm and examined the lexico-grammatical realizations of their specific moves. In another study, Ding (2007) analyzed a corpus of 30 medical/dental school application letters and specified five recurrent moves. Santos (2002) studied "business letters of negotiation" in order to find the communicative purposes and rhetorical features underlying these letters. The result of a study conducted by Abbasian and Tahririan (2008) revealed the discrepancies in the strategies used by EFL teachers and biology professionals to realize the moves as well as the dynamic nature of e-mails.

After a glance at current researches written about genres of different contexts, one can recognize that the domain of official letters is underresearch. Every genre analysis must have a theory and a purpose behind it and this article has its own theory too. The theory stands on the point of understanding and accounting for the private intentions of the author, in addition to socially recognized communicative purposes and the effect of text-external factors on text-internal ones (Bhatia, 2002). As it is argued by Bhatia (2008), comprehensive analysis of professional genres requires the integration of text-internal factors into text-external aspects of language use. The main purpose of this article is to examine different official letters in order to find the communicative purposes underlying these correspondences in accordance to various needs and identities of the writer. The effect of context and convention on the lexical choices is also considered in this study. It is believed that social context and audience affect the use of lexico-grammatical structure of a text.

II. METHODOLOGY

Corpus and Procedure

In order to find the idiosyncrasies of official letters, sixty authentic (created for real purposes) letters were gathered from the English department of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad-Iran and they were checked thoroughly according to the purpose of the letter. Culture and first language were the same for all the correspondences since they were written by natives and all in Persian. Letters are mainly from faculty members who are within the structure of the aforementioned university or from universities related to other cities. Among the data, letters from other faculties and universities are also available. They are kept and analyzed in the study in order to increase the generalizability of the findings.

According to Brown (1988), systematic ordering in data collection is not acceptable. In order to consider this point in mind, letters were collected randomly from a large corpus of official correspondences. This also increases the generalizability of the research since the sample is more representative of the outside world. The Bhatia's *applied genre analysis model* (2002) is used as the main approach toward analyzing the data. This model has some merits over other models toward analyzing genres. In this model, three layers have been identified which were called *perspectives on discourse* (Bhatia, 2002). This model covers all aspects of a discourse and, according to Bhatia (2002), these aspects are three interacting views of discourse that affect each other. It is a structure which is more pattern-seeking rather than pattern-imposing which requires a multi-functional analysis (Habibi, 2008).

Therefore, for analyzing official letters, Bhatia's comprehensive model is used because it gives much more information than just finding moves and steps of a particular genre and it is more flexible and has an open-ended structure which covers the drawbacks of previous models toward genre analysis (Habibi, 2008). These three perspectives are:

- a) Textual perspective or discourse as text (text knowledge).
- b) Socio-cognitive perspective or discourse as genre (genre knowledge).
- c) Socio-critical perspective or discourse as social practice (social knowledge).

The first phase of this study was to analyze the sixty letters to make it clear whether there are varieties of purposes or just one particular purpose in relation to the writers. If there would be a unified text (one particular purpose), then it will be easier to apply the model. But if it contains varieties of purposes, the model should be applied separately for each category. In this part of the study the data were analyzed carefully and were divided into specific groups. In placing

letters to different categories, just the *purpose of the author* was considered because, as it will be mentioned later in the paper, the purpose of a text will affect the use of textual structure. Textual features were not accepted as a good criterion, for there is always some overlapping in different variations of a text. This does not mean that textual features should be totally neglected; they go hand in hand with social power. This relationship is explained somewhere else in the text. Most of the time, because it is a demanding job to find the latent purposes of a text, individuals may resort to surface structure investigations and it may cause some problems in the process of reaching a precise categorization of data since categories share some textual features that are misleading.

After assigning letters to specific groups, each letter was then analyzed according to three perspectives mentioned above (text, genre, and social) and the information was recorded. The aim of this analysis was to come across the microstructure of the letters and move toward larger scales of the text in order to discover the relationships that exist among the layers. In *textual domain*, the use of language and features of lexicogrammar were statistically or functionally analyzed. In other words, the use of linguistic elements was studied to find out whether individual letters, which are categorized in one group, share some commonalities or they are idiosyncratic in linguistic features. Since words or phrases have hidden messages, they should be examined carefully to find out whether they share any connotative meaning that can be used in a specific situation. In this stage, the use of words was investigated. Then, words that were repeated in the categories were grouped and, afterward, counted. It was revealed that each category used *specific words* in order to find its way toward a particular purpose. Word frequency and repetition of specific words are important in this stage. We called this the “*bottom-up approach*” toward analyzing data.

In *genre domain*, the intention of the writer is determined and the way the text is interpreted was specified. Letters are studied according to their underlying purpose so that the effect of purpose and the use of words can be examined. First, the whole data (official letters) were categorized according to their purpose. Moreover, it was evaluated how words in that context help to achieve each specific purpose. For instance, if there is a category which is called a “request category,” then there should be some words in order to show that request format. Words by themselves do not carry specific meanings; it is the art of the speaker or writer that arranges the words in a way to reveal his/her thoughts properly.

The *social domain* takes into account the social context and changing identities of the participants (Bhatia, 2002). The way we use words depends mostly on who is the addressee and the mutual constraints that exist between interlocutors. In this stage, the role relationship of the authors of the letters was studied to find out the subtle influences which exist between writers and receivers. According to the model, the analysis should enjoy some interrelationship between different layers of a genre which were mentioned above.

III. RESULTS

In order to find out whether there are varieties of purposes, the corpus was checked carefully and letters were assigned to specific groups according to their purpose and their effect on the audience. It is beneficial to find the variation between the letters because every communicative purpose is obtained through characteristic words and grammar. It should be mentioned that generalizing a common rule to all the data is not acceptable because individuals’ styles and intentions differ in various situations. In assigning letters to groups, both contextual and textual factors are considered. The first layer of analysis showed that within the realm of official letters there are five specific purposes which are as follow:

TABLE I
DISTRIBUTION OF LETTERS IN CORPUS

Subheading or purpose	Number of letters
1. Invitation	3
2. Acknowledgement	3
3. Informative	25
4. Appointment	7
5. Prescriptive	22

Table I makes it clear that *informative* purpose is the category in which most of the letters are placed. Twenty-five out of sixty letters fall in this group. They constitute nearly forty-five percent (45%) of the whole corpus. The analysis showed that this category consists of two separate parts:

a) Letters that are just informative: Nothing is required to be done and mere informing is enough. Thirteen out of twenty-five letters are placed in this category. For example, some letters informed that specific courses will be assigned in next semester. They required that authorities should give enough information about the courses. These letters are usually observed in the places that students are able to notice them. For example, bulletins are a good place for this purpose.

b) Letters that are informative and to some extent imperative: A thing is to be done besides giving information. Twelve out of twenty-five letters belong to this category. These letters require the people in charge (authorities) to take action and usually they are not placed in front of the public eyes. For instance, a specific university informs the target university that “we do not accept any guests in summer semester so we want you not to send any student until we allow.”

The data showed that the informative category is the only one that includes letters from other universities. In none of the other categories one can see letters of organizations and writers from outside of the faculty domain. Other categories just include letters that are related to members of their own faculty not any exotic organization. Therefore, there are letters from inner circle and letters from outer circle.

The next category which comes after informative letters and occupies second place in accordance to number of cases is *prescriptive* letters. Twenty-two out of sixty letters belong to this category. These letters include delivery of the packages, cleansing the buildings, increasing the time of education, checking the roll-calls of students, solving the problems of students, asking for clarification, giving introduction letters, and the like. They are called prescriptive in that they are written by the authorities and they should be obeyed without questioning. This is how power is established in a hierarchical organization as was mentioned earlier.

The next category is *appointment* letters. Seven out of sixty letters are appointment letters. These are letters that assign people to different posts and positions. For example, an experienced lecturer may be assigned as the chief of the English department or may be appointed as the managing editor of a publication. *Invitation* and *acknowledgement* letters share equal numbers of letters, that is, three. Invitation letters are those letters that ask individuals to take part in conferences or meetings and acknowledgment letters address individuals' good-will and hardworking through mentioning their previous efforts for improving the goals of the organization.

After figuring out different layers of official letters according to their purpose, each category was investigated according to Bhatia's applied genre analytical model. The inquiry begins by categorizing each group according to textual characteristics of each layer. In this scrutiny, the role of context is ignored to see whether there is any feature in the text that would help us toward finding out the aim of the text. The textual analysis revealed the information in five groups which are mentioned in Table II. It should be mentioned that for each phrase or word, the frequency percentage is provided to reveal how frequent they are in comparison to a specific layer. By frequent it means that the specified theme is the main idea behind the text.

TABLE II
TEXTUAL DOMAINS OF THE MODEL APPLIED TO THE CORPUS

Layer	Textual characteristics
Informative	a) Using phrases like 'for giving information' (80%) [i.e., eighty percent of informative letters type 'a' used this phrase] or phrases like 'promulgating to students' (15%) are placed in this group. Moreover, words of choice like 'volunteers' (5%) are used frequently in this category. b) This group of informative letters shares some features with part (a) but enjoys some uniqueness; the use of <i>modal operators</i> such as 'it is necessary' (68%), 'it should be done' (32%), and other means of <i>verbal intrusion</i> (Millrood, 2004) are parts of this layer.
Prescriptive	Phrases such as 'taking action' (79%), 'delivery of information' (13%), and 'words of refrainment' (8%) are frequent in this layer.
Appointment	Using phrases such as 'wish you luck' (53%) and 'you are appointed as' (47%) are frequent in this category.
Acknowledgment	Phrases like 'invaluable serving' (56%) and 'honest endeavors' (44%) are frequent in this layer. Words of <i>appraisal</i> are placed in this category.
Invitation	Phrases like 'attending the meeting' (73%) and 'grateful presence' (27%) are placed in this category.

Table II gives us useful information but one cannot assert that it is all that should be done in order to reach the conclusion. Many texts are different in relation to choice of words but they are categorized in one group. Furthermore, the context and social practice narrow the use of words in a text. These two perspectives will be addressed respectively in the following paragraphs.

As we go to the next layer, which is discourse as genre, we account for the purpose of the text and the relationship between the text and context, that is, the purpose will surely affect the choice of words. Most of the studies which are done in genre analysis are placed in this domain. In this layer, we are dealing with the interpretation of the text. One of the specific features of official letters is their formal convention that forms the peculiarities of this genre. Familiarization with the convention of the genres helps individuals to find out different purposes of a specific genre and to match their choice of words with the specific goals they have in mind. In analyzing the data, five specific purposes were found and each of them followed the formalities of official letters but with changing the purpose of each category, the use of words changes too. Therefore, in writing letters, the convention of a specific group should be analyzed first and then, according to the convention, the use of linguistic elements is determined.

The next analysis is related to social practices of letters. As it was mentioned earlier, individuals change the way they react to environment according to the type of feedback they receive. This feedback is sometimes from other people surrounding, legislations, or the reflections of the writer. Ignoring these three factors may cause problems for the individuals. For instance, a person is at the *head* of a company. S/he has the right to appoint or to dismiss every person in the firm. Or s/he may address people in the way s/he likes because s/he is the owner of the company. Further imagine a *worker* in the same firm. Can s/he address every person in the firm in the same way the manager do? The answer is obvious and the mere thought of the idea makes it clear that social practice has an undeniable role in shaping linguistic categories. Social power is revealed through textual features. Therefore, the role relationship is considerably important.

When individuals are going to write a letter, they should consider the addressee because our goal is our audience as well as the way they react to the letter, not the way a letter is written. In other words, we are going to influence our

reader and it is this knowledge that brings change to the text. For example, if one is going to have a communication with working class people, one should be familiar with their thoughts and desires so that the writing will influence the target group in the best way. Keeping this in mind, analysis of data revealed that writers change their use of words when their addressees change. For instance, in prescriptive letters one cannot see any imperative words. Instead, the addressee is remained unknown to keep the esteem of the person in charge. Also, passive verbs are frequently used in these letters. The writer uses passive to avoid addressing a particular person since it may not be polite. The addressee is not called with the pronoun ‘you’ but with third person plural—‘they.’ Thus, second person plural is changed to third person plural because the context requires behaving in that way. In informative letters senders are categorized in three groups:

TABLE III
CHARACTERIZATION OF VARIOUS SOURCES OF SENDERS IN INFORMATIVE LETTERS

Senders	Features of the letters
1. Minister of Science	Usually there is no addressee in the letter and it is generally directed to the head of the faculty or the person who is responsible for the specified work to be done. These letters are usually given to the delivery system of the target university to be distributed to the person in charge. The addressee is the <i>macrostructure</i> of the faculty.
2. Other organizations	The addressee is determined most of the time. These letters are usually written for director generals or registrar.
3. Members of the faculty	These letters include the <i>microstructure</i> of the faculty, that is, lecturers and members.

Having said that, whenever a letter is to be written, the macrostructure as well as the microstructure of that community should be taken into account otherwise it will not have its own influence. This specification of macro and micro levels affects the choice of words and phrases.

In official letters, the feature mentioned in previous paragraph is of paramount importance. In all five variations of letters, one can vividly see that the writer has put emphasis on social domain of letters. The hierarchical structure of official contexts requires the writer to be aware of some stylistic devices that are not suitable or has face threatening effect. We called this process the “*top-down approach*” toward analysis of data. Data was carefully analyzed to find out the origin and the destination of letters. After doing so, the positions of these starts (writer) and ends (receiver) were investigated. Categories of acknowledgment and appointment letters were different in comparison to other categories in respect to the positions of senders and receivers in that in these two kinds of letters the origin and the destination are individuals. However, in other three categories the origin and the destination are not a specific person but the macrostructure of the organization (the whole organization).

IV. DISCUSSION

The data analysis showed that the top-down approach toward the discourse community has the role of modifying both the purpose of the text and the linguistic choice of words and phrases. The choice of words and the purpose of the author were the yardsticks which categorized the data into five different groups. The investigation revealed that the macrostructure of a text, which is the ‘social domain’ of any genre, has the effect of determining both the purpose and lexicogrammatical structure of a letter. The importance of these social constraints has been shown by some researchers. For example, Santos (2002) maintained that “mainstream commercial English textbooks, adopted by many language schools in Brazil, fail to give thorough descriptions of social and cultural aspects” (p. 167). Likewise, Bhatia (2008) argued for a multiperspective approach to genre analysis which emphasized the context and the disciplinary cultures. In their study, Abbasian and Tahririan (2008) analyzed the generic features of e-mails and found that the discourse communities and purposes had strong influences on e-mails.

Table III gives us valuable information by suggesting that senders themselves sometimes affect how a text is formed. Genres play an important role in shaping and manipulating individuals’ thoughts and it is argued that in order to find the influence of genres on people, individuals should be examined closely (Cheng, 2006). The results of this study showed that categories share some commonalities in respect to textual features and it is misleading if one considers just the linguistic style for assigning data to various groups. In this corpus, informative letters constitute the largest amount of data and this category was the only category that letters from other organizations or universities (outer circle) were used. This category was divided into two groups and each group had some differences with the other one. Acknowledgement letters were the category in which most of the respectful words were used. The two categories which shared the most commonalities were prescriptive and informative. Prescriptive letters are to some extent like informative letters which are *imperative* (something should be done).

What have distinguished official genres from other genres are the hierarchical structures in official situations and, as Table III reveals, the changing features of letters in accordance to various identifications of receivers. For example, when letters are submitted to members of the faculty, one can recognize that the use of respectful phrases and words increases. This is because in correspondences between the members of the faculty, the addressee is known to the writer and this knowledge allows the writer to express his/her feeling more informally toward the person who will receive the letter. In prescriptive letters, one can hardly identify a clear addressee and the message is generalized to include the whole discourse community. In contrast, in informative letters the addressee is usually identified. The analysis revealed that the addressee in informative letters is usually the microstructure of the society—students or lecturers mainly. The

only categories in which there is always a direct addressee are acknowledgement and appointment letters. Although they are to a large degree personal, they have a latent purpose: to inform the macrostructure of the organization.

This latent purpose is mostly assigned to appointment letters. Part of the purpose is to inform a person that s/he has been chosen for a new post but the latent knowledge is to inform the whole organization that some changes have occurred. The background knowledge is important in shaping the textual features of letters. If you know the person you are addressing, then the process of writing would be less formal and the use of respectful words increases to a considerable degree. In appointment and acknowledgement letters, since the sender and the receiver are familiar with each other, the textual features differ in comparison to situations in which the two ends of the correspondence are unknown to each other.

V. CONCLUSION

This study focused on the interrelationship between different layers of official letters. It was recognized that there are various factors that affect the textual organization of a specific discourse. Some of these factors are background knowledge, the relationship between sender and receiver, formalities or informalities of a community, and the latent as well as the surface purposes of the writer. Ignoring these elements may lead to misunderstanding on the part of the reader and sometimes it may be considered as being rude or impolite. Moreover, the three layers of a genre should be kept in mind while writing the letters. These three layers affect each other in a direct way; the direction is from social domain towards context and then to textual domain. For example, whenever the identities of the interpreter (addressee) change, the writer uses different phrases and words to establish a consistency between the text and discourse community. The Bhatia's applied genre analysis model (2002) is useful for finding the realities underlying a genre because it considers different aspects of a given discourse and does not restrict its user.

The main purpose of this paper was to analyze official letters in order to find peculiarities of this genre. Considering just the textual aspects of official letters undermines so many hidden and fundamental characteristics of this genre. The main feature of official letters, which is its formality, owes this to the convention of the genre not to the textual elements. This article emphasizes that there should be a balance between the layers (textual, contextual, and social). It is clear that the features and the variability of a determined genre cannot be limited to just one study. As Brown (2007) put it, "it is the elusiveness of a phenomenon that makes the quest for answers so exciting" (p. 4).

This study aimed to make contribution to the realm of letter writing by proposing features of official letters. It was revealed that in order to convey communicative meaning and purpose, social relationship as well as the purpose of the author should be kept in mind since these two factors establish a framework for selecting lexicogrammatical characteristics. Since there are different purposes, as the results of this study proved, one cannot utilize a specific style for writing all kinds of official letters. It should be highlighted that this multifaceted investigation is a "pattern seeking" study rather than a "pattern posing" one (Bhatia, 1993) and teachers should consider this pattern-seeking nature of teaching genre. As Santos (2002) mentioned, teaching contextualized linguistic and cultural and social differences are keys to success in foreign language communication. Therefore, when students are taught social norms and contextualized linguistic elements, as it was investigated in this study, communication will be much clearer. The findings of this study help EFL students avoid miscommunication by identifying social relationships as well as the effect of these social relationships on the conventions and choice of words and phrases. Moreover, this study is beneficial to raise students' consciousness towards the subtle features of official genres.

There have always been cross-cultural differences that limit the scope of a researcher's findings. Since first language and culture remained constant for all the letters in this study, the generalizability of the findings to other situations with different languages and cultures is under question. Therefore, there may be more variation considering the purpose of the letters. In this study five specific purposes were found but there may be other variations unknown to the researchers. For example, there may be *follow up* letters that enjoy their own styles and features. This study was done on Persian official letters. However, with other languages there may be some idiosyncrasies.

More studies are needed to find out the cross-cultural differences when people write official letters. There may be organizations that differ considerably in their use of formal letters; they may have their own conventions. Therefore, further investigation is required to fulfill the points which were unseen to the eyes of the researchers in this study. As far as we have *Wh questions*, one might encounter some problems standing on his/her viewpoint because applying each of these questions may be a threat to the validity of studies in the realm of *human science*.

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