Writing style: political implications

March 2005

International
Institute for
Environment and
Development

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We acknowledge the support of The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation (BMZ) who have financed the development of these tools, and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) who provided the start-up support. For more information on *Power Tools* please visit www.policy-powertools.org

Summary

"Writing style: political implications" is a tool for guiding systematic, analytic reading. Using this tool helps to uncover partially hidden meanings in all kinds of texts, such as company reports or government policy statements.

What is "Writing style: political implications"?

This approach helps to analyse how writing challenges or supports inequalities. We intuitively do these analyses all the time. For example, we sense that the journalist who writes, 'Four fatalities occurred during skirmishes with rebel forces' has a different ideology from the journalist who writes of the same incident, 'US soldiers murdered four civilians'. This tool offers some ideas for systematic, rather than intuitive, analysis of texts to uncover their partially hidden meanings. This tool was initially designed for use in industry, but it can be used more broadly, and draws examples from a variety of sources.

Some comments on the tool's methodology

This tool is based on Norman Fairclough's (1989, 1992, 2000, 2001) critical discourse[1] analysis. Fairclough uses critical realism as his guiding philosophy. Critical realism is a methodological approach to research that avoids both naïve realist and anti-realist positions. I have simplified Fairclough's critical discourse analysis significantly for this tool.

Steps

The steps of the tool are linear, yet analysis is rarely so. You can enter the steps of the tool at any point, and will tend to move back and forth between them as you uncover new information and ask new questions. Using the tool in groups is often more fruitful than individually because people will have different interpretations and thus add depth to the analysis.

Step 1: Collect examples of text

Collect typical examples of public text that are relevant to the problem being analysed. You should avoid the analysis of private texts, unless you have been given permission and you are certain that the text owner understands the implications of the analysis. One way to obtain private texts for analysis, should this be useful, is to use your own writing prior to your learning about language analysis, or to use fictional texts (Hodge and Kress, 1988:172). It is likely that your texts (e.g. emails to colleagues, proposals and reports you have written) will be just as representative as others' texts; surviving in the professional world implies that you, too, have learnt the language strategies which help construct that world (Bourdieu, 1998).

Step 2: Choose a text

Choose a typical text for analysis from your collection. Do not spend too much time trying to find the best text possible, since all texts will exhibit at least some relevant characteristics. Your initial text is just a starting point, and there is always the chance to deepen the analysis later, in step 6.

Step 3: Describe the text

Use the characteristics listed in Tables a, b, c, d and e. These tables are just a guide and are based on Chapter 8 of Fairclough's (1992) "Discourse and Social Change", although in a form accessible to people with no background in language analysis. Some of the points in the tables

[1] "Discourse" is here loosely defined as "language".

may not be relevant; simply leave them out. Likewise, feel free to include characteristics of the text that strike you as important, but are not included in the tables. Technically, only the left hand column of the tables is ‘description’. The right hand column gives examples of how the characteristic being described might be used in interpreting text, and therefore is not description but interpretation (which we address in the next step).

It is important to understand the difference between description and interpretation. For instance, if there is a case of nominalisation (making a verb into a noun), no-one can question this as the evidence is in the text and this is simple description. However, the interpretation is a more complicated matter; the nominalisation could be to strategically hide an agent, or it could simply be a space-saving tactic. Take for example the difference between these two sentences: “Paper companies have released toxins into the river and this has caused…” vs. “The release of toxins into the river has caused…” In the latter sentence, the nominalisation of the verb ‘to release’ (making it ‘The release’) could function to save space or to hide the responsibility of the paper companies.

Despite the difficulties in trying to keep description and interpretation separate, it is useful at this stage at least to try to achieve this. However, in practice, it is an impossible task and we can only keep description and interpretation separate at a conceptual level. Description will inevitably include some interpretation; we are beginning our interpretation just in our choice of what to describe.

In this tool, we are looking specifically for evidence of political manoeuvring. The description phase can therefore be summarised as a process of looking for textual characteristics that, *in the interpretation phase*, might be evidence for:

1. strategic concealment of information
2. the reproduction of unequal social relations
3. avoidance of discussion, dissent and challenges to the status quo
4. the author’s, possibly hidden or understated, ideology
5. relatively concealed or ‘underground’ challenges to the status quo

However, these textual characteristics are not in themselves evidence of strategy, ideology, inequality and conflict. They must be placed within context and interpreted as such. What complicates matters is that they can simultaneously serve both innocuous and problematic functions. This is part of the reason they are hard to identify. Trying to understand the complex social functions of these textual characteristics is the business of the next step: interpretation.

Table a: ***Textual characteristics which, in the interpretation phase, may be useful as evidence of strategic concealment of information***

Textual characteristic	**How this characteristic might be relevant in the interpretation phase of analysis**
Absences of relevant information	Perhaps hides a reality that the author would rather gloss over, e.g. the absence of information on nuclear waste disposal in the environmental section of an company annual report.
Concealment of the 'agent' (the person, people, or even non-human thing which was responsible for something)	Can allow the allocation of responsibility to be avoided, e.g. 'the multinationals can make goods in low cost countries' (active sentence indicates who is doing what) vs. 'goods can be made in low cost countries' (multinational agency is concealed – a passive sentence).
Nominalisation – representing a process as a noun	This may be a space-saving strategy, but it may also conveniently hide responsibility. For example, the newspaper heading: "load-shedding causes problems for motorists" (Fairclough, 1989). The phrase "load-shedding" is a nominalisation of the process whereby poorly prepared trucks shed their load as they travel the roads. It hides the fact that it is the people who pack the truck, or perhaps their company, who are responsible for this load-shedding.

Table b: ***Textual characteristics which, in the interpretation phase, may be useful as evidence of the reproduction of unequal social relations***

Textual characteristic	**How this characteristic might be relevant in the interpretation phase of analysis**
Assumption of mutual knowledge	For example, the use of professional language excludes those who do not understand it.
Turn taking	This is usually significant if unequal, but the context is important in understanding the significance, e.g. in one context, marginalised persons may be given fewer opportunities to speak, but, in another context, a leader might insist on having the marginalised speak, especially in participatory discussions, and thus the ones with power may speak less.
Politeness	Informality can indicate that the person being addressed is part of the 'in' crowd, but, depending on the context, informality may be an indication of a large gap in social standing, for example, in colonial countries, the colonisers tend to call the colonised people by their first names, never 'Mr' or 'Mrs', which would indicate status.
Allocation of agency	A dominant person will often be given active roles, whereas excluded persons are often 'acted upon', e.g. "employers pay workers more" – the employers are active, the workers passively being acted upon.
Slippage of meaning with regard 'we'	Sometimes 'we' means everyone, sometimes it means a certain group of people, and other aspects of the text must tell us how to interpret this 'we'. In a speech by Tony Blair, sometimes 'we' seems to mean NATO, sometimes 'we' means Britain and sometimes 'we' means an unspecified grouping of nations. This vagueness was to Blair's advantage when he said in a speech that 'we' must invade Kosovo. He was perhaps saying 'we' the responsible citizens of the world, but he was perhaps also meaning 'we', NATO. In fact NATO had made the decision to invade, but to be overt about the power monopoly of NATO would have been a political faux pas (Fairclough, 2000:152, 152).

Table c: ***Textual characteristics which, in the interpretation phase, may be useful as evidence for a tendency to avoid discussion and dissent and thus potentially avoid challenges to the status quo***

Textual characteristic	**How this characteristic might be relevant in the interpretation phase of analysis**
Use of metaphors/language which indicate inevitability	This can refuse discussion or dissent, e.g. "...no country is immune to the massive change that globalisation brings" (Fairclough, 2000:163).
Presupposition that something is given and achieved	This can also refuse dissent, e.g. the phrase 'the new global economy' presupposes that there is a new global economy – that is, it takes it for granted, as something we all know (yet most analyses of globalisation see it as an uneven and partial tendency) (Fairclough, 2000:163).
Use of graphs, diagrams and statistical data	These can indicate, perhaps questionably, that the text contents are based on irrefutable scientific knowledge, giving professional weight to the document.
Use of professional textual markers, such as highly technical professional words	Again, these can be used to imply that a text is official and/or objective and thus unarguably true.
Bullet points	These also tend to refuse different opinions; they are 'to the point', with little room for argument.

Table d: ***Textual characteristics which, in the interpretation phase, may be useful as evidence of the author's ideology***

Textual characteristic	**How this characteristic might be relevant in the interpretation phase of analysis**
Choice of descriptive wording	For example, the choice of emotive vs. euphemistic language: "Two people were violently murdered on Saturday night" vs. "Unknown gunmen were associated with the deaths of two immigrants on Saturday".
Collocations, the frequency with which words are associated with each other	These can also indicate the author's ideology, e.g. in Britain's New Labour party documents, the word 'business' tends to be associated with words such as 'partnership' and 'helping'. In the Old Labour documents the word 'business' tended to be associated with words/phrases indicating conflict e.g. 'uncoordinated selfish business decisions directed to private profit' or was merely used descriptively e.g. 'business education' (Fairclough, 2000:31).
Non-identification language	This can distance the author from an idea or ideology, e.g. "People who hold this position..." rather than "As one who holds this position…"
Modality, the speaker/writer's level of commitment to the truth of what they are saying	This can indicate the writer's beliefs or ideology, e.g. "there's no future for that…" (strong modality) vs. "I don't think there is a future for that (weaker modality) or "you must not do that" (strong modality) vs. "perhaps it's a bad idea to do that" (weaker modality).
The position of a topic in a list	The higher a topic is placed in a list, possibly the more important that topic is to the author.
"Questions" which are functioning more as statements	For example, depending on the context, this question: "Is it not true that protecting the environment reduces profits?" could be more of a statement, indicating that the writer herself thinks that protecting the environment reduces profits.

Table e: ***Textual characteristics which, in the interpretation phase, may be useful as evidence that indicates relatively concealed challenges to the status quo***

Textual characteristic	Example of how this characteristic might be relevant in the interpretation phase of analysis
Over-wording/anticipation of conflict	For example, in a manual on corporate governance there was a highlighted note on gender “The masculine pronoun has been used throughout this manual. This stems from a desire to avoid ugly cumbersome language and no discrimination or prejudice is intended.” This statement anticipates conflict around gender issues. Note the over wording with regard ‘ugly, cumbersome’ (just ‘cumbersome’ would have been adequate).
Resistant readings	These can show that a text is not common sense and normal, even though it may be presented as such, e.g. On an advertising bill board for cigarettes, graffiti erases a few key letters and parts of letters to turn the phrase “New. Mild. And Marlboro” into the phrase “New. Vile. And a bore.” (Hodge and Kress, 1988:8).
Infringement of systems of rules about ‘who’ can say ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ (such as systems of politeness and professionalism)	These systems of rules are often the sites of conflict when the status quo is being challenged (Kress and Hodge, 1988:4). They can also indicate that there is perhaps more to the text than the authors are aware or sharing. For example, in the comment on gender-sensitive language above, the word ‘ugly’ is typically not usually an appropriate word for a professional text. Its surprising presence in a document which otherwise is perfectly professional perhaps indicates the presence of conflict, at least for the author, around gender issues.
Hesitancy and rewordings (in hand written texts), contradictions, use of terms indicating uncertainty (modality)	For example, an author might write: “Perhaps we should, do this” rather than, “We should do this.” She may be uncertain of changes that have already happened to the status quo (such as trying to negotiate her role as a manager in a company which is transitioning from ‘top-down management’ to ‘participatory’ management), or perhaps she is herself challenging, cautiously, the status quo, testing the waters, before giving her full linguistic commitment to the challenge.

Step 4: Interpret the text

Carry out the interpretation (give the text meaning), twice. The first time, merely describe the overall impression that the text is trying to give (read *with* the text). The second time, give an oppositional reading of the text (read *against* the text).

In reading 'with' the text, we are accepting the preferred reading and thus offering unquestioning support for the status quo. The reason that we read ‘with’ the text is so that we empathise with the writer to put us in a better position to understand their motivations and constraints. This will make our critique of their position more detailed and, in the explanation phase, will give us a basis to explore the socio-historical underpinnings of their language as we try to understand why they write the way they do.

In reading ‘against’ the text, we are using critical discourse analysis techniques to deliberately resist the text's apparent naturalness. We try to offer an alternative reading, i.e. we ask such questions as: How is the text positioned or positioning? Whose interests are served by this positioning? Whose interests are negated? What are the consequences of this positioning? In other words, we are asking how the text performs in society to reproduce/transform the status quo (Janks, 1997:329).

Step 5: Explain the text

Explain your interpretation in terms of the social preconditions. Here we ask what are the characteristics of the relevant society that explain (form the preconditions for) the language used in the text.

For example, the choice of colonialist language implying the bringing of ‘light to darkest Africa’ used by a South African electricity company (Price, 2002) can only be understood in the context of South Africa being a dominant country in Africa that is rapidly ‘colonising’ surrounding countries through market dominance. A precondition for this language to seem normal is that we have not moved much from the colonial idea of development: it is still predominantly seen as ‘helping’ people and is supposedly a linear progression towards perfection, a move from ‘dark’ to ‘light’; there is one grand solution to everyone’s problems. Furthermore, the South African government’s insistence upon affirmative action perhaps makes language that would seem crass and abusive in a USA-based company document, seem noble and natural in a dominantly black South African company (it is expected that black South Africans should be able to openly use tactics disallowed for ‘previously’ advantaged groups, to allow them to ‘catch up’).

Researching the history, socio-economics and geography of the society in question will help in this step.

Step 6: Verification and expansion of initial findings

Verify and expand the initial findings. In this phase, look through your collection of texts for evidence which supports or contradicts your initial interpretation and explanation. In CDA, verification is much like a crossword puzzle in which you look for intersecting clues to support your interpretation. If an intersecting clue does not ‘fit’ you need to check other intersecting clues to decide how to proceed with the contradiction.

If your analysis is a strong one, it should explain quite small features of the texts in your collection. For example, perhaps in your initial analysis you suggested that companies were motivated by the need to *be seen* to do the right thing, rather than the need to *actually* do the right thing. Evidence for this was in the form of theory/practice inconsistencies (e.g. the environmental report you analysed was very glossy. If the company was serious about the environment it would have recycled, non-glossy paper). Perhaps in this phase of verification you found that the pattern of theory/practice contradiction continued, but further evidence emerged which added extra support to your initial analysis: documents that were more recent had a much reduced focus on environmental issues, and had turned instead to social issues, in line with current trends. That is, as your analysis might suggest, companies changed their focus when another fashion came along.

Inconsistencies between your initial analysis and what you find in your larger collection of texts need to be examined and adjustments made to your interpretation to accommodate them. It is possible that you have to discard aspects of your initial analysis altogether, or at least change them significantly. For example, you may find that some companies *have* used recycled paper, thus you would have to put qualifications on your initial analysis.

Another method of verification is to ask for writers and intended readers of the texts to read your analysis. Do they agree with it? If they disagree, this does not necessarily mean that your interpretation is wrong, but you will need to justify the difference in opinion. For example, your interpretation may identify gender imbalances; you may find that the women you speak to agree, but many of the men disagree. If you remain relatively sure[2] of your initial analysis, go with it, but the difference in opinion will be a significant finding, which adds depth to your analysis[3].

In this phase, you may also find important time-related changes to the general pattern of language practice: for example, you may find a difference between texts before and after the September 11 attacks in the USA.

Conclusion

One person, recently introduced to the tool, exclaimed, “This tool is dangerous!” He elaborated that whereas in the past he had unconsciously used the tactics in the tool to protect his position when producing texts, he could now use them consciously. However, along with this newfound understanding had come an ethical decision of whether to use it or not. He also felt that whilst he might try to avoid dirty tactics in producing texts, this CDA tool in the hands of a less principled person might give them extra power. Fortunately, a strength of this tool is that the more it is shared, the more we become aware of the effects of language, and the less likely we are to be taken in by language ploys.

A weakness of this tool is that it may raise our level of consciousness about language, but the actions that we can take may seem at best trivial and at worst hazardous. For example, suddenly becoming entirely honest in how we report problems at work could lose us our jobs. There is a risk that the tool may raise our awareness only to leave us wondering what we can do about it. This is where it is

[2] In line with the critical realist methodology, we cannot claim to be absolutely sure of anything.
[3] An assumption of critical realism is that actors are not always aware of the unconscious motivation and effects of their practices. This is where Critical Realism differs from phenomenological research approaches in which the actors’ analyses are always assumed to be correct.

important to remember, “We can only do, what we can do, with the resources that we have got” (Bhaskar, 2002). Sometimes, change cannot simply be a case of changing awareness; we have to work towards material changes as well. Therefore, this tool must be seen as only part of the process of emancipation. Apart from language constraints, we may also need to consider, for example, economic, cultural, institutional, legislative and psychological constraints.

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Example of using “Writing style: political implications” with environmental managers in Zimbabwe

The case study is from a workshop, carried out in Zimbabwe, in which we tested the tool with a group of environmental managers from a variety of industries. People who work as industry managers in developing countries often feel aware of the contradiction that their business uses the rhetoric of globalisation but at the same time workers and the environment suffer consequences of international capitalism. The motivation for using the tool was to better understand how the language of business and globalisation was perhaps implicated in poor environmental management and inequalities.

This is not an expert analysis. We stopped the analysis when time ran out, not because we felt that we had completed it. Therefore, the findings, whilst interesting, are not exhaustive. The process of carrying out the analysis, with texts, which were relevant to our work, was just as important as the final outcome.

Step 1: Collect examples of text

We collected Annual General Reports from Zimbabwean companies, management magazines, environmental magazines for business, speeches, minutes from relevant meetings (we obtained permission and the minutes were from a company represented in our group), newspaper articles, etc.

Step 2: Choose a text

We chose to analyse a set of meeting minutes from a safety, health and environment committee. The company to whom the minutes belonged had given their permission and their environmental manager was present at the workshop. This company was involved in large-scale agricultural production of a raw material, which it then processed on site. They also packaged their final products (there were more than one) and sold them locally, regionally and internationally.

Step 3: Description of the text

See the Appendix for the actual minutes analysed (names and distinguishing features have been removed).

The text was characterised by passive language, nominalisations and abbreviations. Some examples were:

“<u>Water hyacinth</u>… spraying is in progress” (nominalisation of verb ‘to spray’)
“<u>Boreholes</u>… Next sampling scheduled for August” (nominalisation of verb ‘to sample’)
“Due to financial constraints, work will be deferred to 2005” (passive sentence)
<u>“Property Damage</u>…Several meetings have been held. In progress. To finalise.” (passive sentence and abbreviated sentences)

The classic official structure for meeting minutes was used. Information was summarised. The environmental manager present at the meeting from which the minutes were taken commented that much dissention and commentary was absent from the minutes. Emotion had also been removed from the minutes (one of the managers had been angry about a pollution incident but this was largely absent from the minutes). There was much use of abbreviations, without explanation, which assumes the reader will be familiar with the abbreviations. For example, the safety statistics (Lost Time…) are reported as a lost time figure, with no details of what happened: “LTIFR for the directorate was 0.38”. Points were numbered.

From the discussion around safety, it appeared a worker had died, mentioned in passing: “BJB to follow up with DW with regard to outsourcing in view of HVE fatality” Several environmentally related activities were minuted without comment, e.g. spraying of water hyacinth, spraying of *Lantana camara* with Roundup, cutting firewood.

One statement was not typical of professional language, namely, “Two pollution incidents occurred this week!!” Exclamation marks, and especially two exclamation marks, are usually associated with informal writing.

Step 4: Interpretation

Reading with the text

These minutes were efficient. They did not reflect all that was said but they reflected what was important and ensured that allocated tasks were appropriately recorded to ensure accountability with regard the completion of those tasks.

Reading against the text

Possible strategic concealment of information

The use of passive sentences, nominalisations and abbreviations was able to hide responsibility, for example, “Two pollution incidents happened this week!!” allowed the responsible people to be protected. Since most of the passive use of language, nominalisations and abbreviations was innocuous and merely efficient, and conformed to standard grammatical practice, it all the more difficult to spot strategic use of these grammatical characteristics. This was in itself perhaps strategic. Should the avoidance of responsibility be pointed out to a writer, she could claim this was not purposeful; she was merely being compliant with grammatical norms.

The efficiency of the minutes allowed things to be hidden that might be controversial or confrontational. For example, the two exclamation marks were efficient but they were also all that remained of the fact that the environmental manager was very angry about the pollution incidents. As an accusation that not enough care and diligence was being given to environmental issues, this anger was perhaps a threat or challenge to the status quo.

However, the concealment of information may not have only benefited the status quo; it may also have benefited those who were challenging the status quo. For example, if the environmental manager had felt that his anger outburst would be captured fully in the minutes, he might have withheld his emotions. Thus the way in which the minutes hide things could be seen as both a way of maintaining the status quo, but it could also be a strategic possibility for bringing in alternative ideas and allowing more freedom of expression.

Possible avoidance of discussion/dissent and challenges to the status quo

That the secretary’s name did not appear on the minutes might be a way of making his hand in the writing of the minutes seem invisible, and therefore objective, thus avoiding argument. The professionalism of the minutes also implied objectivity and therefore refused argument or dissent. Having the input of someone who was present at the meeting helped us to understand that a large amount of discussion and dissent was hidden; thus, the minutes presented a unified view of the proceedings, which concealed different opinions.

The professional lack of emotion of the minutes refused comment on the use of environmentally unfriendly substances to control vegetation and the chopping of firewood. It also prevented too much discussion of the accidents that had occurred, by reducing the accidents to a number. An accident may be reported as having lost 10 working days to the company, but the fact that the accident had resulted in a worker losing a finger, and the cost to that worker, is completely hidden by those figures. Emotion is potentially a stimulus for change; it seems likely that avoiding emotion is a way to protect the status quo. The strict format of the minutes, reflecting a strict format for the meeting it recorded, perhaps limited “out-of-the-box” solutions to problems. These might also challenge the status quo.

Use of the word ‘fatality’ rather than ‘death’ seemed to reduce the loss of life to a technical event, and thus perhaps refused some of the impact of that event, which may have been challenging to the status quo.

Possible reproduction of unequal social relations

The use of passive language, nominalisations and abbreviations was forgiving of misdemeanours and minor problems. For example, the company in some way absorbed the blame for the two pollution incidents that occurred. If blame had been allocated to individuals, they would possibly need to be reprimanded and perhaps lose their jobs. However, if management already did not like the perpetrators of the incident, naming them personally in the minutes would be a good way to get them into trouble.

This ambiguity in minutes and meetings leaves room for abuse, since it seems possible that the minutes could be more forgiving of the management insiders than marginalised employees. This would be hard to identify as the minutes give the impression of unbiased objectivity. However, such differential allocation of responsibility was only surmised, and no direct evidence for it was found (we returned to the text for further description to explore this question). It was difficult to find evidence because we did not know enough about the people at the meeting. In addition, the company seemed to have already done a good job of excluding specific social groups; thus there was perhaps little current need for such tactics. For example, there were no women at the meeting.

Some indirect evidence for differential allocation of responsibility may be that, on the one occasion when praise was called for, responsibility was clear: “Agric to be commended on containment procedures”. Nowhere was there an instance of responsibility being indicated if this could lead to blame.

Although there was much technical language and many undefined abbreviations, it seemed unlikely that this deliberately exclusionary to workers, as, according to the employee who participated in the analysis, those who read the minutes would be familiar with the terms and would be able to understand them. However, the technical language and abbreviations, apart from their efficiency functions, perhaps also performed as an in-crowd code language. This perhaps encouraged camaraderie amongst staff members.

Possible indication of ideology

The placement of environmental issues as the last thing on the agenda might indicate that environmental issues tend to be considered less important than other issues.

Possible 'underground' challenge to the status quo

The unusual use of two exclamation marks in the sentence describing the two pollution incidents, which were all that remained of the manager's anger in this regard, could be evidence of a relatively hidden status quo challenge. The manager's outburst had indicated that there was not enough weight being given to environmental issues. Those two exclamation marks were perhaps subtly saying, "This is not good enough!".

Step 5: Explain your interpretation findings in terms of the social preconditions for them

A precondition for meetings to be run this way is that it is almost impossible to imagine them being run in any other way. This is how it has always been done and it seems there can be no alternative. All over the world, meetings are run in this particular way. In *reading with* the text, we wrote very little. Perhaps this was because the structure and function of meeting minutes seemed so obvious and natural, that it was hard to think of anything to say about them.

Another precondition for these minutes is that everyone involved must somehow understand the subtle rules of 'who' can say 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'how'. For example, the secretary needs to be able to distinguish between what is and is not to be included. To make the most use of the minutes, managers need to feel confident that they can say things which are 'off-the-record'.

A precondition for the sidelining of environmental concerns, compared to safety and health concerns, could be that there are more regulations for safety and health. There is also more accountability with regard safety and health, with regular checks being made by the safety and health organisations. Furthermore, 'health and safety' have been part of the company culture for longer than 'environment'; people are more comfortable with them. Perhaps another precondition for sidelining the environment is the assumption that we have to place people in opposition to the environment. Short-term safety, health and profit are seen as primary over environmental concerns. The dependence, in the long-term, of safety, health and profit on a healthy environment seems to be overlooked.

A precondition for the 'polite' refusal to allocate responsibility to problems could be that culturally we find it difficult to accept criticism. We tend to expect harsh penalties for misdemeanours to be handed down by authority. It would be easier to be honest if authority was not so hierarchically structured. There seems to be an unspoken rule that if a misdemeanour comes to the attention of authorities, they must punish it to maintain their authority; they must not be seen to be weak. However, if authority was less hierarchical, and less fear based, leaders would not have to use misdemeanours to demonstrate their power, and instead employees could be part of the discussion process to determine how best they can make reparation for mistakes. In other words, if 'management' was more 'co-management', it might be easier to be more honest and this fear of authority may be a precondition for some of the refusal to admit responsibility.

Step 6: Verify and expand the initial findings

The other minutes we looked at had the same characteristics of efficiency, lack of emotion and agent-less language. Discussion and dissent were to some extent minimised by all the minutes. We noticed, however, that our initial minutes were unusual in that the others did give the name of the secretary who wrote them (this must have been an oversight in our initial example). Also, minutes could be quite different depending on who wrote them, with varying degrees of detail included. In the other minutes we looked at, not only were environmental issues last on the agenda, but also significantly less time was allocated to them, adding weight to the claim that environmental issues were sidelined. Again we did not find much evidence of differential allocation of responsibility depending on status, although, perhaps a larger selection of texts and greater research, which included a way of distinguishing among individuals, might be necessary to fully confirm this intuitive idea.

Case study conclusion

The professionalism of the language of meeting minutes can be used to strategically prevent challenges to the status quo. For example, the use of passive language can hide responsibility and avoid blame, which prevents the organisation having to change. However, there is also potential for the professionalism of minutes to allow relatively safe challenges to the status quo. In this case, a manager became angry about the lack of due care with regard environmental issues but his outburst was possibly allowed because it would not fully find its way into the minutes.

Minutes might also have the potential to allow relatively hidden unequal treatment of people, for example, by moving strategically between active and passive language. Hypothetically, insiders can be protected by passive language, which removes responsibility from them for misdemeanours, while outsiders can be squarely blamed for their actions, with the use of active language.

The classic minutes structure seems so natural and unquestionable that it is hard to challenge. It is also hard to challenge because of the penalties that might be incurred if people were to resist their format, such as accusations of being unprofessional.

Appendix: Meeting minutes analysed in case study

Committee meeting minutes held on Thursday 29th July 2004 at 1000 in the committee room

Present
BJB[4] Agricultural Director (Chairman)
GC Agricultural Fields Manager
MM Estate Manager
LG Personnel Officer, Estate
TG Area Supervisor, Estate
MN Area Manager
HT Section 2, 5, & 7 Manager
TM Section 9 & 14 Manager
LM Irrigation Systems Manager
CM Agricultural Training Manager
UM Agricultural Statistics Clerk
MR Section 22 Overseer

Apologies
FE Agricultural Technical Manager
TN Estate Area Manager
BM Sustainability Manager
PM Senior Area Manager 2
WG Senior Area Manager 1
GK Loss Control Manager
DN Agricultural Extension Manager

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2. ADOPTION OF PREVIOUS MINUTES

- The minutes of the Agricultural Committee meeting held on Thursday 24th June 2004 were taken as read.

3. SAFETY AND HEALTH

3.1 MATTERS ARISING

3.1.1 Driver Selection and Testing (Minute 3.1.1)

Meeting to be scheduled with relevant Management representatives for adoption of policy. To follow up. **BJB**

3.1.2 Agric Division – SHE Action Plan (Minute 3.1.2)

- ***Sustainable Management for the Environment***
  Total Package – GC to give Area Managers copies and BJB to give copy to MM. To respond by 15.08.2004 to EE.
  BJB/GC/MM/A/Mgrs
- ***Property Damage***
  Several meetings have been held. In progress. To finalise. **FE**

3.1.3 Tractor Seat Suspension (Minute 3.1.3)

Numbers completed as follows

Agricultural Technical Department	5/9
Agricultural Fields Department	68/111
Estate	9/19

[4] In the "Present" and "Apologies" sections of the actual minutes, names were given in full. Here we have abbreviated them and the abbreviations do not reflect actual name initials. This is to protect individual identity.

3.1.4 Perry Loader Seating & Chevrons (Minute 3.1.4 & 3.1.6)
Trial done, continuing **GC**

3.1.5 Dumpers (Minute 3.1.5)
Dumpers fitted with back barriers fitted as follows:

Area 1	5/12
Area 2	7/11
Area 3	4/6
Agric Tech	9/13
Estate	Using chains (tail gates to be fitted)

BJB to follow up with DW with regard to outsourcing in view of HVE fatality. To be done by 31.08.04. **GC**

Estate planning to go back to tail gates. Aiming to have 4 on tail gates and 2 on chains by 31.08.04, currently 5 are on chains and 1 on tail gates.

3.1.6 Personnel Trailers (Minute 3.1.8)
One trailer being tried on Area 3. Report being compiled by MM. **MM**

3.1.7 Drowning Prevention Action Plan (Minute 3.1.9)

a. Walkways
Rationalised which sections and provided an F2 budget for them. **GC**

b. Canals
To finish by 31.08.04
- Audit on the drowning Action Plan by 31.08.04. Report by 31.08.04 to BJB. **GC**

3.1.10 Safety Signs for Water Bodies (Minute 3.3.2)
LG to approach a sign writer for pictorial stencil to fit on the existing boards. **LG**

3.1.11 Loader Legs (Minute 3.3.4)
One done and seems satisfactory. To be adopted by all. **GC/MM**

3.1.12 Harvest Knife Bags (Minute 3.3.5)
Sample shown – implement it. **A/Mgrs**

3.1.13 Malaria (Minute 3.3.9)
To use Paraffin/oil in canal boxes where water will be stagnant for more than 1 week to avoid breeding of mosquitos. **A/Mgrs**

3.1.16 Automated Cutter (Minute 3.3.2)
Machine is back in use. JSA to be revised. GC to finalise. **GC**

3.2 Safety Statistics (May 2004)
LTIFR for the Directorate was 0.38. **GC**

3.3 New Business

3.3.1 Programme Incentive – new policy
Policy not yet out. To pass on once it's ready. **BJB**

4.0 ENVIRONMENT

4.1 MATTERS ARISING FROM PREVIOUS MINUTES

4.1.1 Wilderness Area (Minute 4.1.1)
Area 1 – Ongoing. Summer house repaired.
Area 2 – Hut thatched. Benches being done and toilet under construction.

Area 3 – Paths done naming of trees being done. Water connection on the way.
M/Estate Being fenced. Baseline review not done yet. To look at it. **BM**

4.1.2 Toilets (Minute 4.1.2)
To be progressed. **FE**

4.1.3 Boreholes (Minute 4.1.3)
Next sampling scheduled for August. **DN**

4.1.4 Kamba Dam (Minute 4.1.4)
Due to financial constraints, work will be deferred to 2005. **FE**

4.1.5 Estate – Section 1 Sewerage Ponds (Minute 4.1.6)
Expedite **MM**

4.1.6 Firewood (Minute 4.1.7)
Area 3 cutting at Masangula. Waiting for contractor to ferry. **MM**

4.1.7 Water Hyacinth (Minute 4.1.8)
Spraying is in progress. **(CLOSED)**

4.1.8 Lantana Camara (Minute 4.1.9)
CN asked to revisit sites where Lantana Camara was sprayed with Roundup, to check for regrowth before Sections order the chemical in bulk quantities. **DN**

4.1.9 Sewage Ponds (Minute 4.1.10)
Managers to inform FE of priority with regard to refurbishment. **A/Mgrs**

4.1.14 Liquid Waste (Minute 4.2.4)
Two pollution incidents occurred this week!! Both due to negligence, and both were avoidable, however, Agric to be commended on containment procedures.
MM

5.0 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Agricultural Directorate Programme Committee is scheduled for Thursday 26th July 2004 at 1000 hrs in the Committee Room.