

Discourse quality

Ever since discourse evaluation research by means of readability formulas and cloze tests has been done, various approaches have been proposed as to make use of new text-oriented evaluation methods in addition to reader-oriented evaluations (such as pretests and think/work aloud protocols). Several of these approaches go beyond a short or long list of measuring points (on sentence structure, perspectivization, use of words, etc.) and try to design an evaluation scheme on the basis of a theory of discourse quality. One of these approaches is the CCC-model designed within the Discourse Studies Group (see Renkema 1994 and 2000). The model links up with, among others, the balance and harmony approach in esthetic theories on quality.

Within the CCC-model the ancient rhetorical division into five discourse levels is used: text type, content, structure, formulation and presentation. One of the model's claims is that discourse aspects on a higher level have a greater influence on judgments about discourse quality than discourse aspects on a lower level. In other words: improvements on the formulation level (sentence structure and choice of words) will generally have less impact on quality judgments than improvements on the content level. This claim has been partly confirmed in Spooren, Smith & Renkema (2000), in which it was proved that a change in content in direct-mail letters *does* and a change in formulation *does not* have an effect on persuasive force. In Kloet, Renkema & Van Wijk (submitted) it was proved that errors in structure have a greater effect than spelling mistakes.

In various externally funded research projects the CCC-model has been a guideline for research, for example in projects on the improvement of standard correspondence of the Dutch Internal Revenue Service, the National Ombudsman and the Central Statistical Office. One of the most striking findings was that when experienced copywriters improve some specific text types, e.g. a letter asking information, in accordance with the CCC-model's norms for the four levels of content, structure, formulation and presentation, there is indeed some improvement in discourse judgment. However, an effect on persuasion, intention or behavior as aimed at by the writer cannot or only hardly be pointed out. A plausible explanation is that although several improvements are based on writers' purposes or readers' expectations (e.g. additional examples accompanying explanations of difficult regulations or a more clear task specification from a government agency), these improvements in content produce no effect, since the benevolentia criterion has not been taken into account sufficiently. This ancient rhetorical term has until now only been used for the exordium, the introductory part of a text. It concerns the relation that has to be established between receiver and sender. However, it is very plausible that aspects of content are not only being judged on factors such as need for knowledge, but that discourse judgments are also determined by the extent to which a reader is made benevolent in regard to the content of the message or the required action.

In this project discourse quality research will be curtailed to research into the effect of benevolentia factors in content choices. Three experiments will verify the effect of adding benevolentia content in respect of other textual improvements on discourse quality judgments in terms of text judgment, persuasion, intention and action. The choices in design are prompted by the nature of external projects that have been or are to be carried out by the Tilburg Department of Language and Literature. The scientific importance is found in the need for the framing of theories in research on assigning

quality, the relative influence of various discourse levels and relational aspects of the inventio in text production. Three aspects of the benevolentia criterion will be examined in respect of specific text types.

1. The reader can be made 'positively' benevolent by applying the 'do-ut-des' principle. See Dillman (1991) and Childers & Skinner (1996) on this 'reward' theory in mail surveys. On the basis of the theoretical framework presented there, the effect of adding reward information on quality judgments in respect of other textual improvements will be verified. This question will be addressed with regard to letters in which the reader is asked something for which he feels no obligation (for example Central Statistical Office forms sent to retailers).

2. The reader can be made 'negatively' benevolent by adding so-called fear appeal information, such as the announcement of high way speed checks. See among others Burgoon (1990) and Dillard et al. (1996) on fear appeal. A possible positive effect of this type of information is the reader displaying the desired behavior. However, a possible negative effect is that, due to repeated use fear appeal, the sender's image is influenced negatively to such an extent, that readers try to evade the regulations in a new situation with even more effort. In cooperation with the Dutch Internal Revenue Service an experiment will be constructed in order to verify the effect of fear appeal information on the reader's desired behavior and the sender's image.

3. On the basis of the face-keeping principle in politeness theory it can be predicted that benevolence is influenced positively when the reader is treated respectfully (with his own 'decision domain') in texts that are meant to stimulate him to display different behavior (e.g. anti-smoke and aids prevention campaigns). This is one of the central themes in governmental information, as campaigns such as 'Safe sex' are regarded to have failed because of the patronizing tone of voice of the information. The information provided in this particular case could have been assumed to be known to the target audience and was formulated in a way which addressed the audience (teenagers) as if they were children. In line of current research done in cooperation with Huls & Van Wijk new experiments will be designed as to verify the effect of a patronizing tone of voice in healthcare information on quality judgments.

The experiments will be designed following the already developed standard methods (see for example Renkema & Van Wijk 2003). The most important components comprise the design of institutionally approved discourse manipulations, the (pre)testing for naturalness of discourse versions and the use of question sets in which various target audiences are not only questioned about persuasion and intention but also about involvement and image. It is planned to carry out parts of this project – the comparison of similar types of discourse manipulation for various target audiences – in cooperation with members of the SAGUS working group at Stellenbosch University.