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# Controlled Language promoting readability and Tone-of-Voice

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## Introduction

The opportunities offered by language technology for supporting and streamlining document production are being increasingly exploited by companies for all types of documents. This is the case not only at the level of using correct terminology and correct grammatical structures etc, but now also at the level of supporting the right Tone-of-Voice of the corporate language. Companies are increasingly interested in developing a language style that will communicate their brand values to customers in order to create and maintain good customer relations. The Tone-of-Voice phenomenon is however not only interesting in connection with the marketing efforts of private companies; the public sector can also benefit from using a suitable Tone-of-Voice in order to attract the reader's attention, create commitment and achieve the desired reader response.

The present paper presents results in this area achieved in the Danish VID project (Viden og Dokumenthåndtering med sprogteknologi – Knowledge and Document Handling with Language Technology). VID is headed by Center for Sprogteknologi (Centre for Language Technology). The project group includes a number of Danish companies, and two of those, namely Bang & Olufsen Audio Visual and Nordea AB, are both working in the domestic as well as the export markets, and need to express themselves in many languages. For both of them, the corporate language is English.

Bang & Olufsen and Nordea want automatic support for their writing of user documentation, corporate communication texts etc.

Both companies aim at high quality texts. Both companies are high profile, and they

have developed a corporate image which should be supported by the language used in the written documentation. I.e. if the company image signals 'solidity', 'loyalty', 'quality', 'creativity' or 'design', such characteristics should also be signalled by the language of their documentation.

## Objectives

Consequently, the aim of this study is twofold: on the one hand we will on the basis of company texts establish a set of Controlled Language (CL) rules promoting clarity and readability and investigate to which degree these rules correspond with existing CL rules. On the other hand we will perform an analysis of the linguistic phenomena used in the texts in order to achieve a particular Tone-of-Voice and develop linguistic specifications which can be used in an authoring tool with Tone-of-Voice support.

The result of this investigation is depending on CL techniques to a very high degree. However, the type of language we are defining, and for which we are developing ideas for authoring support, is not an ordinary CL. It has some features that are different from and perhaps in some ways even in contradiction to, ordinary CL.

An ordinary CL is often used in connection with documentation and manuals where **readability** is considered the prime factor. Tone-of-Voice in this context concerns definition of a style of communication reflecting a company's **corporate image** taking the receiver and type of message into consideration as well. This may require other types of expressions and other means than those preferred by traditional CL.

At the same time, the fact that ordinary CL basically aims at readability, does not in itself contradict the aim for high quality language.

In fact it is one of the qualities of high quality language that it is readable! So, we feel that Tone-of-Voice features are a natural extension to CL, and that it seems that a pretty large portion of these features may be expressed through the same types of rules as for CL.

**Controlled language promoting readability**

As mentioned above, controlled languages are traditionally concerned with readability and they enhance readability through simplicity, obtained by for example simplified sentence structures and sometimes a very constrained vocabulary.

In the VID project, the companies started out by defining rules that improves readability. They did this on the basis of their own ‘style

guides’ and written ‘language policy’ documents, as well as their own texts using their long experiences as text- and copywriters, but without research-based or formalized knowledge of the field of controlled language. Still, the two rule sets developed were nearly identical and they were also very similar to the AECMA<sup>1</sup> rule set. The companies developed about 40 main rules which can be classified into the categories of lexical, syntactic and textual rules.

The lexical rules include various restrictions on the use of vocabulary concerning for example the use of terminology, abbreviations, currencies and numbers, pronouns, superlatives and other word types. The syntactic rules concern restrictions on for

<b>Sub-categories of lexical rules</b>	<b>Applied by company</b>
Restrictions on use of vocabulary: <i>e.g. only use established terminology, avoid foreign words, avoid complicated words if a simple word exists (lists of ‘allowed/forbidden’ words created).</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Restrictions on use of abbreviations and acronyms: <i>only established, including domain/company specific, abbreviations and acronyms are allowed</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules regarding currencies and numbers: <i>e.g. rules for using numerals and letters</i>	Nordea
Restrictions on use of superlatives	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Ruling out word division	Bang & Olufsen
Rules regarding use of pronouns: <i>e.g. always use ‘you’ instead of ‘the customer’ and ‘we’ instead of ‘the bank/the company’</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules regarding date and time format	Nordea
Restrictions on use of slang, idioms and metaphors	Bang & Olufsen

<b>Sub-categories of syntactic rules</b>	<b>Applied by company</b>
Restrictions on use of verb tenses: <i>prefer the present tense, past tense, imperative or infinitive.</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules regarding use of modals: <i>e.g. do not use 'shall' use instead 'must', use only 'can' in the sense 'ability', use only 'may' in the sense 'possibility'</i>	Nordea
Restrictions on use of participles	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules regarding use of prepositions: <i>not more than 2 prepositional phrases in a row</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules limiting the number of subordinate clauses: <i>avoid more than 2 subordinate clauses</i>	Bang & Olufsen
Restrictions on the length of noun phrases: <i>not more than 3 nouns</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules regarding sentence structures	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Avoid nominalisations	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Restrictions on the use of passive: <i>avoid the use of passive sentences when possible</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea

example use of verb tenses, modals, participles, prepositions, subordinate clauses, the length of noun phrases, the passive voice and sentence structures. The primary function of textual rules is to restrict the information

load in sentences, headings, paragraphs etc. In the VID report no.1 "Kontrolleret sprog" these rule sets promoting clarity and readability are described in detail. The below tables provide an overview of the CL rules.

<b>Sub-categories of textual rules</b>	<b>Applied by company</b>
Restrictions on sentence length: <i>4-25 words</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Rules limiting the use of parentheses: <i>use of parentheses restricted to specific purposes</i>	Bang & Olufsen
Restrictions on paragraph length: <i>not more than 13 sentences in a paragraph</i>	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Restrictions on information load in a sentence	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Restriction on length of headings	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea
Limit the number of ideas presented in one sentence	Bang & Olufsen and Nordea

Figure 1: Selection of CL rules promoting readability

Traditional CLs and Tone-of-Voice phenomena certainly share the same universe and in many ways CL rules are an inherent part of Tone-of-Voice as clarity and readability will usually be considered basic and essential elements in order to get the message across and establish good relations to the customer.

Some rules promoting clarity and simplicity and used in many controlled languages are however hampering when it comes to expressing a corporate image. Some examples are rules stipulating for the vast majority of a word collection that one word can only have one meaning and one word can only belong to

one part of speech (e.g. *drink* is a verb, not a noun). These rules are much too restrictive when the goal is to express a corporate image as this will usually also require a vivid, subtle and varied language. It is of course a delicate balance where rules promoting a clear and simplified writing style should never be confused with rules promoting a simplistic writing style.

Tone-of-Voice rules are concerned with emotion and not necessarily always simplicity. It is often the words and phrases surrounding the core message that constitute an original Tone-of-Voice and cutting away

these elements may simplify the text, but may also mean a loss of emotion and nerve.

### **Controlled language promoting Tone-of-Voice**

As indicated in the above short description of the readability rules these rules primarily discourage linguistic phenomena that are actually correct use of the language. These phenomena should still be avoided when possible as they do not promote readability. The rules do however not regulate all the remaining words and sentence structures.

Though Tone-of-Voice rules are not a fixed set of rules that can be clearly separated from readability rules, Tone-of-Voice rules are not as much a matter of discouraging, but more a matter of encouraging certain linguistic elements in the text. These rules will optimise the use of the remaining language by encouraging the use and controlling the frequency of language phenomena that particularly emphasize certain elements of the corporate image.

Tone-of-Voice is to some extent, though not solely, expressed through the choice of words. In the following we will especially concentrate on Tone-of-Voice in relation to choice of words as the use and frequency of words are relatively easy to control automatically and certainly in line with traditional CL rules. However, we will also investigate certain grammatical phenomena, some of which are already, as we shall see, included in the CL rule collection. Our purpose will be to pinpoint the language characteristics of a text promoting a particular Tone-of-Voice.

Methods for analysing the concept Tone-of-Voice and the way it is expressed by the two companies have to draw upon elements from discourse analysis, and in this case we have been inspired by the sender - receiver - message model (Fairclough 1989).

This model suggests basically that the discourse has three main elements: the *sender*

or producer of the message, the *receiver* and the *message* itself. The sender in our case is the company, Nordea or Bang & Olufsen. The receiver is a potential customer, a costumer, or maybe for some text types, the press or more generally the public. And finally the message is what the sender wants to say.

The sender-receiver-message model says that the form and style of a text depends on the triangle. This means that texts from the same company will normally differ depending on the receiver and the message – but the company's personality values remain the same.

### **Company personality values**

The definition of a company specific language policy including Tone-of-Voice aspects will require an analysis of the sender. We believe this involves a distillation of the company's key personality features, i.e. the company's values, tasks, goals, missions and the promises it wants to make to its customers and the society. The personality of the sender is static (as the company and its values remain the same within a given period) and in our opinion constitutes the core of the Tone-of-Voice phenomenon.

The companies in the VID project, Bang & Olufsen and Nordea, both have very clear descriptions of their corporate values.

Nordea's key personality values are:

*Informal, Committed to people and Embraces change and challenge.* Bang & Olufsen's personality values are: *Excellence, Originality and Passion.*

### **Company profile**

A definition of personality values is one perspective of the sender. Another one is definition of the company profile in terms of what the company wants to offer to its customers. Judy Delin (2001) has described how the below Brand Analytics framework can be used to analyse a company's profile.

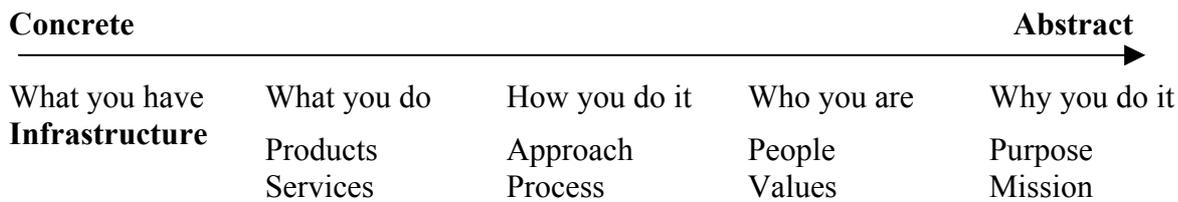


Figure 2: Enterprise IG’s Brand Analytics continuum

In this context the Brand Analytics framework can for example be used to determine how personality values are expressed in existing texts - or how they should be expressed. A vocabulary or grammatical feature reflecting a particular personality value could for example mainly be used in connection with statements about the company’s infrastructure, its products and services or perhaps the people constituting the company. It is important to use the language features intentionally and felicitously in order to reflect the company image appropriately. One company might find it useful to emphasize the very concrete elements that are offered to the customer as for example the infrastructure or the products and services whereas another company would rather emphasize the more subtle values they offer.

**Language features reflecting Tone-of-Voice**

Inspired by studies of especially Norman Fairclough (1989) and Judy Delin (2001) we have identified a selection of language features that contributes to convey a company image and that could potentially constitute part of an authoring tool. These language features can be divided in two categories: vocabulary and grammar.

**Vocabulary**

A definition of the sender’s personality values permits an analysis of the kind of words or phrases that particularly emphasize these values. Analyses of text corpora<sup>2</sup> from both

companies consisting of ‘good’ texts with the right Tone-of-voice revealed collections of value-laden words that convey each personality value. Dependent on the purpose of a particular text, words from each collection - or selected collection(s) - should then appear in the text. Below we show a few selected value-laden words from each personality value.

**Nordea value-laden words:**

- Committed to people:* reliable, ensure, safe, well-organised, qualified, opportunity, benefit, lower costs, local knowledge, personal, private, seamless look and feel, easy access
- Embraces change and challenge:* aim, business goal, strategic, unique, forefront, ambitious, innovative, change, improve, facilitate, minimise, optimise
- Informal:* your, you, own, we, us, our

**Bang & Olufsen value-laden words:**

- Excellence:* authentic beauty, elegant, enhance, exact, exclusive, perfect, powerful, precision, pure, quality, seamless, simplicity, spectacular, striking, strong, stunning, ultimate, thorough, genuine
  - Originality:* comfortable, design language, flexibility, future, idea, intelligence, intuitive, new, original, progressive, powerful
  - Passion:* dreams, enjoy, enjoyable, entertainment, experience, freedom, harmony, inspire, you, your, we
- It may be surprising to see that personal pronouns form part of the *Passion* value, but passion in this context also concerns creation of a close relationship to the customer and this is not achieved by using the 3<sup>rd</sup> person (e.g. ‘the bank’ and ‘the customer’) when

<sup>2</sup> The Nordea corpus contains 196,748 words in 92 texts and the Bang & Olufsen corpus contains 87,301

words in 25 texts

referring to the sender or the receiver (this also forms part of a CL rule, see section 2 *Controlled language promoting readability*).

### **Grammar**

The below grammar features should of course be used in accordance with company personality values as well as company profile. We have however not related the grammar features to Nordea's and Bang & Olufsen's values/profiles as this would require a too lengthy and detailed description for this paper. However, below we give a few examples of how a particular grammar feature may support a certain position in the Brand Analytics continuum.

### **Who does what to whom**

One interesting grammar category concerns the processes or actions involved in the text in terms of 'who does what to whom'. Agency, active/passive sentences, nominalisations etc. are of course interesting aspects in this context, but these aspects already form part of the CL readability rules, see section 2 *Controlled language promoting readability*. Another aspect concerns the semantics of the verbs used in sentences where the sender or the receiver is the grammatical subject. The sender can for example choose to offer, suggest, persuade or tell customers to do things and the sender can choose to be a very active 'doer' or a very passive one expecting the receiver to do things. Furthermore, different aspects of the sender can be put in focus according to the company profile. For example in one Bang & Olufsen text type the 'doer' is usually the products, not the company itself: *BeoSound 9000 makes a bold statement...*, *BeoVision 5 finds channels...*, *BeoVision 5 sets new standards...*. This feature supports a 'What you do' position in the Brand Analytics continuum.

### **The sender's mission**

Mental verbs are also important as they express the sender's wish, desire, opinion etc., and may thus be used to express the mission and the target of fulfilling the mission, - when the grammatical subject is the sender. Below we give some examples, organised in two sets of verbs, first the 'desire' set of verbs, and secondly the 'think and utter' set of verbs. 'Desire' verbs: *Will, wish, desire, want, crave for, seek, demand, ask for, request, allow, permit, forbid, prohibit, strive, endeavour, strain, aim, attempt, try*. 'Think and utter' verbs: *Think, hope, intend, mean, suppose, consider, deem, feel, mean, say, remember, recollect, understand, comprehend, perceive, grasp, realize, gather (meaning 'understand'), expect, anticipate, perceive, comprehend, know, suspect, speak, tell, confirm, affirm, admit, acknowledge, confess, declare, remind, answer, reply, urge, recommend, believe*.

In one Nordea text type there are for example many sentences containing *we expect...*, *we anticipate...*, *we consider...*, *we aim...*. This feature supports a 'Why you do it' position in the Brand Analytics continuum.

Here, we have concentrated on verbs as verbs are the traditional way of expressing acts of will, but of course other parts of speech may be used as well, in particular adjectives. E.g. desire can be expressed not only by the verbs given above and similar verbs, but also by *be anxious to*, and the mental state of being sure by expressions like *be sure of, be certain of, be confident that*. We have chosen not to include adjectival expressions here, but others may prefer to include them. Adjectival expressions will be particularly needed if emotions as happiness, joy, despair are to be expressed.

### **Customer relations**

The sender establishes relations between the sender and the receiver. Modality is one of the grammatical features that can contribute to sender (or perhaps receiver) authority. Modality may be expressed through modal verbs, but also through adverbs and tense. We

should note that modal verbs are often ambiguous, e.g. *may* is able to express possibility as well as permission (*it may happen, you may go now*) and *can* expresses permission, possibility or ability - the latter two sometimes with a touch of a cautious or reluctant attitude – (*you can have an orange, if you settle your payments we can offer you..., we can give you sound advice*).

## Conclusion

The results of the VID project indicate that there seems to be a rather large consensus on the kind of language features that should be applied in order to produce clear and readable texts in English. Though the companies in the VID projects worked with readability rules separately and without formal knowledge of the field they still developed rule sets that were quite similar and also similar with the AECMA rule set. Therefore, if a company wishes to implement a CL promoting readability a reasonable strategy would be to use an existing CL (as for example AECMA) as a ‘pool of selectable rules’ and perhaps add a few company specific rules. Though Tone-of-Voice rules are deeply anchored in readability rules Tone-of-Voice rules are much more company specific and a ‘pool of selectable rules’ cannot as easily be assembled, but there are some guidelines. Our investigations have shown that inclusion of Tone-of-Voice in a CL requires a definition of company values and profile. On the basis of these aspects word collections representing each value can be assembled and appropriate language features from the grammar categories mentioned can be selected to reflect the desired values and profile.

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