

Representation of Social Actors in the Genre of the Institutional Press Release: a Study of Headlines

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Abstract

The paper aims to investigate the relationship of self-reference to other-reference in the discourse of institutional press releases focusing on headlines. For the purposes of the study, two key political actors were selected – the European Commission and the British government, namely their environmental departments. Corpora of more than 70 press releases from each organization have been compiled to compare the degree of self-centredness as demonstrated by foregrounding and backgrounding linguistic techniques, with particular focus on how syntactic-semantic structures are allocated to social actors. The analysis shows that while there is a significant level of similarity as far as allocation of agency and prominent linguistic structures related to self-reference is concerned, there are stark differences in terms of the space and prominence of linguistic structures allocated to the other social actors, personality and directness of reference, and the intensity of self-promotion by frequent repetition.

Keywords: Institutional press release, self-reference, social actors, linguistic actors

1. Background and methodology

The genre of the institutional press release is an instance of a more general category of the genre of press release, where besides the obvious informative function, i.e. to communicate news about an organization relating to a specific event or development, the promotional function comes to the foreground, which is aimed at serving the public relations needs of an organization and generating a positive image of it. In other words, information

is given in such a way as to promote the organization. From the point of view of communicative purpose, it is thus adequate to postulate an axis of *informative* – *promotional* as the most general variable relevant to the study of inner differentiation in the genre, which is the aim of the present paper.

In his classic work on the genre of the press release *Preformulating the News*, Jacobs designates three prominent ‘standard features of press releases’: *self-reference*, *self-quotation* and *semi-performatives*. It is the first one that will be my focus, as it is most directly related to the representation of social actors – one of the persistent themes in the framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA), which accentuates power relations. By applying the approach of CDA, I wish to shed additional light on the nature of self-representation as a typical generic feature, and study the dynamics at work by comparing two analogous corpora of institutional press releases. Self-referencing will be considered within the structural elements of headline¹, and it will be evaluated both in proportion to ‘other-referencing’ as well as in relation to the position in syntactic-semantic structure.

The corpora consist of 83 press releases (PR) issued by the European Commission (EC) and 71 PRs issued by the UK’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The compatibility of the material compared is guaranteed by the fact that the institutions are analogous in function, as well as by restricting the topic coverage to the (highly controversial) issue of climate change. The following criteria were applied in compiling the corpora: PRs were issued under the heading “environment”; each PR had to contain at least one of the keywords *climate change* and *carbon* (the corpora were manually sifted to remove press releases that, although containing one of the keywords, address a topic that is not directly related to climate change, e.g. a release on smoking). In the case of the EC, the PRs were published between 21 October 2005 (the start of the second European climate change programme, a turning point in the EU policy making in the area of climate change) and 28 March 2008 (the start of the corpus compilation). In the case of DEFRA, relevant press releases were collected by working backwards from 28 March 2008 to compile a corpus matching the size of the EC corpus (i.e. 66 000 words).²

2. Proportion of ‘self’ and ‘other’ reference

In the EC corpus of 83 headlines, we find a total of 93 references to social actors. The situation is basically mirrored in the DEFRA PRs, where 71 headlines include 80 references to social actors. It can thus be asserted that the element falling under the journalistic ‘who’ is a vital constitutive part of PR headlines, which makes it a relevant point of investigation. However, while the focus on ‘who’ is relatively stable between the corpora, the EC and DEFRA show a marked difference in terms of the proportion of self and other reference, as shown in figure 1 below:

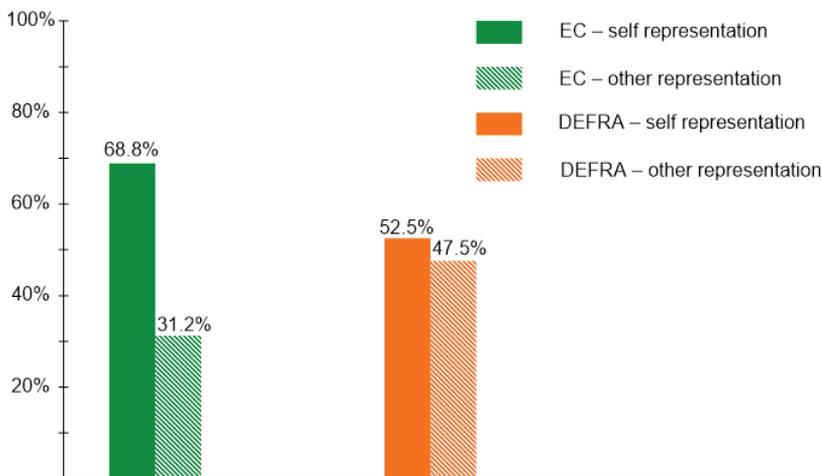


Figure 1. The proportion of ‘self’ and ‘other’ reference in the EC and DEFRA headlines

Here we can see that while DEFRA headlines are marked by almost equal distribution of reference between ‘self’ and ‘other’ in respect of social actors, there is a clear self-centering tendency prevalent in the corpus of Commission headlines. The latter can thus be placed closer to the promotional end of the *informative – promotional* axis, where the variable of ‘self’ and ‘other’ proportion can be described as unstable across the genre of institutional press releases.

3. Type of designation

In the EC corpus, the most common designation in terms of self-reference is *Commission* followed by *EU* and *Commissioner Dimas*. There are only two instances where the designator *Europe* is used at least partly referring to the institution: one instance with the full name of the institution, i.e. *European Commission*, and one instance of reference by the possessive pronoun *our*, which is also ambiguous. Figure 2 shows the types and distribution of social actors related to the issuing organization:

Linguistic representation	Number of instances	Percentage
Commission	40	62.5 %
EU	14	21.9 %
Commissioner Dimas	6	9.4 %
Europe	2	3.1 %
European Commission	1	1.6 %
Our	1	1.6 %

Figure 2. EC headlines: linguistic representations and distribution of social actors in self-reference

The overwhelming prevalence of the shortened form *Commission* over the full name *European Commission*, together with the omission of the definite article, are a clear sign of what Quirk et al. classify as ‘block language’, characteristic of newspaper headlines due to limitations on space. The main feature of block language is “omitting closed-class items of low information value, such as the finite forms of the verb BE and the articles, and other words that may be understood from the context” (Quirk et al. 845). Similarly, where *EU* is used in the position of a foregrounded clause element, the definite article is omitted. It is also significant that there is not a single occurrence of the full form *European Union*. The form *Commissioner Dimas* is again a shortened version of *European Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas* that is frequently used in the leads, even though the function is always explicitly referred to, with no occurrence of just the name *Dimas*. Nevertheless, in terms of structural features of designation, the Commission press release headlines share the characteristics of newspaper headlines.

In the DEFRA corpus, the most frequent designation in terms of self-reference is *UK* followed by *Government* and the surname of the environment secretary *Benn*. In contrast to the Commission headlines, where the name of the issuing organization was by far the most common type of self-reference, the name *Defra* is only used 4 times in the corpus of DEFRA headlines. Note, however, that the hierarchical equivalent to Defra would be the Commission’s DG ENV (Directorate General – Environment), which does not occur in the respective corpus at all. Figure 3 below shows the types and distribution of linguistic forms related to the issuing organization:

Linguistic representation	Number of instances	Percentage
UK	15	35.7 %
Government	6	14.3 %
Benn	6	14.3 %
Defra	4	9.5 %
Pearson	4	9.5 %
Woolas	3	7.1 %
Miliband	1	2.4 %
Gardiner	1	2.4 %
Hilary Benn	1	2.4 %
Prime Minister	1	2.4 %

Figure 3. DEFRA headlines: linguistic representations and distribution of social actors in self-reference

Similarly to Commission headlines, DEFRA headlines exhibit features of ‘headlines’ or block language characteristic of newspaper headlines. This is proved by the omission of articles (*UK*, *Government*), use of short, univalarized forms (*Government*, *Defra*) or abbreviated structures (*UK*, *Defra*), omission of social actors’ functions, and indeed their first names (*Benn*, *Pearson*, *Woolas*, *Miliband*, *Gardiner*). A major difference in comparison to EC headlines is the frequency of reference to politicians without designating their function. While in the EC headlines corpus the designation *Commissioner Dimas* as the only type of reference to a politician occurring 6 times is outnumbered by 58 instances of

impersonal reference, the ratio personal/impersonal reference is 17 to 24 in DEFRA headlines corpus, as illustrated in figure 4 below:

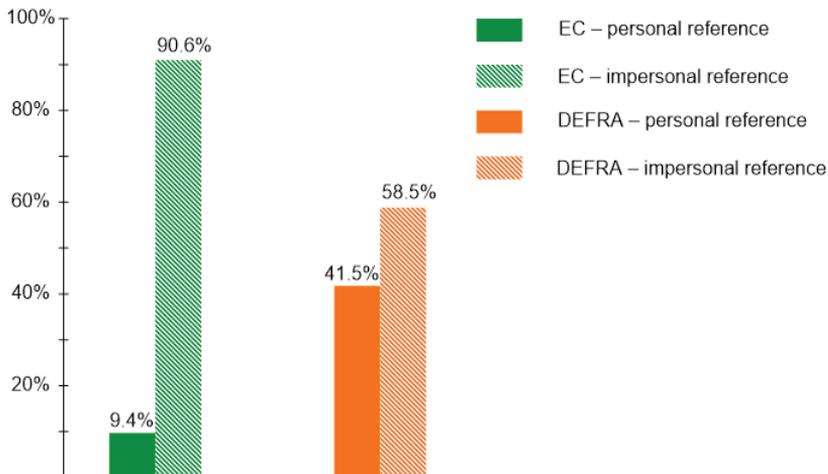


Figure 4. The proportion of personal and impersonal reference in EC and DEFRA headlines

We can thus point to the more personalized character of self-reference in DEFRA headlines as opposed to the Commission headlines, which is even underlined by the omission of the politicians’ functions. Arguably, such personalization is characteristic of the journalistic style (cf. Bell) and can thus be classified as an instance of pre-formulation as defined by Jacobs. In comparison with the more impersonal character of the EC lexical units, the level of personality can be identified as another variable influencing the inner differentiation of the analyzed genre.

4. Type of identification – directness of reference

While in the majority of the cases in EC headlines reference to the issuing organization is made directly, reference by identification with the EU and Europe is used as well. The distribution of direct reference and identification with a larger space that the institution represents is shown in figure 5 below:

	Number of instances	Percentage
Commission; Commissioner Dimas; European Commission	47	73.4 %
EU; Europe; our	17	26.6 %

Figure 5. EC headlines: the distribution of direct and indirect reference

However, self-referencing by the designators *EU*, *Europe* and *our* is ambiguous. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the European Commission is the body that represents the European point of view, as opposed to the Parliament and the Council which

embody the perspectives of the member states. The Commission's projection where it refers to itself by the more general designator *EU* can be seen in the comparison of the headlines:

*Climate change: **Commission** looks for progress from UN ministerial conference in Nairobi*

EU welcomes solid results of Nairobi world climate conference

where the forms *Commission* and *EU* are used interchangeably. The designation by *Europe* is more problematic, although similar logic is applied. For illustration, we can consider the headline

*Climate change: **Europe** must take adaptation measures to lessen impacts of current and future warming*

together with the following lead, which is more explicative:

*Climate change poses a double challenge: **Europe** must not only make deep cuts in its greenhouse gas emissions but also take measures to adapt to current and future climate change in order to lessen the adverse impacts of global warming on people, the economy and the environment. This is the key message of a Green Paper published by **the European Commission** today which sets out options for **EU** action to help the process of adaptation to climate change across Europe. Adaptation means taking action to cope with changing climatic conditions, for example by using scarce water resources more efficiently or ensuring the frail and elderly are properly cared for during heatwaves. The Green Paper aims to stimulate a broad public debate on adaptation in Europe, starting with a major **stakeholder** conference hosted by **the Commission** on 3 July in Brussels.*

The social actors (marked by bold print in the excerpt) involved actively in the activity described are, in successive order,

Europe
the European Commission
EU
stakeholders
the Commission

The prominent position of the European Commission is underlined by the lexico-grammatical structures into which it enters, which is most evident in the last sentence where *stakeholders* appear in a backgrounded position as a pre-modifier, while the Commission is in a more foregrounded position assuming the syntactic-semantic role of ACTOR. A similar comparison can be drawn between the nominal phrases *the key message of a Green Paper published by the European Commission* and *options for EU action*, where *EU* is syntactically an ATTRIBUTE while *the European Commission* again takes the syntactic-semantic role of ACTOR. While this intricately portrays the Commission as having the

key to the activity, the reference of the form *Europe* both in the headline and in the lead is more complicated, notably by the use of the modal *must* in reference to the activity. The modal verb here is used in the sense of ‘obligation’ or ‘compulsion’. In this context, Quirk et al. speak of

the implication, to a greater or lesser extent, that the speaker is advocating a certain form of behaviour. Thus *must* [...] typically suggests that the speaker is exercising his authority. An apparent exception to this occurs where the subject is in the first person [...] the meaning is one of self-admonishment, appealing to his own sense of duty, expediency, etc. (225)

Because the reference to *Europe* here includes the European Commission as the representative of the ‘European’ perspective as well as other stakeholders, it can be stated that the issuing institution both appeals to its own sense of duty and exercises its authority. In this way, the reference is ambiguous. In fact, corpus studies of policy discourse carried out by Mulderrig indicate that such ambiguity of reference might be a characteristic feature of the discourse: “deontic modals that express an imperative such as *must*, *need to*, *have to* occur most frequently with ambivalent instances of *we*, where the referent of the pronoun is unclear” (“Textual Strategies,” 144).

It should be noted, however, that most instances of self-reference that is not direct are not realized by foregrounded clause elements, usually appearing in attributive or possessive position; with the ratio being 7 foregrounded clause elements to 10 instances of modification, either attributive or possessive use. This is in stark contrast to direct self-reference, where of all 47 instances, only two are not foregrounded syntactically. It can thus be concluded that direct self-reference receives a much more prominent place in the EC headlines than reference through identification with a higher political unit. From the point of view of genre, the tendency to promote the organization by repeating its name in the prominent lexico-grammatical structures again shifts the specimen towards the promotional end of the axis mentioned above.

As in the Commission headlines, DEFRA headlines involve cases where the issuing organization is identified with a higher political unit, namely the whole governed country. In such cases, the designation *UK* is used invariably. The distribution of direct reference to the issuing organization or its representatives and reference by identification with a larger political unit is shown in figure 6 below:

	Number of instances	Percentage
Government, Defra, Benn, Pearson, Woolas, Miliband, Gardiner, Hilary Benn, Prime Minister	27	64.3 %
UK	15	35.7 %

Figure 6. DEFRA headlines: the distribution of direct and indirect reference

Compared to the Commission headlines, self-referencing by identification with a higher political unit is slightly more frequent, with 35.7 % as opposed to 26.6 % for the Commission corpus. An important factor in this comparison, however, is the syntactic-semantic

role assumed by the linguistic forms, with *UK* much more frequently occupying the position of a foregrounded syntactic element than is the case with its *EU* counterpart. These are also the instances where reference is less ambiguous, e.g.

UK Delays Issuing EU Carbon Allowances

where *UK* clearly refers to the political representatives of the country, or, in other words, its decision-making authority, as shown by the verb in the following lead:

The UK has decided to delay issuing 2008 EU Carbon Allowances because the European Commission is still discussing a date of the carbon trading registry system, connected to the UNFCCC's International Transaction Log (ITL), to go live.

The exact nature of reference is more obfuscated if *UK* is used in an attributive syntactic position, e.g.

UK-China clean coal initiative launched

While *UK* is one of the social actors involved, the identification of the designator in terms of self-reference is based on our knowledge of socio-political context rather than on the immediate linguistic context. There is, however, a degree of ambiguity, as in syntactic-semantic terms, agency is not made explicit either in the headline or in the lead. Agency is coded in the implicit subject of the verb *launched*. Still, based on the socio-political context, *UK* can be identified as an instance of self-reference assuming the role of modifier in the phrase structure. This is, however, a more indirect type of self-reference than direct quotes of the issuing organization or its representatives. For an overview of the directness of self-reference, see figure 7 below:

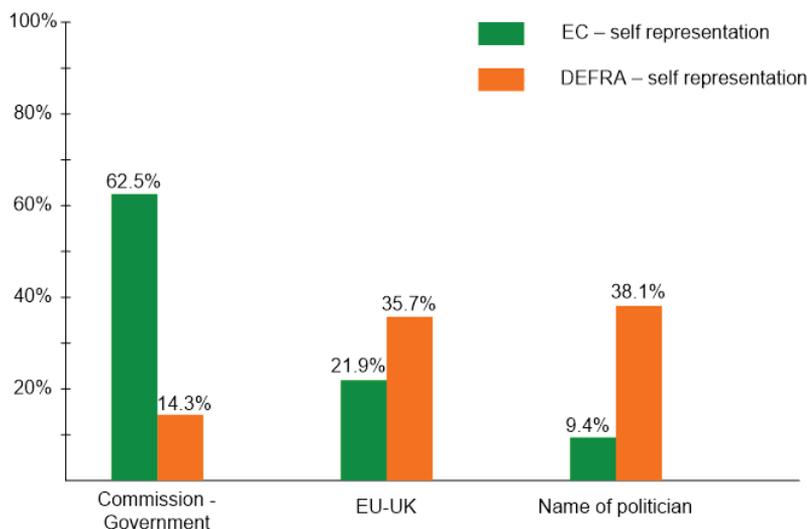


Figure 7. Type of identification in EC and DEFRA headlines

It can be summed up that the stronger tendency on the part of EC to ‘sell’ its ‘brand’ is compensated by the tendency towards personalization in the DERFA headlines, presumably for reasons of pre-formulation, and the two tendencies highlight clear inner differentiation in the genre of institutional press release.

5. Foregrounding/backgrounding patterns in the syntactic-semantic structure

CDA studies tend to presume that social actors can be grammatically foregrounded or backgrounded³, and that such stylistic treatment is socially/ideologically significant. Fowler points out that

[t]ransitivity [in Hallidayan sense] has the facility to analyze the same event in different ways [...] we must represent [the phenomenon] as one particular structure of meaning. Since transitivity makes options available, we are always suppressing some possibilities, so the choice we make – better the choice made by the discourse – indicates our point of view, is ideologically significant. (71)

Moreover, it is argued that this has implications for the definition of genre from the more interdisciplinary perspective assumed by CDA. In the analysis, three main foregrounding/backgrounding strategies are considered.

Clause/phrase elements The categories ‘foregrounded’ as opposed to ‘backgrounded’ are a matter of degree rather than an ‘either-or’ choice. This means that on the syntactic level, discourse referents might occupy the most prominent position of a clause element in the syntactic structure of the main clause, or they might be part of a pre-modifying or post-modifying phrase, which is the least prominent linguistic treatment when the discourse referent is made explicit. The cases in between include clause elements in subordinate or embedded clauses. The term ‘embedded’ is used to refer to elements in clauses other than the main clause.

As for verbal processes, Halliday notes that

[i]n formal grammar what is said is treated as ‘noun clause object of the verb say’, meaning a down-ranked or ‘embedded’ clause [...]. But functionally the verbalized clause is not down-ranked; it functions as the secondary clause in a ‘clause complex’ being either a) directly quoted or b) indirectly quoted. This means that such sequences consist of two clauses. (129)

Such functional perspective, being closer to the point of view of CDA, will be adopted in my analysis as well, where any social actor referred to within a verbalized clause (formally within a direct object) will be treated as being syntactically foregrounded occupying a position of a clause element on the level of main clause:

Gas and electricity companies of the future could be as much about helping customers cut their energy use and CO2 footprint as selling units of energy, Environment and Climate Change Minister Ian Pearson said today.

where *gas and electricity companies* will be treated as an element of the main clause, similarly to *Environment and Climate Change Minister Ian Pearson*. This will concern all other quotation structures.

The quantitative study of the two corpora shows that there are no significant differences as far as the foregrounding and backgrounding of the self is concerned (see figure 8 below), where approximately 80 % of self-representation receives the treatment of the main clause element with ACTOR as the most frequent participant role. It can thus be hypothesized that such a strategy represents a generic constant, although it would require further verification on a more (especially thematically) varied corpus.

Unlike self-representation, the treatment of other-representation shows significant differences, with almost 70 % of other social actors relegated into a modifying structure in the EC headlines, while DEFRA headlines are marked by slight preference towards a main clause element. Again, this feature needs to be postulated as a variable from the point of view of genre.

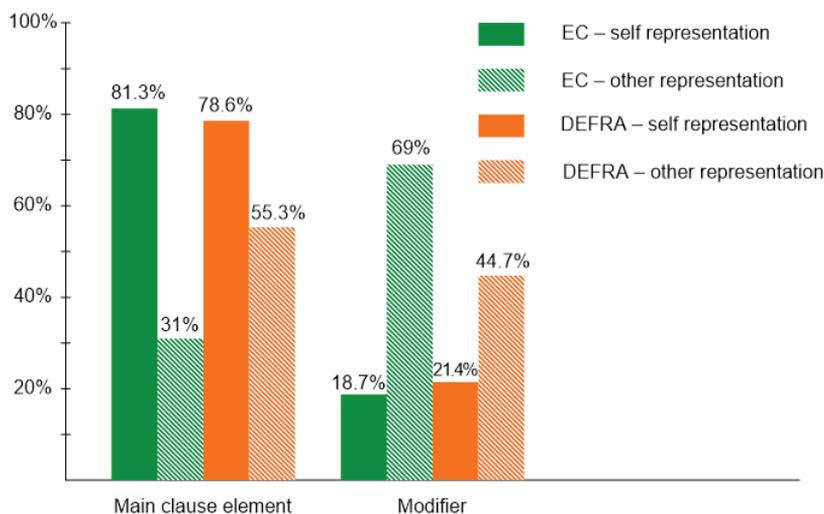


Figure 8. Syntactic foregrounding/backgrounding of social actors in EC and DEFRA headlines

Clause participant role Apart from foregrounding/backgrounding on the level of clause/phrase structure, the participant⁴ structure is taken into account (cf. Quirk et al., Huddleston and Pullum). Van Leeuwen points out that “[a]gency [...] as a sociological concept is of major and classic importance in CDA [...] but sociological agency is not always realized by linguistic agency, by the grammatical role ‘Agent’” (32).

My focus will be on the role of ACTOR in order to determine the degree to which it is conflated with the discourse referent of social actor (‘who’), while bearing in mind that “the function of Actor [...] is defined only by its relation to other representational functions such as Process and Goal” (Halliday 37). The analysis of the corpora shows that most

verbs refer to either abstract material processes (*launch, decide, publish, propose, confirm, release, approve, agree*) or verbal processes (*announce, say*). This is in line with Jacob’s findings that semi-performatives in PR serve pre-formulation, and as such they are a defining feature of the genre.

As in the context of the present analysis, the agents of both the material and verbal processes can be conceptualized as processes of ‘doing’ something (cf. Halliday 103), the term ACTOR will be used in a wider sense to refer to the initiator – the person or entity responsible for any process including verbal or mental processes (cf. Mulderrig “Consuming education, 13”).⁵ The simplification serves well the objective of the analysis, which deals with agency as such. The person or entity to which something is done, on the other hand, will be referred to as AFFECTED OR RECIPIENT (cf. Quirk et al.), depending on whether it concerns a direct or indirect object in the syntactic clause structure. For relational processes (cf. Halliday 115) the label TOKEN-VALUE will be used (cf. Fairclough 141). Clause participants semantically referring to circumstance will be referred to as OTHER⁶, as these are not significant from the point of view of our analysis and are only counted in order not to proportionally distort the statistics. While it is appreciated that the above classification is a simplification⁷, it is assumed that the level of generality of the roles involved matches the needs of the analyzed phenomenon.

The quantitative analysis from the point of view of agency reveals a fairly consistent pattern across the two corpora with only a slight strengthening of agency in other-representation in the DEFRA headlines (see figure 9 below). It is clear that if other social agents receive a favourable treatment as the main clause element, they tend to be assigned the participant role of AFFECTED OR RECIPIENT rather than that of ACTOR. This is in stark contrast with self-representation, where the role of AFFECTED OR RECIPIENT is insignificant in comparison with the role of ACTOR.

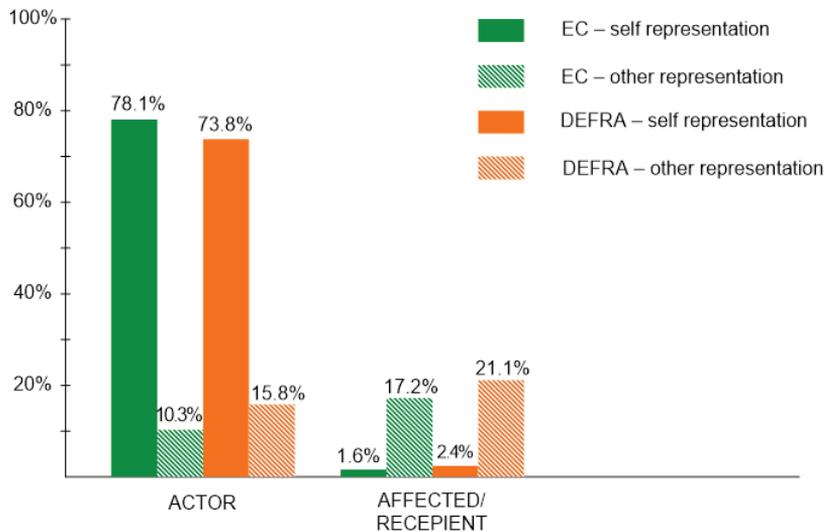


Figure 9. The proportion of the role ACTOR versus AFFECTED / RECIPIENT in EC and DEFRA headlines

The results obtained from the comparison point to a possibly stable generic feature, which is, moreover, tied to the form of governance. Such link can be further substantiated by comparing the findings to Mulderrig's ("Consuming education," 8) study on the representation of social actors in educational policy discourse, where the proportion of linguistic agents (ACTOR in the present study) assigned to other-representation totals approximately 20 %. This is comparable to the 10.3 % and 15.8 % for the EC and DEFRA headlines respectively, bearing in mind that the latter two do not represent a full text.⁸ Such tendencies in fact suggest a paternalistic character of the relationship between the governing and the governed, and undermine the participatory framework which is called upon in discussions on legitimacy.⁹

Passivization The third means of foregrounding and backgrounding on the level of syntax is through *passivization*. In connection with headlines, Fowler notes that "[p]assive is a common structure in headlines – it saves space as well as immediately establishing the topic [...] [it is] possible that the agentless passive is chosen not only for brevity but also because of the official or bureaucratic nature of the events referred to" (78).

In the analyzed corpora, passive constructions in headlines are rare, and they are outnumbered by non-finite or verbless ones:

National search for England's 'Climate Change Champions' is launched today.

In several cases the auxiliary verb is ellipted:

Climate change initiative welcomed

Climate change: More effort needed to reverse EU's greenhouse gases emission trends

The passive in both EC and DEFRA headlines is used to avoid naming the agent for reasons outlined in the quotation above.

6. Conclusion

The perspective of CDA on the nature of self-reference as one of the three standard features of the genre of the press release has revealed not only tendencies that might be constant across the genre of institutional PR, but also those that highlight its inner differentiation.

The comparison of two analogous corpora shows that there is a significant level of similarity as far as allocation of agency and prominent linguistic structures to social actors is concerned, with both institutions largely favouring self-reference. Here a link to the mode of governance can be made, where lexico-grammatical instantiations of the social actors enforce a paternalistic rather than participatory framework.

On the other hand, the analysis reveals significant differences regarding the following dimensions: (i) degree of self-centredness marked by the space and prominence of linguistic structures allocated to the other social actors; (ii) personality and directness of reference; and (iii) the intensity of self-promotion by frequent repetition. In this context, the axis informative – promotional (journalistic – advertising) is seen as adequate to ground

the inner differentiation within the analyzed genre, where DEFRA displays characteristics closer to the informative end, while EC gravitates towards the promotional one. The more journalistic character of DEFRA headlines indicates greater emphasis on pre-formulation on the part of the British ministry.

Further analysis, including corpora of PRs issued by other institutions and/or activating other discourses (e.g. the war on terrorism), could be undertaken to verify the tendencies outlined in the study.

Notes

¹ Headlines are selected based on the top-down strategy of decreasing importance, and their role in the orientation of the story (cf. Bell).

² The present paper is part of a more extensive study, so the design of the corpora serves to accommodate other related avenues of research.

³ Note that in this context, Halliday speaks of down-ranking (63).

⁴ By ‘participants’ I understand ‘entities realized by noun phrases, whether such entities are concrete or abstract’ (Quirk et al. 740).

⁵ Chilton refers to ‘prototypical agent’ and ‘prototypical patient’ (53–54).

⁶ In this context, see Van Leeuwen’s claim that “one cannot [...] have it both ways with language. Either theory and method are formally neat and semantically messy [...] or they are semantically neat but formally messy” (33).

⁷ Huddleston and Pullum question the possibility of establishing a small number of general roles “such that all arguments can be assigned to one or other of these roles, with no two arguments in the same clause having the same role” (228).

⁸ In fact, the study of the leads following the analyzed headlines gives the figure of 24.5 % for both EC and DEFRA for allocation of agency to the ‘other’ social actor.

⁹ See for example the 2001 White Paper on European Governance, which redefines the role of the Union in policy-making: “[EU] legitimacy today depends on involvement and participation. This means that the linear model of dispensing policies from above must be replaced by a virtuous circle, based on feedback, networks and involvement from policy creation to implementation at all levels.” (European Commission 2001, 11).

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