



“What we've got here....is a failure to communicate. Some men you just can't reach.”

Cool Hand Luke (1967)

# Systemic Functional Linguistics and Business English writing lessons

BESIG Summer Symposium

Graz 2014

Rob Szabó

Michael Haliday (1978)

'Linguistic structure is the realization of social structure.'

## Mikhail Bakhtin (1981)

'Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life, all words and forms are populated by intentions.'

# SFL

## Systemic Functional Linguistics

- ▶ Systemic – language is viewed as a system of potential choices
- ▶ Functional – linguistic decisions have functions in real life

# The three metafunctions

- ▶ **Ideational (field)** – social activity, topic, angle of representation, participants and processes: subjects, verbs, objects
- ▶ **Interpersonal (tenor)** – social roles and status, social distance, speech functions, modality, register, evaluative language
- ▶ **Textual (mode)** – interactivity, spontaneity, communicative distance, clause structure, lexical density, exophoric reference

Dear all,

Due to disappointing sales figures over the past two quarters, Head Office has decided to review regional operations.

Kindly complete the attached spreadsheet with details of all of your purchasing, marketing and staffing arrangements for 2013. The relevant sections have been highlighted for ease of use.

Please be aware that Head Office will be working with you to ensure efficient use of resources as of 1 September 2013.

Kind regards

Sabine Meyer – Executive Assistant to the CEO

Hi Sabine,

You can't be serious. Even the most cursory glance at the H2 report should tell you that we don't need oversight.

This creeping centralisation is misguided. Just think about the last time Head Office imposed a uniform template for operations. We lost five skilled project managers.

I hope that you chose to include us on this circular as a courtesy and that you will redouble your efforts to rein in some of the more profligate offices in this organisation.

Regards

Mike Walters  
Regional Manager USA



Dear Ms Meyer

thank you for your Email. From what I understand, your Message says that Head Office is concerned about managing in some regions. We share your worry and want to help.

Therefore, we will of course, complete the spreadsheets, and send them back to you but we hope that you understand our situation. It is August now and many people are on Holiday. You have asked for a lot of information and we will need time to get it together. Is it possible that we send the data until the middle of September?

We would also like to ask if you have had time to look at our most recent report? You should see that our sales figures have been excellent this year. Maybe you could use our ideas as Best Practice?

Kind regards

Elena Helmholtz  
Regional Manager Germany

## **Genre**

1. What is the long-term goal of the email?
2. What is the short-term goal?
3. What are the stages?

## **Field**

1. What is the email about?
2. Which people are mentioned?
3. Who sent the email?
4. Who is the recipient?
5. Is there a lot of very technical language?

## **Tenor**

1. Is there a clear power/social distance between sender and receiver?
2. Is this a formal or informal email?
3. Are there a lot of questions/statements/commands?
4. Are there any modal verbs for permission or possibility?
5. Is there any positive or negative evaluative language in use?

## **Mode**

1. What is the first sentence of the email/ each paragraph?
2. Is there a clear, logical progression of ideas?
3. Is the sentence structure simple or complex?

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6 October 2013

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