

Journal

of the DMA Nonprofit Federation

Fund Raisers, We have a problem!

by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

Clear and direct speech or writing demands short Anglo-Saxon words. The Old Norse *get* gets to the point more quickly than the Latin *acquire*. And it's certainly better than the affected verb-turned-noun, *make an acquisition*.

But to make the point that such points about language matter, the richness of the Latin legal phrase *conditio sine qua non* is better. It means *the condition without which not*. Without a strong language bridge between fund raiser and donor, no money is raised, no program is funded, and pretty soon ... a nonprofit organization will simply cease to exist.

More than 300 MBA-like graduate programs across North America equip nonprofit executives to lead their organizations. But most of these programs barely touch on fund raising. And while professional associations like AFP, CASE, and AHP offer plenty of practical training in technique, they fail to teach practitioners how language shapes the underlying message technique delivers.

This lack of attention to the central tasks of fund raising and its language might lead one to think higher education and association leaders believe that some benevolent philanthropy fairy just tosses magic dust, waves her wand, and *poof*—money suddenly appears. But there is no wand, no magic dust, no fairy . . . just real people who raise money the old-fashioned way. They ask for it. And in asking, they leverage language to become the *voice* of those who have no voice. They become *the voice of philanthropy*—literally, *the voice of the friend of mankind*. The question is, *how strong is that voice?* New quantitative methods in the field of corpus linguistics provide the answer.

Unfortunately, that answer is a harsh indictment on the discourse of the nonprofit sector. The sector's failure to teach language theory and practice is no less serious for fund-raisers, than were schools of engineering not to teach their professionals how to design load-bearing structures. That point was made by a tragedy on Friday July 17, 1981 when 114 people died at 7:04 p.m., crushed beneath two 32-ton walkways that fell to the lobby floor during a dance at Kansas City's Hyatt Regency. A bad choice in designing the tie-tods supporting the walkways had caused the collapse. This article is an exposé on the collapse of language in the nonprofit sector. The scope of that collapse is revealed in the largest research study of its kind.

The study marries the hard science of multivariate statistics with the soft art of language analysis. Its findings are shocking. They bring to mind the unsettling words that astronaut Jack Swigert radioed back to Houston on April 14, 1970 from Apollo 13. I echo Swigert in describing the implications of this benchmark research: *Fund raisers, we have a problem.*

Continued on page 16




Also in this Issue

- 9 Premium Fundraising: Where Art Meets Science
- 11 State Charity Registration Laws
- 16 The Way We Write Is All Wrong
- 23 New Leadership, New Century: NAACP Case Study
- 26 Cutting Your Print Newsletter? Think Again!
And MORE...

The Way we write*

A Profile of and Prescription for Fixing The Broken Discourse of Fundraising

Frank C. Dickerson Ph.D.

 A new kind of data mining from the scholarship of linguistics and rhetoric has uncovered disturbing artifacts in the discourse of fundraising. These discoveries are the product of my doctoral studies at The Peter Drucker School of Management and Claremont Graduate University School of Educational Studies.

I FOUND THAT THE DISCOURSE OF FUNDRAISING IS BROKEN.

Like a linguistic MRI, my computer-based corpus analysis revealed surprising linguistic and rhetorical patterns in fundraising texts. These underlying patterns profiled a discourse focused more on transferring information than creating interpersonal involvement. Fundraising texts sounded cold and detached like doctoral dissertations rather than warm and friendly like personal conversations. Rather than gaining reader attention with emotionally rich human-interest stories, these texts contained less narrative than academic prose. They contained even less narrative than official documents!

A SEVERE JUDGMENT? PROBABLY. ACCURATE? UNFORTUNATELY, YES.

These counterintuitive conclusions grew out of research that mined 1.5 million words of online and printed fundraising texts from America's largest charities. Of the 880 organizations represented, 735 reported direct support of \$20 million or more on IRS form 990, line 1a or 1b. I analyzed 2,412 web- and print-based documents across nine philanthropic sectors. The largest study of its kind to date, my research offers insights that can help improve communication among fundraisers at all levels—from direct mail to major gifts. The methodology was patterned after research Ulla Connor and Thomas Upton of Indiana University conducted that examined 316 fundraising letters (2003).

MY STUDY WAS BASED ON A MULTIVARIATE FACTOR ANALYSIS.

Douglas Biber (1988) performed a factor analysis that profiled approximately 960,000 words contained in three corpora (bodies) of texts. The first was the LOB (Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen) corpus that represented a wide range of published documents. The second was the London-Lund corpus, comprised of spoken English that included panel discussions, private conversations, interviews, telephone conversations, radio broadcasts, spontaneous and public speeches. The third corpus was a collection of personal and professional letters. Analysis of these corpora yielded profiles for 23 text types (alternatively referred to as genres or registers). Biber's seminal work laid the foundation for follow-up studies that measured and compared the linguistic content of new text types against the linguistic benchmarks his groundbreaking factor analysis calibrated for spoken and written English.

AS A RULER DESCRIBES LENGTH, LINGUISTIC SCALES REFLECT A TEXT'S COMMUNICATIVE AIM.

Biber's factor analysis measured 67 linguistic features in texts, and discovered that certain groups of features occurred together to achieve specific communicative aims. Personal pronouns, contractions and private verbs (e.g. I think, I feel) co-occurred to create interpersonal involvement in personal letters and conversation — two genres located on one pole of a continuum between

high involvement and high information. Conversely, on the high information pole of the same continuum, long words and nominalizations that transform verbs and adjectives into nouns by adding ion or ity (e.g. evaluate becoming evaluation or intense becoming intensity) co-occurred in order to serve the communicative aim of creating an informational focus in genres like academic prose.

I MEASURED AND COMPARED THE LINGUISTIC CONTENT OF FUNDRAISING TEXTS TO BIBER'S 23 GENRES.

While the analogy of a ruler is helpful, Biber's analytic framework measures texts on seven dimensions of variation, a procedure he calls multi-dimensional analysis. So to be adequate my analogy would need to stretch and include an ensemble of measures like those a doctor makes when he or she draws blood for a battery of tests, weighs you on a scale, measures your blood pressure, etc.

My study measured fundraising texts on five of Biber's seven dimensions of variation. I summarize and benchmark scores on two of those dimensions in Tables 2 and 4. The analysis included four steps: 1.) first I tagged and tallied counts of linguistic

Table 1. The Twenty-eight Salient Linguistic Features Whose Co-Occurrence Defines Dimension 1

Positive Features:	DO as pro-verb	BE as main verb	Sentence relatives	Negative Features:
Private verbs	Analytic negation	Causative subordination	WH-questions	Nouns
THAT-deletion	Demonstrative pronouns	Discourse particles	Possibility modals	Word length
Contractions	General emphatics	Indefinite pronouns	Non-phrasal coordination	Prepositions
Present tense verbs	1st person pronouns	General hedges	WH-clauses	Type/token ratio
2nd person pronouns	Pronoun IT	Amplifiers	Final prepositions	Attributive adjectives

Note. Adapted from Biber, (1988).

Dimension 1 – Interpersonal Involvement versus Informational Content

Sum of Z-Scores	Biber Corpus	Connor & Upton 316 Corpus	Dickerson IRS 880 Corpus
INTERPERSONAL INVOLVEMENT FOCUS			
35	Face-to-face conversations		
30			
25			
20	Personal letters		
	Public conversations		
15	Interviews		
10			
5	Romantic Fiction		
	Prepared speeches		
0	General Fiction		
	Professional letters		
-5	Science Fiction		
	Religion		
-10	Popular Lore		
	Academic Prose	-11.9	-12.8
-15	Press Reportage		
	Official Documents		
-20			
INFORMATIONAL CONTENT FOCUS			

Table 2. Scores on Dimension One Positioning Texts on the Continuum Contrasting Those Focused on Interpersonal Involvement with Those Focused on Creating Informational Content.

Note: Using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), both the Connor & Upton 316 Direct Mail Corpus and the Dickerson IRS 880 Corpus were compared to the scores of 14 of the 23 genres in the Biber Corpus. Dimensional scores represent the summed frequencies of the linguistic features that make up the dimension. Before summing the occurrence of these features, their raw scores were normalized to a per-thousand-word ratio in order to eliminate skewing based on text-length. Then these scores were converted to units of standard deviation (z-scores, with means of zero). Adapted from Biber (1988, 1995)

features in my corpus of texts; 2.) to avoid text-length skewing, I normalized these counts to their occurrence per 1,000 words; 3.) then I translated averages to units of standard deviation; finally, 4.) I compared my texts' dimensional scores to those of Biber's 23 common genres. The frequency counts of 28 linguistic features made it possible to locate and compare my corpus against Biber's genres on a continuum between two poles: interpersonally focused on one end and interpersonally focused on the other. Table 1 lists linguistic features measured and Table 2 shows how fundraising texts in the Dickerson IRS 880 corpus compare to Biber's corpus and the Connor and Upton 316 Corpus.

In fundraising, narrative has long been championed by practitioners like Jerry Huntsinger and Mal Warwick. In fact, one of Huntsinger's letters scored highest among those studied. This remarkable letter featured the narrative account of a young girl who was rescued by Covenant House workers from slavery to sex traffickers. It put a human face on the appeal. Most of us know a good story when we see it. But seeing what makes a story good—well . . . that's another story. Table 3 lists the ten linguistic features which indicate the presence of narrative content in a text. Then Table 4 shows how fundraising texts in the Dickerson IRS 880 corpus compare to those in Biber's corpus and those in the Con-

nor and Upton 316 Corpus.

IN ADDITION TO PROFILING TEXTS, I SURVEYED THOSE WHO WROTE THEM.

My goal was to learn what factors these executives believe make a fundraising text effective. To this end, I asked respondents to score the importance of using an argument-centric (expository) writing style on a 1 to 5 scale (with 5 being high). Only 5.04 percent rated exposition high.

I then asked them to score emotional, human-interest narrative writing. Those rating narrative high grew by a ratio of nine-to-one over those rating exposition high. But despite the increase of those favoring narrative to 45.21 percent, the linguistic evidence of their writing revealed a wide gap between what they believed about good writing, and what they actually wrote. Belief did not match practice. The root of the disparity is that we all tend to take writing for granted.

We all can write. And we all think we can write well. Yet the evidence of linguistics analysis refutes this assumption. The problem is that few of us critically consider the rhetorical and linguistic substructure of what we write. We don't critically consider the language.

Stephen King drove this point home in explaining what motivated him to write *On Writing*, his book about composition principles and techniques. King's motivation came from a conversation with author of *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan. He had asked her "if there was any one question she was never asked dur-

Positive Features:	Synthetic negation	Negative Features:
Past tense verbs	Present participial clauses	Present tense verbs
Third-person pronouns		Attributive adjectives
Perfect aspect verbs		Past participial WHIZ deletions
Public verbs		Word length

Note. Adapted from Biber, (1988).

Dimension 2 – Narrative Versus Non-Narrative			
Sum of Z-Scores	Biber Corpus	Connor & Upton 316 Corpus	Dickerson IRS 880 Corpus
NARRATIVE			
7	Romantic Fiction		
6	General Fiction		
	Adventure Fiction		
5			
4			
3			
2	Biographies		
	Spontaneous Speeches		
1	Prepared Speeches		
	Personal Letters		
0	Popular Lore		
	Face-to-Face Conversation		
-1	Religion		
	Press Editorials		
-2	Telephone Conversations		
	Academic Prose		
-3	Official Documents	-3.1	-3.0
	Broadcasts		
-4			
NON-NARRATIVE			

Note: Using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), both the Connor & Upton 316 Direct Mail Corpus and the Dickerson IRS 880 Corpus were compared to the scores of 15 of the 23 genres in the Biber Corpus. Dimensional scores represent the summed frequencies of the linguistic features that make up the dimension. Before summing the occurrence of these features, their raw scores were normalized to a per-thousand-word ratio in order to eliminate skewing based on text-length. Then these scores were converted to units of standard deviation (z-scores, with means of zero). Adapted from Biber (1988, 1995)

ing the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk Amy paused, thinking it over carefully, and then said: "No one ever asks about the language" (2000, p. 8).

Fundraisers, of all people, should care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper. In fundraising, language is everything. Someone selling a service or product creates an exchange based on the value of what is being offered. And before buying, a prospect is able to kick the tires or thump the melon. But for a fundraiser, the weight of raising money rests squarely on the power of words. Yes, there are those occasions when a person visits a charity, or sees a video about its work. But most potential donors decide to give based on what they read. And unfortunately, what they read is usually not that good.

WHAT HAPPENED?

One explanation may be the way we are raised to write. Our educational upbringing teaches us to use an abstract impersonal writing style that is diametrically opposed to the expert advice of fundraising practitioners. The persistence of this kind of fundraising discourse is consistent with research by Peters and Wolfred (2001), who found that 58 percent of nonprofit executive directors hold Master's degrees or doctorates. They write what I call discourse de facto (Latin for as if or as a matter of practice).

They write as if they were still graduate students. They continue to produce a style of discourse appropriate to a past-bound setting, dedicated to a past-bound task, created for a past-bound audience. Fundraising requires a different style of writing,

but they seem to be living in another place, at another time, writing for a professor who is no longer there.

Our educational upbringing teaches us to use an abstract impersonal writing style that is diametrically opposed to the expert advice of fundraising practitioners.

NEUROSCIENTISTS AT ITALY'S UNIVERSITY OF PARMA SHED LIGHT ON HOW WE PROCESS LANGUAGE.

An important source of insight on effective writing comes from the University of Parma, led by the seminal research of neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti and his research team, which identified a special class of neurons that fired in the brains of macaque monkeys during specific grasping activities. The researchers linked the discovery of this mechanism to understanding language processing. This "mechanism was the neural prerequisite for the development of inter-individual communica-

tion and finally of speech" (1998, p. 190). They write:

We provide a unifying neural hypothesis on how individuals understand the actions and emotions of others. Our main claim is that the fundamental mechanism at the basis of the experiential understanding of others' actions is the activation of the mirror neuron system. A similar mechanism, but involving the activation of visceromotor centers, underlies the experiential understanding of the emotions of others (2004, p. 396).

At the core of the Gallese, Keysers, and Rizzolatti discovery is evidence from fMRI scans of human subjects for what was only suggested in their experiments with monkeys—that the human brain contains ". . . neural mechanisms (mirror mechanisms) that allow us to directly understand the meaning of the actions and emotions of others by internally replicating ('simulating') them without any explicit reflective mediation" (2004, p. 396).

UCLA AND USC RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT NARRATIVE TEXTS CREATE POWERFUL NEURAL RESPONSES.

Lisa Aziz-Zadeh from USC's Brain and Creativity Institute and Marco Iacoboni, director of UCLA's Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Lab at the Ahmanson Lovelace Brain Mapping Center in the David Geffen School of Medicine, found evidence that the triggers of mirror neuron response are not limited to visual input alone. Evidence suggests that just reading or hearing about an action

can produce the same response as seeing the action firsthand.

The research team found that among 12 volunteers studied, the premotor cortex of their brains indicated the presence of the same neural activity when they heard words describing an action as when they saw it. “In sum” Aziz-Zabeh writes, “these results support a key role of premotor areas with mirror neuron properties for embodied semantic representations of actions, whether they are delivered through visual or linguistic modalities” (Aziz-Zadeh, Wilson, Rizzolatti & Iacoboni, 2006, p. 1521). Their research explains why it’s hard to put down a novel, but easy to fall asleep reading a textbook.

The evidence of neuroscience suggests that the current style of writing dominant among fundraisers actually circumvents the way the human brain is hard-wired to process language. The implications: fundraisers should not shy away from emotion, they should tell stories, and they should not over-edit and formalize texts.

Science writer Gordy Slack summarizes the implications of mirror neurons to creating, processing, and interpreting language. He not only states, but also artfully illustrates implications in a brief text that marshals linguistic features to paint a narrative scene (note his use of past tense to report past actions and move the reader sequentially through time), intensify interpersonal involvement (note his use of contractions, first person pronouns, private verbs, and conversational style), and produce empathy (note how he makes you feel, thus achieving his rhetorical aim—to make you care).

A young woman sat on the subway

and sobbed. Her mascara-stained cheeks were wet and blotchy. Her eyes were red. Her shoulders shook. She was hopeless, completely forlorn. When I got off the F-train, I stood on the platform, paralyzed by emotions. Hers. I’d taken them with me. I stood there, tears streaming down my cheeks. But I had no death in the family. No breakup. No terminal diagnosis. And I didn’t even know her

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or why she cried. But the emotional pain, her pain, now my pain, was as real as day. (2007, p. 1)

The data in my research confirms that linguistic features like those Slack used above—features that involve readers and paint connecting narrative moments—are woefully absent in fundraising discourse. ■

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direct mail and also heads up a new research organization, The Written Voice. To discuss having your fundraising discourse analyzed, Frank can be reached at 909.864.2798 or at Frank@TheWrittenVoice.org.

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How Dimension (Factor) Scores Are Derived

The following illustrates how **one** mean frequency count for **one** feature (which has been normalized to reflect its occurrence per 1,000 words of text) in **one** document is **standardized** to a mean of 0.0 by using the **z-score** formula to determine the **standardized** value for the feature's **normalized** mean.

Six linguistic features on Dimension 2, which mark the presence of narrative focus. (Only salient features are listed.)	Measures in this text of each linguistic feature's normalized frequency of occurrence per 1,000 words of text (χ)	Measures in whole corpus of each linguistic feature's normalized mean frequency of occurrence per 1,000 words of text (μ)	Measures in whole corpus of each Linguistic feature's standard deviation (σ)	This text's standardized mean frequency counts, expressed in terms of variance as z-scores (z) $\left(z = \frac{\chi - \mu}{\sigma} \right)$
1. Past Tense Verbs	113	40.1	30.4	2.4
2. 3 rd Person Personal Pronouns	124	29.9	22.5	4.2
3. Perfect Aspect Verbs	30	8.6	5.2	4.1
4. Public Verbs	14	7.7	5.4	1.5
5. Present Participial Clauses	5	1.0	1.7	2.3
6. Synthetic Negation	3	1.7	1.6	1.4
This Text's Factor or Dimension Score (the sum of all its standardized per-thousand mean frequency counts' z-scores):				+15.9

For the **first** linguistic feature listed above (past tense verbs), the normalized mean frequency count of its occurrence per 1,000 words of text (113) is **standardized** by transforming it into a unit of standard deviation (a z-score). This process is illustrated below:

Definition of Terms In the z-Score Formula

In the adjacent formula, **z** refers to the standardized **z-score** being sought; **χ** refers to the normalized frequency (mean-count-per-1,000 words) for the linguistic feature being considered (113 past tense verbs); **μ** refers to the mean occurrence of past tense verbs in the corpus as **a whole**; and **σ** is the standard deviation score for past tense verbs in the corpus **as a whole**. The **standardized** mean frequency for past tense verbs in this text is found by computing their **z-score**. This process makes possible inter- and intra-corpus comparisons without the skewing long or short texts might create, by translating raw means to units of standard deviation, using the **z-scores** formula.

The formula used below to calculate the **standardized mean count-per-thousand-word** occurrence for just **one** linguistic feature (past tense verbs) is also applied above to the **other five** remaining features for the text. This sum for **six linguistic features** (+15.9) is this text's **Factor or Dimension Score**.

$$z = \frac{\chi - \mu}{\sigma} \quad z = \frac{113 - 40.1}{30.4} \quad z = \frac{72.9}{30.4} \quad z = 2.4$$

The standardized score of 2.4 for past tense verbs means that this text has a much higher occurrence of past tense verbs relative to the rest of the corpus: almost 2-1/2 times the mean occurrence of 40.1 per thousand words of text. Biber notes: "This standardized value, reflecting the magnitude of a frequency with respect to the range of possible variation, is a more adequate representation for the purposes of the present study" (1988, p. 95). Summing all of a text's standardized means for all salient linguistic features in any given dimension of variation yields a Factor or Dimension Score for that text on that dimension.

The same process can be applied to an **Entire Genre of Texts**, so that the sum of **all its texts' standardized per-1,000-word mean scores on all salient features** yields for each Factor or Dimension, a **Genre-Wide Score**.

The procedure above first derives **just one z-score** for **just one salient linguistic feature** in **just one dimension of linguistic variation**. This procedure is then applied to the **remaining five** salient linguistic features in this text.

Then the second major step in the procedure involves summing **all** the **standardized scores** for **all six** linguistic features in the text to provide a **Dimension or Factor Score** for **this one text** (e.g. $2.4 + 4.2 + 4.1 + 1.5 + 2.3 + 1.4 = 15.9$).

So after standardizing all the count-per-thousand means for **each** salient feature by converting them into **z-scores**, this **Single Text Factor or Dimension Score** is derived by summing those **z-scores**. Here the result is a score that characterizes the degree to which this text is **narrative or non-narrative** (the label for Dimension 2).

Computerized analysis of IRS Dickerson IRS 880 Corpus does this for **54** salient linguistic features among **2,412** texts across **five** dimensions of variation, requiring some **130,248 z-score** computations. Then additional multivariate analyses examine statistical significance. Biber's original research similarly summed **mean scores** for **67** salient linguistic features among **481** texts across **23** genres of written and spoken English. At the heart of the process is the two-step procedure described above (1. standardize to **z-scores**, all per-thousand means for salient features, then 2. sum all those standardized **z-scores** for a text). This process of standardizing mean-per-thousand frequencies to derive a Factor or Dimension Score for **One Text** can be used to produce standardized Factor or Dimension scores for **Entire Genres of Texts**: 1.) First, sum **all Factor or Dimension Scores** for **all the texts** of an **Entire Genre**. Then 2.) divide this total by the **number of texts** in the genre to get a **Genre-Wide Score**. "For example," Biber illustrates, "if there were only three fiction texts, having factor scores for Factor 2 of 16.6, 12.0, and 10.4, the mean score for fiction on Dimension 2 (Factor Score 2) would be: $16.6 + 12.0 + 10.4 \div 3 = 13.0$ "