

# Journal

of the DMA Nonprofit Federation

## CHARITABLE GIVING SHOULD NOT BE PUNISHED

*United States Senator John Thune, South Dakota*

**I**t is a remarkable statement on the character of the American people that in difficult economic times, individuals give generously to those who are less fortunate than themselves. President Kennedy once said, “The raising of extraordinarily large sums of money, given voluntarily and freely by millions of our fellow Americans, is a unique American tradition.” This spirit of generosity is something we should celebrate and promote, not discourage. Unfortunately, the Obama Administration has proposed reducing the tax deduction for charitable giving, which would discourage individuals from giving money at a time when many are struggling.

Charities provide invaluable public services to those in need, especially during difficult economic times. The services provided by charitable organizations are frequently more targeted, more effective, and more sustainable than comparable government services.

*cont. on page 6*




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 on-line 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
<b>INTERPERSONAL INVOLVEMENT FOCUS</b>			
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			
<b>INFORMATIONAL CONTENT FOCUS</b>			

**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-

**Table 3 The Ten Salient Linguistic Features Whose Co-Occurrence Defines Dimension 2**

<b>Positive Features:</b>	Synthetic negation	<b>Negative Features:</b>
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
<b>NARRATIVE</b>			
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 Broadcasts	-3.1	-3.0
-4			
<b>NON-NARRATIVE</b>			

**Table 4. Scores on Dimension Two Positioning Texts on the Continuum Contrasting Those Containing Narrative with Those Containing No 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

**fundraisers  
should not  
shy away from  
emotion, they  
should tell stories,  
and they should  
not over-edit and  
formalize texts.**

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. ■

*Frank Dickerson has been involved in fundraising since 1969. He holds a BA from The Ohio State University, a Masters from the International School of Theology, an MBA from Pepperdine, and a PhD from Claremont Graduate University, where he studied under Peter F. Drucker. He is president of High Touch Direct Mail, a California direct mail company specializing in hand-personalized*

*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.*

## REFERENCES

- Aziz-Zadeh, Lisa; Wilson, Stephen M.; Rizzolatti, Giacomo; Iacoboni, Marco. (2006). *Congruent embodied representations for visually presented actions and linguistic phrases describing actions. Current Biology, 16(18), 1818-1823.*
- Biber, Douglas. (1988). *Variation across speech and writing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*
- Biber, Douglas. (1995). *Dimensions of register variation: A cross-linguistic comparison. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.*
- Connor, Ulla & Upton, Thomas A. (2003). *Linguistic dimensions of direct mail letters. In Papi Leistyna & Charles F. Meyer (Eds). Corpus analysis: Language structure and language use (pp. 71-86). Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2003.*
- Gallese, Vittorio; Keysers, Christian; Rizzolatti, Giacomo. (2004). *A unifying view of the basis of social cognition. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 8(9), 396-403.*
- King, Stephen. (2000). *On writing: A memoir of the craft. New York: Scribner.*
- Peters, Jeanne & Wolfred, Timothy. (2001). *Daring to Lead: Nonprofit Executive Directors and Their Work Experience. San Francisco: CompassPoint Nonprofit Services.*
- Rizzolatti, Giacomo & Arbib, Michael A. (1998). *Language within our grasp. Trends in Neurosciences 21(5), 188-194.*
- Slack, Gordy. (2007, November 5). *I feel your pain. Salon.com. Retrieved April 23, 2008, from http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/11/05/mirror\_neurons/print.html.*