Systems And Networks – An Ethnographic Case Study

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A prerequisite for the teaching of ESP, is an understanding of the culture and the identification of target texts (spoken and written) within the community in which the learner wishes to participate. Only when there is awareness and first-hand experience of both the community and community-specific texts can organised learning of new members take place. This is an investigation into a Malaysian business organisation to see if it has the attributes of a discourse community.

1. BACKGROUND

Malaysia is undergoing economic transformation and is fast entering an era of rapid industrialisation. The principal thrust of development is the promotion of a more balanced, broad-based, resilient and internationally competitive economy so as to provide the foundation for attaining the status of a fully developed nation by the year 2020. This is the axis of Vision 2020 as it is now popularly known. The challenges facing the country in achieving this dream are best summed up in the **Outline Perspective Plan 1992:** *"The nineties will be a challenging decade for human resource development. This is because the economic transformation towards greater industrialisation depends not only on capital resources and technological development, but also on the quality of available human resources."*

The rapid development of information technology and the widespread use of electronic media and the current interest in the development of knowledge and service industries has brought about a new need competence in English, the language of trade and commerce. Given these changes in the social and economic

environment, many Malaysians are now feeling the pressure of being forced to communicate effectively in their second language in the business sector   Coming from an educational system where the medium of instruction is Malay , many new members of the industry are at a disadvantage not only because of a lack of general proficiency in this language, but more importantly because of inadequate command of the variety of English used in business discourse .This situation is further compounded by Malaysia moving from agriculture-based to manufacture-based industries. The change in focus has brought about a need to compete and communicate with the rest of the world, especially with the developed countries, who have been the leaders for manufactured goods. Following Green 's (1993) argument, *"English language and literacy courses stand as the significant gatekeepers for regulation, membership and access to dominant discourses and traditions, relations of knowledge, power and authority "*

Malaysia's economic interests may be jeopardized through communicative inefficiency in its negotiations with the rest of the world. In order to network with the rest of the world and to take advantage of new office technologies, Malaysians in the business sector, must become proficient in the English used in business communities. English has become an agent of social process and change for Malaysians.

Schools and other educational agencies are being called upon to play a more active and appropriate role in preparing young people for entering the post-industrial work world and to help strengthen the hand of the national economy.

Like a football coach, the ESP teacher needs to know not only the strengths and weaknesses of the away team but also to be extremely knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of the game so as to equip the home team adequately for the sport. In the ESP context, effective teaching of skills means effective operations of mechanisms within the industry The ESP teacher must first understand the society and mechanisms that operate in the society, before s/he can begin to equip new members with effective skills.

2. VIEWS OF LANGUAGE THAT INFORM THIS INVESTIGATION

Many theories of language have proven to be inadequate foundations for second language teaching because they never quite address

the essentially social nature of the individual or of the manner in which individuals develop their being in social process. There is, therefore, a need to shift towards discourse orientation and approaches which focus on the social, interactive nature of learning and meaning. Social semiotics provides for such an approach Halliday (1985), Hodge & Kress (1988) propose that an appropriate model for language teaching practices will begin by addressing the nature of language as a social semiotic. Within such a model, language is seen as one primary resource with which humans build meaning. Human action is seen as an inherently social phenomenon in its sources, functions, contexts and effects.

Following this perspective, the business organisation is viewed as a *"a social institution"* (Halliday, 1978). From a linguistic point of view it is seen as *"a communication network"* (Halliday, 1978). In this network, there will be sharing of experience, expression of social solidarity, decision-making, planning and forms of control, transmission of orders etc. The structure of the institution will be *"enshrined in the language, in the different types of interaction that take place and the linguistic registers associated with them"* (Halliday, 1978). The mechanism in this communication chain or network, is linguistic and can be described by the researcher The knowledge gained would make newcomers and ESP teachers aware of the ways in which communities actively participate in the building of social reality in language, because the different ways of working are encoded in the linguistic patterns used by that social group.

The individual is seen as a social being achieving a sense of membership into the ways of working of the community, especially where such ways are linguistic. The individual is initiated through guidance and experimentation with the models of other experts in the community

In essence then, this approach holds the view that if one is to see a real change in ESP education one needs an understanding of the business discourse community as a whole before one can focus on the individual member's communication needs within the setting.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE INVESTIGATION

This case study is not so much to get data but to gain insights. The primary purpose is to establish the norms, values and beliefs of the community The other purpose of this investigation is to

identify the most popular genre of the telecommunication companies of Sapura. I have adopted Swales' (1990) notion of a socio-rhetorical network and Drafts' (1989) social entities/activity systems to serve the working needs of this preliminary investigation. Using Swales' categories, it is argued that it is instructive to analyse the target community in terms of its common goals, participatory mechanisms, information exchange, community - specific genres, (spoken and written), a highly specialised terminology and a high level of expertise. I now provide a practical illustration of this in a Malaysian business organisation, Sapura Pte. Ltd.

4. METHODOLOGY

The company Sapura is analyzed using the six characteristics (Swales 1990) and seeing how these categories/ characteristics apply to the discourse community identified. Interviews, questionnaires and extensive field notes provide the data for this purpose. Sapura is an extremely large organisation, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to study not only the whole organisation complete with its 36 subsidiaries but all written documents within it as well (refer Appendix 1). The second part of the inquiry, therefore, will look at only one genre in one particular strand in the organisation – the telecommunication block (refer Appendix 3).

5. ANALYSIS

Characteristic One - "Participatory Mechanisms"

All companies are bound by a form of organisation which is the basis of the company's strengths and weaknesses. We need to identify the different cultures, sets of values and norms and beliefs that are reflected in the different organisational structures. Following the Torrington model of organisational structures, Sapura can be viewed as having a pyramidal structure, or the bureaucratic structure (the other structures being the entrepreneurial structure, the matrix structure, and the independent structure. Refer Appendix 2) The hierarchy permits the structure to be expressed as a set of successively more detailed levels. This concept of levels begins with the assumption that there are systems embedded within systems – a hierarchy of systems.

At the top level, the system consists of the executive chairperson and the executive vice-chairperson and the group managing director,

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Participatory Mechanisms in Sapura Pte. Ltd.

Involves planning and organisation of resources of organisation.

Managing the sub-groups
Implementing goals of I

Specific tasks performed to achieve goals spelled out by II.

I — TOP LEVEL

II — CUSTODIAL SUB SYS LEVEL

III — OPERATIONAL LEVEL

KEY

| I, II, III | The different participatory levels in structure. |
| ▲ ▼ | Information and ... levels. |
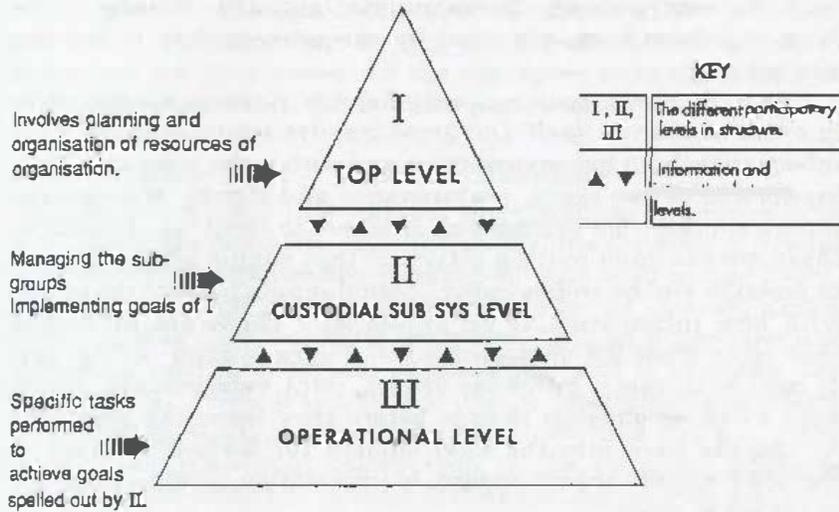
who concern themselves with the strategic view of the organisation. This strategic view involves planning for the future of the enterprise and organising the resources of the enterprise. The main concerns of this layer are broad, long-term, unstructured and externally oriented.

Below the strategic level is the tactical layer (or the custodial subsystem) which concerns itself with managing the specific subgroups of the company. These middle managers organise the tasks of the enterprise as efficiently as possible. They convert the broad goals that are defined at the strategic level into tactics that can be implemented to achieve these goals. The viewpoint and information needs of this layer are intermediate between those of the strategic level above and the operational level below

The next level, the operational level of the organisation, has specific tasks that need to be performed to achieve the goals of the company. These tasks are relatively narrow, short-term, structured and internally-oriented. The information needs at this level are stable and predictable,provided that the strategic goals of the enterprise do not change. All the various levels are thus participatory mechanisms that interact. There is interaction between the levels as well as within each level.

Characteristic Two – "Information Exchange"

Sapura, functions as an open system, one which processes inputs from its environment. These inputs (stimuli), usually in the form of information, are used by the open system to function and survive.

As a dynamic open system, Sapura processes information in order to change itself and grow Sapura's inputs are both the information from the environment and within the company These inputs are of two types, maintenance and signal. Maintenance inputs energise the system and enable it to function. In Sapura, these are the daily routine activities that enable all sub-systems to function and be orchestrated. Signal inputs provide the system with new information to be processed. These are all stimuli that come from the environment or Supra system in the form of new businesses, purchase orders, joint ventures etc. Inputs such as these undergo change before they leave the enterprise as outputs back into the environment for further interaction. Sapura's outputs are in the form of information, products, services or invisible products.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE
IN THE OPEN SYSTEM OF SAPURA
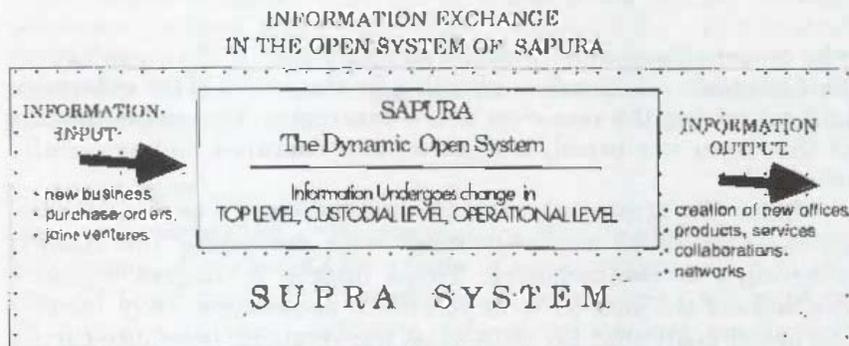
Thus Sapura is a dynamic open system or network that exists, interacts and becomes dependent for survival on participation and information exchange not only within the system but also with the Supra system or the environment.

Characteristic Three - "High level of Expertise"

A questionnaire administered to senior and middle managers revealed that all except one had university degrees. In addition

to university degrees, they all had further specialised skills through on-the-job and in-house training. All had a minimum of five years of job experience and were experts at the computer terminal. The company is highly automated and computer technology is fully utilised. All the managers were either hooked up to a computer terminal or had access to one.

Characteristic Four – "Common Purpose"

The overriding ethos that informs the structure and function of every genre the company uses and underpins the very existence of the business organisation is based on competition
This single-minded devotion to
of the organisation including language Language (written and spoken) is used to generate, negotiate for and to maintain the profit margin. Profit
the language at all levels in the hierarchy from the top, right down to the individual salesperson in the company Profit is also the reason behind all writing in the organisation from extensive reports right down to individual lexical items. This is in fact the raison d'être for language competence in the organisation. Language holds the key to the success of the business organisation.

ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN PROFIT MAKING
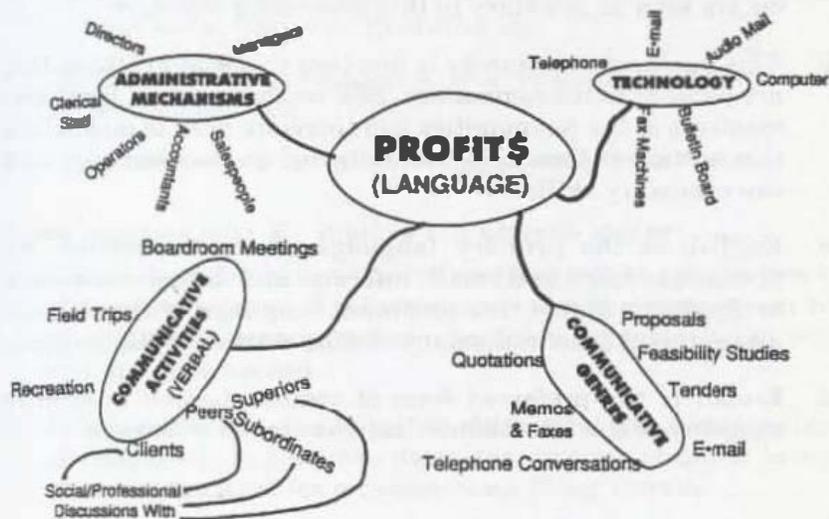
Characteristics Five and Six – "Genre / Highly Specialised Terminology"

The following genres were identified as used by all levels of the company They are: proposals, reports, feasibility studies, tenders, quotations, projects, briefs, faxes, electronic bulletin boards, E-mail, minutes, letters, memos, brochures and press releases. The bulk of the written documents produced were essentially routine documents. They are documents that already have a definite, repeatable format. Many of the documents analyzed used specialised terminology pertinent to the activity the enterprise is involved in namely, telecommunications, information technology, and light based industry Documents have generally shrunk in bulk The company is doing away with frills and preambles.

6. RESULTS

1. Sapura Pte Ltd, has all the attributes of Swales' notion of a discourse community and "is considered to be a unity of mutually relevant elements whose functions are determined by their respective contributions to the workings of the whole."(de Beaugrande, 1980)

2. This discourse community has a shared social purpose of profit-making at all levels The driving motivation of the organisation is profit although this is never overtly stated. Customer satisfaction, after sales service, training and so on are seen as ancillary to this overriding objective.

3. This business community is involved in social practices that are peculiar to the community ESP teachers are not legitimate members of the communities and therefore need to understand this culture before they can help equip new members with the necessary skills.

4. English is the primary language of communication. All documents large and small, informal and formal are written in English Malay, the dominant language of the country, was not used even in the daily routine matters of the company

5. E-mail is the preferred form of communication inter/intra company of the telecommunications strand of Sapura.

7. E-MAIL – THE PREFERRED GENRE OF THE TELECOMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY

E-mail is the nerve of the communication network in Sapura yet none of the managers highlighted or even talked about it, as it was so much a part of their lives that it was second nature to them. To them E-mail is as essential to business as breath to life. (All managers indicated that they used their E-mail in 80-100% of their tasks and used it many times in one day). Since this is an important and common form of communication, some of the E-mail texts were examined for their community - specific features.

Uses of E-mail in Sapura (in house and with the Supra system)

1. *Short messages* – to members within the organisation to inform of meetings, to take action on certain phenomena etc., to orchestrate inter-department information flows.

2. *Solidarity information* – news about company recreation, "man-talk" in the form of off-colour jokes.

3. *Technical diagrams* – graphics from overseas and locally

4. *Writing of memos.* – more formal communication within the organisation.

5. *Routine house-keeping matters* – keeping tabs on who is on medical leave, who is on fieldwork etc.

6. *Global market information* – new releases, summaries of market competition

7 *Negotiation* – new businesses, quotations, tenders etc.

Some reasons why E- mail is the chosen genre

1. *E-mail is preferred for speed of communication.* At the touch of a button a piece of information is simultaneously sent to as many people as intended inter/intra organisation at one and the same second.

2. *It is cost-effective* Not only is it cheap after the initial outlay of setting up, it also cuts down the amount of paper being used and the need for a cumbersome filing system.

3. *Empowering effect.* The user is able to get instant information literally at her/his fingertips. Networking ensures keeping abreast with changes in the marketplace, etc.

4. *Maintaining industry solidarity* Networking allows members to keep in touch with peers, clients, branch members and industry co-runners, thereby creating solidarity and goodwill and also maintaining the competitive edge without having to leave the confines of the office.

5. *Cuts down on third party in communication system.* With direct communication through E-mail there is less dependence on postal and courier services and unavoidable delays.

6. *Big-Brother effect.* Since all communication in the office is served by a central system, the powers that be can at any time check any individual's mail The individual, while functioning in his/her own right, is first and foremost an employee and therefore totally answerable to the company Another aspect of the big brother effect of a key, members can check on-line if other members and subordinates have actually checked their mail and responsibilities for the day right down to the day, hour and minute.

7 *Storage space* With on-line communication, information and documents can now be stored on storage disks with memory as large as hundreds of gigabytes thereby cutting down on physical size of office storage space.

8. *Ease of Use.* – User friendly system allows use with minimum of instruction

General discourse features

This computer communication straddles the literacy continuum. In terms of linguistic features, choice of medium , and levels of formality, it does not occupy a static place in the oral/written continuum The form changes from "writer style" to "talker style" depending on the interactant's relationship, topic and intent. Computer communication is very context- dependent. Outsiders would have difficulty understanding the discourse if they are not given the background or context in which the communication

takes place. Because it is context-bound, members understand each other very well despite incomplete sentences and lack of logical cohesive devises in the traditional sense, within the texts.

Essential information in all E-mail

1. Date and time of sending of mail
2. Sender identification code
3. Company and country identification
4. Recipient identification code

8. IMPLICATIONS

This initial inquiry into the business organisation has confirmed the researcher's hunches that the business sector is a socio-rhetorical community that is involved in social practices that are peculiar to the community To bring about meaningful changes in ESP education, one has to first study the setting or context where communication takes place, and all its social practices and values before one can begin to understand the language skills needed by new members of the community

The integration of office technologies implies the need for an English Language communication skills program that enables one to function and communicate within the limitations and advantages of this new technology

Such a program would enable new members to learn to operate in the target language by learning how expert members of the community already function and use the language for this specific social need in the community It also implies that ESP teachers must become community-sensitive analysts of target texts and that the language learners in this environment are the real content experts while the ESP teacher is the informed facilitator of how language functions in these texts and community contexts. Teachers thus need to work with target texts themselves to ensure that there is a good match between learner needs and community demands.

The company Sapura, recognises the importance of management having strong communication skills in English Many, if not all, upper and middle management are Malaysians who have graduated from foreign universities, implying perhaps that local graduates do not yet have the command required by the company

Greater proficiency in the English language would enable graduates from local universities to be more marketable in the private sector but more importantly, would help them function effectively and adjust quickly to the communication needs within the organisation

In the teaching of written discourse, it is possible to replicate some of the activities because writing is a time delayed activity and therefore can be done in the classroom, provided community values (already identified above) are in place. While this is true for most of the genres in written business discourse, it does not hold true for E-mail which is not a time delayed activity most of the time. The fleeting yet semi-permanent nature of the E-mail makes it an enigma that warrants researching into.

These findings indicate that more research is needed into E-mail but it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide that detail. Such research is currently being carried out as a doctoral dissertation by the writer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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APPENDIX 1
ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

SAPURA HOLDINGS SDN. BHD.	**METAL BASED INDUSTRIES**	Manufacturing of Automotive Components • Metal Forming Foundry Works
	INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY	System Integration and Software Development Distribution of Computers and Peripherals Remote Sensing
	RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT	Manufacturing of telecommunications equipment Sales & Marketing of telecommunications equipment Paging Services Project Engineering Cable Network Installation
	TELECOMMUNICATIONS	Cable Manufacturing Telephone Manufacturing Manufacturing, Installation and Maintenance of Public Payphone Management of Public Payphone Network
	FINANCE & ACCOUNTING	
	OTHERS	Property Management Supply and installation of electrical power transmission equipment General Trading
	GROUP SERVICES	Quality Assurance Information Service Corporate Planning Personnel and Administration Legal & Secretarial

SAPURA

APPENDIX 2

ENTREPRENEURIAL ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

Distribution — Personal assistant — Company secretary and personnel office

Southern region sales

Northern region sales

Overseas sales

Design and engineering — Production supervisor — Research and development

Accountant and general office

Purchasing and supplies
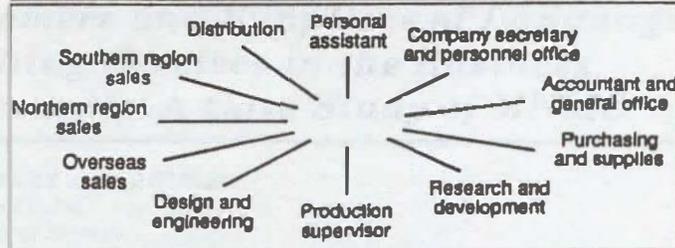
TYPICAL MATRIX ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

Functional areas resourcing projects

Production	Design engineering	Personnel	Material supplies	Cost accounting

Production

Project Team A

Project Team C

Managers
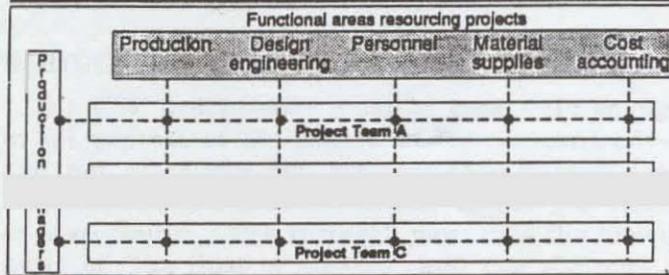
TYPICAL BUREAUCRATIC ORGANISATION STRUCTURE

Chief executive

Director of manufacturing	Director of marketing	Director of finance	Director of personnel	Director of research
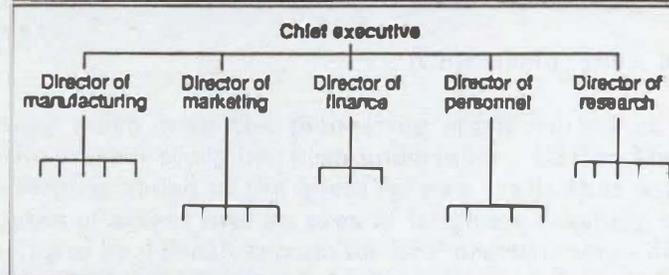
THE INDEPENDENCE FORM OF ORGANISATION

Consultant – Pay and conditions

Consultant – Executive selection

Consultant – Organisation development

Consultant – Management training

Consultant – Employee relations

Office Manager

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