



Transitivity in social work reports: A case of destitution reports written by professional social workers in Botswana

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Abstract

Social work in Botswana is a rapidly developing profession. In the last fifty or so years, the role of the social worker has changed, from distributing practical help to taking on roles that were previously filled via age- and status-based social structures. A lot of research has been done on business communication in different workplaces. However, there is not much done on Social work professional communication in Botswana. This study, which is part of a longer study, analysed the types of texts produced by social workers in their professional settings. The research method for this study combines two major research tools in the qualitative inquiry, which are text analysis and interviews. Sixty-four (64) destitution reports were collected and analysed. Six (6) professional social workers were also interviewed to share their experiences in writing the reports. The findings show the powers that the social workers have over their clients.

Keywords: social work, destitution reports, clients, transitivity

Introduction

Social work writing substantiates various characteristics of professional writing. It is important to study professional discourse because it plays a great role in professional society. It is a form of communication that links organisations in the professional world as well as being a form of communication that links professional organisations with the wider society of which they are a part. Social workers have to communicate with their clients, and they often have to work in multidisciplinary teams with different professionals. They also communicate with different officers in different departments and even government officials. For example, one of the tasks they do is sitting in a board of child adoption hearing where they might interact with nurses, lawyers and magistrates. They prepare reports for legal action and give evidence in court. They conduct interviews with service users and write assessment reports based on these. In Botswana, such reports are written in English. This paper is part of a longer study. It focuses on reports written by professional social workers in Botswana to recommend them for social benefits. The paper shows the powers that social workers have over their clients.

In recent years an increasing number of studies related to workplace English has been conducted in the field of applied linguistics. Swales (2000) feels that it is still rather limited compared to many other well-researched applied linguistic areas of study, but even so, a number of studies can be mentioned. Forey (2004) examined the meanings of workplace texts for teachers and business people and found that there is a mismatch between what teachers/trainers are trying to teach and what the language business people identify with. Bhatia (1993) looked at sales promotion letters to explore how business people persuaded customers to buy their products. Henry and Roseberry (2001) researched letters of application where they were looking at how applicants present themselves in order to get a job, Pintos

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Dos Santos (2001) also looked at 117 business letters written by European companies to have their products represented by a Brazilian company. Giminez (2006) looked at embedded business e-mails in order to explore the changes in international business communication represented in the textual features of e-mails. Up to now, no research has been done on Case reports written by social Workers in Botswana, and hence this study.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

A comprehensive definition of professional discourse is provided in Gunnarson (2009). Gunnarson (2009) explains that “professional discourse includes written texts produced by professionals and intended for other professionals with the same or different expertise, for semi-professionals, i.e. learners, or for non-professionals, i.e. lay people” (p. 4). Gunnarsson (2009) distinguishes a set of features which characterise professional discourse as distinct from non-professional discourse. The features are discussed below with relevance to Social work.

Expert discourse related to different domains: This is the language and discourse used by professionals within their field illustrates their knowledge and skills in the area and differentiates them from other fields. That is, members of different discourse communities have different ways of communication in their special fields. For example, police officers and social workers will treat a case similarly but will use different terms in some issues. For example: Sarangi (1998), exploring how social workers construct cases, examined how social workers and other professionals interpret a case and how “they legitimize their action in a network of interprofessional communication” (p. 247). He concludes that “interprofessional alliance is not so much about giving in, but to safeguard individual professional space/authority” (p. 265).

Goal oriented, situated discourse: Professional discourse is goal oriented and the professional environment is held together by a set of common goals, often specified in documents. Professional organisations often state their goals in their mission and vision statements. There are different contexts in which professional discourse can take place, and this affects the enactment of the goals.

Conventionalized form of discourse: The conventions of a certain group distinguish it from other groups. Social workers need a form of discourse which enables them to display professional competence that distinguishes them from non-professionals, whether they are interacting with other professionals or with clients.

Discourse in a socially ordered group: There are certain social structures in a workplace unit; professional discourse is the result of collaboration between professionals in different working groups. There has to be cooperation and collaboration for an easy flow of communication in a working environment. Communicative practices contribute to unification of workplaces. They hold workplaces together (Sarangi & Roberts, 1999).

Discourse dependent on various societal framework systems: Gunnarsson (2009) identifies four framework systems on which professional discourse depends. First is the legal-political framework which refers to rules and regulations that are drawn to guide how members of the working group should conduct themselves and includes contracts and handling confidential records. Second is the technical economical framework: technological advances are important for the development of organizations, partly because they affect the communication mechanisms available. The third framework is the socio-cultural framework where attitudes and social values have to be observed for communication purposes in organizations. Lastly, there is the linguistic framework, the language of the workplace. This is partly to do with discourse conventions as discussed above; but in Botswana social work, there is also a more obvious linguistic issue. For instance, social workers might use Setswana to interview or consult their clients and write reports of these interviews in English, the official language.



Dynamically changing discourse: genres are dynamic and not static. Schryer and Spoel (2005) concur that genres, as representation constructions, convey social and textual meanings that are formed by past members and passed on to current ones to use and this shows how dynamic genres are, and that those who are using these genres can never expect same formats from the genres they are currently using.

Methodology

In this study, 64 destitution reports were collected for text analysis. The documents viewed occurred in a natural setting, and already existed before this study. The destitution reports were written by social workers. These reports are written specifically for the social welfare office. The reports are written by social workers after an assessment of the client to determine whether the client can be included in the destitute care programme, whereby they will be assisted by the provision of food and some basic needs. Destitution reports aim to assess the welfare of the client to check if they really need support from the social welfare office. There are two aspects to the text analysis: macro-level move analysis, and micro-level transitivity analysis. The analysis will be based on micro-level (for the macro-level, see Nkateng & Wharton, 2014). Six professional social workers in the South East District were interviewed. The interviews with professionals were conducted in the offices of the selected social workers. The interviews with professionals were conducted in the offices of the selected social workers. Three interviews were held in council offices while the other three were at the community centre where the workers' offices are based during the day. The interviews were conducted in order to investigate both participants' experiences in writing their documents and to clarify some issues identified in the documents collected.

Brief Description of the Reports

From the examination of 64 destitution reports, the following subheadings were found and were then translated into moves below the descriptions:

- *Profile of the client:* the personal details of the client
- *Background information:* a brief history of the client and what may be the source of the problem
- *Health status:* The health issues of the client will be stated in this section.
- *Economic status:* Whether the client is employed or if there is any form of income that the client receives.
- *Home environment:* Brief description of the client's home.
- *Educational background:* whether the client has been to school and how far the client has gone as far as education standards in Botswana.
- *Assessment findings:* The social worker has to state the findings that will help in decision making and in recommendations.
- *Recommendations:* To suggest whether the client needs support or not based on the findings from the subheadings discussed above.

The structure and format are not fixed and subheadings are found at different parts of the reports depending on the writer. Report structures differ but they all contain essential information for the reader to make decisions about the client. The Move analysis will not be used in this article, but it is mentioned to support the analysis. From an examination of 64 destitution reports, it can be argued that the following labels describe moves of this genre:

- Move 1. Record the client's particulars
- Move 2. State the purpose of the report
- Move 3. Describe the client's social networks



- Move 4. Assess the standard of the client's physical residence
- Move 5. Categorise the client's well being
- Move 6. Interpret facts in relation to client's ability to self-support
- Move 7. Recommend a decision
- Move 8. Justify the recommendation
- Move 9. Acknowledge authenticity

Transitivity or Process Analysis

Halliday's transitivity framework is used for analysis, and it enables analysis of the clause in terms of who is doing what to whom. Halliday (1985) states that, "Transitivity specifies the different types of process that are recognized in the language and the structures by which they are expressed" (p. 101). In the case of destitution reports, we are looking at what the social workers are doing or saying about the clients. The purpose of this analysis is to observe any patterns in how the client is represented in terms of the process they are associated with and whether they are represented as active or passive with respect to these processes.

The Clause in its Ideational Function

Within the moves stated above, main clauses where the client or some representation of the client is the grammatical subject were selected. In addition to these clauses, the same criteria to select some dependent clauses, and in the case of reported speech, the focus is on both the reporting verb and the reported clause.

The ideational function of the clause is concerned with transmission of ideas. Halliday (1985) explains that, "Our most powerful conception of reality is that it consists of 'going on': of doing, happening, feeling, being... expressed through the grammar of the clause" (p. 101). The semantic processes expressed by the clause have three components, which are:

- I. The process: what kind of event is being described? The process is expressed by the verb phrase in the clause.
- II. The participant: referring to the roles of entities that are directly involved in the process. The one who does, says and receives the action. This is realised by noun phrase in the clause.
- III. The circumstances which describes when where and why events occur. They are expressed by adverbial and prepositional phrases (Halliday 1985, p. 101-102).

The purpose of this analysis is to explore different types of processes expressed by social workers to represent their clients. Therefore, there is a need to look at the different types of processes that can be found in the clauses. Butt et al. (1995) state that, "...the one obligatory constituent of a clause is the Process expressed by a verbal group which is essentially realised by a nucleus or head word that belongs to the class verb" (p. 37).

Transitivity processes can be classified into material, relational, mental, verbal, behavioural and existential processes, based on whether they represent processes of doing, being, sensing, saying, behaving or existing. The next section discusses these processes with examples from the destitution reports.

Material Process Clauses

Material processes are about doing. They are processes of doing in the physical world. There are two participants involved in material processes. First, there is the Actor or Agent which expresses the doer of the process. The second is the Goal which expresses the person or entity affected by the process. There is also an extra element called circumstance which provides additional information on the "when,



where, how and why” of the process. Circumstance provides information about place, time, extent, matter, manner and condition. An example is provided in Table 1.1 below:

Table 1.1

Case 4

“The client stays with her friend.”

The client	stays	with her friend
Actor	Process: material	Goal (where)

In the example in Table 1.2 below, Bontle is the goal and the actor is not named because the verb is in the passive form.

Table 1.2

Case 10: “Bontle was visited at her home.”

Bontle	was visited	at her home
Goal	Process: Material	Circumstance

Relational Process Clauses

Relational processes are processes of being in the world of abstract relations (Halliday, 2004). Some relational processes are attributive. Thompson (1996) explains that “... a relationship is set up between two concepts, in this case an object and a quality, and the function of the predicator is simply to signal the existence of the relationship” (p. 86). This is illustrated in table 1.3 below.

Table 1.3

Case 10: “The client is a psychiatric patient.”

The client	is	a psychiatric patient
Carrier	Process:	attribute

The second type of relational process is called identifying relational process. An identifying process is not concerned with “ascribing or classifying, but defining.” So the intensive identifying process can be characterised as “x serves to define the identity of y” (Eggins, 2004, p. 241). An example of this case is presented in Table 1.4.

Table 1.4

Case 10: “Bontle is an old woman of 1936.”

Bontle	is	an old woman of 1936
Identified	Process	Identifier

The other type of relational process is possessive and it states ‘x has a’ (see Table 1.5 below).

Table 1.5

Case 1: “He does not own assets nor resources.”

He	Does	not own assets nor resources
Possessor	process	possession

Mental Processes

Mental processes express meanings of feeling or thinking. Thompson (1996) states that “Mental clauses form a viable category: there are clear differences between something that goes on in the external world and something that goes on in the internal world of the mind” (p. 82). Mental processes

involve two participants: the sener and phenomenon (see Table 1.6 below). Mental processes can be classified into three types: cognition, (verbs of thinking, knowing, understanding etc.), affection (verbs of liking, loving, fearing and hating), and perception (verbs of seeing and hearing).

Table 1.6

Case 1: "He does not know his relatives."

He	does not know	his relatives
Senser	Process: cognition	Phenomenon

Verbal Processes

Verbal processes are processes of saying. They exist on the borderline between mental and relational processes. The verbal process expresses the relationship between ideas constructed in human consciousness and the ideas enacted in the form of language like saying and meaning (Halliday 2004, p. 171). As presented in Table 1.7 below, the participant who is speaking is called Sayer, the addressee to whom the process is directed is Target, and what is said is verbiage.

Table 1.7

Case 5: "The client claims he does not have anybody to help him."

The client	claims	he does not have anybody to help him
Sayer	Process: verbal	verbiage

Behavioural Processes

Behavioural processes are processes of physiological and psychological behaviour; they are on the borderline between material and mental processes. These processes "represent the outer manifestations of inner workings, the acting out of processes of consciousness and physiological states" (Halliday 2004, p. 171). The participant who is behaving is called Behavior. Behavior is usually a conscious being.

Existential Process Clauses

Existential processes are processes of existing and happening, and these clauses have the verb 'be' or some other form expressing existence. The 'existent' may be a phenomenon of any kind and it is often an event (see Table 1.8 below).

Table 1.8

Case 1 "He grew up in Otse."

He	grew up	in Otse
existent	Process	circumstance

The next section presents the patterns of representation in the main moves identified in the reports.

Patterns of Representation Identified in Moves 3, 5 and 6

Previous researchers have used transitivity to elucidate social work reports (e.g. Hall et al., (1999, p. 276) in their study of social work discourse explain that they were struck by the choice of lexicogrammatical structures which showed how the institution and the client were represented and how the case was closed down. They explain that the institutional agent was combined with a mental process for example "the hospital felt..., the staff found...". They also observed "the combination of the parent with agency in a material process of physical violence the black worker was kicked and punched, the mother was so hostile" or with a mental / material process indicating closure of the procedure the parents refused to cooperate.

The patterns identified in moves 3, 5 and 6, where social workers describe the situation of the clients, are selected for analysis. In the areas selected, the social workers choose to use the word “client” or prefer to use the clients’ first name. As Day (1972) explains “the single word “client” is commonly used to denote the person who requires the services of a social agency. Some social workers dislike the use of this word because they dislike its connotation” (p. 17).

Patterns of Representations in Move 3 “describe the client's social network”

This section describes how social workers represent their clients. This is the part where the social network of the client is assessed. The social workers tend to describe members of the family which includes the number of children the client has, as well as siblings and parents.

The first distinction to be made is the social workers’ choice to represent the client directly or to report the client’s voice. Hall et al. (1999) explain that:

One of the tacit assumptions underlying social work is that workers not only act in the best interest of the client but also hear the client. ... One way to demonstrate professional competence is by showing how client voices and positions inform and justify institutional intervention.... (pp. 565-566)

Firstly, the social worker reports the clients’ situation directly through the use of relational processes. Out of 190 clauses, where some language item representing the client is the grammatical subject, there are 125 relational processes. Sixty-four (64) of these are attributive, 47 are possessive, and 14 are relational identifying clauses. Relational processes are more frequent in this move as they tend to talk about the client and their social life. There are more relational attributives and possessives where the social worker describes the client as a single person or a mother of five children. Below is the presentation of examples of processes in Tables 1.9, 1.10. and 1.11.

Table 1.9

Relational attributive

Case19	The client	was	Never married
Case 4	She	is	a single mother of three
Case 21	The client	is	an elderly woman
Case 7	The client	is	a registered destitute person
Case 8	She	Is	A widow
	carrier	process :relational	Attributive

Table 1.10

Relational possessive

Case 1	Mphari	does not have	a wife nor children
Case 22	She	is a mother	to five
Case 29	She	has	three sisters and a brother
Case 32	She	has	two sisters and five brothers
Case 38	The client	has	one grand child
	carrier	process :relational	possessed

Table 1.11
Relational Identifying

	Case11	The client	belongs	to a family of nine including his mother and father
14	Case	She	is	the last born and eleventh daughter of the late Phaks and Pule
15	Case	She	is	a Motswana by birth
28	Case	T.R	Is	the first child in a family of four
		<i>Identified</i>	process :	identifier

The use of relational processes contributes to the final recommendations as the social worker will have to refer to the number of children who are dependents and whether they are working and can support the client. The information in this section was provided by the client to the social worker, as Healy and Mulholland (2007) explain “the social worker will collect information from a range of sources, including interviews with the client, family members and other people who have played a significant role in the client’s life” (p. 88).

Secondly, the social workers bring in the voice of the clients through the use of projected clauses. Out of 190 clauses analysed, there are 43 projected clauses. Social workers are reporting what they were told to strengthen their cases in order to support their decisions in intervention. In this case they use reported speech or projected clauses (see Table 1.12 below).

Table 1.12
Verbal processes

	Case 5	Mr K.B	confessed	he has never been married
10	Case	She	outlined to this office	she is a mother of four, all boys
21	Case	She	indicated to the office	she has two surviving siblings
	Case 7	She	explained to the office	she has also recently lost a daughter who was murdered
	Case 5	The client	claims	he does not have anybody to help him
		<i>Sayer</i>	verbal	receiver verbiage

Social workers tend to distance themselves from what their clients are saying, in order to make fair judgements or to avoid biasness. Hall et al. (2006) explain that “Reported speech is of particular significance because it is deployed for strategic purposes: to agree or disagree with a particular state of affairs, to attribute agency to participants and to underline the decision-making process, etc.” (p. 92). This is illustrated by the use of reporting verbs that are found in this move. Some of them are: confessed, conceded, claims, explained, indicated and mentioned. Hall et al. (1999) explain that social workers use speech representation at times to support or weaken certain categories.

Patterns of Representation in Move 5 “categorises client’s well-being”

Move 5 is the part that informs about the client’s well-being; it can be by the client or by members of the family. The first part is a description of how the social worker directly represents the client. Out of 146 clauses where a language item referring to the client is the grammatical subject, there are 77 relational clauses of which 64 are attributive while 13 are possessive. Clauses found in this move explain the client’s health and if they are fit enough to support the family (see Table 1.13 below).

Table 1.13

Relational attributive

Case 1	He	is	now an old age pensioner
Case 5	The client	is	a sick man who cannot work
Case 17	Gab	is	mentally challenged and has a handicapped limb
Case 23	Lesley	is	unable to walk properly since her legs are stiff
Case 31	He	is	mentally disturbed
	<i>carrier</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>attributive</i>

Table 1.14

Relational possessive

Case 38	She	has	a brother who is epileptic
Case 41	The client	has	a breathing problem
Case 56	She	has	no adverse medical conditions
Case 56	She and her family	have	no medical or health complaints
	<i>carrier</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>possessed</i>

Secondly, the social worker brings in the voice of the client. Hall et al. (1999) state that:

The professional account offered by the social worker should not only persuade by being coherent, it should also adhere to institutional criteria of rationality and objectivity. It is therefore likely to entail a report that the appropriate interactional moves have been made, but it is also an evidence-oriented display of certain labels, terms, and key formulations ‘as used’ by the professional and client actors involved. (p. 543)

Out of 146 clauses, there are 64 projected clauses where the social worker brings in the voice of the client (see Table 1.15 below).

Table 1.15

The voice of the client

Case 3	The client	reported	other family members are enjoying good life
Case 5	The client	purports	that he is a sick man who cannot work



Case 8	The client	Was also said		to be immobile
Case 8	She	Was also said		to be diabetic
Case 9	The client	affirmed	to the officer	that he is visually blind since 2007
	Sayer	verbal	receiver	Matter

For the two representations discussed above, which are the relational clauses and the projected clauses, Social workers tend to plead for their clients by following the destitution policy. According to the Destitution Policy (2002), “A destitute person is an individual who due to: old age or mentally or physically disabled as determined by social worker” (p. 4). The clause gives social workers supremacy to determine whether the client qualifies or does not qualify for benefits through physical assessment and by use of statements such as “the client is mentally fit, HIV patient and is on ARV therapy”.

Clauses or descriptions in this move are related to the recommendations in the destitution policy. It can be inferred from the clauses what the outcome of the case will be, for example; There are no health issues or problems in this family. If there are no health issues it means the client is fit and can find work to maintain the family. But if the clause says: The client affirmed to this officer that she is epileptic as well as asthmatic and on medication for both conditions. The client is not fit for work and therefore needs to be supported.

It can be inferred from the example above that the client might qualify for the benefits. For example:

He reported that he is on TB treatment and adheres well [According to the officers’ observation it is more than just TB but because of age difference it was difficult for the officer to discuss in depth]” (Extract 4.14, Case 12).

The officer is not aligning with what he is reporting but contradicts what the client is saying because of the observation that the social worker has made. This shows that culture can also contribute to what the social workers are reporting because if the client was younger than the social worker, more information could have been sought to clearly identify the problem of the client. It is not a Setswana culture for a young person to ask an older person about health issues.

It could be observed from the interviews that the main challenge they are faced with is a language issue. Out of 6 interviewees, 5 stated that they conduct the interviews in Setswana and yet the documents they use are written in English and so they have to translate. B.B said “*Setswana to English is something else, some concepts are clearer in English than Setswana*”. Translating from Setswana to English is problematic as they stated that some concepts are better expressed in English than in Setswana and if the client does not know English it also becomes a challenge for the writer. Setswana and English are different languages and they have different connotations. The other challenge they are faced with is the use of “ACTS”. These are legal documents that have to guide the workers to make decisions in cases that involve children (Children’s act). O.N stated that “*we do not interpret them in the same way. So we need a legal affair officer to interpret acts*”. The misinterpretation of the acts by the writers might affect the outcome of the report.

The other challenge which was expressed by two officers is the lack of professional challenge and language use. O.L.M said “*Some reports are monotonous and not challenging unlike court cases that are very challenging*” O.L.M shared the same view that

“The challenge honestly that I have faced with me, personally, is a destitution report. It’s tiring, I don’t feel like I was educated to come and do destitution, honestly. If you looked at I think



most of our reports, if you want to see good work. Uh huh. Just compare between a destitute report and a court case” (Extract 4.14).

Conclusion

The findings in this section show that social workers have more power to make recommendations about their clients. They are prompted by the client visiting their office, then they do home visits before they come up with the final destitution report. Intertextuality between the case register, home visit, intake sheet and the destitution policy influences the final report and helps to ensure that the writer is guided by the destitution policy to write fairly without any biases. The factual and interpretive sections are then divided into moves to help the writer make appropriate decisions. They produce moves that are obligatory in order to provide facts that will strongly support their recommendations. The moves are then realised by the choice of words used to represent either the writer or the client through the use of processes. The processes are used to determine whether the clients can be assisted or not. The interviews also showed that the writers are faced with the challenges of translating from Setswana to English. Grammar and direct translation from Setswana to English pose a big challenge to the writers. There is a need for writing workshops for the writers to be developed.

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