

Correctness and clarity in applying for overseas jobs: A cross-cultural analysis of US and Flemish applications

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Abstract

This study examined cross-cultural similarities and differences between US and Flemish letters of job application as a promotional business-writing genre. Altogether 74 letters were collected and analyzed for 'correctness' and 'clarity', two linguistic properties that strongly correlate with communicative success in getting invited for a job interview. The results show that a typical US applicant writes more than the Flemish applicant and makes fewer mistakes. Differences were also found in the degree of clarity, i.e., content and length of information. The typical US applicant provided more supporting arguments for the application, discussed benefits for the employer and the applicant, but was not as direct in asking for an interview. The results correspond with previous contrastive rhetoric research showing cultural differences in writing for specific purposes (Bhatia, 1993; Jenkins and Hinds, 1987; Maier, 1992).

Keywords: *genre analysis; research on promotional genre; cross-cultural business writing; discourse analysis of application letters and resumes; analysis of semantic meaning components; genre-specific contrastive rhetorical analysis.*

1. Introduction

Any given text, Coulthard (1994: 1) argues, can be seen as 'just one of an indefinite number of possible texts, or rather *possible textualizations*, of the writer's message'. Clearly, not all of these alternatives will be equally successful in fulfilling their shared ideational and interpersonal purposes (as defined by Halliday, 1985).

One text type, or genre (Swales, 1990), in which someone's writing performance and textual strategies play a crucial role in the reader's

evaluation is the written job application. As in a sales promotion letter and similar persuasive documents, the communicative purpose of a written job application is 'to elicit a specific response from its reader(s)', in this case a call for interview (Bhatia, 1993: 59–60). Though a subsequent invitation for a job interview, i.e., getting shortlisted, is the ultimate goal of the application, its immediate objective is to attract the attention of the person who screens and hires job applicants (e.g., Brusaw et al., 1987: 54–55).

In many parts of the world written job applications typically consist of both a letter of application (or cover letter) and an enclosed resumé (or curriculum vitae). However, prospective employers generally read the letter first before deciding whether to check the applicant's resumé. Thus it is in the cover letter, rather than the resumé, that applicants should try to arrest the reader's or employer's attention, to create a desire to hire the applicant, and to prompt action in the form of an employment interview (e.g., Murphy and Hildebrandt, 1991: 340).

Thus, securing the reader's attention as well as getting shortlisted at a later selection stage depend to a large extent on the evaluation of the quality and quantity of linguistic input. To put it another way, inadequate textualizations of the cover letter jeopardize someone's possibility of getting shortlisted and subsequent hiring chances. Bhatia's (1993: 59–68) recent analysis of academic job applications shows that adequate textualizations tend to display a six-part structure: establishing credentials, offering incentives, enclosing documents, using pressure tactics, soliciting response, and ending politely.

Many academic and business genres exhibit only small variations across writers. Yet, as Bhatia's research on South-Asian job applications (1993: 69–74) has shown, cover letters tend to exhibit cross-cultural differences. In Western cultures, the main function of a cover letter is to provide self-appraisal, i.e., to highlight the qualifications and experience of the job applicant and demonstrate their relevance to the specifications of the vacancy. By contrast, South-Asian job applicants tend to use the cover letter just to enclose the resumé, and do not really take the opportunity to offer self-appraisal in order to persuade the reader of the strength of their application.

Letters of application may also vary from country to country in the West. Several studies dealing with other business-letter genres suggest cross-cultural variation among Western writers. Jenkins and Hinds (1987), for example, discovered cultural differences in the amount and emphasis of material in business letters from France, Japan, and the US. The US letters were longer and more individual in content than those from France. Hinds and Jenkins explain the US characteristics as stem-

ming from culture-specific value orientations that emphasize individualism, informality, open-role behavior, and a concern with 'doing'. A recent study of fund-raising letters in the US and the Netherlands also revealed important differences (Abelen et al., 1993). US fund-raising letters were 'found to have a more overtly persuasive character than Dutch letters from comparable organizations' (1993: 343). The US letters were also far more direct and employed a more interpersonal style.

Although no previous research exists investigating cross-cultural differences in letter writing by Flemish speakers, one can expect Flemish students to differ from US students because of different styles of self-promotion. According to Gannon et al. (1994: 159), Belgians (and Flemings) are 'not generally boastful, tending not to expound about their capabilities and accomplishments'. Thus they are less assertive, more humble, and less self-reliant in promoting themselves and/or furthering their careers. As a matter of fact, when applying for a job in writing, they tend to rely on *others* to read between the lines in order to find out more about their real talents and personal qualities.

This lack of self-promotion relates to Hofstede's (1991: Chapter 2) dimension of 'power distance', the extent to which people accept that power is distributed unequally. Belgium ranks much higher than the US on this dimension. This higher degree of trust which Belgians and Flemings alike tend to put in authority clearly affects their letters of application. If you trust your superior (i.e., your prospective employer) to make the right decisions, there is no need for you to 'come on strong' or to 'glorify your successes' yourself. Trompenaars (1993: Chapter 11) argues that Belgium, like Spain and France, exhibits a corporate culture where the typical company has a leader who is regarded as 'a caring father who knows best' (1993: 161).

Research in the field of contrastive rhetoric has convincingly documented that first-language communication patterns and strategies transfer to second-language writing (e.g., Kaplan, 1966; Connor and Kaplan, 1987). More particularly, transfer of first-language style and organization has been found at the most advanced levels of writing such as the second-language writing of university professors (Ventola and Mauranen, 1991) and an experienced business executive (Connor, 1989). The Flemish students of business English in our study provide further evidence for the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis.

In this paper, we will examine similarities and differences between US and Flemish textualizations of the application letter as a business-writing genre. More specifically, we will focus on *correctness* and *clarity* as two linguistic properties that strongly correlate with communicative success in getting invited for a job interview. By correctness we mean surface

features like spelling, punctuation, lexical accuracy, sentence grammar and paragraph structure. The second concept, clarity, refers to the organization and style of the prototypical content of the application letter, i.e., its informativeness in terms of an empirically derived generic profile of meaning components. We will further elaborate both concepts in section 2 of this paper.

The data, a total of 74 cover letters written in English, have been collected from a large cross-cultural US–Flemish job application stimulation, the ‘Antwerp-Indianapolis Project’ (or AIP). The Antwerp-Indianapolis Project was set up, in 1990, by Davis, De Rycker and Verckens as an international project between their respective college students of ‘Writing “and” Business English’ at Indiana University–Purdue University at Indianapolis (IUPUI), US, and the *Handelshogeschool Antwerpen* (the Antwerp Business School), Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium). The objective of the writing project was to create a pedagogically sound, but sufficiently authentic, communication setting within which students from both sides of the Atlantic could improve their job application skills in English. In addition, the project was intended to help US and Flemish college students to become ‘mindful’ (see Gudykunst, 1994) of their communicative behavior by having them interact with readers and writers from a different culture. A brief description of the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project and its participants will be given in section 3.

Section 4 will present and discuss the main findings of the descriptive and correlational analyses. We will conclude with a number of general observations in section 5 by examining the extent to which the findings allow us to formulate culture-specific generalizations about US and Flemish job application practices, both within and outside the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project simulation.

2. Levels of analysis: Correctness and clarity

As pointed out in section 1, written applications constitute a business genre in which communicative success (or lack of it) partially depends on observed writing skills; that is, there is a correlation between textualization and the prospective employer’s evaluation. Obviously, applicants’ writing skills (or writing performance) can be analyzed, and compared, for a fairly wide range of relevant levels and units of linguistic realization (e.g., Bhatia, 1993: 24–34). However, in this paper, we will be concerned only with the distinctive message properties of correctness and clarity (or their opposites of incorrectness and vagueness). The reason is that unlike

other formal or functional features of the cover letter, both stand out as particularly powerful determinants of communicative success, both in the US and Flanders.

2.1 *Correctness, clarity and shortlisting*

In spoken discourse, performance errors (incorrectness) and instances of referential and pragmatic vagueness (a lack of clarity) are frequent, but usually they are inconsequential and can be easily repaired in the same or a subsequent turn at talking (e.g., Crystal and Davy, 1969: 95; Levinson, 1983: 339–345). As far as application letters are concerned, however, a widespread feeling is that 'bad language' and/or a lack of explicitness at the level of meaning and content will rarely go unnoticed. Worse, they may even undermine an applicant's chances of being short-listed and later recruited.

Human resources managers and recruitment consultants constantly make this claim. Also, observations to this effect can be found in business communication textbooks, practical how-to-do-it books, brochures issued by private or public employment agencies as well as academic publications (e.g., Brusaw et al., 1987; Spinks and Wells, 1987; Murphy and Hildebrandt, 1991; Race, 1992; Verckens, 1994).

The following quotations, randomly selected from these sources, illustrate this claim:

A few glaring mistakes can easily mean no job or no promotion.

If your resume is misspelled and ungrammatical throughout, the applicant lacks verbal skills important on the job and shows poor judgement in failing to have another person proofread the resume.

A final check for grammatical errors may save you embarrassment.

Be concise, relevant and to the point.

What these and similar quotations have in common is that they all highlight the relationship between 'bad' written language use in the application materials, and a candidate's chances of getting on the short-list. Moreover, as the piece of advice given at the end illustrates, a lot of publications also emphasize the necessity to provide clear, unambiguous and well-structured information. Though resumés will generally provide this, Byars and Rue (1991: 161) correctly observe that

Cover letters should be strong enough to stand on their own and promote you even when separated from your other credentials. In other words, no 'Dear Mr. Gronk, I'm interested in working for your organization. Enclosed, please find my resume. Sincerely ...'

The cover letter should be used as an opportunity to add a personal touch to the resumé by elaborating on aspects of the applicant's education or work experience that may be a selling point. As for quantity (or length of the letter), most references which we consulted made statements similar to those in the following quotation from a booklet distributed by the New Hampshire College Career Development Center: 'The [cover] letter should not exceed one page and averages 3 to 5 paragraphs'. As the same booklet goes on to say,

The letter actually serves as a sample of your writing skills. Employers will read cover letters first and from that decide whether or not to read your resume.

It is, therefore, in an applicant's own interests to produce a letter of application that is free of errors, and that contains the essential genre-specific meaning components and functions, as an integral part of its overall clarity. Instances of bad language use or lack of clarity tend to reflect unfavorably on the applicant's suitability for the job.

These attitudes toward writing performance are not typical of the US alone. In Dutch-speaking Belgium the relevant literature advises job seekers to double-check their applications for typographical errors and mistakes in grammar, spelling, or punctuation, and to pay close attention to aspects of clarity and informativeness. For references, see, among others, Golzen et al. (1983), Korswagen (1985), Hosdey (1989) and Tixier (1992: 70). A recent survey of 22 Belgian businesses (Verckens, 1994: 12) found that all informants rated correctness, and especially syntax and spelling, as important to very important. The importance of providing clear information was reported by 45 to 86 percent of the informants.

If US and Flemish sources are compared, the only cultural difference in writing applications seems to be that the cover letters must be typed in the US (e.g., Brusaw et al., 1987: 55), whereas in Flanders and the rest of Belgium handwritten letters are more common (e.g., Tixier, 1992: 70). Only 17 percent of Verckens' Belgian business informants indicated a (mild to strong) preference for typed letters of application, compared with 58 percent in favor of handwritten letters (1994: 10).

2.2 *Definitions and methods of analysis*

2.2.1 *Correctness.* Correctness as a linguistic message property can, of course, be defined in many different ways. For present purposes, it will be regarded as consisting of the following four features: *mechanics* (absence of mistakes in punctuation and spelling); *words* (absence of mistakes at the lexical level like word choice); *sentences* (defined basically

as sentence-level syntax); and *paragraph structure*. These are among the features of the written product isolated by Davis and Lovejoy (1993) in their book on effective writing. To be successful, a piece of writing should be, among other things, without mistakes in spelling and punctuation, both lexically accurate and appropriate, grammatically correct at the level of individual sentences, and well-organized into paragraphs. In what follows, correctness is measured by carrying out an informal error analysis of the 74 cover letters, and by comparing the frequency distributions of errors in US and Flemish job applications.

2.2.2 Clarity. In this paper, clarity will be taken to refer to textual message properties which demonstrate the writer's overall sense of the writing *situation* (writer, reader, subject, and purpose), the *content* and the *organization* of his or her message (Davis and Lovejoy, 1993: 9–10). To accomplish the main communicative purpose of the application letter, writers need to pay close attention to, among other things, content, informativeness, functional transparency, and the like. In this study, however, the primary focus will be on what Bhatia (1993: 29–34) refers to as the analytical level of 'structural interpretation of the text-genre', that is, the rhetorical moves which give a textual genre its distinctive cognitive structure.

To describe the meaning components, a system of analysis was developed specific to the application letters in our cross-cultural corpus. We examined the meanings and functions of clauses and T-units (i.e., minimal terminable units of text) in the cover letters in terms of how they related to the specific objective of our application letters for a business student internship (see also section 3). Thus, we considered a cover letter as one long directive speech act, namely, a request for action, with sentence-level requests interspersed in the text (e.g., a request for interview). In the analysis we excluded structural and functional components that occur in all types of (business) letters and therefore do not add to an appreciation of the special nature of letters of application: the writer's address, the receiver's inside address, the dateline, the salutation (e.g., 'Dear Dr. Davis') and closings (e.g., 'Sincerely').

Note that the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project-specific meaning components in our system are similar in function to the 'moves' in Bhatia's (1993: 63–68) analysis of applications for academic jobs (see section 1). They describe the functions (or communicative intentions) which a particular portion of the text realizes in relationship to the overall task of applying for respectively an academic job or an overseas student internship. They have both been empirically derived on the basis of a fairly large data sample. In this way, they describe the generic profile of the

text, or its prototypical sequence of functional meanings, specific to the subgenre. Because of the nature of the task and the different vacancies applied for (academic lecturer versus temporary student internship), our own discourse categories and those of Bhatia's differ slightly.

Table 1 shows the final coding scheme of six moves or categories. Though the majority of the cover letters in our US and Flemish corpus contained the meaning components in the sequence presented in the coding scheme, they did not have to appear in this order to be coded. In other words, we were more interested in the presence of the meaning components than their sequential order.

The first component deals with the identification of the source of information about the business student internship including statements such as 'I received your letter from Prof. De Rycker of the Handelshogeschool Antwerpen' or 'After reading your position sent to Ken Davis for a student internship, ...'. Supplying details about the source of information, or giving a proper context for the writing, distinguishes native speakers of English from non-native ones. Connor and McCagg (1983), for example, discovered that non-native speakers from a variety of backgrounds tend to provide a far less explicit context than native speakers of English do in summaries. Scarcella (1984), also found the same difference in expository essay writing.

'Application for the position' is the next meaning component category. The data allow us to distinguish two subcategories: (1) using a direct strategy of unalloyed clarity, which groups together statements such as 'I apply for this position', and (2) indirect strategies, which include statements such as 'I would be a good candidate ...' or 'I have included my resumé for your consideration'.

Table 1. *Meaning components of a letter of application: a coding scheme*

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- | | |
|------|---|
| I. | Identify the source of information.
(Explain how and where you learned of the position.) |
| II. | Apply for the position.
(State desire for consideration.) |
| | a. direct strategy: 'I apply for this position ...' |
| | b. indirect strategy: 'I would be a good candidate ...' |
| III. | Provide supporting arguments for the job application.
(Describe your qualifications, personal and professional. Describe reasons for application. Describe benefits to you and/or prospective employer.) |
| IV. | Indicate desire for interview. |
| V. | Specify means of further communication.
(Indicate how you can be contacted or when you will contact the prospective employer.) |
| VI. | Express politeness (pleasantries) or appreciation. |
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Category III coincides with the traditional 'body' of a job application letter. This category is called 'providing supporting arguments for the application'. It includes descriptions of qualifications, both personal and professional. It also typically gives reasons for why the writer applies for the job, and in many cases, lists benefits to be gained by the applicant and/or the prospective employer.

The next two categories in the coding scheme invite action from the reader by either suggesting an employment interview, describing how the applicant can be reached, or both. Finally, meaning component VI includes pleasantries such as 'Thank you for your time', 'Thank you for your time and consideration', 'I look forward to talking with you soon' and 'I look forward to speaking with you'.

The six-part coding structure was used to classify the utterances in the letters of application. After dividing each corpus letter into its constitutive T-units, these T-units were coded, using the generic profile discussed above, and for each category of meaning component, length was quantified in terms of the number of words written. Occasionally, clauses had to be classified because a T-unit included two different meaning elements. To illustrate this, consider the following utterance: 'I am applying for the student internship/that was presented by Dr. Davis in my business writing class'. The first part of this sentence is an explicit statement of application (category IIa), whereas the second part, the relative clause, identifies the source of information (category I). Note that this example also shows that cover letters do not necessarily display the structural sequencing of the meaning components as given in the coding scheme of Table 1.

3. The Antwerp-Indianapolis Project corpus

The 74 application letters analyzed in this study were randomly selected from a large database of about 200 resumés and cover letters written in English. This corpus has been collected over the past four years in the context of the Antwerp-Indianapolis writing project.

3.1 *Activities and design features*

The Antwerp-Indianapolis writing project begins with two simulated, but tailor-made and roughly identical, job advertisements, describing a summer internship in an international business seminar to be held at our respective institutions. Originally, the Flemish vacancy was for a tourist information management trainee with the Antwerp visitors' bureau, the

data from which have been included in our present corpus of cover letters. Both job advertisements were written by the project instructors.

Both groups of students then wrote cover letters and resumés for the foreign internship, and these letters and resumés were exchanged across the Atlantic Ocean. Students at both institutions then went through the documents from their counterparts, and acting as simulated shortlisting committees decided which candidates would get an invitation for a telephone interview. The US students then wrote simulated rejections or requests for interviews as well as personal, student-to-student critiques of the Flemish job applications. The Flemish students, on the other hand, wrote shortlisting reports and discussed their main findings in a videotaped presentation.

During all stages of the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project, participants in both countries discussed what they were learning about the foreign students' textualizations, and after shortlisting, also about their own major ideational and interpersonal decisions in the light of the foreign students' evaluations.

The main design features of the project, as described above, are that it is cross-cultural, cross-linguistic (the non-native speakers communicate in English), and student-centered (formal instruction and guidance are kept to a minimum and instructors take a back seat during the exchanges). Most importantly of all, the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project strikes a balance between pedagogical demands and the justified call for authenticity in language learning. Except for the initial job advertisements, the requirement that students should apply (the practical need for a job), and the shortlisting and final evaluation steps, all critical aspects of the simulation, closely resemble the two-way job application process in real life.

3.2 *Participants and sample letters*

The students whose letters will be analyzed here participated in the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project in 1991–1992 and 1992–1993. To ensure quantitative comparability and reliability of sampling, we randomly selected two equal sets of 37 students each, one of US applicants, the other of Flemish.

In the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project, the cultural contrast coincides with the contrast between native and non-native speakers of English. It should be emphasized, however, that all Flemish writers have had at least six years of formal instruction in spoken and written English in both secondary school and college, and for a good many, often more than that.

Unlike their US counterparts, the Flemish applicants are much younger (average of 19 years old) and few have, or have had, any part-time or full-time work experience beyond the occasional vacation job. In addition, whereas the Flemish participants are all full-time students of business, the IUPUI participants are often only part-time students, and show a wider range of university subjects (telecommunications, arts and humanities, architecture, economics, medical record administration, etc.).

The following two randomly chosen letters demonstrate the differences between US and Flemish applicants.

(1) *Flemish applicant*

Dear Dr. Davis

In reply to your advertisement in wich [sic] you offer a business education Internship at your Indiana University, I would like to apply for the job. [I/II]

I am doing my second year at the Antwerp University of Economics and you will find a full account of my qualifications on the attached personal record sheet. [III]

If you feel that my qualifications meet with your requirements, I shall be pleased to be called for an interview. [IV]

Sincerely yours

(2) *US applicant*

Dear Sirs:

Dr. Ken Davis, Professor of English W-331 at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, has provided me with your job description for the position of Assistant to the Tourist Information Manager for the City of Antwerp, Belgium. This position greatly interests me because in [sic] encompasses both my work experience and my interest in international culture, as indicated on the attached resume. [I/II]

I have had over twelve years of experience in the public relations/marketing field. During that time, I have served as the Marketing Director for a major Indianapolis chiropractic clinic with responsibilities for developing marketing plans and public relations venues for four clinics. I also assisted with, produced and directed a local radio talk show for the clinic. My employment duties have included a variety of coordination duties for clients and dignitaries, including travel and hotel accommodations.

As an assistant to the Practice Development Director at a major Indianapolis law firm, my duties included organization of client receptions, travel arrangements for attorneys and clients, and intercommunication with attorneys and clients, some of whom have been in foreign countries. [III]

I have a special personal interest in European culture, based upon my experience as a host parent for the Youth for Understanding international youth exchange program. During my involvement with this group, I have hosted children from Denmark, Finland and Germany, as well as Chile and Japan. [III]

I will be available for interview at any time. I may be reached at my place of business at (XXX) XXX-XXXX from 8:00 a.m. (USA time) until 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, or at home at (XXX) XXX-XXXX at any time. [IV/V]

Thank you for your review of this application. [VI]

Sincerely

The roman numerals given in square brackets at the end of each paragraph refer to the coding scheme and analytical framework discussed in section 2.2.2 (see Table 1).

4. Cross-cultural and other findings

4.1 Average letter length and presentation

Our quantitative corpus analysis reveals that the length of the cover letters (expressed in words) was apparently culture-specific. Whereas the average length for the entire group of 74 candidates was 150.8 words, the Flemish applicants produced shorter letters (averaging 104.9 words), compared with the letters written by their US counterparts (196.6 words on average).

A second introductory observation is that despite the pronounced Belgian preference for handwritten cover letters (see section 2.1), only two US applicants out of 37 adopted the Belgian standard and sent handwritten applications. The Flemish participants, on the other hand, accommodated much more strongly to their US readers. Only six out of 37 did not type their applications.

4.2 Correctness

None of the applications analyzed here were error-free. A total of 414 writing errors occurred, yielding an average of 5.6 per applicant.

Mechanics constituted approximately half of all observed errors. Mistakes in spelling, whether due to ignorance or to careless proofreading, accounted for 28.5 percent of all erroneous forms. Syntax, punctuation, and word accuracy were second, each representing about 20 percent of all mistakes. The frequencies show that paragraph structure presented much less of a problem, with only 35 identified errors (or 8.4 percent of the total). See also Table 2. Given an average letter length of 150.8 words per student, the average number of errors per 100 words is 3.7. As Table 2 shows, Flemish and US applicants did not depart radically from the general tendencies observed in the preceding paragraphs.

As non-native speakers of English, the Flemish job applicants yielded a higher absolute number of mistakes than the US applicants. Despite their high level of formal training in English, the Flemish job applicants made approximately twice as many writing performance errors as their US counterparts. Curiously, for both sets of applicants, natives and non-natives alike, punctuation and/or spelling errors and typos were the most frequent, making up 48.8 and 48.9 percent of the subtotals respectively. Comparable scores were also obtained for the least frequent error class of paragraph structure.

The native versus non-native contrast seems to have played a bigger part at word and sentence level. The US applicants were considerably better at word choice and word accuracy, whereas the Flemish participants made a lower percentage of syntactic errors. The different error frequencies and their distributions should not only be attributed to differences in English language proficiency, but also to variations in the overall length of the application letter and variables like lexical scope and density, structural complexity, and the extent to which certain problematic constructions are avoided, especially by the non-native candidates (see, for example, Abbott and Wingard, 1981: 229–234, 246).

Table 2. *Error frequencies and classification by error type and the Flemish versus US contrast*

Error type/Applicants	Flemish n = 37	US n = 37	total n = 74
mechanics punctuation	62 22.4%	22 16.2%	84 20.3%
spelling	73 26.4%	45 32.8%	118 28.5%
words	68 24.5%	16 11.7%	84 20.3%
sentences	52 18.8%	41 29.9%	93 22.5%
paragraphs	22 7.9%	13 9.5%	35 8.4%
Total	277 100.0%	137 100.0%	414 100.0%

As observed above, US candidates submitted much longer letters than their Flemish counterparts. The averages given in section 4.1 allowed us to compute the following two error ratios: on average, the Flemish applicants make 7.1 errors in every 100 words of written discourse, compared with only 1.9 for the US group.

4.3 *Clarity*

We compared the length in words of the six meaning component categories of the generic profile (see Table 1) for both Flemish and US applications. The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 3.

The cultural difference in average length of the letter, is evident in most of the meaning component categories. As Table 3 shows, the Flemish applicants write shorter meaning component sections than the US applicants in all but two categories, namely categories I and IV. In the first category the Flemish Antwerp-Indianapolis Project participants use more words to indicate the source of information about the position than their US counterparts. The same holds for category IV: more of the letter is used by the Flemish applicants than by US applicants to request a job interview.

Table 3 indicates, however, that the difference in length was not statistically significant in either of these two components. There is a difference in pragmatic clarity, i.e., in the degree of directness of expression, between the Flemish and US applicants. While all Flemings who asked the reader for a job interview did so by using the actual word, several of the US

Table 3. *Mean number of words and standard deviations (s.d) of the meaning components for the Flemish and US applicants*

Component/Applicants	Flemish n=37		US n=37		calculated <i>t</i> value
	mean	s.d	mean	s.d	
I. Identify source of information	18.02	6.6	14.33	11.81	1.63
II. Apply for the position	9.15	7.04	18.67	8.44	-5.18*
III. Provide supporting arguments	58.82	34.30	130.77	83.11	-7.80*
IV. Indicate desire for interview	12.99	10.45	12.15	9.65	.35
V. Specify means of further communication	4.82	8.77	12.72	12.09	-3.17
VI. Express politeness and appreciation	1.28	3.06	9.04	13.70	-3.32*

* $p < .05$

applicants avoided the word *interview*, and instead, used expressions such as 'an opportunity to discuss' or 'meet at your convenience'.

In the four other categories (i.e., II, III, V, and VI) the US students used a significantly larger number of words to express the respective meaning components. As shown in Table 3, the results of the *t* tests were calculated at the $p < .05$ level using a two-tail test.

The largest difference in the mean lengths of meaning between the two groups of applicants was in category III, i.e., that part of the cover letter which functions to provide supporting arguments for the application. The average number of words used by the US applicants was 130.8, as compared to only 58.8 words by their Flemish counterparts. The sample cover letters shown as examples (1) and (2) in section 3.2 neatly illustrate this difference in approach. The US letter included a lengthy discussion of the writer's qualifications, both personal and professional. In addition, it mentioned the benefit for the prospective employer as well as for the candidate. The Flemish letter, on the other hand, included a short and rather general statement of qualifications and relied more heavily on this to convey information.

4.4 Discussion

This corpus shows that a typical US applicant writes more, but also that he or she produces fewer mistakes, predominantly at the levels of spelling and sentence grammar. By contrast, the Flemish job seeker tends to write a much shorter cover letter and is more likely to make a larger number of mistakes, especially in the areas of spelling and semantics.

These differences in error frequencies and error types do not point, however, in the direction of cultural differences between the US and Flemish applicants, but rather to native/non-native speaker contrast. Still, the fact that the typical US error is syntactic rather than semantic, ties in with our clarity findings: the US letters exhibit a larger degree of informativeness and functional transparency than the Flemish ones. Though further research is obviously required, our quantitative analyses suggest that clarity correlates much more strongly with word accuracy and lexical precision than with the other aspects of linguistic correctness examined above.

Interestingly, differences found in the degree of clarity, i.e., content and length of information, that characterize both groups in this study correspond with findings from previous cross-cultural research on business letters (Jenkins and Hinds, 1987). As in Jenkins and Hinds's study, the US letters are longer, are more individual in content, and pay attention to the welfare of the reader, i.e., the average US applicant directs

his or her writing efforts towards the reader(s). For example, the US cover letters do not explicitly request an interview, but give information about how to get in touch. The Flemish cover letters, like the French business letters in Jenkins and Hinds's study, are rather brief and usually do not attempt to personalize. For example, they only rarely elaborate on the objective information contained in the resumé and they tend not to include closing expressions of pleasantries and/or appreciation.

Our findings also lend additional support to Maier's (1992) study of politeness strategies in letters written by native and non-native speakers of English. The US (native) speakers in our analysis use more negative politeness strategies such as being conventionally indirect (Blum-Kulka, 1987) and deferring to the reader. Also, US applicants do not ask the reader for a job interview (i.e., do not perform the potentially face-threatening act of requesting) in as many cases as the Flemish applicants. Instead, they seek to prompt the desired action by giving the reader information about how they can be contacted for the next exchange. In addition, the US applicants express their appreciation far more frequently than the Flemish applicants. As a final note, the US Antwerp-Indianapolis Project participants in our simulation do not exhibit negative politeness in all of the six functional categories. For example, they do not generally apply as often for the vacant position as do the Flemish candidates.

5. Conclusions

From a pragmatic perspective, the genre of written job applications, viewed as promotional discourse, is not different from other forms of professional or commercial discourse. In fact, there is widespread acceptance, in the relevant literature, of business writing as persuasion, where writers of letters 'create sympathy for their need in their readers, develop a theme of mutual benefit, and build the reader's ego by gentle and sophisticated stroking before they ask for a favor' (Limaye, 1983: 17).

For this reason Shelby (1986: 7), among other communication experts, advises business writers to apply the AIDA hierarchy-of-effects model (e.g., Baker, 1984: 17-18; Cameron et al., 1988: 202) as a general persuasive strategy. In this view, the AIDA approach of having the reader go from *attention* to *interest*, and to *desire*, and finally, to *action* should not only work well for promotional documents, sales letters, fund-raising letters, but also for written job applications.

The four steps in the AIDA model are almost exclusively a function of the applicant's cover letter. At the most general level, our cross-cultural analysis shows that the US participants in the Antwerp-Indianapolis

Project simulation are much more skilled in this respect than their Flemish counterparts. As Metzger (1993: 31) puts it,

Promoting yourself is a dirty job, but someone has to do it. If you don't, who will?

Our data reveal that the US job applicants are much better at promoting themselves, or to quote Bhatia (1993), 'providing self-appraisal', than the Flemish students. The US cover letters not only provide more information, but also show a greater concern for semantic precision. Our Flemish applicants, on the other hand, tend to use their much shorter 'Dear Mr. Gronk' letters merely to enclose the resumé, and whatever information is given remains rather impersonal and frequently vague. In this respect, they actually resemble Bhatia's (1993) South Asian students as well as the French letter-writers of Jenkins and Hinds's (1987) study.

In category III our US and Flemish applicants differ markedly from one another. The US Antwerp-Indianapolis Project participants promote themselves by giving relevant information about themselves and by using the letter as a sales instrument. By contrast, the Flemish group seem to content themselves with referring the prospective employer to the enclosed resumé and do not generally provide supporting arguments.

Belgians' typical reliance on others also entails a heavier reliance on past achievements (including university degrees, qualifications, and the like) rather than on current accomplishments. This preference may also explain why our Antwerp students put more emphasis on the resumé (i.e., on the objective facts, educational background, etc.) than on the letter.

Despite its high levels of product and process authenticity, the Antwerp-Indianapolis Project remains a simulation. No claims will be made, therefore, about the job application process in real life. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that our subjects, and especially the more experienced US students, behaved differently from what they would have done if they had had to apply for a real job. Just as in real life, they were very much left to their own devices. It is this fact which allows us to make reliable generalizations about cross-cultural variation in the present study.

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