

An Empirical Study of Indirect Speech Acts in Resumes

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Abstract — This paper reports on a study that investigated ways that personnel professionals read the contents of resumes. It explored two central questions: (a) Do professionals rely upon inference and indirect speech acts when they read resumes? (b) If they do share a predisposition toward inferential reading, how similar are the inferences that a group of such readers would make? Using a discourse interview method of inquiry, the study investigated responses by thirty personnel officers to six resume content areas that might elicit inferential readings: *marital and parenthood status; hobbies; extracurricular activities; college grades; lists of known reference writers' names; and professionally-printed format*. The results suggest that professional readers do share a special inferential reading of resumes and that there may even be some similarities in their specific inferences. On the whole, however, the thirty readers did not share the kind of consistent reading that might result in a formula for how to write a resume. On the other hand, the results of the study can be beneficial to teachers of resumes to both native and non-native speakers. They can reveal biases, show shortcomings of popular prescriptions of resumes, and, more generally, help students recognize the indeterminacy of interpretation in certain genres.

The writer is a person who knows how to work language while remaining outside of it . . . [and] has the gift of indirect speech.

M. M. Bakhtin

Introduction

In my experiences teaching technical writing to native and non-native speakers, I have found the resume to be a valuable genre for my students to acquire. In the U.S. at least, the resume is tantamount to a professional calling card, which most students can use almost at once in their own job and scholarship searches. For this reason alone, it appeals to many of them. Furthermore, the resume is also a valuable way to teach them several rhetorical principles. For one, it is syntactically simple and superstructurally linear, making it easy to imitate. Also, because of its immediacy for students, the resume also can help them understand the notion of discourse community in a way that few other genres can.

Unfortunately, actually teaching students how to write resumes can be quite a difficult matter. After all, some of them believe they will never have to produce their own but can instead rely on resume-writing services, which exist

in most major cities. A more serious problem with teaching the resume involves our understanding of the genre itself. Since actual examples of the genre are largely invisible to anyone but professional readers, most samples we have access to are in textbooks, which present idealized versions of the resume for pedagogical purposes. Little empirical evidence (except for Holley, Higgins, & Speights 1988) is available about the textual characteristics of actual resumes used for real discourse situations. Moreover, we also know virtually nothing about what the resume is like (and how it functions) cross-culturally, or whether it differs from one discourse community to another. Some of my own recent work (Popken 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1993; Popken & Conklin 1993) attempts to address a few of these research gaps.

Much of the scholarship about resumes that does exist involves the reading preferences of professional resume screeners (e.g., see Feild & Holley 1976; Holley, Higgins, & Speights 1988; Hutchinson 1984; LaFitte & Tucker 1979; McDowell 1987; for a complete literature review, see Popken and Conklin, 1993). Most of this work follows a formula: the researcher surveys a group of personnel directors in industry and business, finds out what components of resumes they prefer, and then prescribes what contents a resume should have. However, despite the abundance of such survey research, none of it tells us much about how professional resume readers construct meaning through their reading.

As I have speculated elsewhere (Popken 1992c), when personnel professionals read resumes, they draw upon the contents of resumes to construct a persona for each candidate. After constructing personae for all candidates for a position, these readers then "screen" them, finding them acceptable or unacceptable to fill the position. Some of this construction of candidates comes from facts about work background and education appearing on a candidate's resume. However, a major part of this construction involves inferences which professional readers draw from "indirect speech acts" (Morgan 1978: 261). These readers use what is often minimal surface information to infer characteristics about candidates and how those candidates will succeed in the work world. Some of these surface cues are "implicatures" (Grice 1975), planted there by the writers, but other cues are accidental, unintended for inference by the resume writers (Popken 1992c). Because most people probably do not read resumes as inferentially as professionals do, part of learning how to be a professional screener is to learn how to read.

Two recent articles illustrate this process of learning how to read in the manner of a professional screener; in both cases personnel professionals teach other personnel professionals how to infer candidate characteristics from resume contents. In "How to Evaluate a Resume," Robert Half (1987: 25) says "it isn't enough simply to *read* a resume. You have to read between the lines." He goes on to show "signals" in resumes which are "often hidden" (p. 24). For instance, he says that resumes containing long lists of "interests and hobbies" should be read to mean that the candidates "are weak in experiences and skills or . . . have a busy leisure life and may not have enough time for the job" (p. 25). In "Watchwords for Interpreting Resumes," Sharon Herlihy

(1991) teaches other professional resume readers that words such as “supported,” “involved in,” or “helped” really mean that the candidates are “suggest[ing] more experience than they’ve had” (p. 5). Herlihy further teaches her readers to infer from a “sloppily prepared” resume that the candidate “will approach his [sic] job rather carelessly” (p. 36). In what Half and Herlihy show (and in any such inferential reading), a series of inferences lead the reader from surface cues to interpreted propositions. These inferences are not always entirely logical, as is fairly clear in this last one of Herlihy’s reading guidelines; it contains a chain of inferences something on the order of the following:

1. A resume is a good indication of how a job candidate will do on the job.
2. A sloppy resume means a candidate would do careless work on the job.
3. Thus, candidates who submit sloppy resumes are undesirable job candidates.

Two questions come to mind about what I have been saying about professional resume readers relying heavily upon inference and indirect speech acts. First, how accurately would the theory describe the reading activity of an actual group of professional readers? Do professional readers really look at resumes this way? If a reader’s orientation toward inference is based to some degree on genre (Walzer 1989), it is reasonable to assume that when professionals pick up a resume to read, they are already disposed to read it for inference. A second question about my resume reading theory is this: if professional readers do share a predisposition towards inferential reading of resumes, how similar are the inferences that they make? It seems reasonable that members of a discourse community (in this case the discourse community of personnel professionals), who read articles such as Half and Herlihy’s, who attend professional meetings, and who discuss resume reading among themselves, might share a kind of *Inferenzgeful* (Enkvist 1990: 18), a contextual gestalt that tells them what inferences to make.

The present paper explores these two questions about inferences in resumes by reporting on an empirical study of a group of professional resume readers. The paper concludes by suggesting pedagogical applications of the results of this study.

Methodology

The present study is limited in scope to a community of professional resume readers in the U.S. Specifically, I conducted interviews with thirty professional resume readers in North Central Texas. All these consultants were personnel directors in businesses, corporations, and institutions in seven major professional fields: agricultural research (in a state university research farm); banking (in four savings and loans and three banks); health care (in five hospitals and one mental health agency); government (in three city government offices, one county government office, and one state government office); manufacturing (in four engineering firms); mass media (in two newspapers and two advertising

agencies); and public education (in two public school systems and one state university).

The research technique was the discourse interview, adapted to the particular rhetorical circumstances of indirect speech acts. Similar to research by Odell, Goswami, and Herrington (1983), the present study looked for signs of "tacit knowledge" shared by members of a discourse community. But, whereas Odell et al. were concerned with such knowledge on the part of *writers*, my interest was the *readers*. That is, I was looking for some consistency in "classes of information that individuals trained in a technical discipline bring to a text . . . in their attempt to read any piece of written discourse in the chosen EST discipline" (Selinker 1979: 192). In this case, the "classes of information" were interpretations of indirect speech acts.

To address the first question (i.e., whether or not the readers used inferential reading), I began each interview with a brief discussion of an article about how personnel readers need to "read between the lines" on resumes (Meyer 1970: 49). To address the second question (about similarities of inferences), a set of open-ended prompts was used. Specifically, I provided consultants with a set of typical resume entries or characteristics and then asked them to indicate what they felt the entry implied to them about the candidate. These entries and characteristics are not the only ones that could lend themselves to inference, of course. However, since I was concerned with the *process* of inference rather than with exact inferences, I limited the study to some very common resume entries and characteristics that are discussed in previous empirical studies of resume readers. These entries and characteristics included *marital and parenthood status*; *hobbies*; *extracurricular activities*; *college grades*; *lists of known reference writers' names*; and *professionally-printed format*. Consultants were then asked about inferences they might draw from these resume entries and characteristics about candidates and their likely job success. All responses were recorded and categorized either as *positive inferences*; *negative inferences*; or *no inferences*.

Results/Discussion

As for the first question, all but one of the thirty consultants said that they were quite familiar with the idea of reading between the lines and that they themselves read resumes this way. One rather crusty old personnel director said, "Hell yes, I read between the lines all the time when I read resumes. And anyone who says he doesn't is a liar!" Although they acknowledged this sort of reading, three of the government personnel directors were apologetic about doing so. One said that it interfered with his "objectivity," which he wanted to maintain in retaining his function as a "resume reading machine" who only "looked at facts."

Table 1 summarizes the overall results of consultants' responses to question two: how similar were inferences the consultants made about specific resumes entries.

TABLE 1
Summary of Consultants' Inferences from Resume Entries

	Positive inference	Negative inference	No inference
Married, three children (female)	13.3%	40.0%	46.7%
Married, three children (male)	30.0%	16.6%	53.5%
Hobbies	94.0%	3.0%	3.0%
Extracurricular activities	76.6%	16.6%	6.6%
GPA, above 3.50	66.6%	3.0%	30.3%
GPA, below 2.50	3.0%	51.5%	36.4%
Known-reference writers' names	26.7%	10.0%	63.3%
Professional-looking format	33.3%	23.3%	43.3%

Marital/Parenthood Status

Consultants were asked to assume that they were reading resumes written by two candidates for one of their job openings. Furthermore, they were told that both resumes contained the following entry: "Married, Three Children." The first resume, they were told, was from a female job candidate. Only four consultants (13.3%) indicated that they drew any positive inferences about this female candidate from the entry. One applauded her honesty for volunteering truthful yet probably ill-advised information, while two others said that to them the entry signified the candidate's stability. Here, they said, is a woman who is rooted and will not soon be looking to get married or to leave the community. The fourth positive response was by a consultant who said that the entry implied a candidate who "has had all the kids she's going to have, so we won't have to worry about her asking for any maternity leave time."

However, a larger number of responses (40%) to this entry by the female candidate were negative. These clustered around stereotypic concerns about the relationship of the candidate to her children in the cases of illness or daily care. A personnel director for a large manufacturing company labeled this hypothetical candidate "unstable" and said that he doubted her ability to "deliver" in the manner that his firm's customers expect. Similarly, a hiring officer for a small advertising agency said that he expected this candidate to have "interference because of her children" and that "someone will always have to cover for her" because of those children.

For the second part of this prompt, consultants were told that the other resume with the "Married, Three Children" entry on it was written by a male. As might have been expected, more of them (30%) saw the entry as positive than they did on the female's resume. The consultants used the terms "stability," "responsibility," and "maturity" to indicate what it was that they inferred about the candidate from the *marital/parenthood* entry. A personnel director from a small urban bank inferred that such a man would probably be "a serious employee because he is the family's breadwinner." (This consultant further inferred that the candidate's wife does not work, which was not even a part of the prompt he was given.) A personnel director at a savings and loan

remarked, "This is an all-American type husband and family man. That's exactly what we're looking for. They make the best employees."

However, even for this hypothetical male candidate there were some negative inferences drawn from the *marital/parenthood* entry. Three consultants said that in the 1990s, anyone (male or female) with three children will not be as committed as s/he might otherwise be to the company. The personnel director at the small advertising agency mentioned earlier inferred that a man with three children would not be satisfied with the salary he would be paid in his firm.

Hobbies

For this section of the interviews, consultants were to assume that they were reading a resume that included a list of a job candidate's hobbies. With the exception of two consultants (one of whom said, "Anyone who is stupid enough to put hobbies on a resume is too stupid to work for me"), everyone (94%) drew positive inferences. However, aside from their agreement about this entry being positive, they were rather idiosyncratic in what specific candidate qualities they inferred from the entry. They used the following terms in those inferences: the candidate is "well-rounded," "involved," "relaxed," "mentally healthy," "creative," "self-motivated," "energetic," and "positive thinking." A few consultants also mentioned that they frequently analyze hobbies listed on resumes to draw more specific inferences. For instance, two personnel directors from banks told us that they are repulsed at any hobbies involving guns, even if the candidate refers to skeet shooting or gun collecting. One of them said that gun-related references caused her to infer "a redneck mentality, which is a turn-off for me. I just don't want to work with this kind of person."

Extracurricular Activities

For this prompt, consultants were asked for inferences they would make about a recent college graduate whose resume includes a list of college extracurricular activities. Most consultants (76.6%) said they would draw positive inferences from this list. Major terms they used to represent these inferences were that such a candidate would be a "leader," "group-oriented," "well-rounded," and "able to handle stress." There were only two negative inferences: one consultant felt that a list of extracurricular activities "indicates a boring person," and another regarded it as showing "a self-indulgent little brat who doesn't know what it's like to be in the real world."

Grade Point Average

As is the case in the first question, this one contained two prompts for which consultants assumed two different resumes: one showing a grade point average of "3.50 or above" and a second with a GPA of "2.50 or below." In the case of the former, well over half (66.6%) of the consultants said that they made

positive inferences about the candidate and his/her work potential. Common inferences were that a candidate with such a GPA is "intelligent," "hard-working," "self-motivated," "conscientious," and "persevering." On the other hand, as might be expected, several consultants (51.6%) had doubts about the candidate with the lower grades. Typical inferences about this candidate were that s/he was "lazy," "unfocused," and even "stupid." However, several of the consultants were also surprisingly benevolent toward this candidate, pointing out that their doubts would not necessarily eliminate the candidate from the job search altogether. Rather, they said that they would want to look further at the candidate's resume to see if they could infer any reasons for the poor academic performance. Indeed, three consultants said they would be benevolent because they could identify with students with lower grades: when they were students themselves, these three consultants said, their other responsibilities (such as work) prevented them from getting high grades. A personnel director at an urban savings and loan office said, "I think that if this candidate has most of the other qualities we are looking for, I would at least grant an interview just to hear explanations about the low grades."

Known Reference-Writers' Names

For this part of the study, consultants were to assume that they were reading a resume that included a list of references whose names they knew and respected. Most of the consultants (63.3%) said they drew no inferences from such an entry—that it was "just information." Those who did draw a positive inference (26.7%) inferred from the entry that the candidate had a high level of credibility; that is, that there must surely be some philosophical or ideological kinship between the resume writer and the reference writers.

However, the other consultants (10.0%), all of whom were personnel directors in government offices, said that they could only read negative inferences into the known reference writers entry. In general, these readers inferred that the candidate probably regards government positions as the result of political favoritism. The personnel director at a county government office summarized this position: "This tells me that the candidate is a politico. And, we already have all of *them* we can use."

Professional-Looking Format

This final section of the study explored inferences that consultants might make about candidates based on resume format. Specifically, it involves the inferences these readers would make from professionally-designed or professionally-printed resumes such as are often produced by resume-writing services. Although (in light of laser printing and computer software) it is much harder than it used to be to identify what is "professionally-printed"; the consultants all said that they receive such resumes regularly. One consultant said that he could spot them not only by their "slick appearance," but also by their "cookie-cutter contents."

Consultants were asked to assume they had just received a resume that had clearly been produced by a resume writing service. Of all areas of potential inference in the study, this one resulted in the greatest number of disagreements among the readers. Though nearly half (43.3%) said they made no inference at all from such a resume, 33.3% drew positive and 23.3% negative inferences. Those who made positive inferences said, for instance, that "[the candidate] is a very professional person;" that "by going to the expense and bother of having it done professionally, this candidate is taking the application very seriously;" that the candidate "knows the importance of making a good appearance in the business world;" and that the candidate "has a great deal of pride." However, those who drew negative inferences were quite deprecatory in what they inferred: the candidate is "too lazy to write a resume and has to have someone else do it;" the candidate is trying too hard to impress me and therefore must have something to hide;" and the candidate "is probably not being represented fully in the resume. It has probably been embellished somehow by the resume writing service."

Conclusions

Let us return to the two questions raised at the outset of this paper. First, though obviously the exact data of this study would change in different cultural settings or different discourse communities, the findings suggest something about professional readers in general: they do read between the lines. Answering the second question (whether or not a group of professional readers would have similar inferences) is much more complicated. In one sense, there was some consistency of inference among many of these thirty readers. At the general level of positive and negative inferences, for instance, two resume entries (*hobbies* and *extracurricular activities*) had a fairly high degree of agreement by the readers. And, in the cases of specific inferences of *GPA*, *hobbies*, and *extracurricular activities*, several consultants used similar terms to explain their inferences. However, from another perspective, there was also an immense inconsistency in their inferences. In short, none of the evidence suggests that professionals would interpret resume entries in a highly predictable way, certainly not lending itself to any kind of quantifiable formula.

This disparity of interpretive consistency is important for students to know about. In fact, the range of inferences by the readers who might read resumes in actual job situations is probably even greater than that which the present study revealed. After all, even though many professional readers (such as our consultants) screen resumes for basic qualifications, they then often turn them over to the real decision makers (department heads, supervisors, peer workers), who are often not part of the professional personnel community. A number of the consultants admitted (apologetically) that such readers in their organizations hadn't really been "trained" to read and thus often made "mistakes" in inferences.

From the range of inferences seen in this study, students can learn that how they *want* their resumes to be interpreted may not necessarily be how they

will be interpreted. More specifically, they need to be aware that virtually anything they place in a resume has the potential to trigger inference. But will those inferences be positive or negative? For example, what kinds of inferences will be drawn from resume entries about women who have been removed from the work force by child rearing? Or, what kinds of inferences will be drawn from a resume that is an alternative color or print style, or from one that is longer than a single page, or from one that shows a candidate who took 7 years to finish a master's thesis?

Certainly, students can learn some rather harsh lessons about the nature of inference from the results of this study. For one thing, they might see that, despite being "professionals," resume readers still have preferences (and even prejudices) that show up in how they interpret indirect speech acts. Sometimes, in fact, such readings are so idiosyncratic and personal that they are frightening. For example, the personnel director who said that a list of extra-curricular activities indicated a "boring person" went on to say that he knew "people like this" in college who were always "wasting their time." He had never been in such activities himself. *Real* business was about working, not playing around like these "spoiled rich kids" usually did. It hardly takes a psychoanalyst to see from this chain of inferences that this man was probably working out some old frustrations, perhaps even some old grudges. An equally harsh lesson that students might learn from this study involves the possible discriminatory inferences that can be made from their resume entries. The most obvious example from these findings involves inferences made about a female candidate's capabilities based on her *marital/parenthood* status entry. Surely there are also professional readers who would make discriminatory inferences about students who may have graduated from a university overseas, or whose name just "sounds foreign."

Students can learn, too, not to trust much of what they read about resumes. When they are desperate to put together a resume, job seekers often consult popular sources: magazine and newspaper articles, self-help manuals and other instructional books. These sources abound (see Moran & Moran 1989) but unfortunately are largely prescriptions based only on the experiences of the writer of the source (Stephens, Watt, & Hobbs 1979; Popken & Conklin 1993). What these popular accounts usually do is to treat the resume as formula, which normally also means that they overlook subtleties such as indirect speech acts. Typical of such articles is one that begins by telling resume writers that the "first rule" of resume writing is that writers should "only state facts, and back up those facts with specific accomplishments" (Rivers 1981: 31). Unfortunately, this article fails to go on to say that the real concern for the writer should be *what facts?* and *what will readers infer from those facts?*

Although it is a difficult task, instructors who teach resumes should prepare their students for the indeterminacy of interpretations in resumes. This has never been an easy task for me since most of my students believe language to be a "conduit" for facts placed in it by users (Reddy 1979). So, I often begin my discussion of resumes by making an analogy between the resume and poetry (Girrell 1979), often juxtaposing transparencies of verse and resumes to show

how both are highly interpretive genres. Ultimately, the class does as much peer resume reading as it can tolerate so the students can see the interpretive process at work. In short, the focal point of my work with my students on resumes is to get them used to this special genre feature of indirect speech acts and the endless struggle to control them.

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