

British Social Departments and Their Lively Language

Anna Kostina

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russian Federation

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Abstract

The paper looks at the stylistic peculiarities of the texts published on three official British social departments' websites: Government Equalities Office, Department of Health, Department for Children, Schools and Families (now, the Department for Education). The author studies the interaction of official and informational functional styles in the departmental publications and comes to conclusion that such texts contain phraseological, idiomatic and euphemistic units typical of a more informal style. Key lexical units for each ministry combined by general componential meaning, depending on the respective sphere of business, are also envisaged in the paper.

The research focuses on the analysis of the official and informational functional styles studying the peculiarities of various publications on the official web sites of three British social departments:

- 1) *Government Equalities Office*
- 2) *Department of Health,*
- 3) *Department for Children, Schools and Families (currently, Department for Education).*

Twenty official texts for the period 2009-2011, including social campaigns and policies, were analyzed with the application of the following methods: random sample and elements of semantic and linguoculturological analysis. As a result, we may observe different phrasal verbs, idiomatic and euphemistic expressions even in the texts of the official governmental campaigns traditionally associated with greater formality, which makes the whole text sound really ‘lively’ (e.g. *to go extra mile, the most vulnerable, to break new ground, to back up etc.*)

Official functional style has always been regarded as dry, formal, containing a number of clichés as opposed to a more informal informational style marked by the presence of different metaphors, phraseological and euphemistic units (Antrushina 2008). It should be highlighted that the term ‘functional style’ correlates with ‘register’ which was interpreted by M.A.K Halliday and R. Hasan (1976) as “the linguistic features which are typically associated with a configuration of situational features – with particular values of the field, mode and tenor...” (Halliday, Hasan 1976).

However, the language is constantly changing reflecting the liberalization of the modern world. Therefore, in the official departmental publications we can witness the appearance of a new phenomenon *mediatext* as a certain result of the styles’ interaction, i.e. official content on the one hand and media (web site) form – on the other. To a certain extent it’s possible to observe a reciprocal influence of *Languages for Specific* and for *General Purposes* (LSP, LGP) which are usually opposed to each other (Hutchinson, Waters 2000). Nevertheless, both LSP and LGP are based on one and the same language. So between the language of daily contact and other varieties of language occurs a constant interchange of units. Therefore, it seems really hard to determine clear boundaries between the LSP and LGP in the departmental publications on the official web sites. As a result, there may occur such linguistic phenomenon as *determinologization*, when a term loses its conceptuality and monosemanticity and the notion becomes simplified. The word adjusts to LGP and becomes a member of the phraseological system (Nikulina 2004). The verb ‘*to entrench*’ may serve as an example in this respect. According to ‘Concise English Dictionary, 1896’ it used to denote: *to dig or cut a trench as in fortification;* and could be traced only in military sphere as a term. Nowadays, word combinations with this verb are to be found on the official site of Government Equalities Office in the section ‘Women and Work’ (e.g. *entrenched collaboration, to be entrenched*) where they have the following meanings:

- 1) Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: strongly established and not likely to change;
- 2) Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary: to establish something, especially an idea or a problem, firmly so that it cannot be changed;

3) Macmillan Dictionary: entrenched attitudes or feelings have existed for a long time and are difficult to change.

Different social departments also tend to use word combinations united by a general componential meaning depending on the respective sphere of business. Here we define semes in the word combinations reflecting the aims of the departments in their social campaigns. Now, let us focus on some of the following examples and descriptions of the social departments.

Government Equalities Office

It was established in 2007, fighting discrimination in all spheres as its main priority. The analysis of the news and policies revealed the prevailing number of phrases where the main element can be characterized by the following semantics: ‘breakthrough’, ‘fight’ or ‘strength’. Some of the examples with such verbs as ‘to fight’, ‘to make’, ‘to take’, ‘to entrench’ are highlighted in the context in the following abstracts. All of them denoting actions, reformation and further development:

- ‘*We have made great strides forward in terms of women’s representation in political life – in parliaments and in governments. There is now only one country in Europe which has an all male cabinet team. That is a big change from when I was first in parliament. I was one of only 3% women MPs and there was an all male cabinet. There were many countries that were in the same position. But though we have made progress we are still pioneers. We are still trying to break new ground. We are still in a minority. I believe we must move from a position where women meet ad hoc – to where the collaboration of women ministers across Europe is entrenched*’.
- ‘*To deliver for women in our own countries we need to be stronger. We are stronger when we all work together. I draw strength from knowing that Bibiana and Nyamko are fighting the same battles that I am*’.

*Harriet Harman,
Minister for Women and Equality (2007- 2010)*

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)

As opposed to a quite ‘fighting’ Government Equalities Office - Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) between 2007-2010 didn’t strive to present any radical reforms and changes in the already existing political pattern. Naturally, there were some improvements in the social sphere, such as e.g. the increasing role of fathers in the upbringing leading to more flexible work conditions and stability in families – making these two -‘flexibility’ and ‘stability’ - the key semes.

A couple of these examples reveal several idiomatic expressions – *one size fits all*, *to be bedrock*; and also such stylistic device as *contrast* , as it appears in the headline of a campaign – ‘Parenting Together Apart” – an effective way to attract attention in a political document.

- ‘*The Government therefore proposes to pilot Parenting Together Apart sessions for separating couples. These pilots will look at how to make*

Parenting Together Apart sessions available to couples who have made the decision to separate' (Green Paper, January 2010)

- *'Working flexibly can bring many benefits to your work-life balance<...> Flexible working does not just mean part-time working' (Dads at Work Campaign, March 2010)*
- *'Strong, stable families are the bedrock of our society.'*
- *'The evidence is clear that it is strong, stable relationships between adults in the home — parents, grandparents and other caring adults — and among all these adults and the children in a family, that have the biggest impact on children's happiness and healthy development'*
- *'The sheer diversity of family life now rules out 'one size fits all' approaches.*

(Green Paper, January 2010)

The general tone of the publications, however, changes after the elections, which results in renaming of this department into 'Department for Education' (DfE). One of the top priorities now is the improvement of teaching in the UK, which is reflected in the name a new campaign '*The Importance of Teaching*'.

Department of Health

In a close cooperation with DCSF functions another social department – Department of Health (DH), established in 1988; which promotes almost the similar values with emphasis on the fact that the UK is an ageing society and therefore focuses on mostly preventative measures to improve the life conditions of 'the most vulnerable' as it's slightly euphemistically mentioned in one of the headlines on the site. Thus 'prevention' and 'care' as key components can be traced in the following examples from the web site.

- *'New study to drive further improvements in health care for the most vulnerable'*
 - *Common sense would say that a simple preventative and collaborative approach to older people's care could bring significant savings. A founding principle of the NHS was that it should improve health and prevent disease, and not just provide treatment for those who are ill.*
 - *<...> Reform of the care and support system, and the shift towards prevention, is the only fiscally responsible strategy for the long-term – but it's also the only morally responsible strategy.*
 - *<...> We must strive to give people more choice, convenience and control over their care, to put quality at the heart of our services, and to take more early, preventative action to keep them healthy and in their own homes – where we know the vast majority of people want to stay'*
- (January 18, 2010; Partnerships for Older People Projects).*

Undoubtedly, health sphere covers lots of delicate issues and can hardly be described without euphemisms, which substitute a mild term for one thought to be offensive. Some examples from the web site illustrate the 'disability' issue, as such word combinations tend to appear in the majority of the publications.



- ‘*Children with a disability or special needs*: ‘I am the only person who they trust to care for my disabled grandson when they go to work.’
- ‘*The Department has instigated a range of work in partnership with disabled people, their families and relevant organisations in order to map the current position, identify barriers to delivery and develop proposals to deliver this objective’*

(Departmental Report, June 2009).

Considering different social campaigns, there are several features from media style.

Illustrations in documents, for a start. The following guide ‘Family Life’ for grandparents is very user-friendly in terms of language and general design, gives advice on how to balance work and care and help families through difficult times.

Secondly, we can mention ‘catchy headlines’ as in ‘Dads at Work’ (GEO) campaign and ‘Parenting Together Apart’ (DCSF). There are others with parallel constructions and repetitions – ‘Keep Warm, Keep Well’, ‘Healthy Lives, Healthy People’ (DH). Were I to see all of this in a newspaper, it would be customary, as the main target of the informational functional style is to attract readers’ attention.

‘Family Life’ 2010

The fact that departmental official texts contain the same strategy was a pleasant discovery.

Summing up all of the above-mentioned language peculiarities it’s possible to outline the following tendencies: official texts on the departmental web sites experience a strong influence of this media format and compression of information resulting in a shift towards a less formal register, transforming into ‘mediatext’, marked by the presence of different phraseological and euphemistic units, stylistic devices such as *repetition, parallel constructions, contrast*. It creates a very user-friendly tone, making texts of social campaigns and official news sound more down-to-earth and the whole language – lively indeed.

The decision to choose such theme for the research was determined by the following factors: social sphere, in general, has always been a so-called ‘political minefield’, which sharply reacts to all reforms introduced by the government. The majority of national revolts and general disturbance are aroused by some not very successful innovations in this very sphere. Social departments, in this respect, take great responsibility because they advance the policy of the ruling party, elaborate different social campaigns, which are aimed at the general improvement in social sphere and the well-being of the people.

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