

Chapter 5

**PRESS RELEASE:
A TOOL FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS**

*Mayyer Ling**

English Studies Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei Darussalam

ABSTRACT

Press releases are amongst the most popular form of communication utilised by corporate institutions such as banking establishments as a tool for the maintenance of sound public relations. The current study compared press releases from two different levels of organisations; local and international in the attempt to decipher patterns in the use of proper nouns and pronouns. The method used was both qualitative and quantitative. The results revealed that there are social meanings implied in press releases with the proper noun choices made. International banks repeatedly use them to (re)introduce, and promote, themselves to the world market with the use of full forms singly, or accompanied by abbreviated forms. The local banks have the inclination to downplay their introductory, and promotional, function by using abbreviated forms of their proper nouns. In terms of proper nouns, there was an extension of

* Corresponding Author: Mayyer.ling @ubd.edu.bn.

the advertising device function proposed by Fairclough (1989), whereby they are also found to be used as a marker for collectivistic society (Hofstede, 2001). It is apparent from the study that careful consideration has to be taken in order to reap the best of the communication tool to maintain sound public relations in such corporations.

Keywords: press release, stakeholder-institution relations, banking institutions, linguistic markers

“We’re using our reach and resources to help address what could be an unprecedented challenge,” said Janet Lamkin, Bank of America California state president. “From philanthropy to engaging our network of employee volunteers, we’re leveraging our platform to help our partners in a time of need.”

The extract above is from a press release by Bank of America. On an introductory note, a text can shape a reader’s opinion about an institution by playing with linguistic elements for the reinforcement of a company’s image (Gilpin, 2010). For instance, “Bank of America” is one of the proper noun variants for self-reference in addition to the abbreviated form “BofA”. Since press releases are restricted in terms of the space that is allocated for each news item, why does the organisation persist in using the full form of the proper noun? Direct quotation also takes up more text space than reported texts. However, Bank of America also uses the lengthy option of using direct quotation, which inherently includes pronouns to refer to the institution. What is the significance in the use of “we” and “our” in press releases? It is apparent that institutions have their own agenda to serve when these texts were written and published. However, the general public is far from a passive audience. They, as the final receiver of the press releases, have the ultimate say in whether or not they accept the contents that are propagated by the issuing institution. This, in turn, demands for information in press releases to be highly strategic, wherein institution-benefitting and stakeholder-benefitting contents are balanced throughout the communication medium.

There has been recent research that analysed the potential for press releases in carrying out a range of functions, including as a manipulative tool (García Osmá and Guillamón-Saorín, 2011), as a conveyor of contentious news (Levin, 2002), as an identity marker (Mayyer Ling 2016a), as an image construction device (Mayyer Ling, 2016b), and as a newsworthy source of information (Schafraad, van Zoonen, and Verhoeven, 2016). In the light of the range of possibilities for untapped research in the use of this mundane yet powerful discourse, and the seemingly overt attention of public relations studies being dominated by the investigation of communication within an institution (Jacobs, 1999a), this study attempts to bring attention to the importance of press releases to maintain, and even enhance, stakeholder relations with banking institutions. Proper nouns and pronouns in press releases, linguistic elements chosen as units to be studied in the current chapter, all have a purpose to serve in signalling a relationship between the institution and their stakeholders.

RELATIONSHIP SIGNALS IN PRESS RELEASES: PROPER NOUNS AND PRONOUNS

Institution-stakeholder relations are important to be investigated because banking institutions' successes are highly dependent on their customers and investors, collectively known as stakeholders. Therefore, good relations are expected between these parties. The two ends of the continuum for the purpose of proper noun usage in press releases are anchored by journalistic and promotional functions (Malekova, 2013). Journalistic press releases are found to have an abundance of abbreviated forms of the institution's proper noun, and that the reported issue often took precedence over the agent institution, simultaneously backgrounding or downplaying their role. This type of proper noun is vague, and most likely be understood by the in-group members. On the other hand, promotional press releases are inclined to subsume the repeated use of full

forms of the institution's proper noun as the organisations are often concerned about foregrounding or highlighting themselves as an agent for the reported issue. The usage would ensure that the referent is less likely to be confused with another, and it may as well be used to carry an introductory function for less known institutions. It is clear that there is a 'social meaning' (Allerton, 1996, p. 630) in the use of proper nouns, and the current investigation aims to decipher what these meanings are in the context of banking institutions.

Another language-related trigger for social meaning is the use of pronouns that Kim (2009, p. 2088) termed "reader-involvement evoking act[s]" because it makes the interaction between the author and the readers more direct. The collectivist nature of the Eastern Asian cultures (Hofstede, 2001), some of which are the cultures of the institutions included in the current study, are found to rely heavily on first person pronouns. The use of "we" or "us" to represent an institution could very well indicate the notion of closing the gap in the relationship between the issuer of press releases and the stakeholders who are the intended reader. The same token of pronouns can also be seen to downplay knowledge-based authority, while the use of "you" distances the institution from the stakeholder, and subsequently highlight the said knowledge-based authority. However, Jacobs (1999b) found in his own investigation of press releases that there were hardly any first person pronouns, which was seen to be surprising as press releases are egocentric in nature. Egocentricity entails that documents such as press releases are primarily issued when institutions want to talk about themselves. Interestingly, when the first person pronouns were used, most were the variant "we" which is marked for solidarity based on previous studies (Lerner, 1993; Schegloff, 1996). The third person pronouns were preferred, especially with the use of the issuing institution's proper noun, when compared to the use of the solidarity marker "we" because the latter is also a form of an advertising device (Fairclough, 1989), and direct forms of self-advertisement are often avoided by institutions.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The corpora collected for this study, which represents two communities for comparative research are World Banks (WB) and Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam (BIBD). The first corpus, WB contains a collection of press releases from ten financial institutions that occupy the top spots in The Banker's list of top 1000 banks 2016 (About us, 2016). The second corpus, BIBD contains press releases from one Brunei Darussalam-based bank, a reputable national financial institution, who currently occupies the 740th spot in The Banker's list in 2016. Each of these press releases was gathered from the institution's media section in their respective websites.

A *chi-square* test from SPSS was used for the quantitative data analysis with an alpha level of 0.05. As for the qualitative analysis, Antconc Build 3.2.4w was used to generate word lists, word counts and concordance lists for logical data representation.

Proper Nouns: Indicators for Social Meaning, and Journalistic-Promotional Performances

The result of the *chi-square* analysis revealed a significant association between the use of proper nouns in referring to the issuing institution between the two corpora ($\chi^2 (2, N = 200) = 59.13, p < 0.05$). This could have been attributed to the overt-usage of Abbreviated Form of the institutions' proper noun as the BIBD corpus contained no instance that only contains the Full Form proper noun.

First, let us consider the overlap of functions of the proper nouns in the two corpora in Table 2. When the institution was honoured, or awarded, press releases in the WB corpus use either only Full Form of the institution's proper noun or accompany this with the Abbreviated Form. In the BIBD corpus, only the Abbreviated Form was used for the same

Table 1. Use of only Full Forms, only Abbreviated Forms and both in a single press release

		Proper Nouns			Total
		Only Full Form	Only Abbreviated Form	Full Form and Abbreviated Form	
Corpus	WB	45	22	33	100
	BIBD	0	49	51	100
Total		45	71	84	200

Table 2. Functions of proper nouns

Corpus	Proper Noun	Function
WB	Only Full Form	First mention, later reference uses generic terms such as 'the Bank' or 'the Group.' Claim responsibility for a product launched, program organised, or partnership signed. Name too short, Abbreviation Form never used. Later reference uses generic terms such as 'the Group.' When honoured, or awarded.
	Only Abbreviated Form	Name too long, Full Form never used. Recurrent corporate social responsibility event report. Highlight on 'what is done' and 'whom it is done for'.
	Full Form and Abbreviated Form	When honoured, or awarded. Later reference uses Abbreviated Form. Claim responsibility for a product launched, program organised, or partnership signed.
BIBD	Only Abbreviated Form	Recurrent corporate social responsibility event report. Highlight on 'what is done' and 'whom it is done for'. When honoured, or awarded.
	Full Form and Abbreviated Form	Claim responsibility for a product launched, program organised, or partnership signed.

function. Other functions of the Abbreviated Form of the institution's proper noun are related to the public good such as organising corporate social responsibility events (i.e., roadshows or financial talks) or philanthropic activities (i.e., charity drives) where the benefits to the public were seen to be more important to be highlighted as opposed to

foregrounding the issuing institution. This can be contrasted to the function of the Full Form of proper nouns in the corpus either used singly or accompanied by the Abbreviated Form, when the institutions intend to take credit for their efforts and foreground their role to the general public. This was especially done when the effort is related to banking products and innovations.

When we consider Table 1 and Table 2, the favourable use of the foregrounding Full Form in the WB corpus brings about three assumptions; (1) the community in which the WB institutions serve need to be reminded who the institution is, and this hint on low levels of familiarity between the institutions and the public, and (2) the institution exerts a high level of knowledge-based authority in the financial marketplace. Both assumptions (1) and (2) can be justified by the fact that the ranking of the institutions from the WB corpus is at the very top of the banking Leaderboard. This automatically entails that their geographical space for influence is far and wide, and have countless number of rival financial institutions from various banking institutions worldwide. Assumption (3) is that since these institutions are already very much established as a financial expert, they are carrying out introductory functions for the potential client community. When institutions are well recognised, potential client build-up is faster compared to less recognised institutions, and these banking organisations aspire to continually expand their market. It is clear that these front-runners strive to magnify their banking-specialist influences while they are at their prime, and uses the mundane press releases to perform this promotional function.

The BIBD corpus, on the other hand, preferred the Abbreviated Form of proper nouns, which brings about two assumptions; (1) there is a strong sense of familiarity between the institution and the community being served, and (2) the banking institution has a niche to fulfil, and hence is only interested in catering to specific clienteles. Assumption (1) can be justified by the fact that the banking rival environment of BIBD includes one other local bank, one financial institute, and fewer than half a dozen international bank franchises nationwide. Therefore, BIBD can afford to use the Abbreviated Form as the predominant proper noun as it is not

likely to be confused with its rivals. To justify the assumption (2), as the institution is ranked in the lower-quartile range in The Banker's list, the clients who are not from the residing country may not be as keen as to invest in the BIBD bank when compared to institutions from the WB corpus. The institution in the BIBD corpus probably acknowledges this and thus, focuses on harnessing local, and perhaps strategic regional, clientele of Islamic banking, which is their niche area of expertise. This presupposition of knowledge (Allerton, 1996) enables BIBD to background themselves as they can count on their readers to automatically acknowledge their role in the Islamic Banking front of the target community, predominantly using their press releases to perform journalistic functions.

Pronouns: Device for Direct Interaction, Knowledge-Based Authority and Rapport Development

The result of the *chi-square* analysis revealed a significant association between the use of pronouns in referring to the issuing institution between the two corpora ($\chi^2 (7, N = 1241) = 165.54, p < 0.05$) in Table 3. This could be attributed to the use of "their", "them", "our", "we" and "your" as there were stark difference in the number of instances found between the two corpora. The WB corpus used more first person pronouns (i.e., "our" and "we") when compared to those found in the BIBD corpus, while BIBD used more second and third person pronouns ("your", "their" and "them") than the press releases in the WB corpus.

Due to the egocentric nature of press releases (Jacobs, 1999b), the first person pronouns were given further attention in this study. The type of text in which these first person pronoun tokens occurred was noted. There are two text types, quoted text and reported text, indicated by the presence of quotation marks in the former, and the lack of quotation marks in the latter.

Table 3. First, second- and third person pronouns

		Pronoun								Total
		Their	Them	They	Our	We	Us	Your	You	
Corpus	WB	231	44	69	183	163	16	6	6	718
	BIBD	275	64	57	52	30	8	30	7	523
Total		506	108	126	235	193	24	36	13	1241

Table 4. First person pronouns occurrence

		Text Type		Total
		Quoted Text	Reported Text	
Corpus	WB	339	23	362
	BIBD	49	41	90
Total		388	64	452

The result of the *chi-square* analysis revealed a significant association between the use of first person pronouns in the reported and main text of the press releases in the corpus ($\chi^2(1, N = 452) = 91.14, p = 0.00$) in Table 4. This significance could be attributed to the extensive use of first person pronouns in the quoted text by institutions from the WB corpus, and a lower use of first person pronouns in the reported text when compared to BIBD.

Regardless of the terms used, Kim (2009), Lerner (1993) and Schegloff (1996) essentially came to the conclusion that pronouns are devices that allow direct interactions between the writers of press releases and the readers. To demonstrate, let us compare these two sentences:

- (1) Sample of quoted text: “Bank of America can provide you solutions for your financial problems.”
- (2) Sample of reported text: Solutions to financial problems can be provided by Bank of America.

The use of the passive form of writing in reported text (2), where pronouns are relatively absent, seems more distant and less involved when compared to the use of active forms in quoted text (1), where pronouns are likely to be found. The use of pronouns has such a profound effect in encouraging the involvement of writers and readers, and this makes the relationship seem personal. This personal level involvement catalyses institution to recognise that the community in which they serve is the driving force for their mere survival, and the residing community to accept that there is a body of finance experts that is present to aid and advise them with their finance-related issues. Therefore, the use of a range of pronouns in press releases is an effort to involve readers and is a form of welcoming invitations for future businesses that can benefit both parties. From this perspective of mutual need, the use of pronouns in press releases can be seen to signal that the institutions consider their stakeholders significant to be addressed directly.

Table 5 shows that the functions for the pronouns “we”, “us”, “their” and “them” overlap completely between the two corpora. Institutions under study used first person plural forms (“our”, “we”, “us”) to indicate institution-exclusive affiliations. This includes instances where praises were given to their own staff members, when taking an oath for further improvement as an institution, and when institutions explain why they are performing certain tasks for the public. An additional function of “our” in the BIBD corpus is to signal a nation-exclusive relationship between the institution and the general public by emphasising a common ground, the nation. “Your” has an additional function in the WB corpus, which is to signal institution superiority. The function of “their” and “them” in both corpora is unique because not only does it emphasise the superiority of the institution, it puts into focus the aid that institutions are prepared to give to the public. This indicates the presence of interactions of organisations from both corpora with their designated readers.

Table 5. Functions of pronouns

Corpus	Pronoun	Function	Example from Corpus
WB	Our	Institution-exclusive (Members of the institution only)	These awards are a direct reflection of the excellent work of our portfolio managers, our global research teams and our risk management professionals - who are dedicated to building better portfolios for our clients.
	We	Institution-exclusive (Members of the institution only)	We are delighted to be part of this important initiative. We already run a programme that supports nearly 300 social entrepreneurs across Britain every year...
	Your	Customer superiority (Power lies in the customer)	ICBC (Asia) launched Integrated Account Self Service Pack Promotion, which made you manage your wealth with ease.
		Institution superiority (Power lies with the institution)	Understanding customers' needs, BOCHK launches Enrich Banking with the aspiration to 'Power Up Your Wealth.'
	Us	Institution-exclusive (Power lies with the institution)	Instead of asking our clients to change the way they work to fit in with us....
	Their	Aid giver-receiver relationship (What aid institutions can give clients)	We're focused on helping treasury organisations improve their efficiency, optimize their working capital, execute their day-to-day financial transactions and identify and invest idle cash.
	Them	Aid giver-receiver relationship (What aid institutions can give clients)	All clients will have access to a large vendor directory, allowing them to instantly link with vendors for electronic payments without the need for bank account information.
BIBD	Our	Institution-exclusive (Members of the institution only)	At BIBD, we feel really proud of having achieved these important milestones in our journey of transformation. The new BIBD website captures the spirit of our company and communicates the sense of vibrancy that pervades our organisation.
		Nation-exclusive (Members of a nation only)	... Relationship that BIBD has with the citizens of Brunei and rooting its values to the heritage of our beloved nation.
	We	Institution-exclusive (Members of the institution only)	We will not be resting on our laurels to ensure we are deserving of the praise we have received.
	Your	Customer superiority (Power lies in the customer)	BIBD Online is a secure and easy way to manage your money online.

Table 5. (Continued)

Corpus	Pronoun	Function	Example from Corpus
	Us	Institution-exclusive (Members of the institution only)	This is also a wonderful opportunity for us to see the beauty in helping others...
	Their	Aid giver-receiver relationship (What aid institutions can give clients)	The talk also hoped to guide them in their financial management practices such as on the importance of budget management along with additional savings and investment techniques, which will add-up to their pool of funds.
	Them		The talks were also aimed to expose the benefits of financial planning to the school's parenting and teaching community, whilst also showing them ways to reduce the strains placed onto them by their financing.

The use of pronouns in the study was generally institution-exclusive (i.e., it focuses on the superiority of the institution), and does not necessarily play a positive role in maintaining relationship involving the institution and its stakeholders in press releases (as claimed by previous pronoun research (Kim, 2009; Learner, 1993; Schegloff, 1996)). Let us consider the egocentric nature of press releases. The use of few first person pronouns can be seen as a strategy to avoid the appearance of direct advertisement as this was previously been established as undesirable. However, the institution in the WB corpus uses third person pronouns “their” and “them” to carry these advertising functions through the maintenance of knowledge-based authority in the banking arena. It was previously established that the institutions seemed not to be able to associate with their stakeholders on a personal level because of a preference for Full Forms as opposed to the Abbreviated Forms of the institutions’ proper nouns which signals the lack of familiarity between the two parties. It seems as though institutions in WB corpus rely heavily on their expertise and integrity in the financial market in order to attain the trust of the audience, which will expectantly result in the investment of clientele.

The favourable usage of first person pronouns in the reported text has been unexpected as it often relates to the direct advertisement of an organisation (Fairclough, 1989), an undesirable trait when an institution wishes to garner the support and trust of its clients. Overall, a number of first person pronouns “we” and “our” were significantly lower in the BIBD than the WB corpus. Thus, the presence of the pronouns were not as aggressive as one would fear. The function of the most-popular first person pronoun in BIBD “our” was to signal institution-inclusivity and nation-exclusivity. The latter is a function that is collectivist in nature which summons the nation to collaborate with the institution for the common good. This justifies the excessive use of first person pronouns in the main texts of the BIBD corpus as it seems to signal nation exclusivity, which further emphasises the close relationship between the institution and its stakeholders, and further the idea of a collectivistic function (from Hofstede’s “collectivistic society”, 2001) for first person pronouns. In the light of this discussion, it seems as though this small banking institution that makes up the BIBD corpus rely on rapport in order to harness the trust of the audience, which then also expectantly result in the investment of clienteles in the Islamic banking front.

CONCLUSION

The multitude of analyses was quite revealing in providing a platform for relationship signals that suited the purpose of this study. The designation of press release space for proper nouns and pronouns provided clues on the relationship between the institution and their stakeholders. It is also apparent that there is a form of direct interaction between the institution and their stakeholders when press releases are written and read. Linguistic markers indicate that press releases are used to perform either promotional or journalistic functions. They can also be used to promote the knowledge-based authority or rapport development, which are both means to an end of resultant investments by clienteles.

IMPLICATION

The implication of the study is three-fold. First, writers of press releases, spokespersons of institutions, website editors – all those who are involved in communicating with the stakeholders on behalf of an organisation have to align their pronouns and proper nouns usage with their institutional intentions. Second, the use of these linguistic markers is subtle, yet powerful, in achieving rapport or maintaining knowledge-based authority through the employment of familiar or distant indicators respectively in press releases. Third, the study is also important in press release research because of the plethora of other linguistic elements, including self-description and lexis usage present in this communication medium. They can all be used to direct the attention of the reader and simultaneously enhance the opportunity of strengthening the organisational presence of an institution in the target community.

REFERENCES

- About us. (2016). In *The Banker: Global Financial Intelligence Since 1926*. Retrieved July 25, 2016, from <http://www.thebanker.com/Information/About-Us>.
- Allerton, D. J. (1996). Proper names and definite descriptions with the same reference: A pragmatic choice for language users. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25, 621-633.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- García Osma, B., & Guillamón-Saorín, E. (2011). Corporate governance and impression management in annual results press releases. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 36(4), 187-208.
- Gilpin, D. R. (2010). Organizational image construction in a fragmented online media environment. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(3), 165-287.

- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Cultural consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. California: Sage publications.
- Jacobs, G. (1999a) *Preformulating the news*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Jacobs, G. (1999b). Self-references in press releases. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 219-242.
- Kim, C-K. (2009). Personal pronouns in English and Korean texts: A corpus-based study in terms of textual interaction. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 41, 2086-2099.
- Lerner, G. H. (1993). Collectivities in action: Establishing the relevance of conjoined participation in conversation. *Text - Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse*, 13, 213-246.
- Levin, D. (2002). Making a Good Impression: Peace Movement Press Release Styles and Newspaper Coverage. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 7(1), 79-101.
- Malekova, D. (2013). Self-reference in the leads of institutional press releases. *Brno Studies in English*, 39, 41-58.
- Mayyer Ling. (2016a). Identity representation in press releases of a Brunei-based banking institution. In Noor Azam Haji-Othman, James McLellan & David Deterding (Eds.), *The use and status of language in Brunei Darussalam* (pp. 201–210). Singapore: Springer.
- Mayyer Ling. (2016b). Corporate portrait in press releases: The case of banking institutions. *Professional and Academic English*, 47, 11–17.
- Schafraad, P., van Zoonen, W., & Verhoeven, P. (2016). The news value of Dutch corporate press releases as a predictor of corporate agenda building power. *Public Relations Review*, 42, 451-458.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1996). Some practices for referring to persons in talk-in-interaction. In Barbara A. Fox (Ed.), *Studies in anaphora*, 437-485. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.