JOLANTA ŁĄCKA-BADURA

University of Economics, Katowice

POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN EMPLOYERS AND POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES REFLECTED IN THE GRAMMAR OF JOB ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to investigate power relations between employers and potential employees as reflected in the grammar of job advertising discourse. Drawing on the premises of Critical Discourse Analysis and the concepts of Employer Branding, whereby employers are encouraged to treat existing and future employees with a similar (if not the same) care and coherence as they would value customers, the study seeks to examine whether the grammatical structures identified in a corpus of 236 branded job ads may indeed be regarded as reflecting a balanced relationship and full reciprocity of benefits between employers and job seekers. The findings, particularly those pertaining to the use of modal verbs and personal pronouns, seem to imply that the power relations between employers and potential employees should not be perceived as entirely equal.

Traditionally, job advertising has been defined as the placement of help-wanted advertisements in various media (Byars, Rue 2000). From a functional perspective, it is perceived as a recruitment method whose aim is

> [...] to attract the attention of the best candidates who may not even be seeking another role, while not raising false expectations and allowing a healthy amount of self-selection. Notwithstanding, recruitment advertising is also advertising for the organisation itself. The form and content will project an image of the organisation (Secord 2003: 355).

The definition quoted above specifies the aim most immediately associated with job advertising, i.e. to attract the attention of suitable candidates; yet it also emphasises two other functions that recruitment ads are intended to perform: to discourage candidates whose lack of desired qualifications, experience, and personality makes them unsuitable, and to project a positive image of the employing organisation (see also Foster 2003; Rafaeli 2001; Roberts 1997; Taylor 2005). The latter function, rendering job ads a salient component of an organisation's *employer branding* strategy, is highly appreciated among Human Resource researchers and practitioners (e.g. Rafaeli, Oliver 1998, quoted in van Meurs 2010: 7).

Employers seeking to attract the most valuable candidates are increasingly being expected to treat employees with a similar (if not the same) care and coherence as they would value customers. In this connection, *employer branding*, understood as creating the image of an organisation as an employer of choice, ideally perceived as such by both existing and potential employees, has become a vital component (or extension) of the overall corporate branding strategy (Edwards 2005; Holbeche 2009; Martin, Hetrick 2006; Welsing 2006).

Customer and employer brands are closely interrelated; consequently, employer branding strategies incorporate approaches and methods commonly used in marketing, such as the Employer Brand Mix (built on the concept of the Marketing Mix) (Barrow, Mosley 2005). In parallel to the USP (Unique Selling Proposition) in marketing, meant to provide a reason for potential customers to purchase the product or service advertised, rather than similar competitive ones, the *EVP* (*Employee Value Proposition*) in Human Resource context is an entire set of persuading factors intended to summarise everything that is *returned* to an employee in exchange for contributing towards the organisation; the *returns* may be of various character, including compensation, benefits, as well as intangible rewards, such as peace of mind, respect in society, the feeling of satisfaction and self-fulfilment (e.g. Barrow, Mosley 2005; Głowicka 2009; Hill, Tande 2006; Martin, Hetrick 2006).

It follows from the above that an employer aspiring to build and maintain a strong employer brand and attractive Employee Value Proposition should create a balanced relationship with their (existing and future) employees, as well as recognise that the benefits to be gained are reciprocal. This image should in turn be reflected in the organisation's recruitment strategy and communication, including job advertising. In view of the highly persuasive/promotional nature of job advertising discourse, resulting in the latter increasingly resembling mainstream advertising (see Łącka-Badura 2015), the risk that (less experienced) job seekers may interpret the positions advertised in an excessively and unjustifiably positive way seems rather high. The vast array of persuasive tactics used in job ads to *sell* the position to the best possible candidate and create a favourable image of the employing organisation encompass positive self-presentation of the employer, building a common ground / solidarity with candidates, enhancing the candidates' status, offering benefits, encouraging candidates to take action (ibid. 2015).

The present paper focuses on the *grammar* of job advertising, seeking to investigate the grammatical structures identified in a corpus of 'branded' job ads, with a view to tracing the signals of unbalanced relationship between employers and job seekers.

1. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The approach adopted in this paper is the critical approach, in line with the premises of *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*, defined as "[…] being fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak, Meyer 2009: 10). CDA

views discourse as not merely reflecting, but also producing the social world, with its knowledge, identities and power relations, as well as contributing to the maintenance or reproduction of specific (privileged) social structures, processes and patterns, perpetuating the interests of dominant groups or classes in society. Critical discourse analysis aims to unmask, challenge and, ultimately, change the social orders and practices that we accept as 'natural,' but which, as a matter of fact, often involve power abuse, dominance, discrimination, and inequality (van Dijk 1993, 2001, 2009; Fairclough 1995, 2001; Fairclough, Duszak 2008; Jørgensen, Phillips 2002; Mayr 2008; Woods 2006; Wodak, Meyer 2009); it seeks to enable people to "[…] emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection," "[…] to describe and explain, but also to root out a particular kind of delusion" (Wodak, Meyer 2009: 7).

Central to the present study, the concept of *power* has been approached in many, often diverse, ways (see e.g. Bourdieu 1986, 1991, 1994; Foucault 1980, 1991, 1998; Lukes (ed.) 1986; Wartenberg 1990; Wrong 1997). Critical investigations have been strongly affected by the theory of power and power relations proposed by Michel Foucault (1980, 1991, 1998), who views power as a force that transcends politics and constitutes an everyday phenomenon, permeating the entire social structure and connecting individuals, groups and institutions in a web of mutual influence. According to Foucault, "[…] power is everywhere" and "[…] comes from everywhere" (1998: 63). It is complex, diffused and dispersed, constructing social organisation and hierarchy, imposing discipline and order, shaping human perceptions and desires. Foucault moves beyond the understanding of power prevalent in western-liberal societies, where it tends to be associated with "[…] competition at best, coercion and domination at worst" (Karlberg 2005: 1), and sees power as having both repressive and productive potential; rather than being a possession owned by power-holders, it is something that acts and manifests itself in a variety of ways (Foucault 1980).

In line with the above conceptualisation, power is a relational force, meaning that it always involves *power relations* between people, groups and institutions. Norman Fairclough observes that power relations are always relations of struggle, the latter word referring to the process "[…] whereby social groupings with different interests engage with one another" (2001: 28). The scholar thus views power relations as the *interaction* between two or more actors; when actors who are known as dominant or more powerful exercise control and constraint of contributions and discourses of other actors (known as less powerful), the relations become *unequal* (ibid.: 27–39). This inequality is not only expressed and reflected, but also constructed and reinforced through discourse. In consequence, discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power; it can also provide a starting point for resistance, undermining and exposing inequalities. Critical studies can analyse how figures in authority use language to express their dominance, and request obedience and respect from those in less powerful positions; they may also investigate how language is used as a form of resistance to those in power.

The work of critical discourse scholars has also been strongly influenced by Pierre Bourdieau (1986, 1991, 1994), who understands power as being culturally and symbo-

lically created, and constantly re-legitimised through socialised norms and tendencies guiding people's behaviour and ways of thinking. In Bourdieau's view, societal power relationships are determined by *cultural* and *symbolic capital*, comprising all the material and symbolic goods that society regards as valuable and worth seeking (e.g. knowledge, education, intellect, style of dress and speech, cultural acquisitions). All linguistic exchanges reflect, perpetuate and co-construct a particular social structure and institution, the latter being understood as a relatively durable set of social relations which endows individuals with power, authority status and resources of various kind. Particular individuals or groups are *authorised* to speak in certain ways; importantly, their power derives to a large extent from the recognition on the part of *others* that this way of speaking is acceptable. The recognition is often based on commonly-shared beliefs and presuppositions, and thus perceived as natural. In consequence, certain aspects of established hierarchies communicated through discourse are taken for granted and perpetuated not only by those profiting from the existing order, but also by those less privileged. The *symbolic power*, as proposed by Bourdieu, hardly ever requires overt physical force; it is transmitted into a symbolic form that renders it (almost) invisible; the power is legitimised by not being *recognised* as power (Bourdieau 1986, 1991, 1994).

Although critical studies have been undertaken in the field of business/organisational communication less frequently than in other areas of social life (see e.g. Nickerson, Planken 2009), there is a growing body of research investigating the role of language in creating and/or maintaining power relations within and across organisations, seeking to account for power abuse, unfairness, inequality and asymmetries in social practices (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, Planken 2007; Deetz, McClellan 2009; Dirven, Polzenhagen, Wolf 2007; Fairclough 1992; Fox, Fox 2004; Gimenez 2009; Mayr 2008). Alan Jones (2009) observes that doing business consists, in a large part, of discursive practices. In a similar vein, Stanley Deetz and John G. McClellan propose that everything about an organisation (its rules, practices, norms and other properties) is constituted through discurse (2009: 122); following from that, the scholars advocate "[…] revealing taken-for-granted power relationships hidden within discursive structures that marginalise some organisational members" (2009: 123).

The critical approach adopted in this paper is instrumental in the analysis of the signals of unbalanced power relations between employers and potential employees revealed in the grammar of job advertisements.

2. CORPUS AND METHODS

As mentioned in the introductory section, the risk that (less experienced) job seekers may interpret the positions advertised in recruitment ads in an excessively and unjustifiably positive way seems rather high given the clearly persuasive/promotional nature of job advertising discourse. The vast array of persuasive tactics used in job ads to *sell* the position to the best possible candidates and create a favourable image of the

employing organisation may result in job seekers' first impression of the *full reciprocity of benefits*, in accord with the premises of employer branding and the EVP. The commonly accepted conventions and presuppositions governing the recruitment process may mask or blur the expression of dominance and request for obedience on the part of employing organisations. As grammatical structures often play a significant role in subtle demonstration of power in discourse, (cf. Fairclough 2001; Mautner 2008; Wodak, Meyer 2009), the present paper focuses on the *grammar* of job advertising, seeking to trace potential signals of unbalanced relationship between employers and job seekers in a corpus of 'branded' job ads. The study thus attempts to answer the following research question:

Does the analysis of the grammatical layer of job ads confirm that the power relations between employers and potential employees are entirely balanced?

A pre-liminary investigation of the whole grammatical layer of the sample, searching for *any* traces of an unbalanced relationship between employing organisations and prospective applicants, yielded three categories of structures interpreted as the signals most strongly indicating that the power relations between employers and candidates are not entirely equal. The more detailed analysis thus encompasses the following grammatical forms:

1) modal verbs; the analysis is concerned with the relational modality, i.e. how the use of modal verbs reflects the relationship between the addressor and the addressees (cf. Fairclough 2001; Mautner 2008; Wodak, Meyer 2009),
2) personal pronouns: the role personal pronouns play in building and 'personalising' the relationship with the audience is widely acknowledged in critical studies (see e.g. Fairclough 2001; Wodak, Meyer 2009); the paper examines the use of the personal pronouns *we* and *you*, with the reservation that cases where *you* is used as an indefinite pronoun have not been taken in the account,
3) grammatical tenses, with particular emphasis on the Present Tenses used to refer to potential applicants' future actions as though it were obvious that the candidates will find the advertisement attractive.

The corpus analysed in the present study was gathered in two stages. In the first place, 400 job advertisements were extracted at different time intervals from five Internet sources: the job sections of the Internet editions of three British quality newspapers: www.telegraph.co.uk, www.guardian.co.uk, and www.thetimes.co.uk, as well as two popular British job search websites: www.jobsite.co.uk and www.totaljobs.com. In order to ensure sufficient diversity, balance, and representativeness of the corpus, an equal number of 80 texts were retrieved from each source, with great care taken to spread the sample evenly across various types of jobs and different sectors of the economy. No other selection criteria were used in the compilation of the initial corpus.

The second stage involved a selection of those ads that could plausibly be regarded as performing (at least potentially) an *employer branding* function. Since it would be hard to classify anonymous ads as 'branded,' only texts revealing the names and some information related to the employing organisations were deemed relevant for the analysis, forming the final corpus comprising a total of 236 ads.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The present section focuses on the analysis of three grammatical categories that appear to constitute the strongest signals of unequal power relations between the employers and potential employees reflected in the corpus: modal verbs, personal pronouns and grammatical tenses.

Modal verbs

The analysis demonstrates that *will* is by far the most frequently used modal verb in the sample (present in 87% of JAs).[1] In the vast majority (over 90%) of these instances *will* is used as an auxiliary to introduce tasks to be performed by prospective employees, as well as certain qualities and characteristics of the role advertised, for instance:

> (1) You **will** be leading pioneering projects, establishing and converting a vision into a tangible outcome. Above all else, you **will** embody the passion for quality and professionalism, creativity, and 'can do' attitude, for which RA CPD is renowned (JA 19).

However natural it may seem that candidates' future tasks and responsibilities are referred to with the future auxiliary, addressors appear somewhat *authoritative* using mostly unhedged *will*, as though taking for granted that the candidates will find the advert exceptionally attractive and thus decide to apply. Importantly, merely 8% of the JAs contain *will* as an auxiliary signalling future benefits to be gained by prospective employees, as shown in the following example:

> (2) In return **you will receive** a competitive salary and benefits package to include pension scheme and generous holiday entitlement (JA 44).

As opposed to the huge number of *will* structures signalling what the *candidates* will be expected to do (or, to a lesser degree, what they will receive), only 14% of the JAs contain *will* introducing future actions to be taken by the *employers*. In the majority of such instances *will* signals actions pertaining to the application process, tasks to be assigned to prospective employees, various aspects of employing organisations' future, or the things they will do for their customers. Markedly, what companies *will* do for successful applicants is communicated in merely 6% of the corpus. Examples include the following:

> (3) **We will** provide nationally recognised training and undertake training in specialist roles as required (JA 153).

> (4) Through training and development programmes, **we'll** give you plenty of opportunities to grow. And our incentive scheme **will** see that your hard work is well rewarded (JA 215).

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[1] The abbreviation JA is used throughout the paper for *Job Advertisement*; the number that follows indicates the job ad in the corpus.

While, again, it seems perfectly natural that job descriptions include Future Tense structures which provide details of the responsibilities, tasks, and requirements involved, the above discussion may be suggestive of *too great* an imbalance between references made to the things that prospective *employees will be expected to do* for the new employers, and statements specifying what the *employers will do* for new employees.

The way other modals are used in the corpus seems to confirm this imbalance. Again, it is easily justifiable that the second most frequently occurring modal verb *can* (found in 40% of JAs) is used to express the capabilities expected of candidates, supported by the modal *must/have to* (in 33% of JAs), and *should* (in 22% of JAs), for instance:[2]

(5) We're looking for an excellent communicator who **can** influence people at the most senior levels (JA 34).

(6) You **must** be an expert at developing business relationships, exceeding targets and negotiating (JA 22).

(7) You **should** be qualified to at least degree level or equivalent in metallurgy or materials science… (JA 5).

However, the instances where the addressors use *can* to communicate what the organisation *can* do for their prospective employees appear more ambiguous; firstly, many constitute *vague promises* whose illocutionary force may well be that of *boasting*, as shown in the following examples:

(8) At Everything Everywhere we **can** offer you an opportunity that few can match (JA 65).

(9) The breadth of opportunities that RBS offers is vast; you might be surprised to find just where we **can** take you! (JA 95).

The above extracts promise (but do not specify) benefits to potential employees, at the same time projecting an image of an exceptionally generous organisation.

Secondly, an interesting combination of modal verbs has been identified in the JAs where what *candidates will/must* do co-occurs with what *employers can* or *may* do for prospective employees. The extracts below provide a good illustration:

(10) […] **you will** be motivated and enthusiastic with an excellent command of the English language, able to adapt your style to produce interesting newsletters, promotional literature, website and social networking site updates. In addition, **your research skills will** enable you to produce regular briefings covering the care and housing sector for older people. In return, **we can offer** a supportive team environment, good terms and conditions, and the opportunity to develop this new post as part of a respected and dynamic charity (JA 11).

(11) To be successful in this role **you must** be pro-active in approach and tenacious with the ability to combine operational and strategic HR to build a best in class HR service across a multi-site, complex organisation. **You must** have a strong HR background gained in either the public or private sector and

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[2] All three modals are also frequently used to communicate what candidates *can* / *must* / *should* do to submit an application. In several JAs the verb *can* contributes to employers' self-presentation (stating what the organisation *can do* for their customers).

a proven track record of operating successfully at a senior HR level. **You must** be an inspirational leader with excellent employment law knowledge and practical knowledge and experience of organisational development and design. If you have annual leave during August or September, please inform us so that **we can try to** accommodate you, should you be shortlisted for interview (JA 30).

The above fragments clearly demonstrate that employers are far more careful when promising benefits than they are when stating their requirements. This may suggest that the power relations between potential employers and employees are not entirely equal, contradicting, at least to some degree, the concept of the EVP, i.e. the *balance* between what an employee receives from their employer and what he or she gives in terms of their performance on the job.

Personal pronouns

Merely 10% of JAs in the sample may be regarded as *impersonal*, i.e. not using *any* of the 'dialogic' pronouns, and referring to both employers and candidates solely in the 3rd person singular or plural, e.g. *the company, this consultancy, the candidates, the successful individual*. As many as 71% of JAs frequently resort to BOTH the *we/our* form (when referring to employers) and the pronoun *you/your* (when addressing the candidates), mostly mixed with instances of impersonal forms of address. It is thus clear that the majority of the JAs in the corpus seek to create, at least to some degree, an atmosphere of familiarity and intimacy between employers and prospective employees.

A closer analysis reveals, however, that 17% of JAs address potential applicants *only* with the pronoun *you/your*, with a significantly lower percentage of JAs (5%) referring to the employers using *only* the *we/our* structure, an observation that may possibly indicate that the employers wish to distance themselves from the candidates or treat the candidates with less respect and courtesy than they feel they deserve themselves.

Time and tenses

It appears rather natural that a general description of a job position is commonly conveyed in the Present Simple tense, most probably indicating that the responsibilities and requirements involved remain unchanged over time, for instance:

(12) This senior international marketing role **has** a fully global remit across […] (JA 4).

(13) Other duties **involve** administering two chorister bursary funds and […] (JA 26).

It seems, however, less obvious when the Present Simple tense is used to describe what the *candidate/you do* (rather than *will do*), what personality and qualifications *he/she possesses* (rather than *should possess*), as if it were taken for granted that the person potentially interested in applying for the position advertised meets all the requirements stated in the advert and is willing to become part of the employing organisation. This pattern occurs in 6% of the corpus, exemplified in the following extracts:

(14) And you **have** a track record of great new business sales in an SME or corporate environment (JA 65).

(15) You **are** an excellent manager of key national accounts with developed negotiating and influencing skills. You **have** a strong sense of commercial acumen and a track record of successful delivery across a range of complex and high value projects (JA 92).

(16) Your task is to provide strategic direction and management for this key international area […] (JA 169).

Sounding even more authoritative, in 3% of the sample the qualifications expected are referred to with the Present Perfect tense, as shown in the instances below:

(17) You'**ve been** a strategic business manager working across the whole sales mix (JA 65).

(18) So if you'**ve made** your mark on a major blue-chip organisation and/or one of the world's biggest brands, this is your chance to […] (JA 83).

A similar effect is achieved in the JAs that make use of the Future Perfect tense when stating the required experience and qualifications, accounting for 6% of the corpus. Examples include the following:

 (19) You'**ll have persuaded** suppliers to innovate at the right price, and **have been** more than happy to challenge the status quo right across the supplier base to drive forward change (JA 81).

(20) A graduate, you'**ll have earned** a minimum 2.1 degree in either maths, economics, statistics […] (JA 94).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The analysis of the grammatical structures found in the sample of job advertisements indicates that certain aspects of the use of modal verbs, personal pronouns, and grammatical tenses signal unequal power relations between employers and potential employees. While, on balance, the way modals are used in the corpus appears consistent with the key communicative functions of job advertising, they also reflect a certain degree of inequality between employers and candidates. The strongest signal of power imbalance include the authoritative use of the auxiliary *will*, as well as the combinations of modal verbs indicating that employers are far more careful when promising benefits than they are when stating their requirements, a finding that contradicts (at least to some degree) the concepts of Employer Branding and the EVP. The fact that the percentage of JAs referring to future employers using *only* the *we/our* structure is significantly lower than the percentage of JAs addressing potential applicants *solely* with the pronoun *you/your*, may possibly indicate that the employers wish to distance themselves from the candidates or treat the candidates with less respect and courtesy than they feel they deserve themselves. Finally, some instances of the use of grammatical tenses in the corpus may be interpreted as signals that employers take for granted the qualifications and experience of the candidates, as well as the latter's readiness to apply for the job. This confirms the

findings indicating that the power relations between employers and potential employees reflected in the grammar of job advertising are not entirely balanced.

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STRESZCZENIE

Relacje władzy między pracodawcami a potencjalnymi pracownikami odzwierciedlone w strukturach gramatycznych ogłoszeń rekrutacyjnych

Słowa kluczowe: ogłoszenie rekrutacyjne, budowanie marki pracodawcy, krytyczna analiza dyskursu, relacje władzy.

Niniejszy artykuł poświęcony jest analizie relacji władzy/nadrzędności między pracodawcami i poten-cjalnymi pracownikami, jakie odzwierciedlane są w strukturach gramatycznych ogłoszeń rekrutacyjnych. Tło dla badania stanowią założenia teoretyczne Krytycznej Analizy Dyskursu oraz koncepcje związane z zagadnieniami budowania marki pracodawcy, w myśl których zatrudniający powinni traktować obecnych i przyszłych pracowników w sposób podobnie rzetelny i troskliwy, w jaki traktują klientów. Analiza warstwy gramatycznej 236 ogłoszeń rekrutacyjnych ma na celu zbadanie, czy struktury gramatyczne występujące w korpusie odzwierciedlają zrównoważoną relację między pracodawcami i kandydatami oraz równomier-ność i obopólność korzyści. Wyniki badania, szczególnie te odnoszące się do użycia zaimków osobowych i czasowników modalnych, sugerują, że relacje te nie są w pełni równorzędne.