Research paper summary

The Literacy Lab 9 “Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports, 1946–2012” by Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre from Stanford University published March 2015 is our key research paper that we have chosen because it investigates the linguistic development of the notoriously incomprehensible World Bank Annual Reports from 1946 until 2012. The paper provides two main investigations into the semantic transformations; and grammatical patterns of the Bank.

Investigating the semantic transformations of the first twenty years of the annual reports, Moretti and Pestre find that nouns are central and frequent (Moretti and Pestre 2015: 2). Adjectives are rare and only used descriptively. Verbs concretize action e.g. to encourage, support or improve. The nouns can be grouped in two main clusters of primarily the economic activities - loans and investments to sponsor infrastructural development projects; and the much smaller cluster describing the operation - demands, analysis and evaluation of programs. The last twenty years are characterized by new semantic clusters. The first cluster of finance indicates the move from agriculture and industry to financial activities e.g. growth, interest and debt. The second cluster of management indicates the change toward monitoring, controlling, rating, goals, agendas, opportunities, challenges and strategies rather than previously suggesting and assisting solutions and publishing descriptive reports.

Unfolding this management discourse, Moretti and Pestre tracked the occurrences of the related expressions of poverty and poverty reduction from 1990 to 2010 to compare their collocates - words that occur most often with the selected words (ibid.: 6). The dominant note near poverty was bank and then, sensibly, million in second and, then, total, cost, population, incomes, services, problems, work, production, employ­ment, resources, food, health and agriculture - terms defining poverty. However, only four of the terms - services, work, resources and health - reappear near poverty reduction. When poverty is the problem and poverty reduction is the policy seeking to resolve it, the words should have many terms in common but the most frequent occurrences for poverty reduction is strategies, programs, policies, focus, management, report, goals, ap­proach, framework, priorities and papers - management discourse where policy is focussed paperwork with goals and frameworks.

The final investigation of the paper into the grammatical patterns of the reports uncovers a bureaucratization of the Bank’s discourse generating a syntax so opaque that it can be difficult for others to understand due to a lack of concreteness for instance words like key, global, innovative and enlightened (ibid.: 13). The Bank also uses two to three times higher frequency of nominalizations - words typically ending in -tion, -sion and -ment (e.g. implementation, ex­tension, development) - than comparable academic prose. This has the effect of transforming actions and processes of the Bank into abstract objects e.g. “South-South cooperation” rather than plainly writing that the Bank is supporting countries cooperating with each other (ibid.: 14).

In sum, Moretti and Pestre find that the World Bank language semantically and grammaticallydevelops into essentially another language (ibid.: 2). In the first decades after 1946, the language is simple, descriptive and straightforward; in the last decades before 2012, the language develops into so-called *bankspeak*, which is a self-referential, complex and codified organizational syntax removed from everyday language difficult for people outside the World Bank to understand. It is this bankspeak that we wish to continue the investigation of from 2012 until the last report published in 2018. Moretti and Pestre criticize the World Bank for writing the reports in a *bankspeak* too unclear for its readers to understand how the bank is handling its money and who is responsible for the consequences of its politics. Diverse actors within - attesting to that the bankspeakis also an acknowledged problem for some World Bank employees - and outside the World Bank have criticized the institution for and warned against continuing down the distancing path followed for decades (QUARTZ 2017).

Although subject-specific language can be efficient when communicating with peers, the complexification of the language challenges the understanding of the annual reports of general readers, which is problematic because these are the people that the World Bank is intended to serve.[[1]](#footnote-1) Failing to communicate in clear and plain language is a transparency failure complexifying holding stakeholders accountable, ensure successful policy implementation and fulfil objectives. If people cannot understand their financial institutions, they are unable to challenge institutional workings, which can lead to distrust, lack of representation and ultimately inefficient policies unable to fulfil their objectives. If the World Bank does not alter its course, fulfilling its objectives will be fundamentally challenged because its language is avoidably difficult, which can impair thoroughly learning from past evaluations to make the necessary future implementations.

1. According to the World Bank, it is a global partnership institution encompassing 189 member countries with staff from more than 170 countries and offices in over 130 locations (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/who-we-are>). The goal of the World Bank is to aide in implementing sustainable solutions to reduce poverty and build shared prosperity in developing countries. The World Bank Annual Reports are intended to provide insight into how the World Bank cooperates with its partnering countries to support global sustainable development, promote shared prosperity and end extreme poverty by 2030. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)