

# **Specialized Language Training for Civil Servants in China and in Italy Today: a Comparative Perspective**

从比较的视角看当今中国和意大利对于公务员的专门语言培训

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Language is a basic tool for the work of the Public administration worldwide, a means for the public offices to exchange information, assign tasks, report results, etc within the administration. And, at the same time, it is a channel to forward any kind of information to the general public. As vehicle to both the internal and the external communication, written language can be considered the main means for the administrative action itself.

Hence, in many countries the quality of administrative written documents is considered relevant for, at least, two different reasons. First, at the institutional level, documents as an output of administrative procedures can testify the correctness of the working methods of the unit which elaborates the texts. Good documents are perceived as a mirror of the right application of processes. And at the same time, from the legal point of view, the correct application of procedures guarantees the texts' efficacy. Second, at the social level, the overall institutional communication to the public is mainly supported by administrative documents. Their quality, therefore, improves the public image of institutions and influences the actual possibility for the citizens to understand the information given by the administration and – when necessary – comply with the rules published in the texts.

In the last decade of the 20th century reforms have been put forward in the administration of both China and Italy. In the two countries the overall reform projects are quite comprehensive and are designed to ameliorate the administrative performance. One of the aspects of the civil service work involved in these reforms is the production of improved administrative documents. As an evidence of the special interest devoted by the two countries to the subject we can refer to two legal texts.

In Italy in 1990 the 241 law redefines the relation between the administrative offices and the citizens, stating new principles such as the right of the people to be informed of any administrative procedures involving them and the right to access any documents relating to them. The right of the citizens to access documents implies a right to understand the administrative texts and a duty for the civil servants to write them clearly.

In China the *Method for the Discipline of Public Documents Written by the State Public Administration Organs*, adopted in 2000 by the State Council, contains detailed rules for the writing of documents within the public administration.

Mentioning these norms is useful to give a general idea of the historical framework in which efforts have been made in China and Italy to improve the language of the administration. Besides, these texts are samples of the discourses on civil service written text production developed contemporarily in the two countries administrations. They are especially relevant because they underline the emergence of a shared need for the development of professional skills in different situations.

A common need which has been met in similar ways: with the publication of manuals for the civil servants training in writing official texts. Since the 1990's we can find in Italy and China books that testify parallel efforts in building stronger abilities in the documents' drafting within the public administration.

This paper is meant to be the record of a work-in-progress comparative research based on the analysis of these textbooks. The analysis of manuals for the specialized language training of civil servants will help us identifying what kind of language skills are requested for the documents' drafting in the public administration, and in the meantime it will shed a light on the present civil servants' expertise in the field of writing public documents in both countries. In particular, our attention will be focused on assessing similarities and differences in the training discourses promoted in the two realities. In this respect, the comparison could also, partly, help us to outline which kind of professional identity is planned for the civil servants in the future.

Notwithstanding the relevance of writing in the administrative work, the choice of concentrating the analysis on the specialized language training, which is only a small aspect of the public administration reforms in China and Italy, is also driven by the need to avoid what Toonen, Bekke and Perry (1996) call the 'equivalence problem'. The authors underline the risk for the researcher, when applying the comparative analysis method to civil services, to attribute wrong meanings to concepts developed in different contexts only for the sake of comparison. To try to avoid this danger, the authors suggest restricting the analysis to a small aspect of the general picture.

## **METHODOLOGICAL DEFINITIONS AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The linguistic data collected for this research are the product of different contexts in geographical, linguistic and cultural terms. Nevertheless, they all address a common subject: the administrative specialized language training for civil servants.

A specialized language is a functional variety of a natural language dealing with a specific field of knowledge or a specialized activity, and is used by a definite group of people to satisfy their communicative needs in that specific sector.<sup>2</sup>

Studies on the administrative specialized language usually emphasize that although this variety shows regular peculiarities and patterns which identify it as an essential professional tool, the boundaries of this language are difficult to mark.<sup>3</sup> Despite the standardized forms of the administration writing, its content is heterogeneous because the civil service tasks address a great number of different aspects of the state and citizen lives. In this respect, in this written variety recurring models and stylistic forms are of major interest, while terminology seems to be a quite fluctuating characteristic.

The theory background of our comparative analysis of Chinese and Italian specialized language textbooks is grounded on the critical discourse analysis approach. The key concept that lies behind this work is that the specialized language textbooks for civil servants foster two kinds of learning processes.

First, these materials help the learner to develop a greater awareness of her/his writing practices and of the shared purposes of public writing. The study of the textbooks could

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<sup>2</sup> Berruto (1974).

<sup>3</sup> Sobrero (1993).

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possibly enhance the civil servants writing skills, even if Janssen (2001) reports the case of the Netherlands where some earlier activities in this field seem not to have produced longstanding effects.

Second, the textbooks offer an interesting insight into the current administrative discourse by picturing – through language training – a specific role the civil servant should play in the society. Explanations of the purpose and nature of public documents are linked to the image of administration that the manual author wants to uphold. It is therefore evident that the language, methods and content of the textbooks contribute to the structuring of discourse.

Fairclough's (1989) definition of discourse as "language as social practice determined by social structures" that "has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and to social change" (p.17) demonstrates the significance of the concept in order to interpret the results of our research. The administrative discourse as revealed by the books could provide a better understanding of the short term effects that the 1990's Chinese and Italian public administration reforms had on the institutions, especially as far as the role of civil servants is concerned. In a period of reforms, discourse is a feedback on the ongoing changes and, consequently, it can contribute to the acceleration or the slowing down of the institutional transformation.

The first step of the present research is a description of the specialized language training patterns applied in the textbooks. As stated in the first paragraph, our aim is to highlight similarities and differences in Chinese and Italian materials in order to clarify their teaching methods and purposes. This will be the content for this paper.

A further step of this research should analyze how and to which extent the teaching of communicative strategies - as presented in these books - seems to effectively promote new social roles for civil servants. It should also try to investigate the main features which are attributed by the teaching materials to these new roles in the two countries. At the present stage it is only possible to make some hypothesis, which will be presented in the next paragraphs and will require further development in the future.

## **DATA DESCRIPTION**

As we have mentioned before, the research is based on the analysis of a few textbooks for the civil servants training in written specialized language, published in China and in Italy after 1993. To my knowledge, in Italy only three manuals have been published on the subject and the most recent one dates of 2003. While in China the production is larger and it is increasing.

This paper, as part of a work-in-progress study, will describe the textbooks contents in a comparative perspective, with an effort to contextualize their peculiarities and to draw hypotheses for the next steps of the research: interpretation and explanation.

In undertaking the initial descriptive task, the concept of genre identified by Swales and modified by Bhatia (1993) will be crucial.

“Genre is a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs. Most often it is highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value.” (p.13)

Here the concept of genre must be applied at two different levels.

First, textbooks for the civil servants language training are expressions of a single genre. This is testified not only by their common communicative purpose and their similar structures, but also by the fact that they are designed for one specific professional community.

Besides, the classification of a set of genres to be used by civil servants is part of the teaching contents proposed by the books. This second field of application of the genre approach is of great concern for the research because the constant use of a set of codified genres contributes to the reinforcement of the discourse community identification amidst the professionals who employ them.<sup>4</sup>

Back to the nature of the data collected, a preliminary assumption is that the Chinese manuals and the Italian ones are not only expressions of a single genre, but can also be considered parallel texts. According to the definition given by Göpferich (2000), these are :

“texts in different languages and/or from different cultures which are not translations of each other, but cover comparable topics and are written for the same purpose” (p. 233)

To confirm this judgment, we can highlight that the books do share a same subject, i.e. the promotion of best practices in the production of written documents in administrative offices. That they are all designed for the same purpose (to inform and train) and addressed to the same group of readers (state administration organs’ employees). Finally, the books have been published independently, they are not translations of each other.

Most of the information required to prove that these textbooks are parallel texts can simply be retrieved from their title. Other indications on the intended purpose and readers can generally be found in the introduction of each book. As shown in the bibliographic references at the end of the paper, the Chinese and the Italian titles testify an evident homogeneity of subject. All titles explicitly refer to a common subject, to the didactic nature of the book and often indicate the public administration as their intended reader.<sup>5</sup> The information given in the introductions is even more explicit. The Chinese texts address either civil servants (公务员) or administrative organs (行政机关); and both the forewords of Liu’s and Cheng’s books define them as manuals (教材) or training materials (培训用书), while the introduction to Zheng’s defines the work a guide to working practice (工作实践) and theory research (理论研究). The Italian introductions include the same information, with the only exception that they regularly mention citizens as relevant recipients of the communicative function of the public documents.

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<sup>4</sup> Swales (1990); Berkenkotter & Huckin (1995).

<sup>5</sup> In the Italian titles, the use of the plural form for the term “administration” refers implicitly to the “administrative offices”.

As we tried to prove, the Italian and Chinese manuals are parallel texts. Therefore, as independent products of different social contexts with some common basic characteristics, they seem to be a good object for a comparative analysis notwithstanding the above mentioned 'equivalence problem'.

## **THE LANGUAGE TRAINING OBJECTIVES IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT**

In the forewords of these works the reader often find a declaration of the aims of the specialized language training. At a first glance, these objectives differ remarkably on a country base. There appears to be a lack of homogeneity between Chinese and Italian textbooks. This difference lays in the authors' declarations about the goals of the specialized language training and about the rationale of the administrative language change.

Chinese authors seek to clarify what an official document is and how it should be forged and employed to better perform the administrative procedures. The Chinese materials focus their attention on the definitions of genre, on the formal aspects a public document must abide to, on the draft writing process, etc. All these features reveal the need to standardize procedures and to guarantee the documents' legal effect. Normalize procedures and certify the legal efficacy of documents are necessary steps in the development of a proficient civil service. The specialized language writing is therefore an important tool for the strengthening of civil servants' professional skills.

The Italian writers promote the application of an administrative language simplification in drafting any kind of official text. The manuals indicate the simplification of administrative language as the principal goal of the civil servants' training. This measure is meant to grant everybody an 'access right' to administrative documents, helping citizen to easily understand the public documents.

Standardization versus simplification, these two aims seem to be completely different. Especially because one perspective stresses the writing process as the main topic of discussion and the other is centered on the readers' comprehension. Nevertheless, the clarification of basic concepts on the one hand and the language simplification on the other can be interpreted as complementary ways of facing the same problem. There seem to be a lack of efficacy in the institutional communication either between administrative offices or with the general public in the two countries. And the problem, according to all the authors, can be solved by developing the civil servants' writing skills.

Chinese and Italians textbooks define different priorities in the process of making institutional communication more effective. The Chinese texts accord a major relevance to the authors' role and to internal communication. While the Italian texts focus on the readers needs and on external communication.

These positions recall the recent global trends in the analysis of the administrative specialized written language shortcomings and are the product of two points of view emerging in the international context. Worldwide, one group equates the reader of the administrative documents with the citizen, stating her/his right to understand the texts as a necessary basis for a better compliance to administrative regulations. This perspective calls for standardization and simplification of texts for the readers' sake. The opposite group

claims the necessity to preserve formal and established language patterns in order to uphold the documents' correctness and guarantee their legal effects.<sup>6</sup>

In the data collected, each author put an emphasis on either one or the other point of view, but there is no exclusion of the other perspective. Often the textbooks highlight the need for precision in applying procedures and – at the same time – the importance to spread clear and simple messages. This seems to be a halfway position amid the above mentioned international groups, which might be a diplomatic way to introduce important changes in the civil servants' writing patterns. In line with the didactic function of the texts, the intermediate position could be a persuasive strategy to slowly modify a rigid situation.

This hypothesis is based on the idea that civil servants attribute great relevance to the appropriateness of their writing products to the organizational culture and hierarchical relations, holding therefore a quite conservative position in drafting documents. It is reasonable to think that the public administration, as any other organization, resist to changes, and that its employees are deeply committed to reproducing the organizational identity and culture even when they write.<sup>7</sup>

## **THE TRAINING CONTENT AND INTERNAL PECULIARITIES**

As a matter of fact, the tools proposed by the textbooks to strengthen the civil servants' writing abilities appear in almost every manual we analyzed, although presented in different ways and with a different emphasis. Ordered from a particular level to a more general one, these three aspects can be generally divided into the following fields of concern:

1. Language guidelines or structures to be preferred by the writer;

According to all the authors, the basic instrument to draft good documents is to apply adequate language registers and patterns. The textbooks usually give indications on how to be formal, objective, unequivocal, exact, appropriate, concise and simple in writing official texts. A multi-layered group of features is indicated as relevant for the production of documents. These include the word, sentence and textual levels, as well as rhetoric devices. The manuals often propose clarifying examples of how to organize the sentences or to streamline a text. This part of the training is clearly focused on the readers' need of an easy access to institutional communication.

2. Specific genres definitions and the explanation of their structures, communicative purposes, intended authors and readers;

The second level of training is based on genres identification in the administration specialized language. Every genre has its communicative purpose and a clear scope of application. Using genres should facilitate the civil servants' work by giving them technical directions on how to choose the suitable writing pattern for a document. This kind of exercise mainly focuses on the writer's needs and intents, even if one can not avoid taking into account the context and the reader when applying a specific genre.

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<sup>6</sup> Fernbach 2003.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Janssen (2001), discussing the results of language training activities for civil servants in the Netherlands, identifies this as one possible cause for a deliberate opposition to change in the writing habits.

This aspect is not common to the two countries textbooks. The Chinese authors always list document genres and explain their use. In addressing this matter they mainly call for the implementation of to the above mentioned 2000 *Method* rules. The Italian writers apply the genre concept only indirectly: they refer to genres by giving examples of some text typologies or by discussing the best document form to reach a specific communicative purpose.

### 3. Graphic indications for the documents layout;

A third level of the learning content is the document layout. Some of the textbooks present the graphic aspect of the documents as a means to increase the quality of communication. They describe the right use of different characters, their size, and the paragraphs structure. Far from being merely aesthetical features, graphics and layout are functional to the readers' comprehension. In parallel, these chapters stress the importance of the positioning of relevant information in the page layout according to a logical order. An aspect mentioned by all authors to uphold the coherence of the text, and at the same time to preserve the legal effect of the document. On the topic we shall remind the reader that the presence and the location of the information about the author, addressee, subject, etc. in administrative texts are crucial to grant efficacy to the documents.

## **SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES**

As the last paragraph has tried to highlight, the specialized language training content does not differ much in the two sets of manuals studied. The classification of the administrative language peculiarities and the main directions given for improvements in the documents drafting seem to be common to both countries. Moreover, the overall description of the administrative language features and the designed field of action for the teaching activities place the analyzed textbooks in a broader international context.

However, despite the similarity of contents in the analyzed manuals, each author gives emphasis to different aspects of the teaching content, producing a significant perception of diversity in the two countries approach. Especially when indicating the general purposes for developing civil servants' language skills.

How can we explain the paradox of trying to achieve different teaching objectives by studying similar contents?

The main characteristics of the administrative specialized language do not change in different places. The problems a contemporary administration has to deal with in terms of internal and external communication are analogous. And these assumptions seem backed by the attention addressed to the same elements in other international contexts.

On the other hand the declared goals for administrative language change, as part of the public administration reforms, can possibly be deeply influenced in each country by the local political context. The nature of the reform project would shape the discourse on civil servants position in the society and on the specialized skills they should develop.

For example, China's policy aimed at introducing new roles and functions for the civil servants after 1993 may put an emphasis on professional skills and standardized procedures

in the administration discourse. And these targets could be reached with an ordinary use of specific genres in the administration writing. Besides, the common use of codified patterns in writing would foster amidst the civil servants the perception of belonging to a discourse community. Therefore, the group cohesion and his on the job efficacy could possibly be enhanced.

Whereas, in Italy, the attention focused on language simplification and on easy access to public document by the citizen are deeply connected with rights guarantee and compliance to the rules. These aspects of the problem can be placed under a democratic discourse label. The evolution of a direct communication between the people and the public administration grant the citizen a negotiating power towards the state, and a common understanding of language is the necessary basis of any discussion between unbalanced-power parties.

In this perspective, the country context plays a relevant role in shaping the declared objectives of training, even if the practical problems addressed by the teaching materials do not differ much. In my opinion, goals are general expressions of the administrative discourse, while the training content tries to meet the real difficulties observed in the offices. From this point of view it seems that the work reality in the two countries administration faces homogeneous problems as far as writing is concerned. Meanwhile, the discourses on the target are different because they are expressions of plans for future institutional changes, a product of the present organizational culture under reform.

A number of further research questions have emerged from the comparative description of the textbooks. And these questions could possibly lead to the research further steps.

Is there a classroom use of the teaching materials we analyzed in the two countries? What are the effects of training in the production of documents in both states? Is there a gap between discourse on administration as promoted in policies and the present situation in the field of civil servants' language skills? How do the differences in discourse between the two countries administration in terms of identity, social role, etc. affect the document writing? Etc...

In the next phases of this research we shall try to concentrate on some of these questions.

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