...the sage moves freely between temporary 'lodging places' instead of being trapped in a permanent standpoint...[understanding] the ordinary language in which meanings fluctuate but right themselves in the spontaneous flow of discourse...

(Chuangtzu)

4.1 Orienting hypotheses

The approach this study takes — what it conceives to be legitimate questions to ask; what it perceives as necessary and adequate evidence to support the intuitions of the researcher; which choices from the array of heuristics the tradition of text study has made available it deems fit for its purposes and so on — is shaped in large measure by a number of hypotheses. Many of these hypotheses are derivations from the empirical and theoretical studies discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Some of them are academic country yokels, in that they are merely a part of the personal credo of the researcher. They are backed neither by previous empirical study or the pronouncements (authority) of an academic heavyweight.

The first hypothesis relates to what constitutes language. It is held in this study that in view of recent developments in language study, the definition of language cannot confine itself to its code aspects i.e. to its syntax, phonology and
semantics. It needs to be recognized that language involves not, to use the terminology of speech act theorists, merely locution. It also involves recognition of its illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions. One entailment of this recognition of language as social action is the need to include in any study of language use the relations that language enters into with other meaning-constituting resources in other semiotic systems in which it participates and from which at least part of its meaning derives.

The second hypothesis relates to the relationship between text and social process. A text, it is postulated, is a product of a universe sustained by values, beliefs, expectations, rules, procedures etc and that it should therefore be a mirror of this universe, the argument being that the product-process dichotomy is a false one, that the process or a large part of it, is manifest in the product, if the product is approached not as an end but as a means to an end (s).

The third hypothesis is, in a sense, a corollary of the second. It pertains to the objectives of text analysis. Since a domain/profession/discipline is a universe constituted of values, expectations etc which are not immediately visible, the meaning of that universe cannot be understood by merely looking at its exterior. The answers sought through tapping limited individual memories are likely to be superficial. It is therefore contended that the task of text analysis is to reveal through a multi-pronged analysis already existing, although often hidden, dimensions of human communication. It should not give "information" about the

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documents but should truly "in-form" the perception of the analyst and reveal the way in which the document is a constituent part of the domain, the "inscape" (Gerald Manley Hopkins, 1844-1889) of the community and its activities. It is hypothesized that it would not be just the individual writer's or institution's past that would be immanent in the document; it is likely that traces of the history of the profession or domain too would have been written into the DNA of the document. "Reading" the text would have to involve unearthing the elements that in-form its "intellectual ecology" (Toulmin, 1972) and reading into it as many of the elements that a bona fide reader would bring to its reading in the form of "members resources" (Fairclough, 1989)

The fourth hypothesis relates to the methods of investigation. This thesis aims to explore the connectivities that bind texts, the people who use them and the contexts which provoke their coming into being, sustains their continued existence and establishes the terms of their meaningfulness. If the goal of research is understanding human communication — how we understand, how we live together, how our history enables or shackles us etc - and the role that language plays in the business of living, then the heuristics for such research needs necessarily to be broad in its scope. It needs to have enough flexibility built into the research design to allow theory to emerge from data and not squint the vision of the researcher through prematurely donning a theoretical lens to whose hues, visual range and predispositions the data is made subject. One implication of this hypothesis is that this study cannot have a theoretical
framework at the outset; it can only have broad theoretical and social orientations.

The fifth hypothesis relates to method of description of findings and conclusions. As the study is exploratory and qualitative, it is held that flexibility, the ability to "spread the attention" is as important, if not more important than "focusing the attention". So the description of findings in the data chapters needs to be inclusive rather than selective. Rigour and selective attention are reserved for the conclusions that emerge from the data.

My notion of text includes the multimodal entity comprising words and other visuals. It also includes the roles this entity plays and the relations it enters into with other texts and with its producers and users. In short, I am attempting to capture the way(s) in which the text and the microcosmic system within which it exists find their conjointly negotiated meaning and mirror social realities and changes in norms, social aspirations, social relationships etc.

One issue that may arise is, if all one wants to do is to discover business norms, would it not be more direct and faster to look at books on business e.g. Johnson and Scholes, (1989). The Annual Report is part of the dynamics of day-to-day business process. It is a concrete instantiation of the principles and practices that frame and give texture to business processes. It thus provides the analyst with a site to seek answers to such ethnographic questions as: which principles of good business practice, which features of the business world as
defined by corporate gurus are operational in the group of companies whose annual reports form the corpus of this study? Are there any systematic, patterned differences between the principles that seem to be in operation in different types of companies? Are there strategies of self representation evident in the annual reports that corroborate or problematize current/popular beliefs about business norms? How do current concerns of the wider society reflect themselves in business? (e.g. Vision 2020, currency crisis)

4.2 Objectives of the Study

In reviewing the key literature in this field in Chapters 1 and 2 and in discussing the social realities within which the Annual Reports of Malaysian companies exist and derive their meaning in Chapter 3, I have discussed the key concerns of this study as they derive from the issues that those three chapters raised. Here I merely summarize the focal areas of inquiry for the sake of ease of reference:

1. How, if in any way, do the Annual Reports reflect the following social processes:
   
   (a) the process of regional and national metagnaphosis that Vision 2020 and The Challenge to the South see as necessary?
   
   (b) the socio-historical processes that influence the evolution of the discourse characteristics of the Malaysian Annual Report and the way in which the discourse accommodates to changes in social structure as well
as to the intellectual procedures, methods and instruments of collective understanding as they change and develop from one time period to another.

2 As "social" in my interpretation of the word is group- and community-related, this next research question centres on community. What information, it asks, do the Annual Reports provide regarding the following aspects of community:

(a) the notion of discourse community;
(b) the intertextual relations between the Annual Reports and other ambient texts;
(c) the enabling functions, if any, of the group conventions, routine expectations, "the kinds of mechanisms embodied in current unreflective practice" (Bazerman, 1988:15)

3 In what senses, if any, are texts indices of social structures, social processes and social practice? What do their structure and use reveal of the empirical matrix within which our human understanding operates?

4 What theoretical insights, if any, does the study of the relationship of the Annual Report to the various interlocking systems of which it is a part give us regarding

(a) the nature of human communication in general and human creativity in
particular?

(b) the processes involved in meaning constitution within a modern business ecology characterized as it is by (i) professional symbiosis within a domain not germane to the disciplinary training of many of the professionals within it, and (ii) the attendant problem of documents generated within it having to speak to a multiplicity of audiences simultaneously?

4.3 Scope of Study

4.3.1 Focus on one side of the reciprocal relationship between society and discourse

This study is based on a social constructionist view of language. There are several interpretations of social construction extant in the literature today (See Rafoth and Rubin, 1987). Whatever view is taken, however, there is a tacit and often explicit recognition of the mutual influence of text on environment and environment on text and the evidence of my own observation of the effects of text on environment strongly urge recognition of this reciprocity of text and environment one upon the other. Despite all this, however, this study only looks at the effects of social process on text and not at the reverse process.

A number of reasons inform this decision. One is the intractability, or at least the difficulty of traction, of the influence of text on environment. One major difficulty would be determining what heuristic and what information would count
in the academic community as necessary and sufficient evidence to "prove" the effect of text on environment. The second reason relates to the extensiveness of the task of exploring the two-way effect of text on society and society on text. It is felt that it is better to acknowledge the two-wayness of the influence and then to concentrate only on one so as to keep the study within manageable size. The third reason is connected to the objectives of this study. The collection of data on the effects of text on social process, it is felt, is outside the requirements of the research questions this thesis attempts to address.

4.3.2 Selection of social processes to focus on

The objectives of this study have two corollaries that have methodological implications. One primary focus of this investigation is to explore the potential of text as a resource for the study of discourse. This focus presupposes exploring the range of information types that can be sourced from texts and methodologically this means identifying as many different types of social processes as there may be and discovering means of teasing this information out from texts. The outcome of such a study would then be taxonomic, producing a list of types of social processes that texts can and do mirror. However, it seems to me that making up lists, while useful, is not useful enough. Taxonomies are not designed to account for the interrelationships that can and do exist between the items in the taxonomy and a study that attempts to account for meaning-constituting relationships, as this study does, cannot take on
board taxonomic enterprises. The number of processes that a text can and does reflect is so vast, it is not just not possible, it is even undesirable to attempt to be comprehensive. The sheer number of trees may prevent, rather than aid, the perception of the shape of the forest. In my selection of the processes that I shall examine in this study, therefore, I limit my focus to the following:

(a) processes that are significant indices of national and international struggles;

(b) processes that are germane to discourse itself but which are socially determined, e.g. the microprocesses by which persuasion is effected, the linguistic processes by which writers' and their companies' social identities are created and projected.

(c) where possible, the interrelationship between (a) and (b) above. For example, how national ideals and the discourse community's norms and values constrain what would be constitutive of a "good company", "good managerial style" etc., and how this is reflected in the way the discourse of individual companies structures itself.

4.4 Reasons for the Selection of Annual Reports

The annual reports of public-listed companies in Malaysia were selected for study for social, theoretical, heuristic, as well as pragmatic reasons:
4.4.1 Social Reasons

It is often argued that one factor that validates a study and gives it significance is the importance of the domain studied. In this respect the Annual Report would rate very highly in that it is one of the most important documents of companies in the private sector and, as we saw in Chapter 3, "For the foreseeable future," the Prime Minister of Malaysia sees this country relying on the private sector "as the primary engine of growth". If discourse is a primary means of accomplishment of the goals and activities of any community, then the discourse of this community must obviously be of great relevance in deciding whether the national aspirations articulated in Vision 2020 would succeed or not.

As clearly indicated by its title, Text as Mirror of Social Process, a primary objective of this study is to explore the ways in which texts mirror social process. The clarity and adequacy with which a text reflects the processes in which the community which uses it (as producers and interpreters) is engaged must surely depend on which members of the community are involved in the production and interpretation of the texts and how many of the text types used by the community are incorporated in the data studied.

4.4.2 Theoretical and Heuristic Reasons

As will be shown in Chapters 5 and 6, the Annual Report, despite its appearance as a unitary document, is a plural entity that contains within its covers the voices of several different professionals who work together within the
business world. This document also serves as the chief organ each company uses in accounting to its shareholders for its performance and in projecting the image it thinks it should project to prospective investors, suppliers, customers, financiers, fund managers and employees. The Annual Report is a document that is influenced by social forces outside the business world proper. Its existence and the structure and content of several of its sections, for example, are regulated by law. It is an integral part of the Annual General Meeting (AGM) which is arguably the most important annual event in each company. The Annual Report, then is likely to be "representative" at least in the following senses: one, it incorporates many of the important features of the modern world like the symbiosis between different professionals envisaged in the "work teams" concept that is gaining prominence in the workplace; two, it allows the possibility of investigating the constraining as well as enabling aspects of public sector regulation of private sector activities as well as the exploration of the significative effect of the intertextuality between legal discourse and the discourse of the domain it seeks to regulate; three, as a part of the AGM the annual report can be a reflection of the activities and concerns of the company in particular and the business community in general and in this sense makes possible the investigation of language as action.

This study attempts to look at texts holistically in their historical, social and cultural milieu. One major dampener on the enthusiasm of most intrepid sojourners into such terrain is the embarrassing (for the analyst) richness of the
data. Indeed most texts are so richly-textured and so bountifully connected, that the job of disentangling the criss-crossing wires and discovering which wires connect which texts to which others and which parts of the text are connected to which other parts and in how many different ways, is not usually possible with the heuristics we now have. The annual report is a highly conventionalized genre and in this sense it is "poor" in that the linguistic, imaginative and intellectual resources it commands are generally highly predictable. In being poor in this way, it offers rich possibilities for one attempting to understand the ground rules of communication before moving on to explore how these rules are exploited in the realms where human innovation, imagination and linguistic resourcefulness are given more free play.

One important issue that has engaged scholars, especially those engaged in research on cross-cultural discourse, is the issue of the possible existence of primary and secondary culture as Widdowson (1979) first pointed out in relation to academic, specifically scientific, culture. Although the possibility also arises in the domain of international business, to my knowledge, this has not been investigated. Since annual reports are a regular feature of large-scale business in every developing and developed country, the comparison of parallel texts necessary for insights into this issue are made possible in a research based on annual reports.
One important reason for the selection of the annual report is the extent of influence that business discourse has upon most other forms of discourse.

As Fairclough (1989) has pointed out, thoughts and ideas are commodified as the sustained metaphor in the following utterance taken from Fairclough clearly demonstrates: "That's a great idea, but can you sell ideas like that to people? Will they buy it, no matter how you package it?" This extensive influence of business English makes the study of one of its primary discourse modes an interesting area of inquiry.

4.4.3 Pragmatic Reasons

One major problem in corpus-based research is access to target texts. This problem is particularly acute in the business sector where the need to keep critical information out of the reach of competitors, and the need to keep confidential facts that the company wants to keep hidden from public access for various reasons make business sector people very reluctant to part with their documents. With the choice of a corpus of annual reports this problem does not arise at all since the Annual Report is a public document that is within easy reach of anyone willing to make the effort to collect them.

The choice of the Annual Report as the site of inquiry has also two salutary effects on the determination of size of sample. Firstly, because the Annual Report is a public document, getting access to them is not a problem and
the researcher would have no problem in getting as many reports as s/he desires. Secondly, the percentage of the population that needs to be sampled before a stable picture of the configuration of features in the Annual Report can be reached is small, in comparison with, say, a corpus of literary works or newspaper editorials. This is because the highly conventionalized form of the Annual Report makes it unnecessary to sample a large number of documents.

One objection may arise as to the appropriateness or even the desirability of using annual reports as the source of information about processes that other disciplines, for example economics and social science, are arguably better able to deal with because these disciplines have better semiotic resources in terms of greater knowledge and more sophisticated infrastructure in terms of conceptual frameworks and methodologies, for gathering information and for interpreting the information that is gathered. It can also be argued that other sources - economic reports, policy documents, research reports - may be more reliable. Again, the answer is that the annual reports are not offered as alternative sources; they are only offered as additional sources. The insights they offer are again not offered as better; only as different. They allow perceptions not available through the other sources. Because they are reports by the private sector of the activities of the private sector, they would enable us to perceive the way in which abstract policies and aspirations for the country and for the private sector actualize themselves on the ground, in the kinds of actions they provoke and the kinds of evaluations and interpretations they invoke. Since material processes are inextricably intertwined
with the thought processes that spawn them, the discourse of the Annual Report which is the report of action, and at the same time an explanation and evaluation of that action, seems an eminently well attenuated barometer of the psychosocial dimensions of this action. Besides, the fact that they are an indirect source (in that they have not been specifically written to talk about these processes) also makes them less subject to the discoursal machinations of those who deliberately set out to justify the ways of themselves to others. While writers of annual reports are notorious image makers (and therefore unreliable), the social processes that are the subject of this thesis are not the focus of their attention and even when these are subjectively skewed, the skewing is a substantial part of the "truth" the thesis seeks to examine i.e. how the private sector (re)presents itself and its actions.

4.5 The Corpus

4.5.1 The Primary Corpus

The primary focus of this study is textual, synchronic and Malaysian. The main source of data for this study, therefore, is a set of forty Annual Reports of Malaysian public-listed companies gathered over a 5-year period from 1990 to 1995. Appendix 1 gives a list of the specific annual reports used.

Table 4.1 below shows the dispersion of the reports according to the number of reports taken from companies in each of the major industrial sectors. The categorization of the companies follows the categories they are put under in the local newspapers.
Table 4.1 Selection of Corpus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Industry</th>
<th>Total Number of Companies in each Sector</th>
<th>Number of Annual Reports Selected From Each Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Products</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Products</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading Services</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properties</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plantations</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed-End Fund</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are 757 companies listed in the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange (KLSE). The following table summarizes the categories of companies listed:
Table 4.2: The number and distribution of all the Malaysian companies according to the industrial sector they belong to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Industry</th>
<th>No Registered in Main Board</th>
<th>No Registered in Second Board</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consumer Products</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Products</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trading Services</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPP</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Properties</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plantations</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mining</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed-End Fund</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>524</strong></td>
<td><strong>233</strong></td>
<td><strong>757</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even a cursory glance at the two tables would point up two ways in which the corpus is skewed. One, the size of the sample is very small, less than 10% of the total for any one year. Two, the selection of the annual reports from each
industrial sector is not proportionate to and therefore not representative of the
distribution of companies in the population.

However, a number of factors "extenuate" this apparent skewness.
Firstly, this is a qualitative study and the issue of statistical reliability therefore is
really not of particular concern.

Secondly, there is evidence that the data is probably sufficient for the
purposes of this study. John Sinclair (personal communication) in an informal
discussion of how one determines how much data is sufficient suggested that one
could take as a rule of thumb the principle that a corpus is sufficient if any
addition of more data into the bank does not substantially change the patterns of
behaviour evident in the results of processing the data in various ways. For
example, there was no significant changes in the way word frequencies
configured with further additions in the Cobuild corpus after the first twenty
million words. I have observed this principle of marginal utility in the
determination of the size of my own corpus. I did this by first analyzing the data
for frequencies and concordances with 30 annual reports and then with fifty. The
addition of the second twenty reports did not seem to make any significant change
in the regularities. My own speculation is that the sample for this study (albeit
small) can provide a fairly accurate representation of the patterns of discourse in
the Annual Reports because of the high degree of conventionalization of this text
type. The variations between texts, it appears, are confined within a rather narrowly circumscribed area of discoursal manoeuvre.

Thirdly, the unrepresentativeness of the sample from the point of view of dispersion of companies according to industrial sector is more apparent than real. This is mainly because the newspaper and stock exchange categorizations are anachronistic. The companies of today cannot be pinned down to a sector because the norm today is diversification and most companies are conglomerates involved in different kinds of business. For example, Kumpulan Guthrie Berhad and Golden Hope Plantation Berhad are two companies that are classified under the Plantation sector but their businesses as Table 4.3 shows are extremely diverse.

Table 4.3 Disparity Between Categorization of a Company and Its Actual Business Involvements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Company</th>
<th>Categorized Under</th>
<th>Actual Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Golden Hope Plantations Berhad</td>
<td>Plantations</td>
<td>Plantations, property development, manufacturing, overseas operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kumpulan Guthrie Berhad</td>
<td>Plantations</td>
<td>Plantations, property development, manufacturing, agricultural consultancy, trading in furniture, healthcare products, landscaping, computer services, rubber merchanting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fourthly, the nature of this study is to look at kinds of information available, not to validate any set of data. Therefore the issue of reliability is not so crucial as the purpose of the study would be fulfilled when the study is able to
suggest ways in which the text mirrors social process. It does not have to prove
that what has been suggested has been validated using reliable data.

Fifthly, even should I want to use the data later for statistical analysis, it
seems to me the loss of degrees of freedom that a stratified sample would
engender and the consequent increase in the difficulty of achieving significance is
sufficient argument for a random sample.

4.5.2 The Secondary Corpus

While the real locus of study is the Malaysian Annual Report of today, an
attempt has been made to give international and historical perspectives, wherever
possible, on the assumption that the here and the now can only truly be
understood in relation to the relevant socio-rhetorical past and to the ambient
international business discourse practice, particularly as it defines the intertextual
world that the Malaysian Annual Report inhabits.

The secondary corpus therefore comprises the following:

a 10 Malaysian Annual Reports of the 1970s and early 1980s. A
primary social process that this study focuses on is the process of
evolution of discourse practice. The Annual Reports of twenty
years ago provide the necessary historical perspective to do this.
Ideally, the ten reports should have been reports of ten companies
whose annual reports form part of the primary corpus. This would have removed the undesirable interference of institutional bias, as a possible factor in accounting for the differences between the reports of today and those of twenty years ago. Unfortunately, however, it was not possible for the researcher to obtain such a sample. Many of the companies of today did not exist then and those that did exist could not make available their annual reports of twenty years ago. The ten reports that have been used, it is taken, are indicative of normative practice in the '70s.

10 Annual Reports each from the USA, Britain and Singapore as well as a few reports from the rest of the world- Sweden, Japan, Netherlands, Australia and Thailand. The reasons for the choice of each type is given below:

**British Annual Reports:** Because of its colonial history, Malaysia tends to look at Britain and British practice as the norm in many things, including law. Besides, the earliest public-listed companies in Malaysia were British-owned. Some of this -e.g. still exist although now under Malaysian ownership. It was therefore felt that an awareness of British practice might provide an insight into the forces that shape Malaysian practice in addition to providing a means of understanding international practice.
American Annual Reports. These were included because a preliminary survey of the annual reports of companies from different parts of the world showed American practice to be the norm towards which the rest appeared to gear themselves. In this sense, they provide a preview of the Malaysian report of the future. Many of the Fortune 500 companies are American and as my social aim in studying these reports is to identify the marks of winners, inclusion of these companies seemed desirable. A pragmatic reason also prompted the choice of the American Annual Report. Unlike the annual reports of other countries, the American Annual Reports were easily retrievable in computer readable form from the Internet.

The Annual Reports of Singapore. These were selected because Singapore shares a common past with Malaysia and because in many senses Singapore's strife, like Malaysia's, is to achieve fully-developed nation status.

The Annual Reports of the Rest of the World. (e.g. Sweden, Thailand, Japan) These were included as a way of keeping tabs on developments in countries which did not have an Anglo-Saxon rhetorical and cultural tradition.
Two facts need to be mentioned at this juncture. One is that although it was originally the intention of this study to include a systematic study of the differences between the Annual Reports of each of these countries and the reports of Malaysia, it soon became abundantly clear that such a scope could only be tackled efficiently by a research team; it was outside the reach of an individual researcher. These reports now only serve as awareness-creation devices for the researcher. Mention is made of them only when reference to them appears to contribute directly to understanding of practices or trends in Malaysia.

Another point is that the annual reports of only the high fliers in each of these countries were used. The reports of average and poor companies were not investigated. This is because the purpose of this study is to look into the practices of leading edge companies to use them as a basis for understanding the practices of Malaysian companies and as a means of placing them in the perspective of international standards of excellence.
4.6 Approach To Text Study


Since CDA is not a specific direction of research, it does not have a unitary theoretical framework...there are many types of CDA, and these may be theoretically and analytically diverse....

He does go on, however, to point out that

given the common perspective and the general aims of CDA, we may also find conceptual and theoretical frameworks that are closely related (van Dijk, 1998:2)

This study adopts the critical discourse analysis framework in the following senses:

1. It shares its heuristically-relevant presuppositions about the language-society relationship:

Language is a part of society, not somehow external to it...there is not an external relationship 'between' language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship. Language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena are social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena...Linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects...Social phenomena are linguistic, on the other hand, in the sense that the language activity that goes on in social contexts (as all language activity does) is not merely
a reflection or expression of social processes and practices, it is a part of those processes and practices...The whole is society, and language is one strand of the social.

(Fairclough, 1989:23)

2 A corollary of the adoption of the above view of language is the perception that the goal of linguistic analysis must be to theoretically bridge the gap between the microprocesses of language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication on the one hand, and the macroprocesses such as power, dominance and inequalities between groups on the other. As will be explained below, this study does not adopt the aims of CDA and hence the macroprocesses it focuses on are not exclusively, or even specifically, related to power, hegemony etc. Although the macroprocess of social engineering, language shift, changes in business values etc replace those of power, hegemony etc, the thrust of the analysis - which is to investigate the links between language and social structure - is the thrust of CDA.

3 This study also borrows from CDA, specifically from Fairclough, the three levels of description, interpretation and explanation which characterize the empirical studies conducted by scholars who describe their work as critical discourse analysis.

4 The investigations of power relations of CDA scholars have
informed this study in two specifically linguistic ways:

a they have helped in the identification of systemic grammar as an explanatory framework for the discussion of the semantic significance of the choice of grammatical elements within the Annual Reports;

b they have also helped in identifying those "syndromes of grammatical features" (Fairclough, 1994:13) and other semiotic resources (e.g. visuals), the careful analysis of whose use in a text yields the most insights about both the macroprocesses under study as well as the microprocesses of linguistic choice and their place in the wider semiotic system. The choice of pronoun use and thematisation in this study, for example, has been largely influenced by the recognition of how useful these have been in CDA studies in revealing the ideologies, subject positions, social realities which often lie implicit and undetected in texts.

This study has also borrowed some of the terms - social practice, ideology, members' resources etc - that form important pegs in the meta-theoretical and conceptual scaffolding upon which CDA scholars rest their explanations.
This study uses the Critical Discourse Analysis analytical framework as its heuristic for the study of the Annual Reports. However, it differs from CDA on a number of counts.

1 CDA appears always to have a political agenda. In the words of one of its proponents, its objective is

- to help correct a widespread underestimation of the significance of language in the production, maintenance, and change of social relations of power
- to help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because "consciousness is the first step towards emancipation" (Fairclough, 1989)

This study makes a concerted effort not to adopt a specifically political stance. The primary reason for this is the researcher's suspicion of mixed epistemologies. Since sociology and politics are disciplines in their own right, any concepts within them need to be evaluated within the intellectual ecology within which they make their paradigmatic choices and from within which they draw their epistemological sustenance. I feel multidisciplinary work, to be genuinely meaningful, demands team effort. This study therefore works from within linguistics, drawing on the strengths that linguistics specifically has as a means of understanding the human condition.

2 Because of their political objectives, CDA practitioners generally select texts which reveal the (negative) effects of asymmetries of power. As is clear from section 4.5 below, this has not been a consideration in my
selection of Annual Reports. In this study an attempt has been made to point out variation and to recognize change, but the focus is on the analysis of how consensual works at the professional and disciplinary level. The study acknowledges asymmetries of power but takes the stance that recognition of the presence of asymmetry cannot ipso facto lead to the conclusion that there is domination with all the negative emotive load that the word carries with it. It is not enough to recognize these asymmetries. This study takes the view that recognition must be complemented by an examination of (i) the circumstances that produce the asymmetry (ii) the way(s) the asymmetry is being utilized and (iii) whether it is an enabling asymmetry or a hampering asymmetry and whom it hampers or enables and with what social effect.

Apart from Pennycook’s (1994) study of the cultural politics of English as an international language, in most CDA studies that I know of conflict of ideologies and asymmetries of power are examined at the level of individuals. In this study asymmetry at the level of North-South heteroglossia – the differential access to economic power as it is embedded in language and the effects of this differential on language choice in Malaysia – is one focus.
3.7 Modes of Analysis

This study has as its theoretical undergirding a simultaneous belief in two apparently conflicting theories of texts. First, it believes with Chuangtzu (quoted at the top of this chapter) and Bakhtin that meaning is ontologically shifting and fleeting. It argues therefore that the best "lodging place" to give oneself for understanding meaning-making practices is within moments of meaning-generation frozen permanently in text events, which can be seen as instances of motion-in-stasis. Second, the study believes that the semiotic resources available are configured in particular permutations by and for the people who habitually share routines in the action semiotic as well as discourse semiotic. As a corollary of this sharing, it is held, certain "structures of expectation" evolve that influence strongly what kinds of topics and what kinds of textual formations a routine text-generating event would trigger.

These two text-related hypotheses led to two complementary text analysis practices in this study. In order to accomplish the first task of understanding the dynamics of text, long stretches of texts were closely analysed to see in what ways discourse structure and discoursal resources are employed by individual text users in the accomplishment of private and communal goals as well as how these resources are (co)deployed in the (re)presentation of social processes, social practices and social identities. The researcher's intuitive response to what kind of analysis would make visible the culture and semiotic habits of the writers and users of annual reports was the primary guide as to how the analysis of any one

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text was to be done. In this sense, the study has forgone the comfort and security of following some specific analytical model in favour of the more risky enterprise of trying to arrive inductively, not at a theory of language, but at some insights that may lead towards a theory of language. The focus here is on the individual, on the way in which communally-owned semiotic resources and the publicly-visible social processes and social structures find their manifestation and use at the micro-level of individual thought, individual utterance and individual action.

The second type of analysis focuses on communal habits of "thought, word and deed". Collages of texts excerpts which deal either with the same topic, the same situation or the same discourse feature are analysed to make visible collective patterns of behaviour.

The Annual Reports are analysed at three levels:

**At the level of the whole text.** In this analysis the various sections of the Annual Reports, their relations with one another and their semiotic links with social structures and social processes are examined.

**At the level of the textbase.** In this analysis the focus is on norms of business argument as revealed by an analysis of the Chairman’s Report. The Chairman’s Report has been chosen because argument is germane to it. The main focus is on content, on the ideational aspect of discourse. Move analysis and argument analysis
are important heuristic devices.

**At the level of surface features.** In keeping with the systemic orientation of this thesis, code features are not studied for taxonomic purposes. Grammatical and lexical features are, instead, seen as indices of larger material, as well as discourse, processes. Lexical chains, semantic relations like antonymy, synonymy and metonymy as well as metaphors are analysed as a means of unveiling hidden orientations and workplace culture.

Social conditions, according to Fairclough (1989:25), relate to three levels of social organization:

1. the level of the immediate social environment in which the discourse occurs
2. the level of social institution which constitutes a wider matrix for the discourse,
3. the level of the society as a whole.

For the purposes of this study, the following levels are recognized:

1. the level of the company
2. the level of the industry
3. the level of the business community
   a. in Malaysia
   b. in the world
4. the level of overall economy and social structure
   a. in Malaysia

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In addition to these, the constantly evolving intertextual environment is also recognized. Figure 4.1 below shows the social context of the Annual Reports as seen in this study:

The Social Context of the Annual Report
Two important aspects of the analysis and reporting of the data perhaps need mention. One is that the subdivision of material and discourse phenomena into the levels discussed above has been used only as a heuristic to guide analytical attention. In interpreting and reporting the findings of these analyses, however, the focus has been primarily on integration of the findings obtained from each of these levels of analysis in revealing the essential features of the semiotic formation of the text(s) under discussion.

The scope of the questions to be answered in this thesis is large as is the corpus from which the answers are sought. This thesis, therefore, does not seek to explore any issue exhaustively. It is much more concerned, instead, with etching out broadly and briefly the kinds of information that the Annual Report is capable of giving: to delineate in what ways this information is given in the text and to describe some of the heuristics that may be used in teasing out such information. The analyses done in this thesis, therefore, are illustrative, not comprehensive.

4.8 Significance of Study

The private sector anywhere in the modern world is an important agent of both economic and social change and it is the source of employment of a large proportion of the population of a country. The social significance of investigating the discourse of the Annual Report which is one of its chief avenues of communication, therefore, needs hardly be rehearsed.
The theoretical significance of this study perhaps needs some articulation. By using text as the primary source of data, the study has attempted in some ways to test the "limits of text" (Swales, 1990). It has attempted to show what general and distinctive strengths text analysis has as a tool in the investigation of language as social action and the relationship that text enters into with the other semiotic resources in creating/sustaining a "universe of meaning". In this sense, the study hopefully works towards restoring text to its rightful place in the study of human communication.

In Greek rhetoric, a distinction was made between doxa (opinion) and episteme (knowledge). In the majority of studies of genre (perhaps because of their genesis in pedagogy) the primary focus has been the episteme. In some, like Kathpalia's work on business English, it has been on doxa. The Annual Report, because it is mandatorily an information-giving document and by choice an opportunity to influence opinion, has been excellent ground for exploring the information-opinion relationship that underpins most texts, even discipline-based texts, as the most recent work on scientific discourse is beginning to show.

The kind of sample selected - a substantial number of exponents of the same genre with possibilities for comparison over time (with annual reports of 20 years ago) and space (with annual reports written in other parts of the world) - makes possible fairly reliable observation of both synchronic and diachronic dimensions of text dynamics. It makes possible, for example, the observation of the evolution of the
functions and text technologies that have characterized this genre over a period of time. It also makes possible the observation of centripetal tendencies like the globalization of discourse that many scholars speak of today.

In the close analyses of texts of different companies we also see the shifting configurations of semiotic resources in the accomplishment of social action. While many studies have recorded the more long term features of genres e.g. their macrostructure, there are few, perhaps none in the domain of business discourse in Malaysia, that attempt to capture the ephemeral, the way people create texts to address their immediate social and economic needs and in so doing actively shape the social, economic and psychological environment that served as the "provoking urgency", the contingency that required the text in the first place. It is contended that to study the ephemeral is to capture the perennially important in human communication. It is a record for permanent observation of the moments at which the constantly shifting and disparate semiotic resources find temporary resolution - and potential actualizes into meaning. Every text is that resolution incarnate. In resisting the temptation to universalize and schematize, this study, it is contended, has argued for the valorization of the moment of experience of the text as the best lodging place from which to experience - and understand - the meaning-making process.

Many of the studies of genre or of professions today tend to focus on single audience communities e.g. research scientists (Myers, Bazerman, Devitt, Swales). However, the social reality of today is of professionals working together in environments
that require them to work symbiotically in the service of common goals. In a corporate entity of today, for example, accountants, managers, lawyers, engineers and economists often work together in ensuring the profit motive is realized. This study of the Annual Report has made possible the observation of the textual construction of the professions (e.g. auditing and management) but it has also made possible the observation of the interaction between some of these professions. Understanding these professions and their discursive operations has also a wider social significance. As Bazerman and Paradis (1991: 4-5) point out in their Introduction,

As these professions increasingly form the framework of modern existence, their texts set the terms of our lives. The better we understand the textual dynamics of the professions, the better we can appreciate the world we have made and continue to make through text. This effort to locate the place of self and society in the world, by means of examining the role of text in constructing that world, is one of the traditional tasks of the humanities.

A further possible use of the perceptions that this study has afforded may be found in the re-configuration of management education in Malaysia. Usually ESP or L1 composition is the target discipline in language study related to different disciplines or professions, specifically the kind of genre studies done by Swales, Dudley-Evans, Frances Christie and J.R. Martin. But here what is being suggested is not the sort of ancillary position that ESP occupies in the education of students of management. A more central and integral role is envisaged. Although a text is often recognized as a response to a rhetorical problem, it is often not consciously recognized that the rhetorical problem almost always has its roots deeply embedded in professional soil and that the responses to the rhetorical problem require excavation of the same ground - for
procedural and discourse frames/recipes, for arrays of semiotic (linguistic, discoursal, action) options from which to create a coherent answer. One of the perceptions that the present researcher has obtained from this study is that a corpus of annual reports of companies belonging to the same domain (e.g. plantation or banking) is a rich repository of management expertise and the dynamics of disciplinary and professional knowledge. One of the accusations made against professional education in Third World educational institutions is that the knowledge they dispense to their students is inert, that the transmissive paradigm of education they purvey leaves their graduates unable to cope with the demands of professional life. They cannot think on their feet although one of the benchmarks of modern professional life is quick and effective response. Brown et al (1989) have argued that acquisition of disciplinary knowledge needs to be situated. They compare acquisition of conceptual knowledge to acquisition of skill in tool use, claiming that

Both are situated and progressively develop through activity... People who use tools actively rather than just acquire them... build an increasingly rich, implicit understanding of the world in which they use the tools and of the tools themselves. The understanding, both of the world and of the tool, continually changes as a result of their interaction.... The culture and the use of a tool act together to determine the way that practitioners see the world; and the way the world appears to them determines the culture's understanding of the world and of the tools. Unfortunately, students are often asked to use the tools of a discipline without being able to adopt its culture. To learn to use tools as practitioners use them, a student like an apprentice must enter the community and its culture.

(Brown, et al., 1989: 33)
The Annual Report, it is suggested, is a means of "entering the community and its culture". This study has been directed at testing the kinds of information that texts can yield and therefore the existence of the recipes necessary for lubricating the decision-making process has not been demonstrated with multiple examples. What it has shown, however, is that these recipes do exist. It is a short step from here for educators involved in the education of managers to look for the examples of situated managerial problem-solving extant in these annual reports - what different managers did with the same problem (shortage of labour is an example analysed in this study), how a particular situation e.g. launching a new product and industry (the automobile industry is discussed in Chapter 7 of this thesis) etc. These problem-solution texts can be the basis for seminar-style discussion of managerial issues in the style of the Harvard Business School. The annual reports are records and repositories of several things of value to apprentices or new entrants to an industry and to the field of management: different managerial problems and strategies; several solutions to the same problem, the evolution of growing understanding and greater and newer resources (for example computers); information about the "conversations" privileged in a particular domain of work (plantations were studied in this thesis). These facts make the annual report a short cut to experience usually acquired only after years of working in a particular industry.

4.9 Limitations of the Study

The limitations in this study can perhaps be classified into a number of categories:
4.9.1 *Limitations related to primary and secondary data sources.*

The choice of text alone as the source of data on social process has allowed the researcher the opportunity to discover the awesome potential in texts but it has also made the researcher aware of its bounds. For example, the aim of this thesis to test the ‘limits of text” excluded the possibility of including some ethnographic data- gathering devices like interviews with key participants. According to two of my informal informants - one an American lawyer who worked in an American public-listed company and another a copywriter in a Malaysian public relations company that prepared the Annual Report of the conglomerate that owned it - the usual process of Annual Report preparation was for the CEO to decide on the thematic keynote and to either provide the data to be presented in elaborating this theme or to provide a first draft of his Chairman’s Report. This data or first draft then becomes the core around which the rest of the Annual Report is elaborated. Several meetings are held between those responsible for this elaboration. Looking at changes wrought at each of these stages and meetings and talking about the reasons for the changes would have provided invaluable insights into business culture and its manifestations in the rhetorical culture it nurtures and uses as its tool. Talking to actual users of the Annual Report – e.g. fund managers and lay shareholders – would have given more depth to some of the speculations the thesis makes, especially those related to the reception of the Annual Report. The confinement of the source of data to texts precluded the use of these other data sources.
Another difficulty that the researcher faced was the unavailability of certain kinds of data. For the diachronic study of the Annual Report, copies of the reports of some of the companies whose annual reports formed the primary corpus were sought. But these were not available, the archives having major gaps in their collection. This meant using happenstance resources; whatever reports were available for the period were used instead of whatever reports would have given the best insights. The same was also true of the foreign reports although, since they didn’t enter into the main object of the study and were merely used to get some idea of world-wide trends, happenstance could be interpreted as random in their case. A more serious problem, however, was the unavailability of information, especially on written business discourse in the Malay tradition. This has made the discussion of the interplay of local and global features in the discourse extremely shallow. Asma Abdullah’s book, Going Glocal was helpful to some extent but because it dealt more with primary culture and its implications concerned more face-to-face management practices than written business discourse, the information gap was not altogether filled.

4.9.2 Limitations related to scope.

The issue of defining the “problem space” (the bite size) to a size that allows sufficient mouthroom for churning and ultimate digestibility and assimilability of content bitten is an important one. The present state of knowledge of human communication and the heuristics available for its study make necessary this

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intellectual prudence and circumspection. The bite size in this study in retrospect seems a little too large for individual effort. One result of this was a form of intellectual breathlessness that didn’t allow the researcher to dwell on any topic for long enough.

4.9.3 *Limitations related to reporting of findings.*

The untidy richness of human communication and its resistance to easy pigeon-holing were a major source of difficulty in reporting the findings. Throughout the whole effort to organize the reporting of the findings there was always a tension between the need to report the data in such a way as to enable the reader to "make sense" of it (which often meant (over)simplifying into categories that occluded important variations) and the need to give some intimation of the awe-inspiring richness of the interacting variables in any one text-event (which made the perception of any theoretical generalization very difficult indeed). I attempted to balance the two in two ways: (1) by organizing the findings into largish categories that allowed the perception of the interaction of many variables and (2) by ensuring that there was close analysis of several longish texts. It was hoped that this combination would give some intimation of the recurrent meaning-making resources and the typical configurations into which they permute. However, this has not been altogether satisfactory.
4.10 Definition of Terms

The important terms used in this study have all been discussed and defined in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.