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Functional evaluation of public information about laws and regulations

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In this article we explore the use of a functional analysis as a method for evaluating public information brochures. We analyzed six brochures from the Netherlands Ministry of Justice about laws and regulations. First different target audience segments of each brochure were identified. Then the functions the brochure had to fulfill were specified for each audience segment. Functions frequently used included: (1) informing to support a decision, (2) instructing what to do, and (3) informing to support the understanding and the evaluation of proceedings. After that, from each function a set of requirements was extracted, against which the brochures were tested. This method is illustrated by an analysis of a brochure about changing names. It appears to be a useful way of discovering deficiencies in public information.

1 Introduction

In technical design processes, for example in developing software, a distinction is made between the functional and the technical design specification. The functional specification, for example, indicates the tasks and manipulations users should be able to carry out, working with a software program. Then the technical specification indicates how the program should be organized in order to make those functions effective.

This distinction also appears to be useful for text design processes. Consideration of both the text aims and the intended readership ideally leads to a functional specification of the text that has to be designed. A plan of the text content, structure and style can be interpreted as a technical text specification: ideally this will indicate how the text should be organized in order to adequately fulfill the intended functions.

In a series of publications Lentz & Pander Maat have drawn attention to the functional analysis of texts. They developed a method by which functions are allocated to a text on the basis of context and text analysis. These functions then form the basis for formulating text requirements and evaluating the text or text type involved. The method was developed using public information texts on subsidy regulations (Lentz & Pander Maat 1992, 1993), safety regulations (Lentz
1991) and patient information leaflets (Pander Maat & Lentz 1994). Also, Elling’s research into the effectiveness of safety instructions starts with a functional analysis of this type of text (Elling 1991, 1992).

Functional analysis is not a method for the functional specification of texts *in advance*, but for the reconstruction of a functional specification *afterwards*. Lentz & Pander Maat extrapolate from the functions text requirements and a 'functional evaluation scheme' that is used for the evaluation of existing texts. Nevertheless the results of the functional analysis, a specification of functions and requirements, are comparable to the functional and technical specification used in other design processes. Although we do not go into it here, it seems useful to work out the possibility of functional and technical specification as a first phase in text design processes. (Cf. Pander Maat 1994.)

Lentz & Pander Maat (1992, 1993) present their text-focused evaluation method as an alternative to the reader-focused evaluation methods Schriver (1989) advocated. Schriver has in mind here readability formulas, computer-based stylistic analysis programs, guidelines and checklists and she writes about text-focused methods:

> The inherent weakness of these methods lies in their predominant focus on word and sentence-level features of the text. Typically, their output provides little, if any, information about how the document is working at the paragraph and whole-text level. Perhaps the biggest weakness is that their output provides no information about the reader’s needs. (p. 244)

Schriver has a strong preference for reader-focused methods (which rely on feedback from the intended audience). What she has in mind here are techniques such as the cloze test, comprehension tests and thinking aloud protocols. These methods provide better information about whole-text or global aspects of text quality, and about how the audience may respond to the text. Schriver concludes:

> Overall, reader-focused methods such as protocol-aided revision can help writers achieve a better model of readers actively engaged in meaning construction. Such a model of readers is helpful not only in revising the text under evaluation, but in planning and revising future text. (p. 252)

On the basis of a small-scale comparison of their method with a pretest according to the plus-minus method, Lentz & Pander Maat (1992) claim that their functional text evaluation method compares well with reader-focused methods. They conclude that their method 'works more efficiently and produces
feedback of a better diagnostic quality than its reader-focused alternative.’ Lentz & Pander Maat (1993) present some further indications of the usefulness of their method of functional evaluation as compared to reader-focused methods.

In this paper we are interested in the same questions: does a functional analysis provide a good basis for evaluation, and are Schriver’s objections against text-focused methods accommodated by the functional analysis? The Dutch Ministry of Justice commissioned us to carry out a functional analysis of six brochures on laws and regulations important to the general public. Five out of the six brochures deal with legal provisions that citizens can, in principle, use: it is up to the individual citizen to decide. The brochures deal with Divorce (Echtscheiding), Alimony (Alimentatie), Legal Restraints (Bewind en curatele), Objections and Appeals for Benefits (Bezwaar en beroep bij uitkeringen), and Change of Name (Naamswijziging). A sixth brochure, ‘You are a suspect’ (U wordt verdacht), has a somewhat different character: it deals with the rights and duties of suspects in a criminal case. Here it is not up to the citizen of course to decide.

The analytical purpose was: highlight problems in these and similar brochures in order to formulate design guidelines for this kind of informative texts. It is the explicit aim to dedicate this functional analysis to the redesign of existing texts and the design of new texts. In this article, however, we do not address the latter. Our aim is to demonstrate the kind of problems revealed by a functional analysis, and to discuss the potential contribution of this analysis to text evaluation.

In our functional analysis we will answer the following questions for each brochure:

1. Audience analysis: for which target groups is the brochure intended, and how are they segmented?
2. Functional specification: which functions must the brochure fulfill for those target groups/segments?
3. Specification of requirements: which requirements can be derived from the functions that have been formulated?
4. Evaluation: what are the problems when assessing texts against the formulated requirements?

In broad terms our method is comparable to the one that Lentz & Pander Maat (1993) use, except for two major differences:
- Lentz & Pander Maat do not distinguish target group segments. For the information on subsidy regulations (not aimed at citizens but institutions and
companies) they specify one homogeneous target group: 'potential applicants'. This may be the result of the kind of texts that they selected for their research, but we are not completely sure. For them a segmentation of the target group could also be a useful possibility.

- Lentz & Pander Maat argue in favor of starting the functional analysis from the context: what are the aims of the organization and the relevant policy, and which functions are attributed to the text by those involved. Subsequently the functions are formulated in terms of interaction between context and text analyses. We have chosen a primary text-driven approach. Only when the text analysis raises questions of interpretation of judicial aspects, we call in the experts.

We will later return to these differences.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the analysis of all six brochures. We will illustrate our method and results by focusing on one: the brochure Change of Name. This brochure shows a picture of the possibilities that Dutch legislation offers for changing first and last names. It comprises 32 pages half of which are appendices. The appendix (10 pages) contains the entire text of the Guidelines for Change of Surnames 1989 (Richtlijnen voor geslachtsnaamwijziging 1989). As far as we know an appendix like this which includes a complete regulation is highly exceptional. In our analysis we have concentrated on the informative text and not on the Guidelines. The Guidelines only proved useful for a few interpretation problems.

2 Audience analysis

The main question in audience analysis is: which readers does the brochure address? Of course, it is possible to define an audience in general terms: people who want to know more about law or regulation X. But this general description ignores the fact that different people in different situations need different information. For this reason it is insufficiently precise as starting point for a functional analysis of a brochure. The question of the information need may seem empirical and could be empirically investigated, for instance by a survey. For brochures in a judicial context another and possibly more effective way exists to describe the audience and the information need: namely analysis of the readers implied in the brochure, and, indirectly, of the different positions of citizens in relation to the law or regulation.

In our case studies we abstract the different audience segments from the brochure text by asking, for each unit of content: which part of the audience needs this information, and what are the distinctive features of this audience
A number of fragments from the brochure *Change of Name* (p. 5) follow to illustrate what we mean.

1. It may be not clearly established whether there is a difference between your first name and your surname. If you have the Dutch nationality you may have your first name and surname determined by royal decree. If you wish to do this, you must follow the procedure for changing surnames.

2. When a woman marries, she keeps her own surname. A married woman always retains the right to use her husband's name.

3. A bill is before parliament regulating that, among other things, married men will have the right to use their wife's surname.

4. If you wish to change your first name, you must lodge a request with the court of law in your district.

First of all, these fragments illustrate that the brochure target group is highly heterogeneous, even though they could be described as 'readers who wish to find out more about the possibilities of changing their names.' The fragments are important for the following groups consecutively.

1. readers with foreign names without a clear distinction between first name and surname;
2. women who wish to use their husband's name;
3. men who wish to use their wife's name;
4. readers who wish to change their first name.

In practice readers unlikely will be interested in all these possibilities simultaneously. Such an interest can only be assumed among lawyers and legal advisors. Readers looking for an answer to a personal problem with their name, will be interested in one, or only a few of the possibilities.

Secondly, the fragments illustrate that the information needs of the different segments are not the same. It is always possible to divide the brochure target group into segments (male vs. female, age, social/economic categories, etcetera.). This, however, makes only sense if there are good grounds for believing that the information needs of these different categories differ in essential ways. This too appears to be the case here. Fragment (1) refers to a procedure for changing surnames, which is the subject of the largest part of the brochure. Fragment (4) refers to an entirely different procedure for changing first names. Fragment (2) refers to standard practice. Readers of fragment (3) must wait for future legislation. The questions that readers in the different situations can pose, require a
wide range of answers. Considering these types of readers as separate target
group segments is therefore useful.

We propose to distinguish a separate audience segment if part of the target
audience can be characterized by a feature F, and as a consequence of F, has an
information need different from other parts of the target audience. In many texts
about laws and regulations target group segments with different information
needs can be identified for various reasons. We cite four below and illustrate
them once more on the basis of the brochure *Change of Name*.

**Firstly**, target group segments are defined by different readers’ situations and
their different applying conditions.

For this reason, in the brochure *Change of Name*, a distinction certainly has to be made
between the following categories and subcategories:

- readers who wish to change their first name
- readers who wish to change their surname
  - because it is ridiculous, annoying, or too common
  - because it is a non-Dutch name
  - because the name is incorrectly spelled
- readers who wish to change a minor’s surname into:
  - the mother’s name
  - the stepfather’s name
  - the foster parent’s name
  - the name of a partner with whom one is living together

Different conditions and procedures apply for each case, as do other procedures. So the
different segments have to be informed in a (partly) different way.

**Secondly**, target group segments are defined because the law may indicate
interested parties in the effectuation of a right, apart from the applicant or
initiator. Their rights and duties are also specified.

An example of this concerns the change of a minor’s name in the brochure *Change of
Name*. For such a request, the law indicates the following interested parties:

- the parent whose name is currently being used
- the person after whom the child is to be named
- the child for whom the change of name is being requested

In designing such a brochure one may, of course, choose not to consider some segments
as a target group. As far as a minor is concerned, for example, the brochure does not
appear to be the proper source of information. The other interested parties, on the other
hand, will look for information in the brochure that is relevant to them: they agree with or
object against a name change request, and their views will always be considered.

**Thirdly**, target group segments are defined because in many cases other (related)
legislation is also relevant. This can take care of the situation where another law
or regulation is important, besides the laws or regulations to which the information primarily pertains.

As we have indicated, the brochure Change of Name deals primarily with changing the first name and surname. Readers who are seeking the solution for their problem in the brochure may discover that for them an appeal for another regulation is relevant. This is the case, for example, for the following target group segment:

- readers for whom the procedure is too expensive and who wish to apply for a reduction or total exemption from payment.

For this category of readers (that cuts right across the categories defined under the first point) the brochure contains separate information about possibilities, conditions, and procedures.

Finally, the phasing of procedures provides an important reason for target group segmentation, to be discussed in the following section.

The reason for identifying audience segments in this way is that they have a different information need. As a consequence, firstly the brochure must enable each segment to find the relevant information as easy as possible, and secondly, the brochure must present the information relevant to the reader segments without an appeal to knowledge from brochure parts that are otherwise irrelevant to them. In other words, for brochures like this one we cannot assume a linear reading process. The individual reader has no reason whatsoever to read the text from cover to cover. Texts with a highly segmented audience have to comply with severe structural requirements.

3 Specification of functions

In the functional analysis of the text, the main question is what the intended effects of the text are on the intended readers. These effects indicate what the reader must know, think, or be able to do after reading. In order to discover these, it is necessary in some cases to take a context-driven approach, such as Lentz & Pander Maat (1992) advocated. The functions that an organization for example attributes to its annual report or personnel magazine can usually not be concluded directly or exclusively from the text. In our case, however - public information brochures on legal provisions for citizens' use - we select a text-driven approach. Here it does not make sense to analyze the organizational and policy objectives of the Ministry of Justice. When informing individual citizens it is also not relevant what the legislators' aims are, nor the societal effects that they have in mind.
The main aims are informing citizens about legal provisions that they are eligible to use, and enabling them to effectuate their rights. The possibilities that exist, the conditions which must be satisfied, and the procedures that must be followed, are legally determined, and the brochure text attempts to communicate as best as possible. This is why, in our situation, we base the functional analysis on the text, and at most (as an additional check) briefly examine the 'context', by consulting the law or regulation concerned, or by asking experts for more information.

For the functional specification it is of primary importance that readers may find themselves in different situations in relation to the law, as indicated in the previous section. Depending on their target group segment, they may need different information, and they may have other tasks to carry out. In addition, what they need to know or do is determined by the procedural stage in which they find themselves. They must take note of the possibilities in their specific situation and be aware of the consequences. They must decide whether or not to use the possibilities, initiate the procedure, they must remember the broader picture during the procedure, and take the right steps, and finally they must know how to act if the procedure does not produce the desired outcome. In fact, for these reasons a second target group segmentation occurs that cuts right across the segmentation presented earlier.

For the brochure Change of Name we distinguish:

• readers who wish to check if the law offers possibilities for solving their problem with a first name or surname, and who must decide whether or not to lodge a request for a change of name
• readers who wish to initiate the procedure
• readers who have lodged a request for a change of name and wish to ensure that their procedure is successful

Within the category 'readers who have lodged a request for a change of name' it is possible to further differentiate according to each step in the procedure. For example, readers who learn that their request cannot be considered, need different information from those who are summoned to explain their request orally; readers who are confronted by other parties' objections need different information from readers without objecting parties.

This kind of segmentation may not be necessary if we could take for sure that every reader has to follow the same route through one and the same procedure. In fact the procedures concerned do have many branches for different cases. Therefore, every reader has to find his own path through the procedures.

It makes sense to relate the main functions of the brochure text to these target group segments: the functions are thus directly linked to the tasks that readers either freely take upon themselves, or are required to fulfill by the regulation. We are now able to distinguish between the following five main functions.
Informing (speech act) readers considering a change of name (target group) about the possibilities applying to their situation (subject), so that they will be able to decide whether or not to submit a request for a change of name (effect).

Instructing (speech act) readers having decided to submit a request for a change of name (target group) regarding the procedure (subject), so that they will be able to initiate the procedure and carry out the requisite actions in the procedure (effect).

Informing (speech act) readers having submitted a request for a change of name (target group) about the procedure (subject) so that they will be able to understand and evaluate the outcome of their request (effect).

Instructing (speech act) readers involved as interested parties in another one’s request for a change of name (target group) regarding the procedure (subject), so that they will be able to make their objections known (effect).

Informing (speech act) readers involved as interested parties in another one’s request for a change of name (target group) about the procedure (subject) so that they will be able to understand and evaluate the outcome (effect).

It is important to realize that these main functions must be fulfilled for different target group segments. Only the kind of functions (informing to support a decision, instructing and informing to support understanding and evaluation) and the kind of audience segments (initiators and interested parties) are limited. So, these functions have to be more precisely specified per target group segment, in order to allow an inference from text function to required content. For the sake of brevity, we omit the more detailed specification here.

In our formulation of the main functions we found that, for the brochures we analyzed, the same terms could recur: informing people to support a decision, instructing them so that they can carry out certain actions, and informing them so they can understand and evaluate the outcome. In fact, we are dealing here with three kinds of functions that are inextricably linked with the information on legal provisions citizens may use. In Lentz & Pander Maat’s (1993) analysis of information about subsidy regulations for institutions these functions are also used, in somewhat different terms. They talk about ‘supporting self selection’, ‘giving insight in the procedure’ and ‘instructing’ as main functions. The only function we do not come across is ‘motivating’, that is convincing readers that it is worthwhile appealing to the regulation. This can be explained by the fact that the government in the cases we examined does not strive for the maximum possible use of the regulations. It is not in the government’s interest that people change their names in large numbers, put their parents under legal
restraints, or pay alimony after divorce. Moreover, here it is not the task of the government to influence the decision process in any direction.

4 Requirements and problems

From the different functions that we ascribe to texts, requirements can be extracted which the text must comply with. The difference between functions and requirements is that functions refer primarily to reasons for using the text, whereas the requirements are formulated in terms of text characteristics. We could consider the formulated requirements as a first step towards a technical design specification.

After the last step the actual text evaluation comes into the picture: we now test the text against the formulated requirements. This results in a description of bottlenecks or problems where the text does not conform to the requirements.

We will illustrate the formulation of requirements and the problems that testing texts against requirements can produce, once again using the brochure Change of Name. For the sake of clarity, we limit our discussion to the main functions we indicated in the general terms above, and we do not systematically break them further down into the many target group segments that can be distinguished for this brochure. Of course we will mention the relevant segments along with the problems our analysis brings to light.

Informing to support a decision

The first function that we identified above implied that the brochure must enable readers to make a decision as to whether an appeal to the relevant law or regulation will make sense in their particular case. From this we derive the following requirements for the brochure Change of Name.

Requirement 1: the brochure must provide readers with a clear overview of the possibilities for name changes (both by appealing to the Guidelines for Change of Name and in other ways).
Requirement 2: for all existing possibilities for changing names, a complete and clear overview must be given of: 1. The conditions that apply, 2. The costs and the effort that changing a name will involve, 3. The consequences, and 4. The chances of success.
Requirement 3: the information that supports on lodging a request to change a name must be clearly stated in a specific part of the brochure.
The requirements are formulated in such a way that the brochure supports the decision optimally. The proviso between brackets in the first requirement is not without importance. From a legal perspective, alternative possibilities which do not involve use of the concerned law are unlikely to be included in the brochure. However, given the problems that readers are likely to seek solutions for, this would be an important addition. It precludes people from making use of a legal regulation, when a better or simpler solution outside of the regulation concerned is available in their case.

Testing the brochure *Change of Name* against the first requirement immediately reveals a problem. The brochure does discuss all different possibilities, but a complete impression of the possibilities can only be formed when the reader reaches page 9 of the brochure. By then, the reader has read too, all the conditions for different situations and some of the information about appropriate procedures. A list of possibilities was presented earlier in the brochure (p.5), but that list is not complete. Some of the other possibilities precede, including the possibility of determining the surname where no clear distinction exists between first name and surname. And one possibility is only mentioned later on: the possibility of changing a child’s surname into the name of the male partner the mother cohabits with. Those who read the text of the brochure from cover to cover will possibly not experience any difficulty at this point. Readers who do not read it completely (presumably the majority), may draw the wrong conclusion from the incomplete list of possibilities on page 5.

The second requirement also relates directly to supporting a decision. Here not only the conditions are included, but also the costs, the consequences, and the chance of success. In the case of a law or regulation, the specification of conditions in a brochure usually presents no problem. These conditions can usually be derived from the text of the law and that is what happens. The other three categories are different. The costs and efforts that an appeal to a law or regulation require, usually depend on the execution procedure. Information about it can easily be hidden in the procedure description and therefore wrongly be left out of the decision-making process. Usually, from a legal perspective, no information about further consequences and chances of success is available. The brochure *Change of Name* illustrates some of these problems. The description of the conditions which must be complied with in different situations is not accompanied by information on costs and procedure duration. It is also not mentioned that the costs, the duration, and the chances of success strongly depend on the possible objections of interested parties. This only becomes clear in the description of the procedure. Through the legal perspective dominating the brochure it appears as if they citizens can make a decision by testing whether they meet the conditions set. Other information that might play a role in that
decision is ignored or presented where it does not appear to be related to the decision. For this reason a decision turns unnecessarily complex in the reader’s perspective.

Instructing people what to do

Brochures showing citizens possibilities they might use, require precise instructions on the steps they must take to effectuate their rights: what should they do, when, and how? This is not only relevant for the first step of the procedure, but also for the subsequent steps in which the citizen must react to government or executive authorities actions. Seldom these procedures are restricted to submitting a request, and a positive or negative decision in response. What is more, the instruction is usually not restricted to those who wish to make use of their rights; interested parties that can often lodge their objections, must also be instructed on the actions they can undertake.

For the brochure Change of Name we derive from the instructive functions of the brochure (functions 2 and 4 above) the following requirements.

Requirement 4. The brochure must clearly indicate which actions the readers must take, when, and in which order.

Requirement 5. The brochure must clearly and comprehensibly, yet precisely describe how the actions must be carried out by the readers.

For the readers who want to change their surname, the most important audience segment, the brochure appears to comply with these requirements. Nevertheless, on closer examination problems exist in both the brochure contents and in the layout. One content problem is that part of the procedure is written primarily from the perspective of changing a minor’s surname. The relevant documents that must be attached to the request are indicated by means of an example from this perspective. It is therefore unclear what one must send in a different situation. Here the instructions clearly lack essential details. In addition, the instructions are not differentiated from the informative passages in the layout. The actual instructions are quite often hidden between other information.

Apart from these problems, readers who wish to change their surname are instructed in a fairly clear manner. Other readers’ segments, however, receive considerably less clear information. Interested parties that could lodge objections against a request for a name change - for example ex-partners who do not approve of the name change of their child - come off badly. The kinds of objections that they can lodge, and how, are insufficiently described in an extremely short manner. (‘Reasons must be given for such an objection and a connection with the request for a change of name should exist.’) One might
suppose that the interested parties do not belong to the intended target group. If so, this should, in our view, at least be made clear somewhere in the brochure. Preferably, interested parties would be directed to another source of information. As things are, we assume that they have become the victim of the in itself praiseworthy author’s attempt to empathize with a different part of the target group.

Also the instruction for another audience segment (readers who wish to change their first name) is extremely cursory. Readers do find out that they must lodge a request to the court of law, engage a lawyer and pay fees to the court clerk, but it does not become clear how and in which order they must proceed this. Probably the number of people who have their first name changed is insignificant compared to that of those wishing to change the surname of a child. Perhaps this was taken into consideration when taking a summary approach here. However, providing partial instructions is almost asking for trouble. It would be better to leave this whole target group segment out of the functional specification of the brochure. Of course, then the necessity of giving precise instructions on this point becomes redundant. Another consideration for taking a summary approach may be that this procedure (changing a first surname) cannot proceed without engaging a lawyer. In general one could restrict the instructive (not the informative) function of this and similar brochures to those (parts of) the procedures that the citizen must be able to go through without the help of experts. In this case we would argue that the text should also be more emphatic in this respect. The instruction will then be restricted to one advice: engage a lawyer.

Informing to support understanding and evaluation

A third main function in brochures such as these, is that they must inform readers who have started the procedure, or who are involved as interested parties in the procedure, in a way so that they are able to understand and evaluate its outcome (functions 3 and 5 above).

We formulate the following requirements for the brochure Change of Name:

Requirement 6: the brochure must clearly indicate the consequences readers may expect from the actions they will undertake.

Requirement 7: the brochure must give the readers insight into what will happen ‘behind the scenes’ after they have taken action (such as actions by third parties, assessment criteria, and intermediary decisions).

Requirement 8: the brochure must ensure that readers keep a view on the procedure they follow. It must be clear at each stage of the procedure what the previous steps were, and which possible subsequent actions exist.
Testing the brochure against these requirements, we see a discrepancy again between the ways different audience segments are informed. For the main procedure of changing a surname, it is always clearly indicated what reaction the readers may expect to their taken steps and when to expect it. Also the description of proceedings 'behind the scenes' is generally clear. This comprehensiveness, however, does introduce other risks. In total the procedure description takes six pages which, in some parts, lack an overall clear structure and contain a fair number of (necessary) digressions about the treatment of objections and appeal procedures. Moreover, the use of headings is far from systematic, and a schematic presentation of the procedure from beginning to end is lacking. Only experienced readers will be able to deduce an overview of the procedure from the text without difficulty. Less experienced readers will probably soon lose track in the whole process.

In addition, the interested parties again receive confusing information here: it is not clear when they may object or where in the procedure these objections will be examined. Apart from that, this information is of course also important for the applicants.

The procedure description for readers wanting to change a first name is extremely brief. Indeed readers will as a consequence not easily lose sight of the overall picture. Yet, scarcely any information is given about the criteria that play a role in the decision. With one or two exceptions, the criteria on which a request is accepted or rejected, remain unclear.

Supporting the selection of relevant information

Up to now, we could immediately deduce the requirements as we have formulated them, from the main functions of the brochure. Most of the problems observed show that one of the main functions is not optimally fulfilled for a particular target group segment. In addition, however, also some requirements exist that are neither attached to a single function, nor can be formulated in terms of a single target group segment. It is exactly the combination of functions for a highly segmented target group that results in different demands of the text. The text must be structured so that readers can easily find the information relevant to their situation. This applies to readers who have a different kind of name change in mind: those who wish to change a ridiculous surname have to deal with conditions and procedures, different from the relevant ones for people who wish to change a minor's name.

The same applies for readers who find themselves in different phases of the same procedure: they are orientating themselves, learn about the possibilities, and look for information different from those who, for example, wish to appeal
against a negative decision following a request. The combination of functions and target group segments involves the following requirements.

Requirement 9: the brochure must be composed in such a way that the readers can easily find information that is important in their situation and also skip irrelevant information.

Requirement 10: the different readers groups must receive their information in a form most specific to their own situation.

These requirements demand a construction that is modular to a large extent. The modules must be clearly marked, both at beginning and end. And the information in each module must be optimally attuned to the use required by the relevant target group segments. It is not acceptable to assume that readers will read brochures in a linear fashion: on page 11 one may not assume that all the preceding pages have been read.

With regard to requirement 9, the brochure Change of Name displays a few inadequacies despite the intensive use of sub-headings. At the beginning of the brochure readers are not guided very well to the passages relevant to their situation. The table of contents is neither complete, nor very clear. Apart from sensible headings in the question form, there are also less informative sections such as 'Another name', 'Determination of name' and 'Adding a name'. An orientation section is placed too late (p.5), and merely offers some of the possibilities. A systematic connection between passages that outline conditions and the relevant procedures is not explicitly made. In this respect no routing is built in. Rather, the author's assumption becomes apparent that one who reads the brochure from cover to cover will learn the appropriate parts of the procedure in due course. Readers will therefore find themselves reading parts that are not relevant in their situation. This effect is increased by the fact that it is only clear where some 'modules' begin, but not where they end.

Also the last requirement, requirement 10, can be illustrated by using a problematic passage from the brochure Change of Name. Adults have the option of changing their surname into that of their mother, stepfather, or foster parent. The adult who wishes to know precisely which conditions must be met, is referred to the preceding passages about change of a minor's surname. The information there is, however, - for good reasons - written from the perspective of the parent who wishes to change the name of a child. Under the heading Mother's name, for instance, it says:

(5) If you request that your child's name be changed into your name, then you must be single and have brought up your child for at least three years. (...) The following situations may be of interest:
you were married; your marriage must then have been annulled by divorce or because your spouse died. (...)

Adults who wish to change their name into that of their mother, must interpret such passages according to their own situation. This requires a fairly difficult change of perspective, and at one point leads to unanswered questions. For the determination of the period of three years care the date of the request for changing the name is important. Under 'adults' this date is stated to be of no consequence, but how the period of three years is actually determined is not explained.

By this example we do not wish to suggest that each target group segment must be exclusively handled in a separate module. Combining segments and references is, however, only unproblematic when the information needs of the different segments regarding the point concerned are identical, and if the information in the module concerned is presented so that some of the readers will not be confronted with annoying interpretation problems.

5 Discussion

In this article we have demonstrated how the functional analysis of a text can form the basis for text evaluation. The results confirm the possibilities that Lentz & Pander Maat (1992, 1993) outline on the basis of similar analyses of public information texts about subsidy regulations and instructions. A meticulous specification of the functions that a text must fulfill for the intended target group(s) makes an evaluation of the text in many respects easier.

Considering the differences between our method and Lentz & Pander Maat's (1992) we draw two conclusions:

1. An analysis of the functions of a text need not necessarily begin with an analysis of the organizational context or the relevant policy.

In our study the 'analysis' of the context was restricted to the incidental experts' consultation and reference to the regulation concerned. Apart from that, we have of course not eliminated our own knowledge of the world. A functional analysis exclusively based on formal text features is out of the question. We do not wish to imply that functional analysis must always start from the text and remain restricted to it. The most appropriate method, according to our assessment, depends strongly on the type of text, of which the functions must be identified.
2 In a functional analysis one must be prepared for the possible presence of segments in the target group that represent another information need.

Of course, texts aimed at a homogeneous target group are not inconceivable; but in many cases it is too easy to assume that everyone has the same information needs. We consider segmentation of the target group on the basis of a text analysis a useful complement to the Lentz & Pander Maat method.

One could question whether brochures like the one we analyzed, are an adequate answer to the information need of a highly segmented audience. Of course, in most cases it is impossible to produce a different brochure for each segment of the audience. A more attractive alternative is to develop an interactive computer program that poses the necessary questions to the user and selects relevant information on the basis of the answers. In this way the reader no longer has the difficult task to select the information he needs, and he is not distracted by information he does not need.

Nevertheless, we assume that, for the next few years, written information will play an important role in the communication between authorities and citizens. Moreover, a specification of functions with a precise audience segmenting is even more necessary for the development or evaluation of (the text base in) an interactive computer program than for the brochures we analyzed.

From our analysis, no general conclusions can be drawn for the relative value of text-focused versus reader-focused methods. On the basis of experience with functional analysis, both our own and Lentz & Pander Maat's, however, it can be concluded that text-focused methods need not necessarily suffer from the drawbacks that Schriver generally ascribes to them.

The results of a functional evaluation are first of all not restricted to the word and sentence level. On the contrary, it is precisely this method which can detect problems at the higher text level. In our analyses these were most often problems with the structuring of information in relation to different target group segments, and the lack of information in relation to some of the text functions. It seems to us that a functional analysis offers even more possibilities for detecting inadequacies at the text level than detecting shortcomings at word and sentence level. Rather, for this last kind of problem, a reader-focused pretest would offer a useful complement for a functional analysis.

Contrary to Schriver's general objection to text-oriented methods, a functional analysis does offer data about the information needs of the readers. We even consider it likely that in our case text analysis has resulted in a model of the readers' better than a reader-oriented test would be able to produce. The number of target group segments is so large that it is impossible they can all be
involved in a reader-focused pretest. Also, the question about the information needs of the reader in the kind of texts that we analyzed is not so much an empirical as an analytical issue. Those information needs are, in fact, not defined by the prior knowledge of the reader, but by the conditions and procedures in the law or regulation.

A functional analysis, unlike the text-focused methods discussed by Schriver, does produce data at the text level and a view of readers’ information needs. This is due to the very fact that the method actually forces the systematic playing of a large number of readers’ roles. When target group segments and functions are determined, the method requires from analysts that they systematically empathize with the different categories of readers: the text is thus screened from a number of relevant user perspectives.

As a consequence, a functional analysis becomes easier as user perspectives or readers’ roles are more predictable and definable. This will generally succeed with informative and certainly with instructive texts, better than persuasive texts. The ‘tasks’ that readers of the latter texts are supposed to perform are generally difficult to define.

A functional analysis will probably yield more surprising results the more the text addresses a wide variety of groups of readers at the same time. The analysis can then clearly ascertain whether the text meets the information requirements of less obvious audience segments.

Notes

1 This project was carried out in commission of The Netherlands Ministry of Justice. See De Jong, Schellens & Witteveen 1995.

References


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