

Being Frank: Corporate Identity Construction and the Tobacco Industry's “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers”

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1. Introduction

Since 1992, when a rogue paralegal leaked the first set of highly incriminating secret documents to tobacco control activists, the tobacco industry's internal strategies to increase addiction and decrease accountability have become, quite literally, an open book (Glanz et al, 1994). The availability of such a voluminous and comprehensive set of involuntarily disclosed texts gives researchers an unprecedented opportunity to investigate the textualization of corporate constructions of reality. This paper uses critical discourse analysis to examine the evolution of a key tobacco industry document entitled “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers” also known as the Frank Statement. In looking at the Frank Statement, we dissect the linguistic construction of the tobacco industry's 50-year battle against public health science.

Tobacco industry documents show that the Frank Statement was originally commissioned in 1954 as an industry-wide response to early scientific evidence of serious health risks posed by smoking (see Forsberg 2003). The principles articulated in the Frank Statement set the tobacco industry's discursive agenda for the next half century, apropos public health research, by questioning the validity of experimentation, rejecting the meaningfulness of statistics, and conveying an image of the tobacco industry as a rational party with an interest in minimizing risk to consumers. The tobacco industry continued to hold this discursive stance, and the position that smoking was not proven to be injurious to public health until 1999, according to Cummings, Morley and Hyland, 2002. Cummings et al. further contends that effects of the Frank Statement's strong rhetoric are still felt to this day in continued public misinformation about the connection between smoking and health. The present paper elucidates the discourse strategies of the Frank Statement and traces how those strategies diffused into the wide-spread campaigns of disinformation and manipulation in the intervening years.

The two main theoretical threads we draw upon in this paper are 1) ideology/identity construction and 2) intertextuality. First, how is language in the Frank Statement manipulated in order to impart an ideology of “rational risk appraisal?” To that end, this paper examines the presuppositions exhibited in the Frank Statement about an idealized smoker (addressee). Also, what are the methods of identity creation with respect to the creation of external “experts” as well as a unified “tobacco industry?” How do these created identities interact in the Frank Statement itself, and to what end?

Second, how does the Frank Statement function intertextually? That is, how has the tobacco industry recycled phraseology and arguments from the Frank Statement over the years so as to “normalize” its claims despite constant contrary evidence? For example, a 1953 literature review of 78 scientific papers on smoking and cancer by an RJ Reynolds' company chemist, Dr. Claude Teague, concluded: “[S]tudies of clinical data tend to confirm the relationship between heavy and prolonged tobacco smoking and incidence of cancer of the lung” (Teague, 1953). Despite Teague's well-informed assertion, the Frank Statement, first published a year later, makes directly contrary claims that are reiterated throughout the literature: “There is no proof that cigarette smoking is one of the causes [of lung cancer] . . . We believe the products we make are not injurious to health.”

2. The Seminal Status of “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers”

In December 1953, executives from every major American tobacco company (except Liggett) met with representatives from the major public relations firm Hill and Knowlton to address “grave concerns” about the link between public health issues and stock prices for the tobacco industry. What emerged out of that meeting of tobacco executives and public relations specialists was the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC), and with it, the Frank Statement. “A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers” appeared in the New York Times and over 400 other newspapers on January 4, 1954. It was reprinted in various versions over a 40-year period. Although the statement was, ostensibly, an attempt at direct communication with cigarette smokers and the American public, archival evidence has revealed that its primary aim from inception was to reshape public attitude towards the tobacco industry and deflect mounting criticism (Cummings et al., 2002).

The Frank Statement provides a unique view into the history of relations between corporate responsibility and public health. It is not only one of the most widely distributed tobacco industry documents, it also took a star role in anti-tobacco industry trials of the late 1990's as a reconstructed banner of shirked duty and unfulfilled responsibility. Previously classified documents from within the tobacco industry situate the Frank Statement in an industry already aware of the negative effects of cigarette smoking on health, and within an industry ready to disavow public health in favor of market share and corporate growth. The Frank Statement has always been a public document, but we would not have known the circumstances and strategy associated with it without access to the extended tobacco industry documents.

3. Ideology and Construction of Corporate Identity

In 1886, the Supreme Court issued a landmark decision in *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* that made corporations “natural persons” under the law. This decision legally established industries or parts of industries as entitled to protection under the Bill of Rights. The impact of *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* has been profound and pervasive. It has facilitated corporations in establishing specific

identities quite parallel to individuals' identities and also allowed companies to further focus their ideologies. For this research, we use linguistic and text analysis to investigate some aspects of the identity work that *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* has facilitated. Our focus on identity construction in the tobacco industry is a next step in sociolinguistic inquiries into group identity development based on and resulting in language use (see Wei, 1993, Schlieben-Lange, 1987, and LeFevre, 1979, among others).

3.1. *Communicative v. Strategic Goals*

Texts can be regarded as arrayed along some continuum ranging from primarily communicative to primarily strategic (Habermas, 1984). Considering this spectrum, the Frank Statement is a great example of a mainly strategic written text. In contrast to its fundamental strategic aim, however, it is presented as if it were solely a communicative informational exchange. To begin with, the title, "A Frank Statement to Cigarette Smokers," indicates that the text should be read as a forthright transmission of knowledge, or at least a knowledge exchange about the industry's beliefs and future actions. This ethos of honest exchange and dispassionate search for truth is expressed in its opening points:

- (1) "We are pledging aid and assistance to the research effort into all phases of tobacco use and health. We accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business. We always have and always will cooperate closely with those whose task it is to safeguard the public health."

Instead of upholding these implicit promises, actions performed by the tobacco industry have been directly contrary to those promised in the Frank Statement. (The deceptive and manipulative nature of tobacco industry research and information campaigns has been amply documented in court case after court case as well as in research literature. See, for example, Glanz et al., 1996.) The gulf between words and actions reveals that the statement was engineered strategically, and was not meant to be a true knowledge exchange in any sense of the word.

3.2. *Lexical Choice*

"Any choice of words creates a mini-world or universe of discourse..." (Stubbs, 2001). Stubbs' view of the importance of lexical choice in language underlies an approach to language as cumulatively world and identity building. This creative aspect of language has been investigated with success in sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics (Stubbs, 1996) discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1999).

Lexical choice in the Frank Statement was technically engineered from the beginning. Authors used indirect or external reports to evoke a communicative background instead of a strategic one (see example 2 below and Duranti, 1997 for further explanation of indirect reporting).

- (2) "Recent reports on experiments with mice have given wide publicity to a theory that cigarette smoking is in some way linked with lung cancer ..."

In addition to creating a misleading communicative context, lexical choices used to describe any parties external to the tobacco industry itself also reflect persuasive

maneuvering on the part of the tobacco industry. The external entities (those not directly involved with or funded by tobacco) mentioned in the Frank Statement are almost exclusively pro-tobacco. Only two instances of unaffiliated external entities are mentioned: “doctors of professional standing,” and “many people.” Every reference to tobacco-affiliated entities includes a connotatively positive adjective: “*eminent* doctors and *research* scientists,” “*distinguished* authorities,” “group of *distinguished* men.” In contrast, there is one reference to individuals who are not tobacco related. Despite the fact that this reference (“doctors of *professional* standing”) contains a connotatively positive adjective, this adjective is distanced from the “doctors” and instead directly modifies “standing” and only indirectly modifies “doctors.” This indirect modification serves to defuse the power of the positive connotation between *professional* and *doctors* almost entirely.

Indirect reporting and the reference to external entities legitimize and externalize claims made in the Frank Statement. These strategies effectively locate the controversy over smoking and cancer as external to the tobacco industry, and cast the tobacco industry as an impartial party who “believes people are entitled to know.” Since this controversy (as it is framed by the tobacco executives) is exterior to the industry, the industry cannot directly affect the outcome. By externalizing most of the argument, the tobacco industry positions itself, oddly, as the unbiased outsider.

3.3. *Legitimation*

Reference to external entities, as described in the preceding section, is one of the ways the authors of the Frank Statement attempted to legitimize their position. According to Van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) and Van Leeuwen (undated), this type of reference to persons of authority is *authorization*, one of the four types of legitimation they propose. Reviewing each of the types of legitimation, we realized that the Frank Statement is very much concerned with legitimacy.

Authorization can reference custom, individuals or any other authorized entity. The Frank Statement invokes authorization again with a reference to custom: “for more than 300 years smoking has given solace...”

Rationalization is a type of legitimation that invokes institutionalized order. To that end, the Frank Statement makes much ado about research efforts, which are generally accepted as part of the institutionalized order of scientific research.

Unambiguously *moral* lexicon is used throughout the Frank Statement to prop up the legitimacy of tobacco industry claims. For example, casting the new director of the Tobacco Industry Research Committee (TIRC) as a man of “unimpeachable integrity and national repute,” not only morally upholds the legitimacy of claims made in the Frank Statement, it also paves the way for assumption of future claims.

Lastly, *mythopoesis* refers to the building of narratives or myths for the express purpose of legitimation. Although at first, it seemed that the Frank Statement did not have any instances of mythopoesis, closer examination revealed that the following example (3) did indeed constitute a full narrative with a legitimizing moral: tobacco has been cleared of fault before; it will be cleared again.

- (3) “For more than 300 years tobacco has given solace, relaxation, and enjoyment to mankind. At one time or another during those years critics have held it responsible for practically every disease of the human body. One by one these charges have been abandoned for lack of evidence.”

3.4. Key Words

In order to obtain a comparative view of the Frank Statement language in relation to the language of other tobacco industry discourse, we performed a “keyness” analysis available with the WordSmith Tools software (Scott, 1996). Key words are words that are proportionally over-represented in one text when compared with that text’s universe of discourse. They give a general view of how a document differs from others in the same universe of discourse. In general, the process of locating the key words in a document is a helpful way to use an application of corpus linguistics to further support a discourse analysis. Keyness was evaluated in this case between a representative corpus of tobacco industry internal documents and the Frank Statement. The universe of discourse here is the entire set of tobacco industry documents (about 7 million documents).

However, since this number is simply too big to handle, the Tobacco Documents Project at the University of Georgia has created a representative sample which is the Tobacco Documents Corpus (TDC). To create the TDC, 1% of the total tobacco documents (7 million total) were selected at random, and then sorted according to date, audience, and other external factors. This distribution was then reproduced for new documents that were selected, up to our goal of 500,000 typed words. By strictly adhering to principled sampling methods, the TDC’s 500,000 plus words represent (to the best estimation) the distribution of genre types and language use in the entirety of the tobacco documents (see Kretzschmar et al., 2004, or www.tobaccodocs.uga.edu for further explanation of the Tobacco Documents Corpus creation).

The top seven key words of the Frank Statement reveal quite a lot about its intent. They are (in order of keyness): *we*, *scientists*, *research*, *distinguished*, *concerned*, *authorities*, *frank*, *health*. The most key word, “we,” supports other document research that has suggested the Frank Statement was primarily focused on creating and maintaining a conglomerate façade for the tobacco industry. This façade was encompassed in “we.” The proportional overuse of “we” without a specific reference to even one tobacco industry company in the body of the message serves to blur the lines between companies and individuals with the corporations. The Frank Statement is the first document published collectively by all the tobacco companies. It is therefore somewhat expected, but at the same time striking, that it does so much toward establishing a cohesive identity for the tobacco industry as a whole. “We” occurs 2.33 % of the time in the Frank Statement text, versus only .35% in the TDC. Even when we compared the Frank Statement only to documents intended for industry-external audiences, the proportional use of “we” in this set is not as high as it is in the Frank Statement. When compared to the average range of documents produced by the tobacco industry, the Frank Statement has a distinctive focus on building a cohesive tobacco industry identity through the use of the plural personal pronoun “we.”

4. Textual Construction of Power

Three elements constitute “the production of interaction,” according to Giddens (1993: 104). Interaction must be 1) ‘meaningful,’ 2) constituted as a moral order, and 3) constituted as “the operation of relations of power.” So far, we have seen that the authors manipulated the perceived type of ‘meaningful’ interaction (communicative or strategic) of the Frank Statement. Moves toward legitimation in the Frank Statement can be viewed as attempts to construct a moral order. The authors of the Frank Statement further manipulate perceptions of power and thus constitute new power operations, and in the mean time satisfy the third aspect of interaction production, the production of power.

Consider the following excerpt:

- (4) “Although conducted by doctors of professional standing these experiments are not regarded as conclusive in the field of cancer research.”

Even though “doctors” have conducted these studies, the Frank Statement attempts to reshape the power relations in order to downplay the expertise of these doctors. The Frank Statement reshapes the mantle of power by ostensibly giving the doctors the power and credit their position in society warrants. However, this power is immediately and drastically undercut and refocused on the tobacco industry’s own experts. One way to put it is that the power is not in the mice (see example 2), but with the “distinguished men.”

5. Intertextuality and Genre Chains

Intertextuality refers to the interaction of a text with other texts that influence or are influenced by it. Investigations of intertextual influences focus on the voices incorporated in or conspicuously left out of a text. Frequently, though it can be assumed that any text has a set of “potentially relevant” voices, those voices cannot be specifically traced (Fairclough, 2003: 43). In order to investigate intertextuality with respect to the Frank Statement document, we have located numerous linguistic strings (i.e. exactly repeated word sequences) from the Frank Statement appearing in contemporaneous and subsequent industry documents in the TDC as well as in anti-tobacco plaintiff’s testimony regarding the tobacco industry. Both the TDC and plaintiff’s depositions were obtained through web-based searchable libraries of previously confidential tobacco industry documents and trial transcripts.

Intertextuality is a concept derived from Bakhtin’s discussion of dialogicality (1986a). There are three main methods of instantiating dialogicality in texts: 1) Agreement and elaboration (“building on”), 2) Accentuation of difference, problemization (“polemicizing with”), and 3) Assumption (“presuming that they are already known to the listener”) (Bakhtin, 1986a). The instances of identical word sequence strings from the Frank Statement in the TDC are good examples of what Bakhtin would categorize as agreement and elaboration dialogicality in texts. In contrast, the same strings found in the adversary context of legal deposition are instances of establishing dialogicality through problemization.

Our major research question with regards to intertextuality in the Frank Statement is: what is the significance of certain repeated strings and their distribution over the Tobacco Documents Corpus (TDC) as a representative sample of tobacco industry documents in

general? We examine strings from the following sentences in particular because they underline three major themes from tobacco industry propaganda: that scientific studies not supporting tobacco industry positions are invalid, that cigarettes categorically do not endanger public health, and that tobacco use is a comfort and a longstanding habit. Specific strings for investigation are in italics.

- (5) “We feel it is *in the public interest* to call attention to the fact that *eminent doctors and research scientists* have publicly questioned the claimed significance of these experiments.”
- (6) “*For more than 300 years*, tobacco has given *solace, relaxation and enjoyment* to mankind.”

5.1. “*Eminent... scientists*”

The recurrence of the string “eminent scientists” strictly refers to scientists who support the tobacco industry’s position. Although it is not particularly surprising that the tobacco industry would want to bolster the credibility of those scientists who agree with them, what is striking is the use of this string in contrast to plain old “scientists.” Twenty years after the Frank Statement was released, various versions of a short 1970’s marketing document twice counterpose “scientists” against “eminent scientists.” In both instances, “scientists” are introduced as a huge mass of people endeavoring to find a link between cancer and cigarettes. But these endeavors come to no avail, as we see within two sentences, when “eminent scientists” who continue to back the tobacco industry’s position of denial are introduced.

The association of “eminent scientist” with a position of denial is carried even into the 1990’s. In a press release dealing with the publication of cigarette ingredient lists, we see the “eminent doctors and research scientists” of the Frank Statement further iterated as “eminent scientist,” and still intertextually retaining the original link to tobacco industry denial. The following excerpt shows this link:

- (7) “Parrish said the independent assessment, performed by six *eminent scientists*, has been conducted on the entire list of cigarette ingredients provided to HHS by the six major American cigarette manufacturers. The authors concluded that ‘the ingredients added to tobacco in the manufacture of cigarettes by United States are not hazardous under the conditions of use.’”

Throughout the TDC, the use of “eminent scientist” across decades occurs in conjunction with other positive epitaphs: “respected scientists,” “independent scientists,” “outside,” “responsible,” and “qualified” scientists. Of the nine distinct TDC documents with this string, all but two usages of plain unmodified “scientist” are rendered irrelevant by further context (and also coincidentally anti-tobacco).

5.2. “*In the Public Interest*”

The string, “in the public interest,” connotes a subtext of knowing what is best for the public and acting for the public. The following is an example from one of the documents mentioned in the previous section:

- (8) “...free, full and informed public discussion is essential *in the public interest*.”

Although this statement seems to be of obvious moral value at first glance, contextualizing it in time and by source gives it a different picture. This document is from the 1970's, by which time the tobacco industry most certainly did have full information concerning cancer and smoking. Yet, at this time the source, TIRC, was steadfastly undermining studies that linked cancer and tobacco. Considering the intertextuality of this statement with the Frank Statement and various other confidential tobacco industry documents, we can see the subtext of this phrase as insidiously intended to present an "open book" reputation for the tobacco industry, specifically in order to stifle "free, full and informed ... discussion" and specifically *not* "in the public interest."

5.3. *"More than 400 Years"*

While we've seen that the repeated use of certain specific strings creates a web of specific (and specifically misleading) meaning in tobacco industry documents, the narrative of longevity referenced by the phrase "more than 400 years" is more rhetorical in use. The narrative is retextualized in another piece of tobacco industry propaganda entitled "Tobacco and the Health of a Nation." In the Frank Statement, the quote is as follows: "For more than 400 years, tobacco has given solace, relaxation and enjoyment to mankind." This phrase is virtually identical to its sister phrase, found in "Tobacco and the Health of a Nation:"

- (9) "When Europeans discovered America nearly 400 years ago, they also discovered tobacco. In the centuries since, tobacco has given pleasure and relaxation to people throughout the world."

A follow-up tracing of "solace," "relaxation," and "enjoyment" through the TDC reveals that these words are not only used in conjunction with smoking tobacco, but also as referents for tobacco use. The substitution of these three pleasant words for "smoking" is an attempt to engineer an atmosphere of pleasant habituation associated with smoking. Basically, this technique uses emotional orientation to prey on aspects of cognition which bypass and undercut more rational thought (Rushkoff, 2000).

5.4. *Intertextuality and Genre Chaining: the Frank Statement and Depositions*

Genre chains represent one type of intertextuality where texts from different genres are systematically linked (Fairclough, 2003). This continued reuse of statements and linguistic strings from the Frank Statement over thirty years served to create a unified and cohesive position for the tobacco industry. This sort of intertextuality in genre chains is an example of completely "undialogized" text (Holquist, 1981: 427). That is, parts of the text are reused without any critical question, or else possibly with the intent to specifically conform to the first text's assumptions. So far, all the repetition examples mentioned have been instances in a genre chain that moves back and forth from interior opinion to exterior policy. Also, all example documents up to this point have been located within the tobacco industry universe.

This next section, however, introduces a change in the manner in which the Frank Statement is invoked intertextually and in the genre chain. The standard genre chain for the tobacco industry (or most any large business) is one that fosters remote control of workers and/or consumers. In the instance of the Frank Statement, report genres (scientific reports) sparked concerned memos among executives. This memo genre was then transferred into drafts of the Frank Statement. Once the Frank Statement was published,

this typical genre chain created links in power and control from research through business leaders to industry policy and then to the public.

Social change, according to Fairclough (2003), can be triggered in a significant way through changes in genre chains. This concept becomes blatantly obvious upon examination of tobacco industry executive depositions. The plaintiff's lawyers in two of those depositions effectively use recontextualized excerpts from the Frank Statement to undermine the tobacco industry. Using the language of the Frank Statement to create doubt about tobacco industry good intentions has the opposite effect from what was intended by the Frank Statement and its industry repetitions. Excerpt 10 shows the plaintiff's lawyer in a case against the tobacco industry recontextualizing the Frank Statement. In doing so, this lawyer develops the argument of tobacco industry responsibility.

- (10) "But you would agree that having undertaken to make public statements about whether smoking causes disease, The Tobacco Institute had a responsibility to speak accurately in those statements..."

Surprisingly, a recontextualized reference to the Frank Statement becomes a strong statement of duty that then can be used to condemn the tobacco industry.

The defense (the tobacco industry), on the other hand, was radically opposed to the recontextualized Frank Statement. On four separate occasions, the defense objected to questions about the Frank Statement with the following: "the statement speaks for itself." When the plaintiffs used references to the gulf between the Frank Statement and known information in the deposition, the defense attempted to shut down dialogic and polemicizing approaches to the Frank Statement altogether.

The recontextualized Frank Statement represents a break in the hegemonic position put forth by the tobacco industry. Let us remind you of our analysis of the Frank Statement as a strategic text masquerading as a communicative one. Plaintiff's lawyers revealed this aspect of the Frank Statement was and recontextualized it within the body of known information of tobacco industry actions (instead of contextualized it only in the text released by the tobacco industry). To that end, a plaintiff's lawyer astutely remarks:

- (11) "So basically this was from the beginning – TIRC and the Frank Statement was from the beginning a public relations campaign on behalf of the industry to reassure the public that their products were okay; correct?"

6. Conclusion

Tobacco industry documentary evidence shows that, in general, the tobacco industry used public relations campaigns masquerading as credible scientific enterprise to strategically manipulate the public (Glantz et al., 1996). This close study of the intertextual aspects of a key industry document in its public context gives some insight into the linguistic strategies used by an industry to manipulate consumers and regulators. The findings of this study reveal aspects of an overall tendency of TIRC documents intended for mass distribution to use identifiable "double speak." This discourse strategy was intended to reassure smokers and the public by evoking a sense of knowledge exchange. Quite to the converse, however, we contend that any reference to knowledge exchange categorically signals a strategic communicative act. In the activist spirit of

critical discourse analysis, this study also reveals ways to effectively unravel the industry's efforts at public manipulation, by means of the discourse analyst's tools of recontextualization.

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