To deceive the receiver

A genre analysis of the electronic variety of Nigerian scam letters

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Abstract

This essay analyses fifty electronic Nigerian scam letters or spam in order to find out whether they can be considered a genre of their own according to Swales’ (1990) definition. It is comparing the Nigerian scam letters to sales promotion letters, as presented by Bhatia (1993). The functional moves Bhatia (1993) found in the sales promotion letters were applied to the Nigerian scam letters, and three functional moves unique for the scam letters were established. The functional moves specific to the Nigerian scam letters together with the scam letters’ compatibility with Swales’ (1990) definition of genre, give support for this essay’s argument that the Nigerian scam letters constitute a genre of their own.

Keywords: Spam, Nigerian scam letters, Genre analysis
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1. Introduction

It seems like a new kind of spam (unwanted mail) arrives in electronic mailboxes around the world every day. Most of the time, it is harmless. It will not hurt the receiver in a serious way. The irritation one may feel will soon wear off. However, every now and then frauds make their way into our e-mail accounts. Since most of the time the receivers are annoyed with unsolicited mail, the majority is deleted without a second glance, sometimes even before a first one. From time to time, however, someone with a spare moment and a great heart happens to browse through one of the sent items and falls for the trick. Analysing one kind of con may help penetrate the next one.

A few years ago, the first so-called Nigerian scam letter appeared, and soon they spread all over the world. People impersonating victims of coups in different African countries sent letters to what they assumed would be easy-to-trick targets. The letters are very similar; the sender has been able to move out large amounts of money before leaving the country but is still monitored by his or her former government. The sender is offering the receiver a percentage of that money, if the receiver provides the sender with a neutral bank account to move the money to.

For this study fifty Nigerian scam letters have been examined in order to find out whether they can be considered a genre of their own based on the definition of genre provided by Swales (1990) and developed by Bhatia (1993). For an outsider there might be difficulties in understanding how somebody in their right mind can give out their bank account numbers or send large sums of money to a complete stranger. This study will also make an attempt to explain that, by revealing the different linguistic strategies that a deceiver may use to create sympathy or greed and persuade the recipient.

Since the mid-1990s almost every aspect of computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) has been thoroughly examined and accounted for. However, very little has been written about unwanted electronic mail. The aim of this study is to scrutinise one kind of spam and compare it to Swales’ (1990) definition of genre. Furthermore, the functional moves included in the so-called Nigerian scam letters will be explained and analysed in order to find out whether they can be defined as a genre of their own and to unveil their persuasive functions. A word’s or sentence’s function is the job it fulfils (Thorne, 1997). For instance, the function of a simple question like what time is it?, is request for information.
The content of Section 3 is a description and explanation of the method used in this study. It is also there, the chosen data will be described. Section 4 is an account of previous research on spam and a further explanation of the definitions used by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993). As there is very little previous research on spam, Swales’ (1990) and Bhatia’s (1993) genre studies have got most of the space in this Section. The results of the study are presented and analysed in Section 5. The discussion follows in Section 6, and the conclusions is found in the last section, which will then be Section 7.

1.1 The scam letters
The letters, known as Nigerian scam letters, are not all even alleged to be posted from Nigeria anymore. Unless one checks all the IP-addresses from where these electronic mails are sent, there is no way of knowing the origin of these letters. The outlines are similar; the senders have a lot of money, usually in US dollars, which they need to take out of the country, for one reason or another. The law of the country where they reside stops them from opening a foreign account of their own to move the money into. Therefore they need somebody else’s account. For the trouble of lending the sender some space on his or her account, the recipient will receive a percentage of the total amount. The recipient is asked to send the account details to the sender, and the account will then most likely be emptied. Some time back, these scams were noticed by one of the highest authorities for security in the world, the US Secret Service. The organisation even put out a “Public Awareness Advisory” on the Internet, where one can also find a detailed description of different likely scenarios of how the frauds are actually performed (www.secretservice.gov). Letter 1 from this study can be regarded as an illustration of the phenomenon of Nigerian scam letters in the Appendix.

1.2 The definition of spam
Zeltsan presented a definition of spam in 2004, that several other researchers have accepted and applied, for instance Cukier et al. (2006).

Spam includes all electronic messages that are unsolicited or unwanted, sent to a large number of users (bulk) without regard to the identity of the individual user, and usually have commercial purposes, but can also include viruses that propagate via e-mail, or fraud and scam mechanisms. (Zeltsan, 2004)
Originally *Spam* is a brand of canned meat, that the British comedy group Monty Python made a sketch about in their second season of their Flying Circus. The scene of the sketch is a diner where Spam is an ingredient in all the dishes, basically it is impossible to order anything without Spam. The association with the fact that one cannot receive anything in the mailbox, without also getting something one does not want is not that far fetched.

### 1.3 Swales’ definition of genre

Swales (1990) has given a rather ambitious definition of genre. This section is an attempt to simplify that definition. Firstly Swales states that “a genre is a class of communicative events” (Swales, 1990: 45). A communicative event according to Swales (1990: 45 ff) is an event where language is absolutely essential. This excludes actions where speaking and writing can be replaced with body language, like in physical exercise or other instances where instructions can be given without actually speaking or writing. The frequency of the classes of communicative event is also important. According to Swales (1990: 46), the rarer the class is, the more important it must be, to be considered a genre by itself, and not only a sub-genre of another genre.

These classes of communicative events have to share communicative purposes as well to be considered a genre. In some cases, Swales (1990: 46) claims, the purpose is obvious like in recipes, for instance. Some genres have more than one communicative purpose as Swales (1990: 46 ff) states. He gives the example of news reporting, which has the double agenda of bringing the latest events to the people and in some cases mould the opinions of the listeners in one direction or another (Swales, 1990: 47).

Swales warns for the variation of “prototypicality”. Certain genres have broader definitions than others, and even if there are grand variations, one has to look carefully at the alleged differences before one names a new genre, since it may be just a variation of an old one. The most typical representative of a genre is the prototype, but since genres have to be compatible with discourse communities, or the people who use the genre, even the prototypes are sometimes objects of pure arbitrariness (Swales, 1990: 52).

The user of the genre decides what can be added to it, both when it comes to vocabulary and form, according to Swales (1990: 54 ff). The seniority of the member of the discourse community who introduces the change is also important. Not all discourse
2. Aim, scope & research questions

The aim of this paper is to perform a genre and discourse analysis of fifty so-called Nigerian scam letters based on Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993). Different communicative moves in the above mentioned letters will be identified and analysed in terms of their form, function, structure and communicative purpose. The main aim of this study is to scrutinise one kind of spam and compare it to Swales’ (1990) definitions of genre. Furthermore, the functional moves included in the so-called Nigerian scam letters will be explained and analysed in order to find out whether they can be defined as a genre of their own and to unveil their persuasive functions. The research questions addressed in the present study are thus:

- Can the Nigerian scam letters be considered a genre of their own, according to Swales’ (1990) definition?
- Which functional moves do the letters include?
- Which linguistic strategies and markers do the senders use in order to reach their goals?

3. Method

Since the scam letters examined in this study, resemble, in many ways, to sales promotion letters in their structure and content, they have been compared to the structural description of the sales promotion letters in Bhatia’s (1993) study in order to establish whether they can be considered a genre of their own.

Fifty scam letters have been thoroughly examined. They are of variable length, from one to four pages long, but the contents are still very similar, which will be presented below. The letters were numbered from one to fifty, and were segmented and examined for structural similarities. Different structural moves have then been identified and labelled.
There were three functional moves corresponding to Bhatia’s (1993) sales promotion letter. Those moves have been compared to see in what way the Nigerian scam letters have been masked as business proposal letters. In addition to the three corresponding moves, three new moves and five sub-moves have been identified, named and analysed. The communicative purpose of each move will be presented in the analysis section, Section 5. The letters have been treated as fifty separate units in this study, and each and every one of them was analysed on its own. Some of the functional moves in the letters have also been counted for statistical purposes, in order to find a frequency pattern in the letters. Every possibility to identify the sender or the person the sender claims to be has been eliminated. Names and telephone numbers have been replaced with Xs in the examples in order to guarantee anonymity, as the identity of the senders, real or false, is not important for this study.

3.1 Data description
The analysed data consist of fifty unsolicited scam letters sent to a recipient in Sweden by different people claiming to reside in Africa or in the Middle East. The total number of words in these letters is 24,257. The letters are of various lengths, from one page to four pages, but the average number of words in the letters is 485. Until the letters are replied to, the communication has to be considered a one-way written communication. Full names, e-mail addresses, telephone numbers and other contact details are provided in the letters, but since it is in the nature of scamming to provide false identity, the letters have to be considered anonymous. The letters are sent to random e-mail recipients; therefore the only way to avoid these letters is to change the settings in one’s e-mail account or software.

The participation structure of this communication is officially one-to-one communication, even if there are reasons to believe that there is not only one person involved in the scam, but rather a group of people. The letters are formulated as private letters, even if the tone of language used is often rather business like. As mentioned above, the letters have to be considered anonymous even if the writers introduce themselves, since the presented identity is not the real one of the writer. This fact also makes it very difficult to know the number of active participants in the plot or their ages and sexes.

To present the characteristics of the participants is mainly guesswork. However, one can assume that they are African in origin, based on their knowledge of
different political situations in various African countries. Based on personal experience, people outside Africa usually have a limited interest and knowledge of the situation in the countries on the African continent. Compare the genocide in Rwanda that could pass without a raised eyebrow from the outside world.

The language proficiency in the different letters varies. Some of the letters are written by somebody with a great knowledge of the English language, whereas others show in several places that the writer does not have English as his or her first language. The sender’s knowledge about computers shows the same pattern, but not necessarily in the same letters. There are senders with a decent mastery of English who show a lack of computer skills and vice versa. This also influences their knowledge of the genre. Somebody, whose English language skills are not the best, is probably not a good writer of business letters either. The senders’ language proficiency is revealed in spelling mistakes and inappropriate choice of words for instance. (1) below shows three different examples of the above mentioned shortcomings in communication.

(1) Sorry at this perceived confusion or stress may have receiving this letter from me, Since [sic] we have not known ourselves or met previously. (Letter 8)

The first part, before the comma, does not make sense. One can understand it, but it is incomplete. Since is written with a capital S although it does not start a new sentence or seem to have any other reason to be spelled with an initial capital. Overall, the second part, after the comma, is written with a peculiar and incorrect choice of words. Instead of what is shown in (1), a more appropriate version would have been: since we do not know each other or have met previously.

Some of the letters are written entirely in capital letters, which points at uncertainty about the computer skills. It cannot be ruled out, however, that some of the computer mistakes are cultural differences; (maybe one writes business letters in capital letters in Sierra Leone, for instance) this then would be equal to insufficient knowledge of the English culture. Since the letters are written in English, they should follow the pattern of English business letters.

The real life personas of the writers are impossible to know, but the projected versions of the writers’ identities are all professional. They are doctors, attorneys, accountants and managers. Even when they present themselves as relatives to deceased presidents they often add some professional title to their false identity. The sole purpose of the communication is to become rich while somebody else becomes poor. The tone
of the communication is often formal and serious. It is important to express reliability, and create sympathy. The letters use different strategies in order to elicit feelings of trust in the reader of the letter. These strategies will be presented later in Section 5. The section below, Section 4, will present some of the previous studies made in genre analysis and spam.

4. Previous research

As mentioned above, very little previous research has been made in the field of spam; however, recently a pilot study has been made by Cukier et al. (2006), which will be accounted for later in this section. This study sets out to perform a genre analysis of unsolicited electronic mail in the shape of scam letters. The recognised experts on genre analysis are John Swales and Vijay Bhatia. Both authors describe genre as highly dependent on the discourse community who created it. The people who use a specific kind of discourse that constitutes a genre form a discourse community.

Swales uses six characteristics to define a group of people as a discourse community (Swales, 1990: 24 ff). First of all, they have common public goals. Those goals may be written down, like rules of a club, or they may be unwritten agreements that have developed over time. Secondly, the discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication. The members of a discourse community communicate with each other in one way or another. It could be through phone calls or e-mails; they do not necessarily have to meet in person according to Swales (1990: 25). As a third characteristic, the communication is used to give information and feedback. Swales (1990: 26) argues that it is difficult for a new group to be defined as a discourse community as it takes a while for the communication to take a shape that fits all the members. That is also the case with new members in an established discourse community; one has to learn to talk the talk. The fifth characteristic defines the specific lexis used by the discourse community as a genre. Characteristic number six is that the members enter as novices and leave by death (Swales, 1990: 27). In order for the community to survive, there has to be a certain number of new members joining, who can be initiated by an appropriate number of old members, otherwise the discourse community dies out and takes the genre with them (Swales, 1990: 24 ff).

The easiest example to illustrate the concept is the discourse community that uses the genre of legal language. The law books with their different amendments were
written in a specific style in any country. One is almost forced to consult a lawyer in
order to understand the wording, never mind interpret the text in one’s favour. Lawyers,
attorneys and judges form the discourse community of the genre of legal language.

Swales describes “(a) genres as types of goal-directed communicative events;
(b) genres as having schematic structures; and most strikingly (c) genres as
disassociated from register or styles.” (1990: 42)

As mentioned above, very little has been written about unwanted electronic
mail. However, Bhatia (1993) describes sales promotion letters in the following way:

“A sales promotion letter is an unsolicited letter addressed to a selected group of prospective
customers (they may be individuals or companies) in order to persuade them to buy a product
or service” (1993: 45).

As seen in the quote above, the largest difference between Bhatia’s definition of sales
promotion letters and Zeltsan’s definition of spam is the receivers. The spam is sent
without regard to the identity of the individual user (Zeltsan, 2004), whereas the sales
promotion letter is addressed to a selected group of prospective customers (Bhatia,
1993). Bhatia argues that sales promotion letters have five communicative purposes:
1. Capture the attention of the potential customer;
2. Eliciting a desired response;
3. Offer an appraisal of the product;
4. Be short enough not to bore the customer but long enough to give details about the
product, and
5. Encourage further communication. (Bhatia, 1993: 45 ff).

In a recent pilot study, Cukier et al. (2006) have studied 300 different spam messages in
order to apply the concept of genre to them. They argue that spam is not a single genre,
but several genres. This essay is a narrower study, concentrating only on Nigerian scam
letters. Cukier et al. (2006) also mention Nigerian scam letters briefly in their study as
one variety of the greater field of spam.

Their definition of genre is applicable to this study as well, since they mainly
use Swales’ (1990) definition. They note that different theorists treat the concept of
genre differently. Since they examine a broader variation of spam in their study, they
compare them to the genre of advertisement rather than to sales promotion letters used
for comparison in this study. Cukier et al. (2006) also claim that one kind of genre can mask itself as another, which makes the analysis more difficult. They also call spam genres hybrids. They argue that the messages resemble traditional genres, yet the actual purposes of the spam are radically different from what they seem to be (Cukier et al., 2006).

In order to analyse the letters in terms of discourse strategies, theories of Smith (1987), Gumperz (1982) and FitzGerald (2003) have been studied and compared to the corpus. Smith (1987) has edited a book about discourse differences between different cultures, and he claims that “Having a clear understanding of the goal/objective is essential if we are to negotiate meaning successfully across cultures” (Smith, 1987: 4). This seems obvious, but it may be the reason why some of this kind of scams examined in this study have actually been successful. The cultural differences may have led to misunderstandings. This is supported by FitzGerald, who claims that “the speakers of a second language often use the organisation and rhetorical style of their first language when speaking a second language” (FitzGerald, 2003: 109). In the following section, the findings from this study will be presented and analysed.

5. Analysis

Bhatia (1993) divided sales promotion letters into seven different functional moves:

1. Establishing credentials
2. Introducing the offer
3. Offering incentives
4. Enclosing documents
5. Soliciting response
6. Using pressure tactics
7. Ending politely

Below follows a definition of each of them. They are not all valid when it comes to the Nigerian scam letters, and in the Nigerian letters there are several functional moves that do not exist in Bhatia’s (1993) sales promotion letters.

5.1 Bhatia’s functional moves in sales promotion letters

Establishing credentials is what the senders of the sales promotion letters do when they create a need for the product they are offering to the receivers of the letters. Examples (2), (3), (4) and (5) were created especially in order to facilitate the reader's
understanding of the points below. Example (2) is an illustration of establishing 
credentials.

(2) In a hot summer’s day, every office should have a fan.

Example (2) probably works best in the summer, when people are sweating in their 
suits, and just long to get out of the office.

*Introducing the offer* is the main part of the sales promotion letters, and 
Bhatia (1993) has divided this functional move into three sub-moves: offering the 
product or service, essential detailing of the offer and indicating value of the offer. This 
is where the senders present the product they are trying to sell.

(3) XXX has all the fans for your needs. Ceiling fans for the open solution office, desk fans for 
the enclosed space and floor fans where the desks are filled with papers. Our expertise on 
fans is based on years of experience. The fans are in solid plastic for everlasting fresh air.

In the example (3) above the fans are offered both in general (first sub-move) and in 
detail (second sub-move), while the last sentence is more advertisement, to convince the 
receiver of the letter about the advantages of these particular fans compared to others 
(third sub-move). Of course, there is more that can be said about these fans, but there is 
a point in being brief. The buyers are assumed to be busy people who have little time to 
read rambling letters.

The third functional move, Bhatia calls offering incentives, and it works like 
a discount. If the receivers answer fast enough, or buy a sufficiently large amount, they 
receive a discount, or an extra item in the deal.

As mentioned in Section 4, one of the main communicative purposes of the 
sales promotion letters is to be short enough not to bore the receiver, and long enough to 
give sufficient amount of details about the product. This is sometimes difficult and can 
be solved by enclosing documents. According to Bhatia (1993:53), the business 
community cannot agree whether it is really necessary to give so much information that 
one has to enclose a document. Some think that once the initiative has been taken by the 
sales representative the customer should make the next move.

In order for the sales promotion letter to be efficient, the communication 
must continue. Therefore one of the most important moves is the fifth one, soliciting 
response. This is mainly where the sales representatives post their contact information 
or, these days, more often their e-mails.
If the third move does not work to make the potential customers answer fast enough, Bhatia (1993:54) gives another example of using pressure tactics in the sixth move.

(4) These fans are only imported in a limited amount, so you better hurry up, if you don’t want to stand without.

Basically this functional move is supposed to work as a push for the customer who has already decided to buy whatever the sender is offering.

The last move is logically enough ending politely. The last impression can be as important as the first one, especially in a letter, as that is the last part one reads. Despite the name Bhatia has given this move, it has little to do with politeness. It is of course polite as such, but more than anything it is formulaic. When somebody ends a letter with yours sincerely, the writer will never check what he or she has written to make sure that it is sincere. When one learns how to write a letter of any kind, one also learns certain formulaic sentences with which to end it. Rarely does one reflect over their meaning. This move can vary from a simple Best regards to much longer varieties.

(5) Thank you for taking your time to consider our offer. We can assure you that we will not disappoint you. Looking forward to your urgent reply.

These endings will never be left out of the sales promotion letter, but can be varied in an endless number of ways.

5.2 Bhatia's functional moves identified in the Nigerian scam letters

Out of the seven functional moves that Bhatia (1993) found in the sales promotion letters, there are only three that have clear counterparts in the Nigerian scam letters. Those are the second, (introducing the offer), the fifth, (soliciting response) and the seventh (ending politely) moves.

5.2.1 Introducing the offer

Bhatia (1993) has divided the second functional move in the sales promotion letters into three sub-moves. There are reasons to do the same with this move in the Nigerian scam letters. The first sub-move, justification of correspondence, explains to the receivers what the writers want the recipients to do, the second sub-move, offer of compensation,
makes it worthwhile and the third, request for information, asks for details relating to the receivers as a condition of the deal. All three of them occur in almost all of the fifty letters. The strategies the writers use in the first sub-move differ from letter to letter, as seen in (6) below:

(6) I am seeking your assistance to enable me transfer the sum of US$30,500,000.00 (Thirty Million, Five Hundred Thousand United States Dollars) into your private/company account (Letter 1).

Example (6) sounds simple enough since the only thing the receiver has to do is to give the account details to the sender who then (in this case) promises to take care of everything else.

Almost all the letters give a lengthy background history of the origin of the money. This will be commented on later in this section. Sometimes the author of the letter wants the receiver to pose as a relative of some wealthy but tragically deceased business man, and apart from taking part in a fraud it may not seem such a difficult thing to do if the alleged relative was called John Smith; however the sender of letter 26 really asks the receiver to raise to the challenge.

(7) Against this backdrop, my suggestion to you is that I will like you as a foreigner to stand as the next of kin to Gen. Ibrahim Moussa so that you will be able to receive his funds (Letter 26).

This suggestion gives us a clue as to the randomness used by the authors when sending these letters. Even if the receiver is greedy enough to participate in a fraud, some little bell should ring in the heads of normal westerners to remind them of the fact that if one’s name is Mark or Mary Stewart, there will be quite a few questions asked if one claims to be related to Ibrahim Moussa.

Once in a while the requests in the Nigerian scam letters involve some travelling as well, as in this case of example (8) below.

(8) Now I am contacting you seeking your assistance to help me in transferring this money to your country. All you need do is to make necessary [sic] arrangement and fly down to Accra-Ghana, to see the money and talk about it. (Letter 25)

Most westerners have no idea where Accra-Ghana is. Information like this included in the letters could perhaps assist organisations like the Interpol to determine the true nationality of the authors of these scam letters. Since nowadays scam letters are mainly
sent via e-mail, it may not be obvious where the recipient is located. The authors may not realise that the recipient lives in a complete different piece of the world with rather different frames of reference, where a trip to Accra-Ghana is not the “hop, skip and jump” that it might be to the writer of the letter.

The second sub-move makes it worthwhile for the reader to get involved in the sometimes dubious business proposed by the author of the letter. In exchange for letting the author use one’s account, for impersonating a relative of a diseased businessman or for a journey to West Africa, the author promises an extensive compensation. In the great majority of the fifty letters, 78%, there is a percentage of the amount mentioned, as seen in (9) below.

(9) 20% of the fund will be for you as beneficiary. (Letter 1)

In two of the letters, there are actual amounts mentioned as illustrated by (10):

(10) My colleagues and I are prepared to give you US$2.5m while we take US$7.4m and the balance of US$5.3m for taxes and miscellaneous expenses incurred. (Letter 23)

In 12% of the letters the compensation is not specified as seen in example (11):

(11) Subject to your satisfaction you will be given the opportunity to negotiate your mode of which we will pay for your services as our representative in Canada/America and Europe. (Letter 10)

Example (11) comes from a letter that is slightly different in character. Letter 10 looks legitimate on the surface. It seems to be a suggestion of some sort of a franchise deal. The wording is very cryptic and it is shorter than the average letter, claiming to originate in China.

Finally, there are actually three letters, which do not mention any compensation at all. Two of them only ask for assistance to give large sums to charity, because the authors have not found any reliable person to help them dispose of their fortunes. However, it does feel far-fetched to ask a complete stranger. The third letter is a business proposal where the sender wants information about lucrative business opportunities in the country of the receiver.

(12) We will appreciate that you give us any insight into the lucrative areas presently available that our client can amass commendable returns on investment, we welcome your response to enable us actualise our client interest fruitfully. We believe that your joint cooperation in this
lucrative venture shall foster a long term mutual profitable relationship between us. (Letter 16)

Although the letter speaks of a mutual profitable relationship, there are no clues as to how the profit is going to reach the receiver of the letter. It is assumed that this letter is meant to appeal to the receiver’s curiosity, so that he or she responds in order to find out how this relationship can be profitable.

The third sub-move, i.e. request for detailed information does not occur in all but at least in 56% of the letters. In the other cases, there are reasons to believe that it is supposed to occur later in order for the scam to be successful. In some of the letters the information is requested in a polite manner.

(12) The information will be as follows,

Bank Name -------  
Bank Address------  
A/c Number------  
A/c Name--------  
Swift Code------  (Letter 27)

In other letters, like (13) below the tone of the request is harsher and unconditional. This is also an illustration of a letter written entirely in capital letters as mentioned in Section 3.1.

(13) THIS IS WHY WE HAVE DECIDED THAT THIS TRANSACTION WILL BE BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:-

(a) OUR CONVICTION OF YOUR TRANSPARENCY, HONESTY AND DILIGENCE.
(b) THAT YOU WILL TREAT THIS TRANSACTION WITH UTMOST SECRECY AND CONFIDENTIALITY
(c) YOU MUST BE READY TO PRODUCE US WITH ENOUGH INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF TO PUT OUR MINDS AT REST.
(d) THAT UPON RECEIPT OF THE FUND, YOU WILL PROMPTLY RELEASE OUR SHARE ON DEMAND AFTER YOU HAVE DEDUCTED YOUR 20%.

(Letter 5)

In Example (13), the tone is more hostile, as if the authors of the letter wanted to pre-empt any suspicions that the receiver may have against them. They use words like the modal verb must and the adverbs promptly and on demand. The senders seem to try to convince the receiver that they have more to lose by sending all the money to the addressee of the letter. This is mainly expressed in line (a) OUR CONVICTION OF YOUR TRANSPARENCY, HONESTY AND DILIGENCE. This may also be a less successful way of trying to flatter the receiver. They also express their trust in (b) where they state their belief that the receiver will TREAT THIS TRANSACTION WITH
UTMOST SECRECY AND CONFIDENTIALITY. This can give the feeling that the senders put their lives into the hands of the receiver. If the receiver does not treat the transaction confidentially, it may imply a risk for the senders. After all they have stolen the money; therefore there is a risk that they will end up in prison, at the least, depending on the laws in the country in question. As a receiver one may feel proud that the sender confides in one, and therefore rises to the occasion. The following section covers the encouragement to reply that is included in the great majority, 94%, of the letters.

5.2.2 Soliciting response

Not surprisingly, Bhatia’s fifth functional move is present in almost all the Nigerian scam letters, 94 %, as one would expect them to be since one of the conditions of a successful scam is that the receivers of the letters respond. In the majority of the letters, there is some sort of encouragement or anticipation of response from the receiver, like in (14):

(14) Expecting your immediate response by email, phone: 234 XXX XXXXXXX or fax: 234 X XXXXXXX while looking forward to a healthy business relationship with you. (Letter 13)

Most of the letters soliciting a response also suggest a sense of urgency indicated by the inclusion of words like immediate such as in example (14). Sometimes the authors explain the need for urgency as a necessity for the senders themselves, like in (15) where the receivers’ urgent responses seem to be able to help the senders catch up in their schedule for this financial quarter.

(15) Please, acknowledge the receipt of this letter using my email address. I will bring you into the complete picture of the transaction when I have heard from you. Your urgent response will be highly appreciated as we are already behind schedule for this financial quarter. (Letter 6)

Other times the writers try to cover up the urgency in words that create the feeling that the hurry may benefit the receiver, as in (16), where words like once and prompt feel like something that would go fast. That impression is emphasised when imagining using the bank’s online services.

(16) Please contact me and I will take it from there. Once I hear from you, I will give you access to view DR.XXXXXX XXXXXXXX account details and you can check his account statement via the bank’s online services to certify what I am saying.

Please reply through my email address: XXXXXXXXXXX@XXXXXXX.com
Waiting for your prompt response. [sic] (Letter 30)

If the statement in example (16) was true, the receiver would get answers to questions about security and truthfulness at a quick reply. If the receiver of the letter does not want to wait for his or her reward maybe the message in example (17) is more tempting.

(17) URTHERMOIRE, [sic] YOU CAN INDICATE YOUR OPTION TOWARDS ASSISTING US AS WE BELIEVE THAT THIS TRANSACTION WOULD BE CONCLUDED WITHIN SEVEN (7) DAYS YOU SIGNIFY INTEREST TO ASSIST US AND PLEASE CALL ME ON TELEPHONE(XXXXXXXXXXX XXXX) FOR MORE EXPLANATION. [sic]

GET BACK TO ME IMMEDIATELY YOU RECEIVE THIS MESSAGE FOR MORE EXPLANATION. [sic] AND PROMISE ME AND MY YOUNGERLOVED [sic] SISTER TO BE A FATHER CONSIDERING OUR SITUATION [sic] AND NOT TO BETRAY US ANTCIPTING [sic] TO HEAR FROM YOU SOON. (Letter 47)

In Letter 47, the authors do not seem to be able to make up their minds. As can be seen from (17), the letter is filled with spelling mistakes, like explanation instead of explanatory and situation instead of situation. The authors claim to be a brother and sister who just lost both of their parents, and there may have been a thought behind not correcting mistakes, to emphasise their vulnerability. However, the knowledge about the number of banking days this transaction might take fits badly with the profile of vulnerable youngsters in need of help.

Seven of the fifty letters, 14%, are written entirely in capital letters like the one in example (17). The general notion of all capitals in electronic messages, like the letters in this study, is that it symbolises shouting (Crystal, 2001: 35). It is a common mistake made by users who is not used to the computer medium. In the letter from example (17) it could be conscious considering the vulnerable image the senders seem to want to create of themselves, i.e. ‘the poor orphaned siblings are reaching out using a medium that is not well known to them’.

Overall there is a multitude of spelling mistakes in the Nigerian scam letters represented in this corpus. These mistakes constitute a major difference between the scam letters and the business proposal letters in Bhatia’s study for instance. A sales representative would not allow him or herself to make mistakes, like these, especially not this many, as it gives a sloppy and untrustworthy impression. One does not want to make a business deal with someone who is not careful enough to check the spelling of the letter they wrote, twice, to make sure it gives an immaculate impression. Letter 47 is
not the only one in the corpus that does not add up in the end. 17 is another letter where
the writers do not seem to have thought their wording through.

(18) Presently I am now in Europe to search for a reliable person/company of high integrity
[sic]/dignity and one with conscience who will claim this fund on our behalf as the
beneficiary, and we have agreed to give you 25% of the total sum as commission for your
assistance/effort. (Letter 17)

This excerpt from letter 17 includes quite a few instances of flattering, which will be
mentioned later in Section 5.3.1. Apart from that, it is difficult to see, how anyone with
*high integrity* and *conscience* could imagine impersonating someone they are not. Those
are not characteristics that one connects with a person who is willing to perform a fraud.

### 5.2.3 Ending politely

Like Bhatia’s sales promotion letters, all the Nigerian scam letters include what Bhatia
(1993: 55) calls *polite endings*. These are, of course, polite, but more than anything else,
they are formulaic. Anyone, who has had any instructions in the etiquette of letter
writing has learnt these phrases with which one is supposed to end letters. There are a
few variations depending on how well one knows the recipient or for what purpose one
writes the letter. There is reason to believe, based on experience of people’s everyday
behaviour, that most letters, no matter what kind of letter it is, include these formulaic
endings. The exception could possibly be letters where one complains about something.
The Nigerian scam letters vary only slightly from the traditional *yours sincerely* and
*best regards* to some longer varieties containing added blessings.

(19) Thank you and God bless as I await your urgent response.
Yours Sincerely,
Mr. XXXX XXXXXX
(Letter 1)

Example (19) is rather common and sounds natural based on personal experience of the
religiosity of people in East Africa. Sometimes the blessings are even more enthusiastic,
like in (20), where the sender managed to include both *blessed, Lord* and *Christ* within
two lines.

(20) Remain blessed in the name of the Lord.
Yours in Christ,
Mrs. XXXX XXXXXX XXXXX
The alleged Christian beliefs of the writer of Letter 7 run through the entire letter. The money in this case is supposed to go to something that the church would approve of, and the sender asks the receiver of the letter to pray for her. A few of the letters are less emotional and more business-like, as illustrated in (21):

(21) Thank you for your anticipated cooperation while we look forward to a mutually benefiting business relationship with you.

Best Regards.

DR. XXX XXX
Chairman Contract Awarding Committee (NNPC).

Considering the fact that the authors of the letters probably are not the people they say that they are, it is worth mentioning that they do stay in character throughout the entire letter. If they start off in a Christian style, they finish in the same way and if the letter is strict and business-like, it is written in the same manner from the beginning to the end.

5.3 Functional moves specific for the Nigerian scam letters

There are three functional moves that are noticeable in the Nigerian scam letters, but these do not occur in the sales promotion letters that Bhatia (1993) used for his study. The first one is the opening. This is where the writers introduce themselves, or rather the people they are impersonating, and explain why they are sending the letter. Sometimes this move overlaps with the second move, introducing the offer. As mentioned above, the Nigerian scam letters all include a large amount of background stories to where the money originates from and also why the people who ask for help, the writers of the letters, cannot themselves take the money out of the country. Because of this, one functional move specific for the Nigerian scam letters will be called background story. This move includes the sub-moves alleged origin of money and reason for needed assistance. Another functional move included in the majority of these letters is the assurance of transaction safety. This is where the authors tell the receivers of the letters that they will not be involved in anything illegal. More explanations, definitions and examples will follow below.
5.3.1 Flattering openings

The openings of the letters vary to a large extent compared to the standard sales promotion letter that Bhatia gives as an example to illustrate his study (Bhatia, 1993: 48). The most remarkable strategy the senders use in the Nigerian scam letters is flattering. This is expressed in three different ways; either in how the receiver is perceived or is expected to be perceived by the sender, like in (22), or in the manner the senders have obtained the contacts of the receiver, like in (23).

(22) This business transaction might not fall within the wide spectrum of your business activities, but I plead your assistance, as your flair for profitable business is needed. (Letter 19)

In (22) the sender uses both caution in the modal *might*, and double flattering. The writer both claims to know about the *wide spectrum* of the receiver’s business activities and the *flair for profitable business* that the receiver allegedly has. All people like to hear how good they are, and if one has a flair for profitable business within a wide spectrum, one has to be rather successful.

(23) HOWEVER YOUR ADDRESS WAS CURTESY [sic] OF A CONTACT IN THE CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE. AFTER DUE CONSIDERATION OF YOUR PROFILE AND AN HUMBLE-DECISION TO SOLICIT FOR YOUR UNDERSTANDING AND CO-OPERATION IN THIS TRANSACTION, AS IT WILL BE BENEFICIAL TO ALL OF US INVOLVED. (Letter 9)

In (23) there is actually a combination of two flattering strategies, as it both claims to have obtained the receiver’s address from the *chambers of commerce*, which sounds reliable and impressive enough, and expects the receiver to be *understanding and co-operative*, which sounds like characteristics that anyone would like to have. The third way of flattering is more subtle, and does not necessarily occur in the opening of the letter, but is slipped in a little later, as in (24):

(24) Though the internet is a seemingly unlikely place to find such individuals, I believe that the Lord hides jewels in the most unlikely places. (Letter 7)

Who does not want to be one of the Lord’s jewels? In the third case of flattering it is up to the receiver to show that they fit the description of the person the sender is looking for. Sometimes, like in (25), identical with example (18), the person receiving the letter has to be quite diversified to fit the description.
Presently I am now in Europe to search for a reliable person/company of high integrity [sic]/dignity and one with conscience who will claim this fund on our behalf as the beneficiary…(Letter 17)

The fact that these characteristics do not actually add up, with what the receiver is asked to do, is commented on earlier, in Section 5.2.2. However, these two lines are filled with positive characteristics, like reliable, high integrity/dignity and conscience which the receiver probably would like to possess. It is likely helpful that one can actually earn 25% of $21.8m if one fulfills the elicited criteria. Flattering strategies occur in 50% of the letters. Table 1 is an overview of these strategies used in the 50 letter corpus of this study.

Table 1. Flattering strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How the contact is obtained</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How the receiver is perceived</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle approach</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The difference between How the receiver is perceived and the Subtle approaches is mainly how outspoken the compliment is. In the first one, the sender claims to know that the receiver has certain characteristics, like in (26):

(26) I came to know of you in my search for a reliable and reputable person to handle a very confidential business transaction which involves the transfer of a huge sum of money to a foreign account requiring maximum confidence. (Letter 6)

In (26) above, it is understood, that when the sender looked for a person fitting the description, somebody recommended the receiver. That is why the sender chose him or her although they had had no prior contact. Compare this to the words the sender used in (27).

(27) On this note, I decided to seek for a reliable foreigner who will act as the foreign beneficiary of the fund from the deceased by providing his/her bank account where the fund will be transferred. (Letter 39)

In (27) it is up to the receiver to show the sender, by replying, that (s)he is the reliable foreigner that the sender is seeking. If the sender finds the receiver reliable enough,
(s)he will supposedly get 20% of $36 million. Even if they are politely formulated as in (28) below, where both please and kindly are included in the opening line of the letter, it does not mean that the stories are more trustworthy.

5.3.2 Background story

In some of the letters, mainly the ones where the money has been inherited from relatives, there are links to news sites on the Internet which are included to back up the stories told in the letters.


As in the case of (28), not all linked websites are completely reliable. Online Nigeria looks like an official tourist page, but it is possible to add one’s own information. The link above cannot be accessed any longer, therefore it cannot be assessed. However, chances are that the information was not even truthful. As mentioned earlier, the background stories vary, but, in most letters, they take up about a third of the mail. In the majority of the letters these moves include both answers to where the money comes from and why the authors of the letters cannot do the intended financial transaction without external help. Table 2 gives an overview of frequency and types of move used to explain the alleged origin of the money in the different letters.

Table 2. Alleged origin of the money

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alleged origin</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fraud by an employee</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deceased foreigner</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inheritance from relative</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first line in Table 2 mentions fraud by employee. Sometimes the writers claim to have been financial directors of contracting companies, and other times they claim to have worked in a governmental position. In these positions they claim to have performed different kinds of frauds in order to obtain a large sum of money, as illustrated by (29) below:
It is remarkable that the authors admit to have over-invoiced as employees in different large companies, and thus acquired these huge amounts of money. This kind of stories may only appeal to scruple free people, but that does not seem to bother the authors of these letters.

More often, they claim to have been governmental officials in a position to hire contractors, who have given, without the knowledge of the government, the contract to a cheaper company than what had been agreed upon officially. The remaining amount, they have put into their own pockets, as shown in (30).

As can be seen from example (30) above, the letters often include a great deal of details, probably to increase the credibility.

When it comes to the letters where the money was inherited from a deceased relative, the relatives mentioned are often former leaders of the country, who have obtained the money through corruption, as in (31) below.

The scenarios are quite believable, but as a reader, it is difficult to get the feeling: “poor helpless Africans, let’s give them a hand”. The letters in the corpus seem to aim at greedy people without either scruples or conscience, with one exception: example (32) below:

I am Mrs. XXXX XXXX, the wife of late Brigadier – XXXX XXXX --- My three daughters and I are trapped in obnoxious custom and traditional norms. We have suffered maltreatment and untold hardship in the hands of my late husband’s family, simply because I did not bear a male child [heir apparent] for my late husband. (Letter 8)
The story in (32) may be something that the liberal westerner reacts to emotionally. According to African customs women are often without rights. They only gain respect when they bear a male child, and in many cultures they have to marry one of their late husbands’ brothers, if their husbands pass away. Otherwise, they may be thrown out on the street. In western countries, however, where women have had the right to vote since the turn of the last century, these customs seem very old-fashioned and cruel.

For an outsider it seems odd that not more scamming authors try the emotional approach. If one looks around at what makes people involved and willing to sign petition lists and collect food and clothes, it is not the already rich and the cynical, but the poor and the suffering homeless.

As can be seen in Table 2 above, the by far most common strategy used by the authors of these letters to explain the background of the money is the deceased foreigner strategy. This move is used in 46% of the letters. In these letters the authors claim to be managers of different banks where the deceased foreigners have accounts that no-one knows about. If one was to believe all these letters, it is very dangerous to be a foreigner in Africa. They have either been wiped out together with their family, in some tragic accident, or never given a next of kin when they opened the account, and every search, for a next of kin, has been in vain. In one of the letters, the authors even admit to have swindled the next of kin of some of the money, as illustrated in (33).

(33) On his death five years ago, his heir (his wife) put a claim for his money and my company paid off in line with her request. However, his wife did not know that the facts of Nine million, eight hundred thousand British Pounds (GBP9.8 Million) paid in by DR. XXXX XXXX in a different account and the money is still lying with us. (Letter 30)

The authors do not present a nice picture of themselves, by telling the receiver that they have swindled a grieving widow of what is rightfully hers. In the other cases, the money would probably only go to some unclaimed funds account at the bank, so there is a chance of not feeling bad for grabbing some of it. (34) below is an example of this strategy:

(34) …at the expiration 3 years of the fund will revert to the ownerships of the Hong Kong Government if nobody applies to claim the funds. (Letter 26)

In the UK, the bank managers apparently have an opportunity for a bonus when something like this happens, if one is to believe the authors of letter 50, illustrated by example (35):
After four years the bank is permitted by law of UK to send the money to the treasury as unclaimed bills and the money shared amongst the directors of the bank. (Letter 50)

After reading example (35), one does not feel so bad for getting, in this case, four million dollars for letting someone use one’s account. The alternative is apparently that a director (a position that sounds well paid anyway) gets the money.

When it comes to the second sub-move, reason for needed assistance, the stories vary more than in the origin of the money. Table 3 below gives an overview of the reasons for needed assistance, followed by an explanation.

Table 3. Reason for needed assistance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign citizenship</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work related</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reason</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugee status</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deteriorating health</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most common reason given for requesting assistance is the need for someone with a foreign citizenship. This goes together with the origin of the money sub-move. In the cases where the money comes from a deceased foreigner, the writers need someone to pose as the next of kin to this foreigner, and then, of course, it makes sense if the alleged next of kin is also a foreigner.

(36) We need a foreign partner to apply for the claim on our behalf because of the fact that the customer was a foreign [sic] and we don’t want this money to go into the treasury as unclaimed fund. (Letter 24)

In (36), the senders are trying to mitigate the fraud by claiming that the money would only have gone to the treasury anyway. The receiver will not really take part in anything immoral, since (s)he is only applying for the claim on the senders’ behalf.
In some cases the senders admit immorality by claiming that they cannot apply for the funds themselves, due to their employment situation, as in (37).

(37) This is bearing in mind that our civil service code of conduct forbids us from owning foreign company or running foreign account while in government service hence the need for an overseas partner. (Letter 40)

In (37) above, the senders admit to break the rules and regulations connected to their line of work. The immorality of this action may lessen the possibility that the receiver of the letter will be willing to assist in the senders’ predicament. Hence, this move is counter-productive.

In seven of the letters, the reason is political, i.e. the sender is allegedly a relative of a former leader of the country, which the current leader of the same country wants to punish by freezing their assets. Since the newscasts in the western countries tend to show only war and starvation whenever they show pictures from Africa, these stories have to be considered believable.

(38) Now that Charles Taylor is no more in Power [sic], I thought it wise to move the money out to any country of the world for investment purposes. (Letter 25)

In (38) the senders have covered their backs by using *any country of the world.* That way they do not have to change the letter in any way when sending it to different receivers.

The letters containing the *no reason* move, give no explicit reasons in the same way the other letters do. Letter 48 is an example of this vague way for the senders to express themselves.

(39) I cannot directly take out this money without the help of a foreigner and that is why I am contacting you for an assistance to claim the funds and share it with me. (Letter 48)

In example (39) above a kind of reason is given, but it does not answer the question why the sender *cannot take out the money without the help of a foreigner.* The letters that include the foreign citizenship move state specifically why a foreigner is needed, as seen in example (36) above.

One could claim that the letters allegedly written by people with refugee status also belong in the political category, and they are related since the refugees have that status due to political reasons. However, in this case the writers of the letters are not
under threat any longer, but the laws of the country where they reside forbid them to use
their funds there, as illustrated by example (40).

(40) Due to my status as a refugee, I cannot invest these funds here in South Africa. (Letter 2)

The wording, *status as a refugee*, may have been used in order to elicit sympathy, yet it
is difficult to obtain it when one is trying to hide “SEVENTY FIVE MILLION
DOLLARS cash” (Letter 2)

The three letters where the bad health of the senders is the alleged reason for
requesting assistance are more religious than the other letters. There seems to be a
connection that once one realises that one is dying, one will automatically find God, as
example (41) below shows.

(41) …but I can no longer partake in these noble tasks. I need a church, Christian individual or
individuals who can continue the work on our behalf and will utilize this money the way I
am going to instruct here into-funding churches orphanages and widows propagating the
word of God and ensure that the house of God is maintained. (Letter 7)

Not only can the senders with the alleged deteriorating health not manage to evacuate
the money from their home country themselves, they want all the money to go to charity
and one of the three letters does not promise anything at all for the performed service. It
can be assumed that the receivers of the letter are supposed to be tempted anyway, with
the sender’s deteriorating health in mind. Once the sender is dead, the receiver can keep
the money without anyone knowing.

5.3.3 The assurance of transaction safety

Half of the letters, i.e. twenty-five, include an explicit assurance that the deal offered is
risk-free. This is a functional move that is completely missing in Bhatia’s (1993)
business proposal letters. In proper offers it should be implied that there is no risk
involved. However, one may think that it is typical of the writers of the Nigerian scam
letters to make such an effort to persuade the receivers about the lack of risk in their
offers, as the risk involved is coming from the writers themselves. Some of the authors
let the receivers know why the deal is without risk, it may be an attorney involved, for
instance, as seen in (42).

(42) There is no risk involved at all in the matter as we are going adopt a legalized method
and the attorney will prepare all the necessary documents. (Letter 26)
Other letters back up the lack of risk with governmental officials, as illustrated in (43).

(43) Be informed that, this business is genuine and 100% safe considering the high-powered of government officials involved. (Letter 13)

It may be worth reflecting over the fact, that the government officials mentioned are the same ones that over-invoiced in order to obtain the money. The safety of their behaviour can be discussed. Most of the twenty-five letters including this move, 80%, have no official at all to back up their reliability. One just has to take the author’s word for it, as in example (44).

(44) I will not fail to bring to your notice that this transaction is hitch free and that you should not entertain any atom of fear as all required arrangements have been made for the transfer. (Letter 4)

The writer of (44) claims to be the manager of a bank. It is difficult to know whether his title makes people trust him more, even if there are reasons to believe that that is the case. On the one hand, the sender uses reassurances like *I will not fail* and *you should not entertain any atom of fear,* therefore readers may feel reassured. On the other hand emphasises like *any atom* may be exaggerated enough for the reader to think twice. Linguistic strategies like the one mentioned above will be commented on in the next section.

### 5.4 Linguistic strategies

As mentioned earlier, one may have expected the Nigerian scam letters to use more empathy seeking strategies, but overall, they do not. However, the three letters, where the senders claim to have a deteriorating health, borders to something that can be considered as empathy seeking. The way the senders lived their lives in order to obtain the money in these three letters is still dubious as can be seen from example (45).

(45) Though I am very rich, I was never generous, I was always hostile to people and only focused on my business as that was the only thing I cared for. (Letter 15)

Because of this, there are reasons to believe that readers of these letters do not feel sympathy for the senders even if they are supposedly dying. Although the senders with
the deteriorating health all claim to be willing to make immense by donating their money to charity, they do not come off as ‘nice people’.

Since all the letters include mentioning a large sum of money, which can be reached by the receiver in exchange for a seemingly small effort, greed appear to be the characteristic that the senders are looking for in the receivers rather than empathy. One similarity to the linguistic strategy in Bhatia’s (1993) sales promotion letter is the simplicity expressed in the Nigerian scam letters. The idea is that the receiver can obtain a large sum of money rather effortlessly. Some times the senders even express it straightforward, like in (46).

(46) This is simple, I will like you to provide me immediately with your full names and address so that the attorney will prepare the necessary documents and affidavits, which will put you in place as the next of kin. (Letter 12)

Words like attorney and affidavit are probably meant to create trustworthiness, and simple may be an attempt to make it sound as if these kinds of transactions are performed everyday. If the receiver is tempted, but feels intimidated, the idea may be to challenge the recipient with the simple tone, e.g. “this is the way we play, if you cannot handle it…” In the case that the receiver wants the offered money (s)he cannot risk to appear to be a coward.

As mentioned in Section 5.2.2, urgency and haste is something the senders of the Nigerian scam letters seem to prioritise. Often they try to make it sound as if the speed of the reply is to the receivers benefit: the sooner they reply, the sooner they will receive their percentage of the money in question. This increases likelihood that greed is the characteristic the senders are looking for in the receivers.

The more logical approach creating empathy is only used in one letter as mentioned in section 5.3.2. The letter where the African custom of inheriting widows between brothers is presented as cruel and inhumane is the only one of the fifty letters examined for this study that seem to try the empathy approach. The deceased husband was an army commander, but in the “West African peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone” (Letter 8). Chances are that the alleged fortune of “U.S $15.5 Million cash” was not obtained legally, but they do not admit to any immoralities, like many senders of the other letters do. These linguistic strategies and the above described functional moves will be discussed in the following section.
6. Discussion

The most recent study in the field of spam is Cukier et al.’s (2006) pilot study. It is an impressive work with a much longer reference list than the one in the present study. However, what they have noticed is that:

One theorist’s genre may be another’s sub-genre or even super-genre, and what is technique, style, mode, formula or thematic grouping to one, may be treated as a genre by another. (Cukier et al., 2006: 3)

This is a problem that this study has encountered also, since the aim was to find out whether the Nigerian scam letters were to be considered a genre of their own. In order to do so, fifty Nigerian scam letters were analysed for similarities and differences to Bhatia’s (1993) sales promotion letters. The scam letters in the corpus were also analysed for functional moves that proved to be unique to this kind of communication.

Bhatia (1993) divided the sales promotion letters in his study into seven different functional moves. Three of these moves were also present in the Nigerian scam letters of this study, which then supports Cukier’s (2006) claim that “the form of one genre is used in place of another as a mask to fool the recipient” (Cukier et al., 2006: 7). In their study, however, it was advertisements that were masked as memos and personal letters. In this study, the corpus consisted of pure frauds, which were masked as business proposals.

In order to fully see how well-planned these schemes actually are, it would have been necessary to be able to follow them to the next step, when the receivers may have replied to the Nigerian scam letters, to follow the communication. Now, one can only speculate in the efficiency of the different formulations that the senders have used.

6.1 Bhatia’s functional moves – a way of masking fraud?

If the recipients are used to receiving business proposal letters of different kinds, the Nigerian scam letters may give them a sense of reliability because they follow a pattern known to the receiver to a certain extent. However, business representatives – who most commonly receive business proposal letters - should be able to read between the lines, to avoid the loopholes. In other words, there may be a risk that the masking can backfire. The senders of the Nigerian scam letters still choose to include moves in their correspondence that resemble the communication of professional business people. They even claim occasionally to be professional business people themselves in high
management positions, possibly in order to give some weight and reliability to their offers. They are not just anybody, they are for instance “representing the board of the contract award and monitoring committee of the Zambian Ministry of Mining” (Letter 1) or “DR XXX XXX, AN ACCOUNTANT WITH THE STANDARD TRUST BANK LIMITED BRANCH OFFICE LAGOS.” (Letter 5)

6.2 Smooth talking or linguistic strategies
The ‘smooth talking’ move is divided into different parts in the letters in this study. Firstly the letters often include flattering openings, which probably, like most compliments, are meant to make the receivers lower their guards. If somebody brings flowers, one tends to accept them. Secondly, the senders introduce the offer, and make it sounds easy, as in (47), a variation of example (8).

(47) All you need do is to make necessary [sic] arrangement and fly down to Accra-Ghana… (Letter 25)

In the phrase all you need do lies all the simplicity that the receiver can wish for. Unfortunately, what is needed to be done is hardly anything one does with ease. After this, it is presented what there is in it for the receivers, should they decide to fall for the offer; this is illustrated below by example (48), a variation of example (10).

(48) My colleagues and I are prepared to give you US$2.5m… (Letter 23)

The senders make it sound easy, and then they offer an amount of money large enough to live from for the rest of one’s life; together with flattering that makes it sound as if the receiver is special, a chosen one.

As mentioned several times before the empathy approach is very rare in the letters examined of this study. The letter where it is used tells a story, where the wife of a wealthy man is inherited by his brother, together with his wealth, like a possession. This is illustrated by example (49) a variation of example (32).

(49) My three daughters and I are trapped in obnoxious custom and traditional norms. We have suffered maltreatment and untold hardship in the hands of my late husband’s family, simply because I did not bear a male child [heir apparent] for my late husband. (Letter 8)

This letter speaks very little of the fact that if the widow had been poor, the brother of her husband had cared for her support, and if she had had a son, he would have decided
whether she would have to remarry the husband's brother or not, and the money would still not have reached her daughters or her personally. Therefore one could claim that the customs is obnoxious indeed. It is interesting to see how senders, who probably are from Africa, use the prejudice that westerners have about how barbaric and behind the Africans are with their strange customs.

This sender mentions maltreatment and untold hardship that she and her daughters have allegedly suffered from the family of her husband. This is probably meant to upset the western reader enough to want to come to the rescue. However, fights over heirlooms happen in families of all cultures, not only the “barbaric African”, even if they do not pass on each other’s wives.

6.3 The Nigerian scam letters and Swales’ definition of genre

The main aim of this study was to find out whether the Nigerian scam letters could be considered a genre according to Swales’ (1990) definition. Below follows a breakdown of the definition of genre according to Swales (1990), compared to what is known about the Nigerian scam letters. Swales’ (1990) definition of genre was presented in Section 1.3; Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 argue that there are definite similarities between Swales’ definition and the characteristics of the Nigerian scam letters.

6.3.1 A class of communicative events

It cannot be denied that these letters represent an event where language is absolutely essential. The letters are mailed from afar, in this case via electronic mail, to receivers, who are unknown to the senders. Furthermore, there are no signs of this kind of communication ever being able to be performed without written or spoken contact.

The frequency of this “class of communicative events” (Swales, 1990: 45) is unlimited. The forum used by the senders, electronic mail, enables the senders to multiply their letters in infinitely and theoretically spread them to as many electronic mailboxes as there are in the world. Compared to written long-distance communication prior to CMC, which needed at least a working fax-machine and before that, a large amount of stamps, today’s technical improvement enables people to send a never-ending line of electronic letters very fast and to a low cost. The advantages that everyone can enjoy can also be distorted by people without morals.

The communicative purposes of these letters are alike from one letter to the next. The sender wants to persuade the receiver of the letter to answer the letter and be
willing to lend their account number to the sender. In the next step of the communication, the sender asks for money to cover official fees (www.secretservice.gov) on repeated occasions. No money will, of course, be sent the other way. Therefore the communicative purpose of the Nigerian scam letters is to swindle the receivers.

6.3.2 The discourse community and the prototype

The letters analysed for this study, and every other Nigerian scam letter, are sent by somebody, who has to be considered part of a discourse community. The difficulty of this particular discourse community lies in defining it. It is in their nature to be anonymous, since their actions are illegal. Theoretically, there could be only one group of people sending all the Nigerian scam letters to everybody in the world. However, according to the US Secret Service, this phenomenon is so frequent, that the follow up of the initial communication would be difficult to manage with only one group of senders. Therefore it is reasonable to believe that there is more than one group who performs this kind of communication. It is also reasonable to believe, as mentioned earlier, that the Nigerian scam letters are sent by a group rather than by an individual. Again, this assumption is connected to the next step of the communication, where the receiver of the letter is asked to meet with a representative, and pay an amount of money, in order to cover the government fees in the country where the money has to be evacuated from (www.secretservice.gov).

Cukier et al. (2006) posit that all spam forms a genre, but in their pilot study they found out, that there were far too many different kinds of spam, sent by a variety of people and organisations, to be considered only one genre. Swales (1990) warns about the opposite, that one may think that one has found something new, when it really is a variation of something already encountered and defined. Sometimes the senders find it to be an advantage, that the receiver perceives the communication as something different like perceiving a scam as a business proposal. Cukier et al. (2006) call this masking – to cover one genre with another, by using some of its functional moves.

The prototype of a Nigerian scam letter is offering a percentage of illegally obtained money, to people with whom the sender is not familiar in exchange for temporary use of the receiver’s bank account. One could also argue that the prototypical scam letter allegedly originates in Nigeria, and any deviation from that prototypicality has to be considered a variation. The origin of the money also varies, but nowhere in the
corpus analysed for this study, was it legal. The offered amount can also be different, but it is always over a million in US currency. Although the discourse community is a weak link since one can say so little about them, there is definitely such a thing as a prototypical scam letter.

6.4 The genre of Nigerian scam letters

Based on the findings accounted for in Section 5, and discussed above, the Nigerian scam letters have to be considered a genre of their own. They have to be considered a class of communicative events, since the communication performed in the Nigerian scam letters absolutely requires the use of written language. The frequency of the letters is unlimited, since the medium used these days is fast and cost-effective. The letters also have the same communicative purpose, i.e. to lure people to send money to the unknown senders under false pretences that they will receive money in return. The single letter varies very little from the letter with the statistically most common functional moves – the prototype.

The functional moves in the Nigerian scam letters that do not occur in for instance sales promotion letters, which can be considered the legal ‘relatives’ of these letters, make them unique and help the Nigerian scam letters prove themselves a genre of their own. The flattering openings and deceiving background stories are also exclusive structures for this class of communicative events.

The only thing that could make one doubt whether the Nigerian scam letters are a genre of their own is the lack of knowledge about the discourse community that is responsible for them. The discourse community behind the Nigerian scam letters is a crowd of criminals who make their living from fraud. Therefore it is impossible to know who they are or how many they are. The more one studies the scam letters, the more one can say about them, but since it is difficult to know which scam letters are sent by whom, it is difficult to connect the dots. As there are no etiquette books of ‘how to write a scam letter’ or ‘how to perform a fraud’, the senders have to write their own scripts and direct their own scenarios. The way they keep to a certain style, as mentioned in Section 5.2.3 supports the assumption of a well planned action. The senders want to be certain to be perceived in a certain way.
6.5 Has the world gone cynical and greedy?

The fifty Nigerian scam letters that have been analysed in this study are just a small percentage of all the scam letters circulating in the world. Even so, they show a pattern of a cynicism in their content that is somehow surprising, considering the purpose of the letters; i.e. to receive money from others. However, since those ‘others’ believe that they will receive money from the senders, maybe the discourse strategies are successful after all.

Every now and then there are shows on TV, where people are challenged with different, often repulsive missions in order to win money. The aims of these programs are supposedly to find out, what people are willing to do, if they get paid. From a psychological point of view it may be interesting to find out where people’s limits are, even if questions are often raised regarding the entertainment value of shows like that.

There are some parallels between these TV-shows described above and the corpus studied in this essay. How far are people willing to stretch in order to obtain a large amount of money? What is the level of importance of the different variables? Does it matter how much money they are offered or how fast they will receive the money? Is the wording in the letters important?

Often, if one reads the Nigerian scam letters in a straightforward manner between the lines, the content is as follows: *I have a large amount of money, which I have obtained in an unlawful way. In order to keep this money, I have to take it out of the country illegally. If you help me evacuate the money you will get a percentage.* What the sender asks the receiver to do can technically be compared to driving the escape car in a robbery. How come ordinary people – who probably would not even consider shop lifting – be willing to commit a serious crime, fraud, for the slim chance of obtaining a fortune? Are the people who fall for these scams victims, who are more inclined than others to fall for smooth talkers, or potential criminals, who cynically will perform any kind of fraud in order to obtain money quickly?

6.6 Practical uses and suggestions for further studies

Even though this study is a purely academic genre analysis, its primary use could be within the Interpol. The analysed texts are technically acts of crime, as they are no ordinary letters between friends or even business associates. In order to develop this
further, one should concentrate on the linguistic mistakes more than anything else, and, as mentioned earlier, they are many.

For a person in the employment of crime fighting, it may be of assistance to know where the writers of these letters originate from, and by analysing the linguistic mistakes in the Nigerian scam letters, that should be possible to find out. The biggest obstacle in that hunt is possibly the fact that there are over 2,000 spoken languages on the African continent. (http://encarta.msn.com)

Cukier et al. (2006) claimed in their pilot study that spam was a super-genre that consisted of different genres. Cukier et al. (2006) suggested that Nigerian scam letters were to be considered as one of the spam-genres. This study supports that argument. Continued research may show that there are even sub-genres to the genre of Nigerian scam letters.

7. Conclusion

In this study fifty Nigerian scam letters were analysed for similarities and differences to sales promotion letters studied by Bhatia (1993). The Nigerian scam letters have then been scrutinised in order to find out whether they can be considered a genre according to the definition provided by Swales (1990).

During the analysis it was found that the Nigerian scam letters included six functional moves: flattering openings, background story, introducing the offer, the assurance of transaction safety, soliciting response and ending politely. The letters also incorporated five sub-moves: alleged origin of the money, reason for needed assistance, justification of correspondence, offer of compensation and request for information.

Three of the functional moves corresponded to Bhatia’s sales promotion letters to a comparable extent: introducing the offer, soliciting response and ending politely. Three of the functional moves were unique for the Nigerian scam letters: flattering openings, background story and the assurance of transaction safety. Counted in words the three unique moves were dominating, since the background stories were rather lengthy.

At a close examination, the Nigerian scam letters cover the criteria given by Swales (1990) in order to be considered a genre of their own. They are a class of communicative events, since they cannot be replaced by body language to fulfil their purpose. The Nigerian scam letters have a common communicative purpose, even if it is
not morally defensible. The communicative events can be performed by the discourse community with unlimited frequency, since they use a fast and cost-effective medium nowadays – electronic mail.

Although not all of the Nigerian scam letters in the analysed corpus included all of the functional moves, and the functional moves sometimes varied in content, there was a possibility to find a pattern – to recover the prototype of a Nigerian scam letter. Cukier et al. (2006) claims that spam works like a super-genre. This study argues that Nigerian scam letters are one of the genres under the super-genre of spam and continued research may be able to find sub-genres within the genre of Nigerian scam letters. However, what may be of use for the international organisations for criminal investigation like Interpol, for instance, is a closer examination of the linguistic mistakes made by the writers of the Nigerian scam letters, in order to catch the criminals before they perform their next fraud.
References

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Secondary sources:
FitzGerald, Helen. 2003. How different are we: spoken discourse in intercultural communication. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
Subject: Urgent Business Assistance
Date: Sun, 06 Jan 2002 14:44:12 +0100
From: Mr XXX XXXX <xxxxxxxxxx@zwallet.com>
Reply-To: xxxxxxxxxx35@zwallet.com
To: xxx@xxx

Mr xxxxxxxxxx
Phone:0034-xxx-xxx-xxx
Email:xxxxxx@zwallet.com
Dear Sir,

I am interested in your partnership in business dealing. This business proposal I wish to intimate you with is of mutual benefit and it's success is entirely based on mutual trust, cooperation and a high level of confidentiality as regard this transaction. I am representing the board of the contract award and monitoring committe of the Zambian Ministry of Mining and Resources. I am seeking your assistance to enable me transfer the sum of US$30,500,000.00 (Thirty Million, Five Hundred Thousand United States Dollars) into your private/company account. The fund came about as a result of a contract awarded and executed for and on behalf of my Ministry. The contract was supposed to be awarded to two foreign contractors to the tune of US$180,000,000.00 (One hundred and Eighty Million United States Dollars).

But in the course of negotiation, the contract was awarded to a Bulgarian contractor at the cost of US$149,500,000.00 (One hundred and Forty-nine Million, Five Hundred Thousand United States Dollars) to my benefit unknown to the contractor. This contract has been satisfactorily executed and inspected as the Bulgarian firm is presently securing payment from my Ministry, where our Board is in-charge of all foreign contract payment approval. As a civil servant still in active government service, I am forbidden by law to operate an account outside the shores of Zambia. Hence this message to you seeking your assistance so as to enable me present your private/company account details as a beneficiary of contractual claims alongside that of the Bulgarian contractor, to enable me transfer the difference of US$30,500,000.00 (Thirty Million, Five Hundred Thousand United States Dollars) into your provided account. On actualisation, the fund will be disbursed as stated below. 20% of the fund will be for you as beneficiary 80% of the fund will be for Us. All logistics are in place and all modalities worked out for a smooth actualisation of the transaction within the next few working days of commencement. For further details as to the work ability of this transaction, please reach me as soon as possible for further clarification. Please, call me on receipt of this mail on 0034-xxx-xxx-xxx.or you can also reach me with this email address below: xxxxxxxx@zwallet.com

Thank you and God bless as I await your urgent response. Yours Sincerely,
Mr.xxxxx xxxxxx