

How is tax framed by the private client industry?

Linguistic analysis commissioned by
The Good Ancestor Movement

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Introduction

In years of linguistic analysis, I've never seen such uniform messaging coming from one industry.

Kirstie Skates, Founder, Illume Linguistics



After analysing tens of thousands of words across 100 websites of leading private client firms we found only a single reference to tax that could be described as positive or 'pro-tax'. This was buried away in a blog post.

There were a small number of more neutral concepts visible, primarily relating to the importance of 'compliance' or 'being compliant'.

Otherwise, the rhetoric, framing and language used to talk about tax was almost uniformly negative. We expected to see tax being positioned in a range of different ways by different private client firms, yet what we found was a set of startlingly consistent 'anti-tax' constructions.

It is very rare to have such homogeneity within an industry discourse. It indicates how *normalised* the negative framing of tax has become.

The constructions around tax are particularly powerful across two critical areas.

First, the tax landscape was presented as a perilous environment, full of risk and jeopardy. Readers were given the message that they were under threat from a 'minefield' or 'web' that presented an ever-changing danger. Private client advisors position themselves as 'trusted guides' who can help readers navigate this hidden danger. This construction flips the traditional power dynamics of a client-service provider relationship, putting greater power in the hands of the advisor.

Second, there was the use of an implicit moral construction: that minimising tax was not just desirable but was in fact the 'responsible' thing to do. 'Loved ones' were often evoked and assumptive language was used to tell clients that they must want to protect loved ones from tax/HMRC. There was no mention of what tax is for, or any positive references to citizenship, democracy, or contribution to wider society. This creates a powerful message – that minimising taxes (or avoiding taxes such as Inheritance Tax altogether) is not a self-serving action but instead the morally 'right' thing to do.

I hope the research helps the industry to reflect on whether these messages are the ones they intend to communicate, and also to consider whether there are alternative narratives they want to introduce.

Executive summary

The Good Ancestor Movement asked Illume Linguistics to take an objective look at how tax is framed in the private client industry.

We sampled the language of 100 firms in the private client industry (financial planners, wealth managers, law firms, accountancies, and private banks), forensically analysing how they talk about tax and tax services on their web sites and in blogs/articles. Our focus was on firms that provide tax services to wealthy clients.

We used qualitative linguistic analysis methods to reveal the language patterns that are most prevalent in the private client industry discourse and to explore the underlying frames of reference.

- **There is a single dominant industry narrative, with a notably negative framing of tax.** Tax is constructed as obstacle, burden or threat to be minimised, mitigated or (in the case of inheritance tax) ‘avoided entirely’. While this may come as no surprise, the pervasiveness of a single industry narrative – with no alternative or emergent narratives - is unusual.
- **The tax system is constructed as a highly complex, continually changing and increasingly punitive environment.** This is often represented by a metaphor cluster (‘web’, ‘maze’, ‘minefield’) which evokes disorientation and hidden danger. Within this context, advisory firms position themselves as specialist guides who can help clients navigate this dangerous complexity.
- **When firms talk about wealth in the context of tax there is a ubiquitous three-part mantra: grow, protect and pass it on to your family.** There’s an uncontested assumption that the advisor’s expert role is to minimise the amount of tax paid by the client.
- **Overall, the narrative constructs a sensible and responsible way for clients to behave.** We see a normative framing where doing the ‘right’ thing means minimising the amount of tax paid (rather than using ‘right’ to refer to the technical accuracy of paying the correct amount of tax). Wealthy clients are also positioned as being more at risk and having more to gain from tax planning.
- **‘Loved ones’ feature strongly in the narrative and are set up in opposition to ‘the tax man’, sometimes in moral terms. The discourse is centered on the idea of preserving wealth within the family.** There is no reference to the role that tax plays in society, or any mention of client values in relation to tax (unlike in other areas such as impact investing where there is an emergent narrative connecting client purpose with a contribution to wider society).
- **It’s noticeable that ‘wealth’ sometimes becomes an actor in the narrative in its own right, separated from the people who own or ‘hold’ it.** It is there to be sheltered, protected (from HMRC and ‘wayward heirs’) and transmitted across generations. However wealth can also have agency, with its own ‘route map’ and the power to ‘safeguard’ family members.

Conclusion

It’s relatively common in established industries for the dominant discourse to become crystalised and get out of synch with evolving client expectations and behaviour. As we see in this analysis, the language can become so familiar that it’s ‘just how things are talked about’. The current tax narrative provides a very limited set of subject positions for advisors and clients and there is therefore little space for alternative ways of talking about tax. Becoming aware of the negative framing of tax is the first step towards breaking out of this mould and changing it.

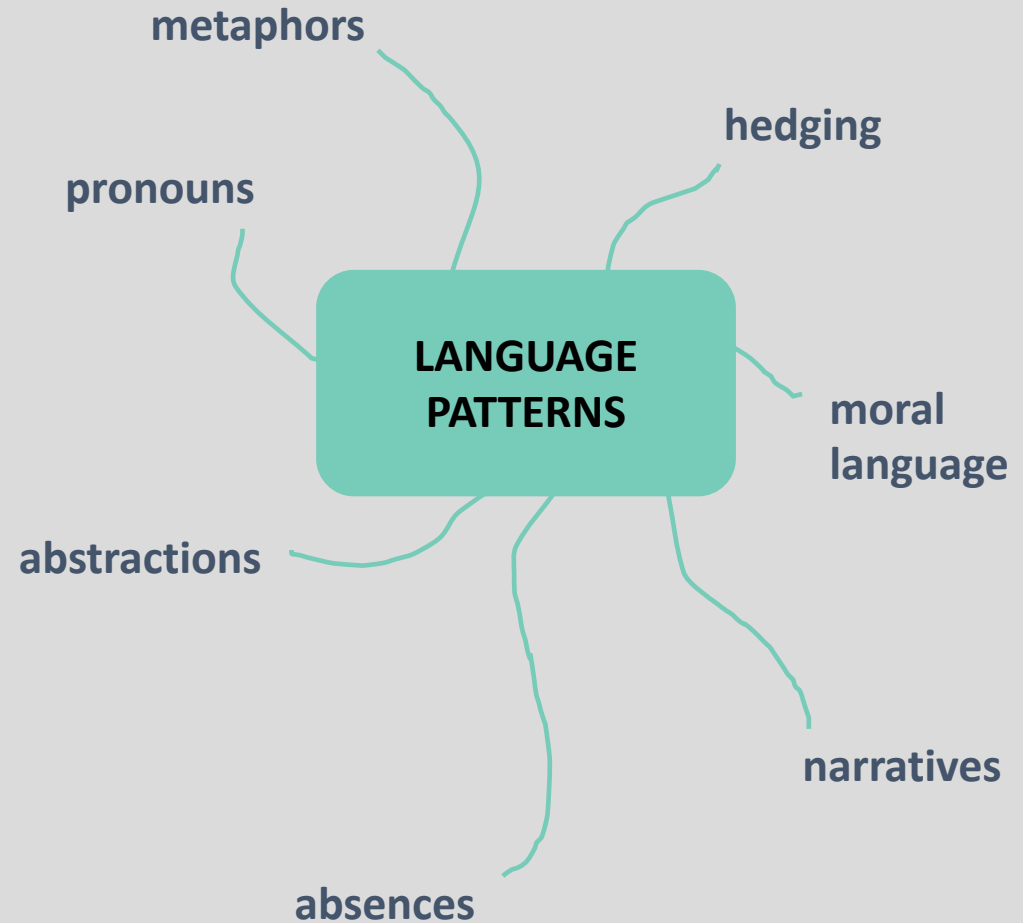
Our approach

We analyse the language of organisations, customers and communities, using methodology from language science, including systematic qualitative methods such as discourse analysis.

We looking for language patterns across large amounts of language data. Not just what is said, but how it is said.

The analysis of language patterns turns everyday 'invisible' language into a rich source of insight about a group's unspoken assumptions and habitual frames of reference.

Seeing these frames of reference and the worldview they project in a fresh light makes it possible to consider what the alternatives might be.

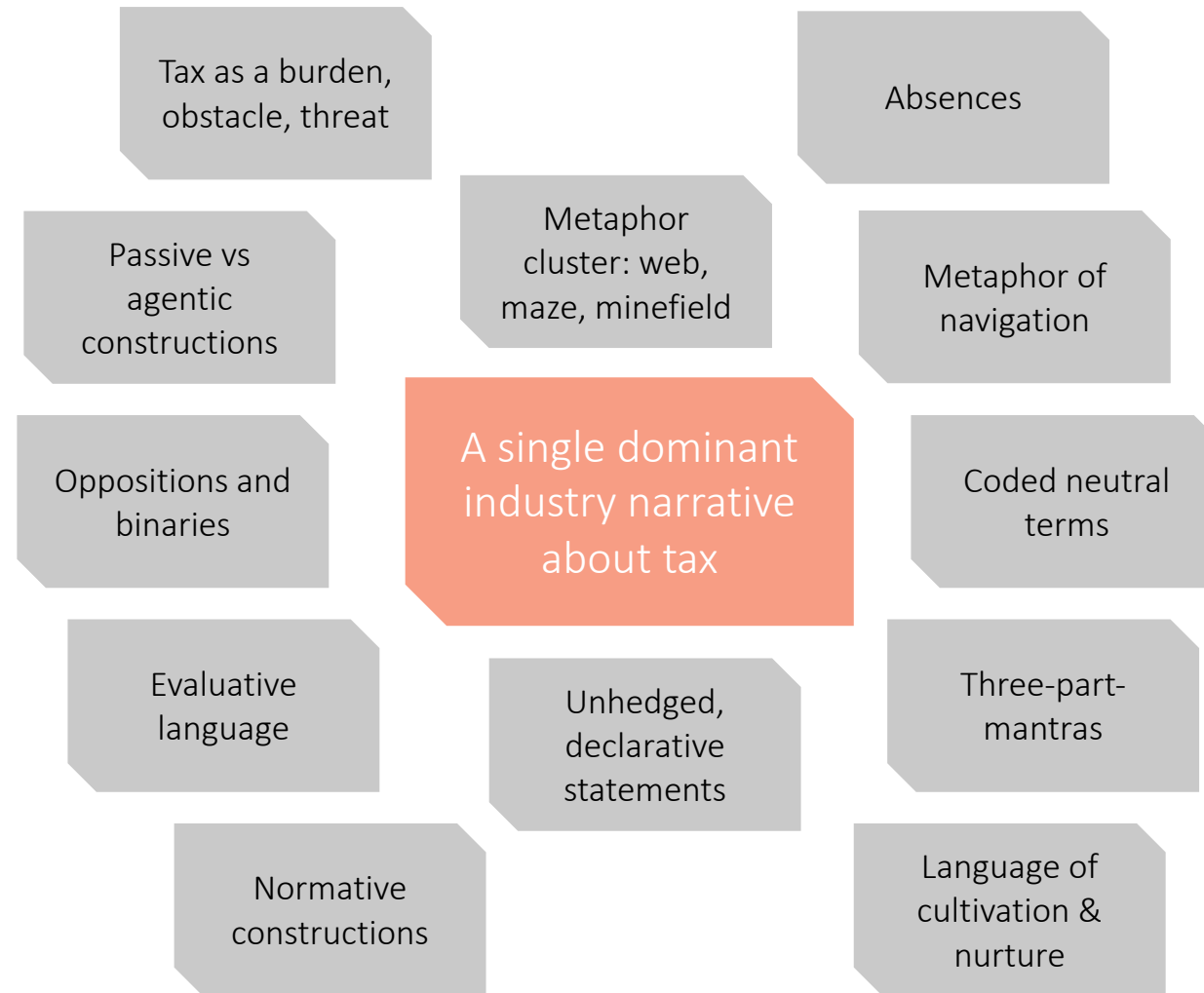


What language did we sample and analyse?

- We systematically sampled language from the web sites & blogs of 100 firms in the private client industry. We used recommendations from the Chambers High Net Worth Guide, FT Advisor rankings & Spears index to identify a range of firms providing services to wealthy clients. These included:
 - Law firms
 - Accountancies
 - Family office
 - Wealth managers
 - Financial planners
 - Private banks
- Our focus was on how the private client industry presents tax and tax services. In the language data we were particularly looking for:
 - **Language patterns**, including emphasis, absences and metaphor use
 - **Narratives** around tax
 - How **tax and tax services are framed** (positive, neutral, negative)
- We chose to analyse web site language as it's in the public domain and easy to access. We also know that this type of 'formal' published language can provide a window into the informal ways of thinking and talking within an organisation or industry. The illustrative quotes in this report were taken from a much larger set of similar quotes - we only included language patterns that were dominant in the discourse of the private client industry as a whole.
- All language data was collected during November 2022, so this research provides a snapshot of the industry.



An overview of the language patterns we found



There is a single, dominant industry narrative about tax

The narrative expresses a distinctive set of norms within a negative frame:

'No one likes to pay tax on their hard-earned money'

'The tax landscape has never been more complex'

'We will use our expertise to navigate the tax minefield'

'Build wealth and safeguard it from the effects of tax'

'A plan that minimises the amount of tax you'll pay'

'You want to pass your wealth on to your family, not HMRC'

'Compliance' / 'being compliant'

There were no alternative positive narratives, e.g.:

What tax is for

Choices about contribution to wider society

Responsibilities as a citizen

Negative Framing

TAX

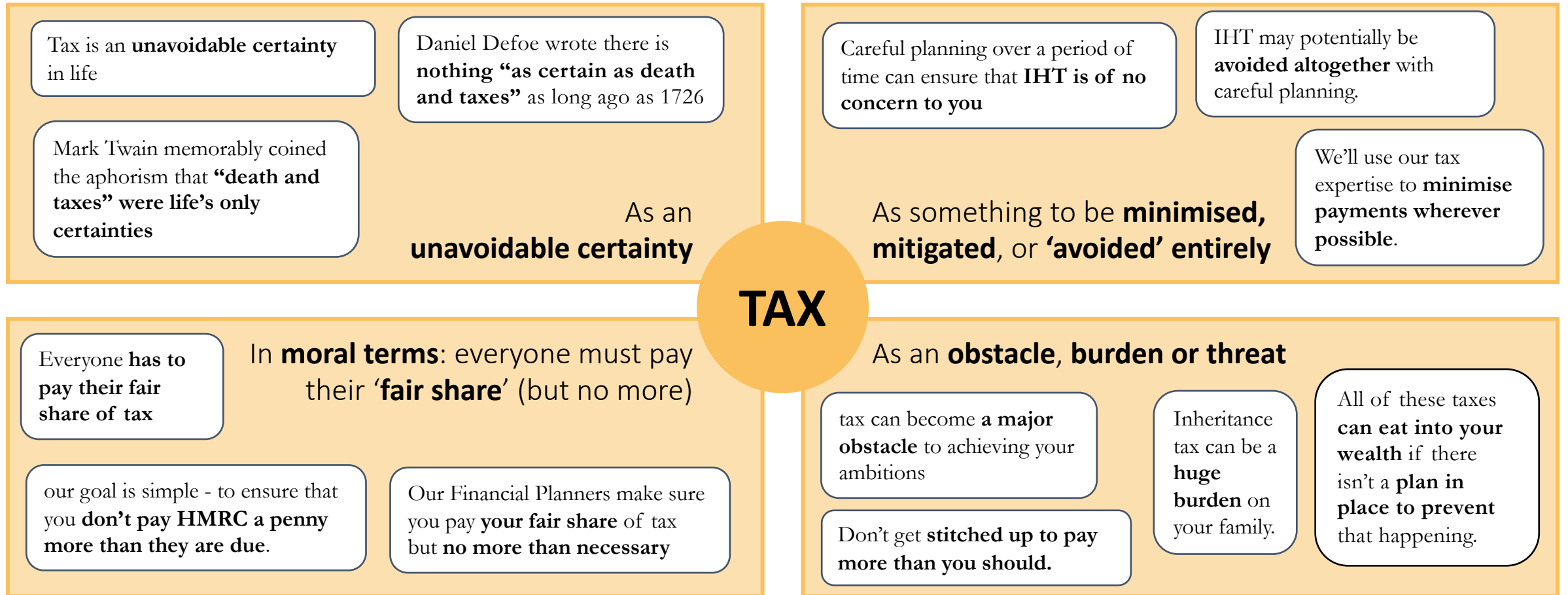
Positive Framing

There is one dominant narrative around tax, with notably negative framing. In most industry discourse we'd expect to see alternative competing or emergent narratives (different ways of talking and thinking about products and services). Having such a strong, normative industry discourse is unusual.

The message about the importance of being compliant was sometimes neutral but was often pulled into the negative narrative.

In 100 web sites and thousands of sentences about tax and tax services, we only found one example of pro-tax language (this was an anecdote in an article, not centre-stage).

'Tax' is overwhelmingly framed in negative terms



Even seemingly 'neutral' language has negative associations

Tax is an **unavoidable certainty** in life

Daniel Defoe wrote there is **nothing "as certain as death and taxes"** as long ago as 1726

Careful planning over a period of time can ensure that **IHT is of no concern to you**

IHT may potentially be **avoided altogether** with careful planning.

Clogged drains are an almost **unavoidable certainty** of the "life" of drainage. Cemeteries remind us about the **unavoidable certainty** of death—and to think about our future preventable disease rather than an **unavoidable certainty**. Trends that increase our awareness of death be at zero, not accepted as an **unavoidable certainty** of life. As always; transphobia or other bigoted soul at death. That is the one **unavoidable certainty** I know about my future, and there is no escape. Failing moulds an individual. That is an **unavoidable certainty**. Whether that process is a positive or negative

Source: webcorp.org.uk

Even terms which might be considered neutral – e.g. '*unavoidable certainty*' are typically used in a **negative context** in everyday language

share of tax

our goal is simple - to ensure that you **don't pay HMRC a penny more than they are due.**

Our Financial Planners make sure you pay **your fair share** of tax but **no more than necessary**

tax can become a **major obstacle** to achieving your ambitions

Don't get **stitched up to pay more than you should.**

Inheritance tax can be a **huge burden** on your family.

can eat into your wealth if there isn't a **plan in place to prevent** that happening.

The tax system is constructed as a highly challenging environment

The **tax landscape**, both in the UK and abroad, **has never been more complex.**

Constant changes to tax legislation, **more onerous reporting requirements** and **increased risk of investigation**

Tax law is applied more strictly and **what was formerly seen as acceptable tax planning is now regarded as tax avoidance.**

The **complexity and changing nature** of the UK tax system means that planning for tax liabilities is more important than ever.

Detailed and changing rules, closer scrutiny and higher penalties

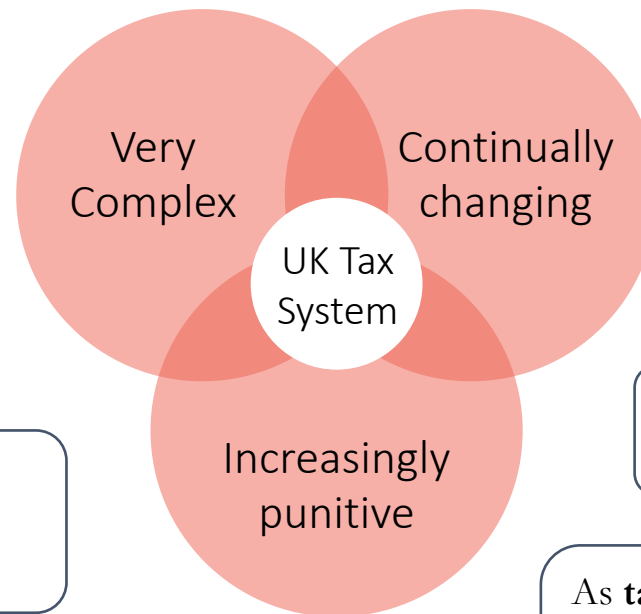
Efficient tax planning is important for both businesses and individuals. However, with legislation **regularly changing**, it can be **complex and challenging**

(We) advise our clients on how best to manage their affairs in a **complex and ever-changing world.**

Around the world, **legislation is becoming more complex**, tax authorities are **hardening their attitudes to tax planning** and there is an **increased risk of investigation.**

This **hardening of attitudes towards tax law and tax planning ...**

As **tax law becomes ever more complex** and **subject to increasing scrutiny**, excellent tax advice is key



Advisory firms position themselves as specialist guides to navigate this complex landscape

Language patterns

- A single, pervasive metaphor cluster
- Navigating a complex (and dangerous) terrain

What are they doing?

Using metaphors (web, maze, minefield) that typically represent disorientation and hidden danger.

Linking this with the metaphor of 'navigation' - constructing the advisor's role as a trusted, expert guide.

Note: This may be reassuring, but it also has the potential to implicitly set up a relationship dynamic where the advisor is 'leading the way'.

We **guide** you through the **maze** of tax mitigation strategies

We can give you **expert help** in navigating the **complexities**

The **terrain** of legal tax planning requires **specialist navigation**

we will **guide** our clients **smoothly** through the **intricacies** of the law

We will use our **expertise** to **navigate** the **tax minefield**

The UK tax system can be **extremely difficult** to **navigate**.

We can **advise** you **on how to take advantage** of the **complex web** of IHT reliefs

If you have a business you may be **faced with the minefield** of business reliefs.

Our tax advisers can **help highlight potential pitfalls** and **penalties**

Tax, Trust and Estate Planning are one of **the most complex areas** to **navigate successfully**

we can **help** you **navigate** through the **maze**.

Simple, everyday terms are used to describe specialist tax services

Language patterns

- Coded neutral terms: *'planning', 'efficient'*

What are they doing?

Advisors present tax services as a straightforward solution to the complexity of the tax landscape.

They use terms that appear to be neutral but that are actually underpinned by considerable technical detail that is primarily focused on minimising the amount of tax paid.

tax **planning**
tax **position**
tax **efficient**
tax **structures**
tax **preparation**

The narrative around wealth is highly consistent: Grow, protect and pass it on to your family

Language patterns

- A ubiquitous three-part mantra
- Positive language of cultivation and nurture

What are they doing?

Emphasising that there is an established way of managing wealth which involves growing it, protecting it and passing it on to future generations. There is no reference to any other alternative path. At all three stages then wealth is at risk from tax.

Advisors align their aims - *'our passion'*, *'our focus'* - with assumed client objectives.

They position their services as *'vital'* and *'essential'*.

to help you **grow, preserve and distribute your wealth** amongst the generations

advice to help to **protect, maintain and enhance their** [UHNW individuals] **wealth.**

The aim is to **preserve, administer and enhance** multi-generational family **wealth**

Our passion is to help our clients **grow, protect and pass on their wealth**

Growing your wealth or business is likely to be high on your list of priorities. **Preserving that wealth** for you and your family is ours.

tax structures that will **preserve more of your wealth for you and your family.**

We help you to **build wealth and safeguard it from the effects** of inflation and **tax.**

Our **main aim** is to **protect clients' wealth for themselves and their families**

Our focus is on growing your wealth and preserving it for future generations.

Tax planning is **vital** to **protecting what we own.**

Estate planning is **essential** to make sure **your wealth is protected**

It's a given that the advisor's expert role is to minimise the amount of tax paid

Language patterns

- Unhedged sentences and declarative statements

What are they doing?

Explicitly defining their role as one of reducing, minimising, mitigating tax, and (in the case of IHT) ensuring tax *'will not apply'*.

They use language of certainty, expertise and efficiency.

Advisors project an uncontested assumption that clients want to pay the *minimum* amount of tax possible

We find the most effective combination of **tax structures to minimise your tax bill**

We'll use our **tax expertise** to look at all your options and **minimise payments wherever possible**

We provide **expert** advice on the **provision and prevention of inheritance tax**, where appropriate

Avoiding IHT however isn't always straightforward

A financial planner will **come up with a plan that minimises the amount of tax you'll pay**

We aim to **minimise your tax liabilities and reduce your tax burden**

Managing Wealth is as much about **minimising the losses to tax** as managing investments

Whether it is **minimising tax now** or taking steps to **mitigate a future inheritance tax liability...**

With **expert** advice it's possible to **reduce IHT**, or even **ensure it will not apply to your estate**

we will use our **expertise and knowledge** to establish opportunities to **reduce your tax burden**

We will work to ensure your **objectives are met and taxation minimised**

This narrative constructs a right and moral way for clients to behave

Language patterns

- Evaluative language: 'sensible', 'responsible'
- Normative constructions: 'we' and 'no one'

What are they doing?

Emphasising norms around the *right way* think and act in relation to tax planning. 'No one likes to pay tax' constructs the norm, and the evaluative language ('right', 'sensible') turns this into a moral norm.

Note: in this context, 'right' isn't a reference to technical accuracy – i.e. paying the correct amount of tax. In this narrative, paying the minimum amount of tax is framed as the smart, sensible and responsible thing to do.

make sure **you are doing everything you possibly can** to run your finances in **the most tax-efficient way**

Having worked hard to accumulate wealth, **you want to pass it on to your family** and not HMRC

No one likes to pay tax on their **hard-earned money**

How **we** deal with tax is **critical to not paying more than we should**

Sensible tax planning can save you money and grow your wealth long term. It also gives you **that priceless sense of wellbeing** that comes from **knowing that everything has been done as it should**

ensure the **right people, get the right money, at the right time**

discuss your IHT options **and prevent costly mistakes.**

one of the smartest things you can do is to start planning your wealth holistically

We can guide you on **the right options** to help you protect, grow and pass on your wealth.

...it makes sense to pay no more tax than you absolutely need to

...help you keep your wealth intact for the people who depend on you.

The industry positions wealthy clients as 'at risk' and in need of specialist support

Language patterns

- Threat ('*pain*', '*missing out*', '*challenging*') vs opportunity ('*bigger the benefits*')

What are they doing?

Building on the narrative of complexity, scrutiny, and the responsibilities and challenges of wealth.

Highlighting the particular risk faced by '*global families*' and '*people with a significant amount of wealth*'.

But also highlighting the gains from tax planning: the significant benefits and opportunities available to them.

For private clients, the need for specialist tax advice has **never been greater**.

Higher rate tax-payers in the UK are missing out on **£769 million** each year in unclaimed pension tax relief

If there is a **silver lining** in the current economic situation it might be that it creates **opportunities for tax efficient gifts to be made**.

HMRC has increased its focus in recent times on **investigating the affairs of high net worth individuals**

many global families encounter similar life events which **present critical opportunities (and sometimes threats) to their wealth**

With such wealth comes a **multitude of responsibilities and challenges**

For people with a **significant amount of wealth, tax planning becomes a more complex process**.

life is much more challenging for the next generation [who] are increasingly reliant on **receiving a sizeable inheritance**.

the more **complex** your needs or situation, the **bigger the benefits** are likely to be.

Our Financial Planning team can **take the pain out of this complexity**

our personal tax advisers are **ready to take the burden off your hands**

Clients are reminded of their responsibility to family and loved ones

Language patterns

- Oppositions
- Emotive language

What are they doing?

Setting up an opposition between 'loved ones' and 'the tax man' or HMRC, often in emotive terms.

Note: In other areas of wealth management – e.g. impact investing and philanthropy, there is an emergent narrative that connects client purpose and values with a contribution to wider society. This is in contrast with the tax discourse which is centered on the idea of preserving wealth within the family with no reference to citizenship or democracy.

We know the best ways to reduce your IHT bill and **can ensure that your family (not HMRC) gets as much as possible.**

maximise the inheritance you leave for your **loved ones**

ensures that **loved ones** are provided for in the manner you want, and offers great **peace of mind**

reduced our **inheritance tax liability** which we can now **thankfully pass on to our loved ones.**

helping you to minimise your tax liabilities and **maximise the benefits of your estate for your loved ones** in the most straightforward, practical way.

shocked by the insensitivity of a tax that is timed to coincide with life's other certainty.

Keep **more wealth within the family** with tax-efficient planning

Inheritance tax can be a **huge burden on your family.**

the desire to **ensure the tax man isn't your largest beneficiary.**

so your **loved ones can make the most of your assets, wealth, and property.**

'Wealth' sometimes becomes a separate actor in the narrative

Language patterns

- Possessive adjectives not always present
- Passive vs agentic constructions

What are they doing?

'Wealth' (without a possessive adjective) can become an actor in the narrative in its own right, separated from the people who own or 'hold' it.

Wealth is generally constructed as passive: needing protection and shelter (from HMRC and 'wayward beneficiaries') so it can be *transmitted* across generations.

But it can also have agency, with its own *potential*, *route map* and power to *safeguard* family members.

offshore trusts, foundations, companies and other **wealth preservation vehicles**

a range of ways to **shelter wealth from inheritance tax**.

It's our job to **make sure your wealth safeguards the financial security of your family** after you've gone.

Bring your wealth to **its full potential**

our expertise helps us to **transmit clients' assets securely and efficiently across generations.**

longer-term strategies for tax-efficient **wealth protection and transmission**

Your adviser will work with you to create **a route map for your wealth**

trusts provide protection from [...] **"wayward" beneficiaries**

protect family wealth from undesirable relationships

Summary: explicit and implicit oppositions

The **oppositions** embedded in the current tax narrative make it very powerful

The oppositions are both explicitly and implicit.

They makes it hard for people (advisors or clients) do do or think anything differently – there are no alternative choices that are positively framed.

Tax	vs	Preserving hard-earned money
Tax man / HMRC	vs	Loved ones / family
Complexity	vs	Expert planning
<i>Being naïve, irresponsible</i>	vs	Being sensible and responsible
<i>Letting your family down</i>	vs	Doing the right thing

Summary: the dominant narrative

The narrative establishes an **obvious, right and sometimes even 'moral'** - way of thinking and acting in relation to tax.

It's presented as the right thing to do – for yourself and your family.

It's such a strong norm that it makes it hard to articulate what a different narrative might be.

Narrative:

- No one likes to pay tax on their hard-earned money
- Wealth needs to be protected from the tax man
- Expert advisors are on your side to navigate you through the complex and dangerous tax landscape
- The responsible thing to do (for your loved ones) is to ensure you minimise the amount of tax you pay

So what does this mean?

The whole narrative is locked in place with a very limited set of subject positions for advisors and clients

The negative framing of tax is so familiar and normative that it's become unremarkable

However, once it's made visible then there is a choice: to maintain the status quo or to break out of the current mould and ask a different set of questions.

- Making the current narrative explicit is the first step towards changing it.
- It then becomes possible to ask:
 - Is this the worldview we intend to communicate?
 - Is it aligned with our clients' values and expectations?
 - What alternative narrative choices are available to us?
 - How else could we frame tax?
 - What different client conversations might this lead to?

illum linguistics

About us

We are a team of linguistics experts who specialise in using techniques from language science to analyse organisational, customer and community discourse.

Our focus is on identifying the underlying assumptions and gaps in understanding that get in the way of effective communication between organisations and the people they want to connect with.

We use these insights to help clients from the private, public and third sector shape communications and guide behaviour change.



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