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A SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO

BUSINESS ENGLISH

Summary

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Key words: discourse, genre analysis, pragmatics, speech act theory, politeness theories, a semantic and pragmatic approach, contrastive analysis, business communication, business English, business letters/ emails, maxims of politeness.

Summary:

The present thesis *A Semantic and Pragmatic Approach to Business English* represents a corpus-based and descriptive approach to Business English.

Its main goals are:

- to identify and describe the functioning and the complexity of business English/Romanian communication in a Romanian workplace environment, even when the focus is narrowed down to specific genres;
- to make use of genre analysis for the macro-level study and combine it with other approaches, including the rhetorical devices in relation to the communicative aim, pragmatic issues and politeness strategies employed by the very specificity of this kind of discourse;
- to express awareness of cultural similarities and differences and cross-cultural aspects related to the study; for instance, the choice of data and the case study were structured considering the Romanian business communication context in English vs. Romanian.

The six chapters of the present research are based on insights derived from the literature in the field, on empirical study, as well as both the ESP teaching experience and expertise in the Romanian academic institution and the self-reflective learning experience as an Erasmus PhD research student in Odense University, Denmark in 2002. In this paper, I will argue and exemplify the ways in which various discursive structures have been adapted to the Romanian specificities of business communication. Pragmatics and speech act theory, especially politeness theory, are important instruments for studying Business English. At this stage of my work it is appropriate to mention that I use a NNS perspective in my approach. A comprehensive study of Business English in general is hard to deliver especially due to the difficulties in establishing the limits of the disciplines involved, such as linguistics, sociolinguistics etc. and then such a study would definitely require more than the limits imposed by a single work.

This PhD dissertation is organised in six chapters, references, two annex sections, with each chapter including an introduction, relevant literature in the field, especially a theoretical framework, review of approaches and explanation of strategies related to the topics under discussion, corpus description, content analysis, conclusion and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1 introduces the **concepts of ESP and business communication genres**. It offers a perspective on how discourse and genre analysis in English for Specific Purposes are linked to business correspondence and in what ways discourse, text and register have been shaped for serving specific purposes. In order to fulfil their professional aims and communicative goals, members of professional communities need to have a prior understanding or knowledge of the conventions associated with individual genres. Linguistic and social processes are seen as utterly interrelated. In the same vein, the notion of *genre* joins socio-cultural and psycholinguistic aspects of text-construction and interpretation with linguistic insights. Genre analysis has thus become a powerful and useful tool to arrive at significant form- function correlations which can be utilized for a number of applied linguistic purposes, including the teaching of English for specific purposes (Bhatia, 1993:11). One of the most relevant features of any professional or academic discourse community is the typical use of a range of appropriate genres, which the people in a community consider suitable for them. The study of genre can be developed on important characteristics included in the works of Bakhtin (1986), Miller (1994) and Goffman (1975, 1981).

The notion of 'system of genres' is viewed by Bazerman (1995 as quoted in Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 1999: 27) as being particularly useful in the investigation of business discourse in that it foresees the very real situation of interaction between different social groups contributing their own sets of genres. Studies in the area of English for Business were influenced by the main characteristics of ESP research and have included a wide range of studies, such as studies of language structures specific to business writing, particular terminology related studies and analyses of discursal and generic features. In analysing business texts and the language used by professionals there is a whole range of approaches. Moreover, there is a growing interest for the intercultural aspects of communication in business, with a focus on the non-linguistic, cultural influences on communication including organizational culture, management theory and practice as well as on the complex communication skills that are required in an international business environment.

Chapter 2 Pragmatics- concepts and review of theories establishes a theoretical framework of the most relevant aspects related to pragmatics: speech act theory, performatives, classification of illocutionary acts, Grice's Cooperative Principle, Lakoff's Conversational Maxim approach, the concept of rapport management. Pragmatics represents the foundation for discussing the notion of politeness in business communication.

Therefore, I revise some of the most significant approaches to politeness as the basis for the politeness strategies used in business settings. Language as action has become a major notion in what is currently understood as linguistic pragmatics. The works of many researchers (Stalnaker 1972; Searle, Kiefer and Bierwisch 1980; Wunderlich 1980; Leech 1983; Levinson 1983; Crystal 1985; Mey 1993; Verschueren 1999, in Martinez- Flor 2004:23) among others, have formulated various definitions of the term of pragmatics taking into account that the interpretation of words varies in concordance with a certain context in which they are said.

An important approach in pragmatics is the application of the notion of speech acts. The insights of speech act theory were initiated by researchers like Austin (1962), Searle (1969) Goffman (1975), Fairclough (1989), Mey (1993), and Saeed (1997) with remarkable contributions in the field. The speech act of requesting, apologising and complaining are described in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness and Searle's (1979) and Leech's (1983) research.

Politeness is mostly described in association with four linguistic approaches. Brown and Levinson (1987) are associated with the face saving approach; Leech (1983), Lakoff (1973) and Grice (1975) are associated with the conversational maxim approach. Fraser and

Nolen (1981) are linked to the conversational contract approach and Fraser (1990) assumes that the social norm view represents a historical understanding of politeness. I consider that politeness is a highly complex process and at the same time a social norm and a cooperative principle, universal and culture-bound. The distinction between face and sociality rights is labelled by Spencer-Oatey's new concept 'Rapport Management'. According to Spencer-Oatey's statement: 'Further [] research is now needed to determine the extent to which the rapport management issues that occur in authentic interactions can be explained [] for analysing [] the similarities and differences that occur across cultures, contexts and individuals' (Spencer-Oatey, 2006:117).

Chapter 3 Politeness- definition and specific approaches describes the concept of politeness from a pragmatic perspective, and revises significant researches that have been explored in this field, such as Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness, first order and second order politeness or the frame-based view of politeness. In this section I will attempt to present some of the issues that arise in researching politeness, as a pragmatic theory, and to argue the nature of politeness and its relevance in work settings. Politeness theories have focused on how communicative strategies are employed to promote or maintain social harmony in interaction. Politeness is based upon recognition of differences of power, degrees of social distance and oriented to reproducing them without change. In formal situations there is a major orientation to and marking of position, status, and 'face'. An impressive number of articles have been written on politeness since the early 1970s and a significant part of them is worth to be mentioned. The issue of what politeness is has been up to the present a source of endless debates among its theorists and researchers. However, it is beyond the limits of this paper to give an extensive overview of politeness related research. In all the major studies of politeness (Lakoff, 1973; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Blum-Kulka, 1987, Fraser, 1990; Kasper, 1990) it is generally agreed that there are different degrees of politeness manifested in linguistic expressions. Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness has been the most influential framework on politeness. Their work is organised in two parts, the first contains their fundamental theory concerning the nature of 'politeness' and how it functions in interaction and the second one describes a list of 'politeness' strategies with a multitude of examples from three different languages. Brown and Levinson (1987:79) propose a scale designed to evaluate the degree of politeness required in a specific situation. In a business context, the distance is determined by the socio-temporal and socio-spatial nature of the contact, its formal or informal aspect, and the nature of previous contacts, such as: letter,

phone, personal between sender and receiver of letters. Generally, the newer the relationship, the greater the scope for reducing distance (cf. Pilegaard, M. 1997).

Beside their presentation of positive and negative politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson also mention specific syntactic, lexical, prosodic and pragmatic features or markers of politeness which are described as part of a strategy or being regarded as a strategy itself. The studies of Eelen (2001), Watts (2003) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2003) present some critical overviews and analyses on politeness. Politeness lacks clear definitions in worldwide researches; however there are varied suggestions about it as a general notion, ranging from the very global view of politeness as appropriateness to the linguistic frameworks that view politeness as interconnected with conversational maxims (Leech 1983) or with threat to *face* (Brown and Levinson 1978/1987). Politeness has been conceptualised by pragmatic theorists as 'conflict avoidance' (Brown and Levinson 1987:1; Lakoff 1975:64; Leech 1983, 1997). It has been also defined as 'behaviour which promotes smooth communication between interlocutors' (Ide 1989:225; Usami 2002:4). One of Leech's (2005:4) statements, with whom I agree, implies that there is no basic difference between the way Eastern and Western cultures define politeness, because the notion of 'collective, group culture' (East) and 'individualist, egalitarian culture' (West) are not absolutes, but simply levels on a scale.

Multidisciplinarity and multimethod approaches should be properly applied to the study of politeness at work, and 'it is, arguably, in the field of comparative analyses of politeness across cultures that the seeds could be sown for an interdisciplinary future' (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 2006: 27).

Chapter 4 An Introduction to Business Communication provides a definition of business communication, states significant contributions to the development of business discourse, especially focusing on written Business English in terms of structure, communicative patterns and negotiation as a type of oral business communication. Business communication includes technical issues and also non-technical communication to clients who may have a background of the particular subject matter (Ulijn and Strother 1995). Successful communication requires mastery of the code by the sender and the receiver and this code mastery is linguistic competence, a speaker's underlying knowledge of the language and communicative competence. Studies on written business discourse in the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by the analysis of the business letter, as an important genre in business setting at that time. The characteristics and influence of the business letter

continued to play an important role, especially the way in which the genre has been subsumed into other genres such as the annual general report and email correspondence, as exemplified by the collection edited by Maurizio Gotti and Paul Gillaerts (2005).

Business discourse research has become increasingly concerned with the role played by the organisational context in shaping the spoken and written genres that evolve within business organisations and the language that is produced to fulfil them. These researchers do not define language in isolation as their object of study but, on the contrary, they try to create an interaction of spoken and written contexts that mirror the social and organizational contexts in which they are established. 'The traditional 'business letter' as a distinctive genre has been replaced by highly interactive and informal 'promotional messages' embedded in the hypertextual web' (Bargiela-Chiappini 2005: 99 ff). Research into business correspondence has provided valuable insights into the textual ways in which organisations aim to achieve certain goals, for example, establishing and maintaining relations with their clients (Van Nus 1996: 181). Writing clearly and effectively is relevant within specific cultural contexts. In written discourse, the writer assumes a hypothetical reader for whom he is supposed to be writing, anticipating his/her reactions and adjusting his/her writing accordingly, to facilitate communication. Business letters contain a set format, many formulaic expressions, a limited vocabulary and a limited set of conjunctions. Furthermore convention and legal framework of the extralinguistic context influence the selection of strategies and strategy combinations in business letters. Politeness should be described in a dynamic perspective which includes the extralinguistic aspect.

Business letters are clearly task-oriented in that they are written as part of the fulfilment of a business task. This task involves eliciting action on the reader's part, such as sending a reply, quoting a price, speeding up delivery and so on. The range of illocutionary acts is bound to be more varied, as a business transaction involves eliciting action from the reader and also frequently committing oneself to action. Directives and commissives are likely to be motivated by a number of assertions, while writers will also conventionally greet, express thanks or apologies, possibly by means of imperatives. An analysis of letters should account for the use of the more or less planned communicative strategies, on one hand the need for the addresser to make his/her acts clear, which implies the use of explicit illocutionary markers; on the other hand, the need for him/her to cope with the risks triggered by explicitness and amplified by the written language medium. Furthermore, the function of an opening paragraph is to identify the sender and/or the receiver by stating the addresses of

the sender and of the receiver. It will establish the text in a dynamic perspective through reference to previous correspondence. The closing is more likely to motivate the reader to act as requested if it is appropriately impressive. The content of the closing depends upon the purpose of the letter and the ideas in previous paragraphs. The letter of request is one of the most used types of correspondence in written business communication. A request might be regarded as a goal-oriented activity which can enhance the communication between companies in the business context. (cf. Chakorn 2006). A study on formulations of requests in the English correspondence in Hong Kong (Yeung, L. 1997:512) reveals a list of different polite formulations of request from the most to the least polite ones. As a conclusion, it can be mentioned that the ranking corresponds to the major existing theories and research findings on linguistic politeness.

Another aspect related to business communication is email business communication. CMC is a mode of communicating written messages to people in all parts of the world via electronic mails and intranet. It has become a major type of communication in most workplaces, as a result emails and intranet have become the most commonly used mediums of communication. The increasing interest in email communication has resulted in studies which have discussed emails as texts, focusing on their linguistic and rhetorical elements. As stated by Sacks (1992) and Searle (1969, as cited in Mulholland 1999:59), the texts exchanged via email are socially important verbal actions and the language used in them plays an important aspect in a successful performance. The language of e-mail messages contains simple, straightforward syntactic structures; co-ordinated ideas are preferred to subordinated ones, short sentences to long elaborate ones. Greetings and closings in emails perform an important social role as compared to other forms of interaction. Signatures are considered an artefact that has arisen out of the socio-historical context of organizations, expressing organisational dynamics. Signatures offer potential insights about the identity of senders through providing a variety of information ranging from their status in an organization to their educational background.

Negotiation has become a significant area of study as a site of language contact in relationship to business. The discourse and interactional characteristics of negotiation are described as a socially constructed, reflexive context-shaped and context-shaping activity.

Chapter 5- Contrastive Analysis of British and Romanian Business Letters points out the recurrent use of English that depends on some sort of adaptation on the part of the participants. English as a lingua franca has the effect of contaminating and hybridizing the

native language system and moreover the use of English as an international language for communication is more widespread in economics and business than in other specialised fields. Romanian workplace communication is now defined by the influences of Western European and American patterns on linguistic innovations at the level of communicative practices. This part focuses on the comparative analysis of written documents in English and Romanian in a workplace context. Many linguistic innovations have been adapted and adopted by the Romanian language at the structural and discourse level. Therefore, Romanian business professionals have become acquainted with new communicative patterns. The use of a foreign language in professional communication, especially in writing, is relatively new in Romania. The multinational companies have imposed the use of the predominant language (in most cases, English) in almost all communication that goes beyond the departmental level. This constraint has had numerous influences upon the cultural, social, and professional identity of the Romanian labour force. Thus, frequent grammar mistakes appear in English texts. In turn, the use of English influences Romanian texts. This is the main source for a great number of innovations both at the lexical-semantic level and at the morpho-syntactic level. Avram and Sala (2000) point out that Romanian displays a natural disposition towards adopting foreign words, without endangering its identity. The lexical system of Romanian has great power of adaptation, so a new term may easily be adopted and its lexical root may even become productive by means of internal derivational and inflectional affixes. Depending on the frequency of the word the orthography and pronunciation of the new loan word is adapted or is preserved as in the donor language. In the professional environment, the main motivation for foreign borrowings is the need to denote concepts and activities. Thus, nouns and verbs are more frequently borrowed than other parts of speech. Workplace language is the source of numerous calques (mostly semantic) that are now spread in everyday communication. In Romanian, the dominant grammatical gender when talking about both feminine and masculine participants is the masculine. The English influence may actually be visible in general salutation formulas, when the recipient is unknown; word for word translation from Romanian: *Esteemed Ms./ Mr. Manager*. The solidarity parameter is relevant to the social distance of the interlocutors. If they are strangers, there is a greater social distance between two interlocutors than if they are members of the same social group.

In **Chapter 6 -Case Study Analysis**, I explain the methods used to collect documents for this research and furthermore, I analyse the authentic and eclectic corpus of English and Romanian business emails contrastively with the aim of establishing the similarities and

differences in their discourse organisation patterns (opening and closing formulas, email signatures, typical moves) as they reflect politeness strategies and point out some of the characteristics of Romanian/ English written business discourse. This approach is sustained by interpretative case studies and content analysis. A thorough analysis of the selected documents prove that topic, hierarchical position and business interest have a great influence on the politeness choices displayed by the interactants in expressing written requests, directives, invitations, task assigning to different people. Topics referred to in the relational correspondence include stages in projects, assignment of tasks, invitations, offers, requesting cooperation and information, actually general business issues that influence the activity and interests of any company. I will discuss greetings and closings in terms of characteristic aspects of workplace email, of the interconnection between their form and use, the workplace or organisational culture and the sociolinguistic variables of status and social distance of interlocutors. The analysis of this corpus of correspondence will be done according to Waldvogel's approach (2007). The study examines the principles and practices of polite strategies in business/ institutional communication. Actual information is not conveyed by the use of salutation formulas; they are mainly used to construct and maintain personal relationships. In the context of written workplace communication, we are mainly interested in identifying the main salutation formulas and in commenting on their use. Forms of address are specific ways of building a relationship between sender and receiver. It will be shown that, even this genre of business letters is one of the most standardised kinds of written business communication, the genre constraints will leave room to rhetorical preferences, whether Romanian or English, both at the macro- and micro- textual level. In this analysis, I mainly follow Grice's Cooperation Principle and Leech's Maxims of Politeness and Tact. I will also try to point out some communicative functions letters of invitations intend to serve, thus describing and exemplifying the procedures through which such functions are served. According to its definition provided by various researchers, a business invitation letter is a formal way to invite peers and clients to events which are being hosted by the company and is one of the most popular ways of inviting guests to functions. These findings indicate that the formulaic sequence used in English invitation emails seems to be similar to the formulaic sequence produced in Romanian. But it should be noted here that the use of these strategies is not obligatory in the absolute sense. Based on the results, conclusions made and implications drawn, the following recommendations are proposed: further study should be done to identify other factors that may affect invitation making, acceptance and refusal in a business context.

Conclusion and suggestions further research- This dissertation investigates linguistic politeness in general and in a Romanian/ English contrastive study of written business communication by means of a thorough analysis of authentic business documents that I collected from various companies. The findings show that the linguistic expressions and the context of utterance determine the use and interpretation of politeness strategies. The conclusion is that there are no relevant differences in the use of politeness strategies in the two languages written business contexts. There are some variations in the use of specific opening and closing formulas in the English and Romanian data in the sense that certain structures are transferred from one language to the other.

Observing the maxims of politeness and analysing similarities and differences between them in Romanian and English emails, it can be asserted that the number of similarities exceeds that of differences, as a result of the fact that norms and principles of politeness are cross-culturally valid. Significant changes may be observed when carrying out an analysis at the level of microstructures such as greeting formulas. In order to operate professionally in a certain culture, NNSE users need to understand two layers: language and sub-culture. In this case, what is missing among NNSE professionals is knowledge not of how to approach a certain type of letter but of how to phrase the content. Even if the number of documents was sufficient to allow the analysis of a semantic and pragmatic approach to business English; a larger corpus of documents would have been desirable.

This dissertation has attempted to reveal possible tools for business writing analysis and the need for interdisciplinary and textual approaches. Future research focusing on synchronous media and politeness should consider the entire conversational turn. This study might inspire further cross-linguistic investigations on evidence of other conventional metacommunicative strategies in formal letters used in a business or engineering environment. Following foreign models on one hand, but on the other hand developing traditional values, Romanian organisational culture and discourse seek their own specific identity.

In conclusion I consider that all we need further one is a better and more systematic access to business and professional discourse communities and time!ö. (Lockwood, 2002: 416).

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