Investigating specialised discourse written Business Discourse

Oana COŞMAN
University of Suceava

L'abstract**:** L'articolo discuterà il lavoro dei ricercatori che hanno indagato la produzione di discorsi specialistici, in particolare il discorso di business. Il documento inizia con una breve rassegna degli studi sul discorso di business. Vengono poi dati dei dettagli del discorso business e delle strategie di cortesia trovate nelle richieste, compresa una descrizione del modello di Brown e Levinson sulle strategie di cortesia. L'ultima sezione è una breve descrizione delle strategie di cortesia riportate nel discorso business redatto dagli scriventi di madre lingua inglese e non.

Le parole chiave**:** discorso specialistico, discorso di business, strategie di cortesia, richieste.

Introduction

The term 'discourse' has been defined as sets of statements that bring social objects into being (Parker 1992)[1]. The notion of discourse includes the use of spoken, written and visual/signed language as well as multimedia forms of communication. Discourses are rooted in particular institutions and embody their culture. "The analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of

[1] I. Parker (1992), *Discourse dynamics: critical analysis for social and individual psychology*, Routledge, London & New York.

language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs" (Brown & Yule 1983:1).

In recent years, the process of globalisation has highlighted the interaction between linguistic and cultural factors in the construction of discourse, both within specialised domains as well as in wider contexts.

Since the early 1970s, scholars have tried to analyse various features of specialised discourse in order to assess its degree of specificity and diversification, as compared to general discourse. Thus, they have clearly defined the differences between specialised and general discourse: "Differences between current English and technical English can be found at all linguistic levels and they manifest themselves in a different way both qualitatively and quantitatively." (Bares 1972:129 as cited in Gotti 2008:17)[2]. Specialised discourse has traditionally been considered objective and impersonal. However, Gotti (2004:2) states that "linguistic research has shown both the existence of overt and covert strategies that modulate the author's control of the recipient's response, and the presence of discoursal realisations aiming at presenting facts and concepts from a non-neutral perspective. This is a confirmation of the fact that language is generally marked both in its cultural content and in the range of available linguistic variants."[3] Moreover, the dominant criteria of specialised discourse are economy, precision and appropriateness which should all be satisfied in order for a text to reach the maximum communicative effectiveness. If they are balanced, the speaker ensures maximum efficiency within the specialised communicative process. If they are in conflict, the criterion of appropriateness is decisive for the

[2] Maurizio Gotti (2008), *Investigating Specialized Discourse*, 2nd revised edition, Peter Lang AG, European Academic Publishers, Bern.

[3] Maurizio Gotti, "Specialised Discourse in Multilingual and Multicultural Contexts", in *ASp* [En ligne], 45-46 / 2004, mis en ligne le 28 février 2010, consulté le 22 octobre 2012 (http://asp.revues.org/839).

communication to be successful as it indicates the psychological intention behind the message.

The term 'specialised discourse' reflects the specialist use of language in contexts which are typical of a specialised community stretching across the academic, the professional, the technical and the occupational area of knowledge and practice. Domain-specific languages are exposed to the pressures of intercultural variation, as not only the socio-cultural factors inherent in a text, but also interpretive culture-dependent sets of knowledge deeply affect its realization and interpretation within the host professional community. Investigating specialised discourse, Van Dijk (2001:1) states that „a more sophisticated account of the role of knowledge in discourse processing is especially relevant in the account of specialised discourses, whose production and comprehension crucially depend on various kinds of specialised knowledge. This is most obvious in the use of technical terminology, but also extends to many other aspects of specialized discourse, such as its preferred topics, overall format or text-schema, style, rhetoric (including its typical metaphors), argumentation patterns, methods of proof and demonstration, the use of tables, figures and other non-verbal aspects of discourse, and so on." Indeed, the knowledge about specialised discourse properties is part of the very specialised knowledge of the experts and the complexity of this discourse calls for a multidimentional analysis, covering both lexis and morpho-syntax as well as textual patterning.

In today's globalised business environment, professionals of all backgrounds are under pressure to employ new and different discourse standards to allow for smoother production and reception of business documents and dialogues. Business discourse, as specialised discourse, has been influenced by a number of different fields and disciplines, such as genre theory, discourse analysis, organisational communication, conversation analysis, ethnography and applied linguistics. The analytical methods applied have been borrowed and adapted, rather than developed specifically for the analysis of business discourse.

Business discourse researchers have been influenced by Poncini's work on business meetings, but also by Charles's research on business negotiations. Moreover, the work of the genre analyst Vijay Bhatia (e.g. Nickerson's work on email and Louhiala-Salminen's work on fax communication) as well as Spencer-Oatey's work on intercultural communication (e.g. Planken's work on negotiations and Bargiela-Chiappini's work on corporate websites) have played an essential role in understanding more about "how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done"[4], and not necessarily on theory development. A more detailed definition of business discourse is the following: "talk and writing between individuals whose main work activities and interests are the domain of business and who come together for the purpose of doing business". Furthermore, business discourse refers to "spoken and written communication that usually takes place within a corporate setting, whether physical (i.e. a manufacturing organization) or virtual (i.e. telework)". Also, business discourse is understood as a web of negotiated textualizations, constructed by social actors as they go about their daily activities in pursuit of organizational and personal goals (Bargiela-Chiapini and Nickerson 1999:273-274).

We believe that defining business discourse in a short and exhaustive answer is next to impossible. Linguistics, communication studies, sociology, ethnomethodology, organisation studies, critical studies, and international management should come together to offer its distinct perspective on what it is understood as business discourse. (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009:1). By the early years of the new millennium, business discourse was defined as 'contextual and intertextual, self-reflexive and self-critical, although not necessarily political, and founded on the twin notions of discourse as situated action and of language as work.' (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson 2002:277).

[4] Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini (2009), *The Handbook of Business Discourse*, Edinburgh University Press, p.1.

If we want to understand how business discourse is produced, we should focus on the patterns of actions that actors construct and follow. These actors interact by producing and interpreting written and oral texts in a specific situation. This point of view is supported by Fairclough (1992:3) who states that "this sense of discourse" highlights interaction between speaker and addressee, between writer and reader. Therefore, it emphasizes processes of producing and interpreting speech and writing, as well as the situational context of language use.

Another characteristic of the business discourse production is the impact of the context on the discourse used in business. Contextualized language use is a hallmark of the English for specific purposes genre analysis, and this influence has been apparent in most of the work that has been carried out by researchers. Thus, the influence of both cultural and organizational context has been investigated by close text analysis. For instance, Charles's work on negotiations has established how the relationship between a buyer and a seller in a negotiation influences the discourse strategies that are used. Also, Nickerson's work on email in an Anglo-Dutch multinational corporation traces both organizational and cultural influences on the realization of the discourse.

Since the early 1980s, a growing body of research on business discourse has considered the nature and production of written business discourse in organisational contexts (see Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999). Grant and Hardy (2004: 5) have argued that an organisation can be defined in terms of its communicative, or symbolic, practices – practices that together constitute a culture and a discourse: The term 'discourse' has been defined as sets of statements that bring social objects into being (Parker 1992). „In using the term 'organizational discourse', we refer to the structured collections of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artefacts) that bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated, and consumed". (Phillips and Hardy 2002; Grant et al. 1998)

In 2000, Spencer-Oatey outlined a rapport management framework, which draws on social pragmatics, politeness theory and face theory. He explains the ways in which interactants use language in order to manage relationships. His model provides a way to account for all aspects of an interaction and its management. As Bargiela-Chiappini states "In this way, it is of potential interest to business discourse researchers interested in accounting for aspects of relational talk in business interactions, ranging from politeness forms and accommodation strategies to contentious and conflictive strategies, as well as the linguistic manifestations of power, and the motivations that might underlie such behaviours."[5]

1. Politeness Strategies in the Business Discourse

Politeness can be regarded as a social value in human interaction, including business, and its universal principles are reflected in language use. In the field of speech act studies, most of the previous research related to politeness focused on daily communication. However, as the studies on speech acts are developing faster and broader, linguists have been paying more and more attention to specific fields of communication, for instance, technical written communication and business communication, to explore the features of speech acts in different registers.

There has been extensive research on politeness in professional written discourse in the business settings, as, for instance, Trosborg (1995), Maier (1992), Myers (1989) (as cited in Bargiela-Chiappini 1997:639). Politeness theory has been applied to written English business communication in general (e.g. Pilegaard 1997) and requesting in business messages in particular (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997, Sipilä 1997, Akar 1998). Requests in written business communication tend to be formulated indirectly for reasons of politeness. Research on "request" speech acts has been carried out since the late 1990, i.e. Neumann's

[5] Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini, Catherine Nickerson, Brigitte Planken (2007), *Business Discourse*, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 42.

(1997) work on directness in spoken business requests in German-Norwegian business discourse (Chakorn, 2006:104)[6]. In his study, Neumann (1997) views the request as a primary speech act in business talk and includes “the entire range of speech acts with the illocutionary force of a request, from a wish at one end to a demand at the other” (Neumann 1997:75 as cited in Chakorn, 2006:105). Consequently, Neuman's criteria could be modified by changing the term Hearer to Reader and Speaker to Writer so that they may be applied to request business correspondence.

Next, taking into account Searle's classification of illocutionary acts (representatives, directives, declarations, and commissives), we can state that requests fall under the category of directives, which are considered “attempts by the speaker to get to the hearer to do something” (Searle, 1979:13). Moreover, Trosborg (1995) views the speech act of requesting as “an illocutionary act whereby a Speaker (requester) conveys to the Hearer (requestee) that he/she wants the hearer to perform an act which is for the benefit of the Speaker” (Trosborg, 1995:187). Thus, we can assert that the speech act of requesting can be considered one of the most face-threatening speech acts according Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. To minimize the threat to the hearer’s face, the Speaker may choose either not to use Face Threatening Acts or to employ various strategies in communication in order to effectively communicate the content of Face Threatening Acts to the Hearer. However, the employment of request strategies in the business field is not as straightforward as it is in daily communication as requests are sometimes made for both sides’ benefit, not necessarily only for the benefit of the requester. Moreover, the Speaker may employ strategic devices to represent his/her own interest as for the interest of both the Speaker and the Hearer. Chiappini defines requesting in business communication as “a legitimate attempt by the writer to get the reader to perform an action required by the business circumstances

[6] O. Chakorn (2006), “Persuasive and Politeness Strategies in Cross-Cultural Letters of Requests in the Thai Business Context”, in *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 16(1), pp.103-146.

through evoking the reader's need for compliance on the grounds of corporate and personal motivators such as necessity, duty and goodwill" (Chiappini and Harris, 1997, p. 638).

Business letters can be analyzed in terms of Grice's maxims and Brown and Levinson's politeness principles, providing a way of understanding successful and unsuccessful communication in mono- and cross-cultural settings. "Such correspondence is expected to have clarity, brevity, and sincerity, and letters, memos, emails or any other type of business correspondence which does not meet these expectations will be unfavorably received" (Vergaro 2004:182)[7]. Grice's (1975) maxims of clarity and brevity are relevant to business letters because they tend to get to the point very quickly as soon as the level of intimacy has been reached. Politeness strategies operate within the sentence, but they also combine at the macrotextual level of choice and distribution of moves. Also, politeness strategies are used to prepare the ground for the formulation of the letter's main request, to redress the face-threatening act of requesting and to round off the letter. Certain discourse organization patterns within the texts may express a concern to avoid face-threatening acts.

Some researchers (e.g. Maier, 1992 and Pilegaard, 1997) have indicated that the use by native English writers of politeness strategies in business messages is different from that of non-native writers. They have approached the politeness of written business discourse from the face-saving perspective. Thus, as Pilegaard (1997) states, "greater care is spent on adapting the text to its illocutionary purpose in written than in oral communication [...] that the deployment of politeness strategies therefore more truly reflects strategic considerations in written than in oral form" (Pilegaard, 1997:240).[8]

---

[7] C. Vergaro (2004), "Discourse strategies of Italian and English sales promotion letters", in *English for Specific Purposes*, vol. 23, pp.181-207.

[8] M. Pilegaard (1997), "Politeness in written business discourse: A text-linguistic perspective on requests", in *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 28, nr. 2, pp. 223-244 (22).

Maier's study (1992)[9] on politeness strategies in business letters written by American and Japanese writers is of great importance as it can be considered a starting point for evaluating the use of politeness strategies by native and non-native speakers of English in written business communication. Her findings indicate that business writing is subject to many of the same rules of politeness which underlie other types of communication. However, she found out that there are striking differences in the use of politeness strategies by the native and non-native speaker groups in business letters of request. The native speakers used more negative politeness strategies to preserve the addressee's face, while the non-native speakers used more potentially risky positive politeness strategies, and were more informal and direct in using these strategies than were the native speakers. In addition, the non-native speakers avoided using certain politeness strategies and relied more heavily upon others than did the native speakers. Her findings show that business writing in English by non-native speakers may be perceived negatively by the reader because of the inappropriate use of politeness strategies. This observation may be extended to any differences observed in established business communication practices. In her study, Maier (1992) shows that the strategies described by Brown and Levinson that occur most frequently are as follows: negative politeness strategies – apologize, admit the impingement, give overwhelming reasons, go on record as incurring a debt, be pessimistic, be indirect, give deference; positive politeness strategies - show interest, offer a contribution or a benefit, be optimistic. She also notes that the non-native speakers rely on positive strategies (i.e. showing interest "I am very interested in your offer") and use fewer negative strategies (i.e. expressions of gratitude such as "I would very much appreciate").

Pilegaard (1997) offers a text-linguistic perspective on the realization of requests in a variety of English business letters. Her

---

[9] P. Maier (1992), "Politeness Strategies in Business Letters by Native and Non-native English Speakers", in *English for Specific Purposes*, vol.11, pp.189-205.

findings indicate that politeness strategies are deployed to prepare the ground for the main goal of the letter, to redress the potentially face-threatening act of requesting something from the client and to close the letter. While both positive and negative politeness strategies are frequent in the early stages of the letter to assert commonality and togetherness, negative politeness strategies are predominant once negotiation has commenced, with the purpose of redressing face-threat. Furthermore, she suggests that politeness results not only from the use of individual politeness strategies at the sentence level, but rather from a number of illocutionary acts 'intricately wound together' in the text. Pilegaard (1997) notes that "in written texts the linguistic expressions of politeness are not only the primary vehicles of politeness, they are the only ones". (Pilegaard, 1997:240).

To sum up, the studies discussed above suggest that in comparison to native speakers, non-native speakers of English often present some differences in the way requests and politeness are realized in business contexts. Thus, it seems that when writing English business texts, traces of the writer's mother tongue will likely remain in the text as is pointed out by Connor (1996: 135–143).[10]

Conclusion

This article has examined business discourse as specialised discourse. We have reviewed one essential component of linguistic competence, politeness, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness strategies because of its interactional approach to the issue of politeness. The article has also made reference to the linguistic realization of positive and negative politeness strategies in business correspondence. The aim was to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which politeness affects and has bearing on the linguistic and rhetoric forms within the business discourse.

[10] U. Connor (1996), *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-cultural Aspects of Second Language Writing*, Cambridge University Press, UK.

References

Bargiela-Chiappini, F.; Harris, S., eds. (1997), *The languages of business: an international perspective*, Edinburgh University Press.
Bargiela-Chiappini, F., ed. (2009), *The handbook of business discourse*, Edinburgh University Press.
Bargiela-Chiappini, F.; Nickerson, C., eds. (1999), *Writing business: genres, media and discourses*, Longman, Harlow.
Bargiela-Chiappini, F.; Nickerson, C.; Planken, B. (2007), *Business discourse*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
Brown, P.; Levinson, S. C. (1987 [1978]), *Politeness. Some universals in language usage*, Cambridge University Press.
Chakorn, O. (2006), "Persuasive and Politeness Strategies in Cross-Cultural Letters of Requests in the Thai Business Context", in *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 16(1), pp.103-146.
Connor, U. (1996), *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-cultural Aspects of Second Language Writing*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
Gotti, Maurizio (2010), *Investigating Specialized Discourse*, Peter Lang, Bern.
Leech, G. (1983), *Principle of pragmatics*, Longman, London.
Maier, P. (1992), "Politeness Strategies in Business Letters by Native and Non-native English Speakers", in *English for Specific Purposes*, vol.11, pp. 189-205.
Parker, I. (1992), *Discourse dynamics: critical analysis for social and individual psychology*, Routledge, London & New York.
Searle, J. R. (1969), *Speech Acts. An essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge University Press.
Trosborg, A. (1995), *Interlanguage pragmatics: Requests, complaints, and apologies*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin & New York.
Van Dijk, T., ed. (1997), *Discourse as Social Interaction*, Sage, London.
Vergaro, C. (2004), "Discourse strategies of Italian and English sales promotion letters", in *English for Specific Purposes*, vol. 23, pp.181-207.