# KEY LINGUISTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

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*Abstract*

Business English teachers as well as its learners have focused, for a long time, solely on the functionality of the language. As a result, research into the linguistic characteristics of the business lexis and Business English respectively has been relatively limited. Therefore, the aim of this article is to pinpoint some of the key linguistic characteristics of Business English. A better understanding of these distinguishing features may help teachers to improve their teaching strategies in their quest to satisfy their learners' needs and learners to achieve more and improve their performance in using Business English effectively in real day to day situations.

**Keywords: ergolect, poetics, layering of business language, sociolinguistic orientation.**

## I. Business English – a distinct part of ESP

There have been many changes in the development of the ESP movement and one of the most important mentioned by Dudley-Evans & St John refers to a shift in importance as far as Business English is concerned: "One major change has been the emergence of Business English as a major strand of ESP teaching. Early ESP work was dominated by English for Science and Technology.... However, in the 1990s … the largest area of growth is Business English." (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998:31)

This internationalization of English in the business world is based on at least two major causes. First of all, there has been an irreversible growth in business institutions worldwide, and we are referring here to multinational corporations which have 'eliminated national frontiers' and set up subsidiaries everywhere in the world. This unprecedented growth has had as result the globalization of western capitalist market-type business practices.

Secondly, we have to bear in mind that the micro and PC revolution and computerization in general for the past two decades have become the modern vehicles for the English language.

The effects of the English language, caused by the developments mentioned above, on the financial markets and the stock exchanges have been enormous. We will try to pinpoint some of them as follows:

- the growth in status of Wall Street;
- the role of City in Great Britain;
- the Single Market within the European Union;
- the adoption in Frankfurt, Luxembourg and Tokyo of English as the *lingua franca* for currency dealers and stock brokers;



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- the increasing influence of international financial banking, aid agencies and organizations, the World Bank, the OECD (the Organization for Economic and Co-operation Development) is documented in their publications in English.

Taking into consideration these things, it is more than clear why English is necessary for international business transactions, among non-native speakers.

Considering the nature of their profession, the learners of Business English need to use an objective language rather than a subjective one: "The language will frequently be objective rather than subjective and personal. For example, in discussions and meetings, it will be more appropriate to evaluate facts from an objective standpoint ('This is a positive point', 'On the other hand the disadvantage is…') rather than expressing personal feelings and opinions." (Ellis & Johnson, 1994: 7)

It has been noticed that both categories of learners, experienced and pre-experienced learners, are interested in the functionality of the language (Business English) rather than in its linguistic characteristics. This is one of the major reasons that explain the relatively limited research into the linguistic characteristics of the business lexis and Business English respectively.

One of those who have carried out research on this topic is Douglas Pickett. Pickett himself agrees that Business English is a part of ESP *but* he also defines some specific characteristics stating that: "...as business and commerce are by definition an interface between the general public and the specialist producer... it must be a lot nearer the everyday language spoken by the general public than many other segments of ESP." (Pickett, 1986a:1)

He then refined this statement by comparing Business English to 'lay-language': "Conversely, of course, the extent to which it departs from lay language depends more on the nature of the business than on any autonomous subject area it occupies all to itself. Thus if we take three different firms, one in insurance, one in pharmaceuticals and one in fashion, their language to the public will be much the same and no more specialised than can be avoided. Their internal specialist languages, however, will be respectively those of insurance, pharmaceuticals and fashion, not business in general." (Pickett, 1986a:1)

As far as written business communications is concerned he argues that there are universal actions that take place in any business, e.g. Bill of Lading, money transfer, the VAT enquiry, etc. However, spoken language is less easy to define and: "...what makes for real business communication is a whole gamut of subtly graded conversations sensitive to the subject matter, the occasion, the shared knowledge and social relationships holding between speakers." (Pickett, 1986: 2)

Although Business English is a part of ESP and thus the characteristics of ESP apply also to Business English, Pickett believed that it is much more complex than other areas. In other areas of ESP, specialist language is only for intra-group communication and in consequence, there is no need for a link to the general public. Pickett made a comparison between Business English and the doctor-patient relationship, explaining that



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doctors, as well as discussing with each other, also need to be able to relate to their patients using an understandable language.

Therefore, broadly speaking there are two main communication areas: an internal communication – among businesses and an external communication – with the general public.

When referring to the concept of register Pickett divides it into two areas. Firstly, he refers to register as defined by subject matter, i.e. special language being used because of the subject area, such as football or cookery, and secondly, register as defined by situation, i.e. by the special situation a speaker finds himself in. "In other words, the individual can switch his linguistic code to conform to his role, just as a bi-lingual can shift languages" (1986a:8).

Pickett emphasises the fact that although Business English is a register, it cannot be confined by current definitions of it.

> *"In both major senses of the word 'register' business English includes register but is not confined by it. In so far as register is defined by subject matter, business English embraces at least two subject matters. One is the specialist language of whatever sort of business one happens to be in - transport, petroleum, jewellery, hairdressing, banking, catering, etc. The other is the language of business in general that occupies a neutral place between particular businesses. Thus, terms like 'order', 'issue', 'bad debt', 'invest', 'boom', 'slump', 'invoice', 'depreciation', 'stock', 'discount', 'turnover', would belong there, since they are part of a framework of concepts that would probably be used in any business. Insofar as a register is defined by situation, we might also speak of a 'business register', since there are certain situations peculiar to business which shape the language used in them." (Pickett, 1986a:9)*

He has characterized Business English as an '*ergolect'* – meaning a work language (Pickett, 1985: 5). He considers that it "is a mediating language between the technicalities of particular businesses – insurance, pharmaceuticals, fashion, firearms, fertilisers, jewellery, construction, etc – and the language of the general public" (Pickett, 1989: 6). Further on he supports his ides by stating: "Business language occupies a twilight zone between the two, a world of forms and frameworks, of conventionalized transactions governed by the courtesies and formalities of business life, which are to a large extent universal".

Beside this concept of *ergolect*, he also discusses another important point, the one he called the *poetics* of Business English. This refers to the idea that the business language is drawn from general English in order to create fresh meaning in a business context which can then flow back into general usage. This concept of poetics is of key importance to later discussion on technical and sub-technical language as it shows a feature of specialist language noted by most writers in the field – that of the *layering* of specialist lexis. Pickett suggested that general language flows into the Business English environment and takes on new combinations and meanings. These meanings are graded in terms of how understandable they are.

As we have stated above, Douglas Pickett is one of the first to acknowledge the vital importance of specialist lexis within Business English. In order to state the



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importance of this he makes reference to the ergolect of Business English: "If the ergolect of business English can be taken as typical of ergolects in general, we can see that an ergolect operates at the level of *lexis*, and at the level of transaction, hardly at the level of grammar." (Pickett, 1989: 11)

Moreover, Pickett supports his idea by stating: "... as far as I am aware there is no specific 'grammar' of business exchanges." (Pickett, 1989: 11) We would dare continue his thought and state that there is specific/specialist lexis of business exchanges or of any other specialist business-related fields of activity.

## II. Key linguistic characteristics of Business English

Next, we shall try to identify some of the distinguishing features of the business language and to provide examples for them.

One of the first characteristics refers to the fact that *the business lexis is layered.*

According to Pickett there is a language of business created by the process of *poetics* – flowing from the general to the opaque (and back again). Thus, for example, the terms *public*, *borrowing* and *requirement* which all have a general English use are, when used together, an *obscure* term. However, when the acronym *PBR* is used the same words become *opaque*. One key distinguishing characteristic of Business English, Pickett believed, is that although all 'special' languages may be based on this process, in Business English it is much more apparent.

As a consequence, this process of *poetics* has as result the layering of language and indicates that words in a business environment take on new meanings.

It is well known that the first movement in ESP was that of register analysis and that the early pre-occupation of register analysis was to try and establish the 'special' vocabulary of different disciplines.

Pickett has not been the only one who considered 'technical' language to be layered. The term *technical* refers to specific vocabulary related to a particular discipline – here the discipline of business. A reading of the early related literature, which was loosely defined as belonging to the field of register analysis, shows similar ideas. Close (1965: 3) suggested that there are three layers in scientific English:

a) a foundation that could serve any purpose;

b) a superstructure that could serve for *any scientific purpose*; and

c) a later superstructure serving *some special scientific purpose* (Close's italics).

Another classification is that made by Kennedy and Bolitho in their book – English for Specific Purposes (1984). They made a clear distinction between:

- highly technical vocabulary – "every subject has its set of highly technical terms which are an intrinsic part of the learning of the discipline itself" (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1984: 57)
- subtechnical vocabulary – the authors explained that:"One reason why subtechnical vocabulary can prove a problem to the learner is that words commonly met in 'general' English take on a specialised meaning within a scientific or technical context.



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The learner may know the 'general' meaning already and may be confused when he meets it in a context with a different meaning." (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1984: 58)

Trimble (1985) continued the discussion on sub-technical vocabulary and extended its meaning to words which "have one or more 'general' English meanings and which in technical contexts take on extended meanings (technical, or specialized in some fashion)" (Trimble, 1985:129). Therefore, sub-technical vocabulary for Trimble meant both context-independent words that occur with a high frequency across the different disciplines of science, and also words that are found in both general English and 'scientific' English but with different meanings.

Broadly speaking, taking in consideration the classification mentioned above we shall try to classify the business lexis and provide some examples of business-related words for each of the categories.

Business English contains:

- **highly technical vocabulary**, such as: *return on assets, securities, capital turnover, shareholders' equity* and others.

Due to the fact that this vocabulary is highly specific students often find words confusing and mainly this happens when similar terms are used in different ways.

- **sub-technical vocabulary**.

A great part of the business specialized vocabulary may turn out to be a real problem for students since words whose meanings are familiar to them from general English prove to have a totally different meaning, a specialized one when used in a business context

Another characteristic highlights the *abundance of abbreviations and acronyms*. It its attempt to offer an insight into abbreviations and to classify them, Zak & Dudley-Evans' study (1986) of word omission and abbreviation in telexes found three main types of abbreviation used. Firstly, there are standard abbreviations that are used in everyday life such as *a.m., p.m., approx*. Secondly, abbreviations that would only really be used in the office such as *asap, c/n (credit note)*. Last but not least, we have highly specialised abbreviations that can be found only in telexes such as *adv = advise, bal = balance*. They stated that: "...the extent of omission and abbreviation depends very much on the type of audience to which the text is addressed and on conventions established by a company, a department within a company or by an individual." (Zak & Dudley-Evans, 1986:70)

Using the above classification, by extrapolating we could say that this classification is also valid in the case of the abbreviations and acronyms used in written business communication (letters, faxes, memos, etc.). Indeed the degree of specialization of abbreviations and acronyms depends a lot on the audience that receives these types of written business communication.

It is well-known that the business lexis has a certain *sociolinguistic orientation*. This means that people choose how to speak business language depending on the subject, situation and a whole range of sociolinguistic factors. As Pickett puts it, the language used



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by business people display "sensitivity to subject matter, the occasion, shared knowledge and social relations holding between companies and communicators" (Pickett, 1986b: 2).

Another characteristic of the business lexis, particularly the one used in business correspondence, refers to *a certain degree of formality and courtesy* – this is usually found in the forms and frameworks of conventionalised transactions (business letters; faxes; memos etc)

Another distinguishing feature is the *use of metaphors* – especially in business press articles. The following example is one of the many we have come across in The *Economist*: "Apart from carmakers and other manufacturers, the list of those laying people off now includes Pepsi bottlers, law firms, retailers, media companies, chemicals producers and even technology firms. *All are desperately* ***seeking a cure***. *And* ***the most attractive medicine on offer looks like cash***."

This example is related to the idea of HEALTH and it is clear that the companies are desperately trying to find a solution to their problems. Instead, the author, by using the metaphors in bold, induces the idea that the companies have "health" problems – financial problems and the only "cure" – solution to their problem would be the "most attractive medicine" – in this case, cash.

Closely connected with the feature mentioned above, we could also note the one referring to the *use of idioms*: "*Ben Bernanke, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve*, ***has a lot on his plate*** these days, including a financial crisis, a probable depression, and the worst recession in 17 years." The idea is that the person mentioned in this example has a lot of things or problems to take care of or a lot of things that he has to solve.

## III. Conclusions

To sum up, being aware of these key characteristics that have been highlighted in this article helps teachers reconsider the language strategies used in teaching Business English and, on the other hand, learners who need to improve their performance.

Furthermore, knowledge of these key features will help language policy makers, course providers, educators and researchers to better meet the needs of business students.

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