WRITTEN COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS

Assistant Ph.D. Student **Oana COSMAN**
"Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania
oanacosman74@yahoo.com

Abstract:
The article examines the work of researchers primarily interested in the investigation of written communication in business settings. The author regards 'business discourse' as a field of study with distinct features in the domain of discourse analysis. Thus, the paper overviews the most important contributions to the development of written business discourse with a number of landmark studies. To gain a greater understanding of the written business discourse, the author also investigates some principles and practices of politeness strategies used in written business communication. In order to highlight different ways of expressing politeness in business correspondence, the author will consider examples of requests made in business letters and point out what linguistic forms are used to carry out the proposed strategy.

Key words: business communication, written business discourse, politeness strategies, business letters of request.

JEL classification: Y80, Z11, Z13, Z19, M29

INTRODUCTION

Founded on the twin notions of discourse as situated action and language as work, the analysis of business discourse is regarded as contextual and intertextual, self-reflexive and self-critical. Further, politeness is an essential ingredient in a great variety of professional communication situations, so interpersonal relations and politeness strategies have become increasingly important in practically all professional settings. In this paper, politeness theory has been applied to written English business discourse in general and requesting in business messages in particular.

BUSINESS DISCOURSE

Business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done. 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" (Bargiela Chiappini and Nickerson 1999:273).

Chiappini defines business communication as the interaction that takes place between individuals whose main activities are located within business and whose contact is motivated by matters relating to their respective businesses (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 1999:2). The study published by Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris in 1997 investigated business meetings and included both a cross-cultural analysis of the structural and pragmatic properties business meetings. This publication marked an important stage in the development of business discourse and emphasized that business often involves cross-cultural communication among people who do not share the same language and culture.

Further, 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) (Bargiela Chiappini and Nickerson 1999:273). Moreover, 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 Chiappini and Nickerson 1999:274).

Researchers interested in business discourse have referred to a number of fields and disciplines in their investigation of language at work, such as genre theory, discourse analysis, organizational communication and applied linguistics, thus leading to a number of different ways of thinking about business language and the different contextual variables that can be of influence in how people talk and write at work. The label of business communication is best understood as an overachieving category encompassing the whole field of communication studies in business settings, therefore, subsuming organizational and management communication, and discourse approaches (Murphy as cited in Bargiela Chiappini and Nickerson 1999:275).

Business discourse research has become increasingly concerned with the role played by the organizational context in shaping the spoken and written genres that evolve within business organizations and the language that is produce to fulfill 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. Thus, the collections of business discourses published by Bargiela-Chiapppini and Gotti (2005) or Bargiela-Chiappini (2005;2006) are fundamentally important to note. These studies establish a context of how important the role of language is in creating and maintaining power relationships in business organizations.

One of the most relevant theories of intercultural communication focusing on the use of language in a business setting is studied by Spencer-Oatey, whose research takes places within the specific context of intercultural negotiations. She defines her work as "rapport management" (Spencer-Oatey 2000a, 2000b) and underlines the idea that participants work together to find a solution, rather than on defining the communication breakdowns that might happen in an organizational setting. As a theory of interaction, Spencer-Oatey's framework lays the emphasis on a number of key concepts that may play a role in the success or failure of intercultural communication in business contexts, including content, the organization of talk, politeness, style and deference, and body language.

In the field of speech act studies, most of the research related to politeness has focused on daily communication. However, as the studies on speech acts are developing faster and broader, researchers 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 business settings, as, for instance, Trosborg (1995), Maier (1992), Myers (1989) (as cited in Bargiela-Chiappini 1996:639). Politeness theory has been applied to written English business communication in general (e.g. Hagge & Kostelnick 1989, Shelby & Reinsch 1995, Pilegaard 1997) and requesting in business messages in particular (e.g. Yli-Jokipii 1994, Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1996, Sipilä 1997, Paarlahti 1998, Akar 1998).

Research in requesting in internal business email messages has also gained some attention (e.g. Kankaanranta 2001, Alatalo 2002).Of course, business requesting has also been investigated in other languages than English, such as German (Neumann 1997; Lainio 2000, forthcoming) and Korean (Jung 2002).

BUSINESS LETTERS OF REQUEST

There has been extensive research of requests in written business communication because they tend to be formulated indirectly for reasons of politeness. Research on "request" speech acts has been carried out since the late 1990, i.e. Mulholland's (1997) work on differences in spoken business requests between Australians and Japanese or Neumann's (1997) work on directness in spoken business requests in German-Norwegian business discourse (Charkon 2006:104).

In his study, Mulholland (1997:99) considers that the request achieves a goal, which involves the cooperation of the other person, but, at the same time, is a fundamental speech act. Mulholland also mentions that "in the business world, the goal may be as basic as buying or selling

goods, achieving compliance with an instruction or order, seeking information or monetary payment, or making a delicate negotiation move" (p.99 as cited in Chakorn 2006:105).

Similarly, 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:105). Thus, 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.

Researchers (e.g. Maier 1992, Yli-Jokipii 1994, Sipilä 1997, Pilegaard 1997, Kong 1998) 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 (1997:240) 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."

Sipilä's (1997) study on business email messages by Americans and Finns writing in English shows that Finnish writers seem to issue their English requests in much the same way as American writers. For example, in the distribution of the structural realizations of requests, that is, imperative, interrogative, modal-initial, and declarative, there were no major differences in internal messages. Imperative, interrogative, and modal-initial accounted for over 60% of the requests made.

On the other hand, Kong (1998) has focused on business request letters written by native and non-native English speakers and found differences between them. His study revealed that, in spite of the same communicative purpose, the letters differed in their rhetorical structure. In the Chinese letters, a deference face system was predominant, including placing the justification before the request and avoiding FTA moves, while in native English letters, a solidarity face system was employed, with features such as introduction of the request before the justification, and frequent employment of FTA moves. (as cited in Upton & Connor (2001).

The above mentioned studies seem to suggest that there may be mother tongue transference in requests expressed in English.

Hollinger (2005) provides some relevant examples of requests made in business letters and points out what linguistic forms are used to express politeness in business correspondence. For instance, in the sentence " As the margin on the order is very small we hope you can allow us the extra discount of 5%", he notes that the use of the verb "hope" is a politeness strategy, a mitigation of the request for a reduction of price, while the use of the modal "can" shows that the writer does not want to impose.

Thus, the use of modal verbs such as "would", "could", as well as polite requests such as "Would it be possible" or "May we suggest that" should be seen as elements used to mitigate the request, therefore a politeness strategy. The use of adjectives such as "glad", "grateful" also adds to the feeling of one's being deferential to one's communication partner. (i.e. I would be grateful if you could send me a copy of your latest brochure.)

Finally, the use of complex clauses to express a request in business letters can also be regarded as a politeness strategy "as it shows the writer's desire to be more explicit and avoid discourteous brief formulations that might imply lack of deference for the other party in the written interaction."

To sum up, 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). All in all, the studies mentioned 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.

CONCLUSION

This article has surveyed the field of business discourse, starting with a definition of 'business discourse' and of the research undergone, and has examined important features of business letters of request in order to gain a greater understanding of the written business discourse. The purpose of this paper was to review some of the issues that have been brought to the fore in recent research. The author has reviewed the work of researchers primarily interested in the investigation of written communication in business settings. All in all, the paper has reviewed current studies on business discourse and has described various politeness strategies employed in business correspondence.

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