

DISCOURSE-ORIENTED APPROACH TO BUSINESS ENGLISH: LINKING LANGUAGE IN USE AND BUSINESS CONTEXT

Datum prijave: 23.9.2013.

UDK 811.111:65

Datum prihvaćanja: 22.11.2013.

Stručni rad

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ABSTRACT - *There is no doubt that English, being used as a first language for some, but also either as a lingua franca or as an international business language for millions of speakers, has taken the dominant position in the globalised world. As an international means of communication being taught all over the world, Business English represents certain challenges for its users; linguistic, but also cultural. Alongside the linguistic turn in the second half of the twentieth century, emerged Business Discourse Studies, a subfield of applied linguistics and discourse analysis, which tries to explain the link between language in use and business context. This paper will try to analyse the aspects of such a functionalist approach to ESP (English for Special Purposes), based on findings by acknowledged researchers in the field, like Catherine Nickerson and Francesca Bargiela - Chiappini, who regard language not as isolated object of study, but want to establish how written and spoken language reflect the social and organisational context in which they are used. This is especially meaningful for Business English, since it is the number one foreign language taught for business purposes within the European, and more specific, Croatian context.*

Key words: Business English, English as a lingua franca, English for special purposes, discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, discourse theory was widely drawn upon by humanities and social sciences. This also resulted in a 'linguistic turn', giving language a more central role in social phenomena and leaving behind the view of language as an isolated and idealised system void of its social aspect, as it had been studied in linguistics. Instead, actual spoken and written discourse started being investigated, as well as its pragmatic and social component. Around the same time with the linguistic turn, English began its rise as world's dominant lingua franca, leading to its status of the dominant language in international business today. The two processes converged resulting in a large number of Business English research and even Business Discourse Studies, a functionalist approach that wants to establish how written and spoken instances of business language reflect the social and organisational context in which they are being used. Being such a widely taught and used language, English inevitably causes problems and challenges for its non-native users and learners, because the real life and real language use can be another world compared to textbooks, which is precisely why a functionalist linguistic approach should be adopted in studying English from this perspective.

In this paper, I will briefly describe the role of English as a global language and a lingua franca in the world, and more specifically, Europe. I will also list linguistic and discourse-oriented approaches which deal with English from that perspective and explain their advantages. In the end, I will outline possible implications of that research applicable in the Croatian context.

2. ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA AND A GLOBAL LANGUAGE

In the 80s American linguist Raj Kachru, the founder of study of World Englishes, presented a model of the expanding influence of English as three concentric circles, which represent different ways in which the language was being acquired and used at the time. The inner circle represented Anglo-Saxon countries where English was used across all domains, although sometimes coexisting with other languages (e.g. with French in Canada). The outer circle represented those countries which were once colonised by Britain, where English was adopted in some domains (e.g. administration, education, and law). The last, expanding circle represented the remaining countries of the world, where English is widely being taught and used for business and education, even though there is no linguistic or historical ties to English-speaking countries (Nickerson 2010: 506). This model is still used today as a helpful visual representation of the complexity of the global status of English, even though more and more countries do not fit it neatly due to the complexity of scientific, technical, communicational and economic globalisation that followed its first description.

However, it is widely believed that English today has more non-native than native speakers, and it is often used in a context where it functions 'as a direct mediator between participants in a discourse who would otherwise have to rely on translation of a third party' (Seidelhofer 2010: 357), or in other words as a lingua franca. In linguistics, the term *lingua franca* is closely related to a *pidgin*, i.e. a language which has no native speakers but is rather used for communication between speakers of different languages. Thus, English as a Lingua Franca

(ELF) refers exclusively to the use of English between its non-native speakers. Due to its growing importance in international business communication, recently a term Business English Lingua Franca (BELF) has emerged, which defines English being used for business purposes between speakers whose mother tongue is other than English. *Global language*, on the other hand, implies much more than just a means of communication between foreigners who do not understand each other. According to David Crystal (2003), there are several factors that make a certain language achieve a genuinely global status. Besides being spoken by a large number of native speakers in more than one country, it needs to be taken up by other countries and develop a special role that is recognised around the world. Due to the increasing growth of its first-language, second-language, and foreign-language speakers, it is inevitable that a global language will eventually come to be used by more people than any other language. This is also true for business communication because recent data has shown that 99% of European organisations use English as a working language (Rogerson-Revell 2007: 106). Without doubt, all criteria for establishing a global language are applicable to English so we can say that it has indeed become the global language of today.

Of course, this massive monolingual international communication has its serious flaws. Crystal (2003) mentions the three biggest dangers of a global language: *linguistic power* (possible automatic position of power for those who don't have to learn it as an official or foreign language, i.e. its native speakers), *linguistic complacency* (loss of motivation for adults to learn other languages), and *linguistic death* (possible disappearance or even death of minority languages). Of course, these negative aspects of globalisation must be taken into account, a task being bravely undertaken by critical linguistic approaches, namely critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2006)¹.

2.1. English in the European context

Even though there have been several lingua francas within Europe, namely Greek, Latin, German, and French, it is established beyond dispute that, English has firmly developed into the biggest business lingua franca within Europe today. According to the Kachruvian model explained earlier, continental Europe belongs to the expanding circle, but due to the global developments on the continent, this model is increasingly difficult to apply to the European context. Europe is usually considered to be one geo-political entity, but, as Seidelhofer argues, it is obvious that linguaculturally

it is an extremely diverse area in which English plays a distinctive and unique role (Steidelhofer: 2010: 355). Rogerson-Revel emphasises that 'the mobility of Europe's boundaries and people within them, together with growing opportunities for cross-border trade adds to the complexity of language use across Europe and doubtless encourages the development of an international language' (2007: 105). There is, of course, another side of the medal, a discrepancy between EU's multilingual promotion and the actual practice of its citizens and institutions which is rarely explicitly stated. As Seidelhofer puts it, 'even though the EU eagerly presents itself as a multilingual area, the supremacy of English is being established step by step in European politics and various European and international organizations in Europe' (ibid., 358).

3. DISCOURSE-ORIENTED APPROACH TO BUSINESS ENGLISH

Since its beginnings in the early 20th century and for the next fifty years, linguistics has generally been oriented towards a formalistic analysis, and usually prescription rather than description of language. This culminated with Noam Chomsky's generative grammar, a highly rigid and abstract linguistic approach, which to date has numerous devoted followers. However, alongside this presumably dominant linguistic approach, there have always been a number of functionalist linguists who regard language as something that should be described considering its real usage, and not viewing it as an idealised system. This worked to the advantage of the emergence of text and discourse analysis, which focus on the social dimension of language. To put it simply, this means that linguists, reacting to the unnatural and rigid formalistic approach to language, have started to build their linguistic descriptions around the pragmatic aspect of language, describing and analysing real language in use, and even its further influence in creating social and individual identities, and more recently ideologies, as in the case of critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Since using English, either as a lingua franca, or as a global language for business communication involves speakers and users from different countries, different cultures and different language backgrounds, it is inevitable that it has a deep social impact on those who use it, creating new and changing old identities, distributing power relations etc. It is thus natural, but unfortunately forgotten in textbooks and classrooms that users/learners will inevitably encounter difficulties other than linguistic while learning and finally using English. Even when non-native English users acquire solid grammatical and syntactic competences, they might inadvertently avoid pragmatic aspects of the language, which can often result in miscommunication and in even

¹ For further details also see Fairclough's 'Language and Power' (1989) and 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (1995)

complete misunderstanding. The difference between Business English textbooks and real life can be vast sometimes, which is precisely why there is a need for a usage-based, i.e. discourse-oriented approach to Business English. Since Business Discourse Research puts an absolute imperative on working with authentic data, despite the difficulties associated with gaining access to business organisations and the confidentiality of the data (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007), it represents itself as the best approach. Consequently, authentic examples of Business English provide invaluable insights into how people actually communicate in business organisation (ibid., 12). Furthermore, all those findings can and should be used to enrich the process of teaching/learning Business English.

4. ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES AND BUSINESS ENGLISH RESEARCH

As already mentioned, it is now clear that in the last two decades English has established itself as dominant language in business and business communication. It is used every day not just in meetings, negotiations, correspondence, but also as the official language of numerous organisations and companies. In Routledge's *Handbook of World Englishes* (2010) there is a special chapter dedicated to Business English(es), which shows that the presence and the importance of this variety of English is being widely acknowledged in linguistic research today.² Of course, Business English does not have the same status and characteristics in the inner circle of the Kachruvian model (e.g. in the United Kingdom, United States etc.) where it is the official language and a mother tongue, and in the remaining two circles, i.e. in India or Poland, which shows further complexity of the field. Consequently, as part of World Englishes studies, another term emerged, that of English for International Business (EIB)³, which is used to refer to the use of English as a common language in business contexts where both mother-tongue and lingua franca English speakers could be present (Rogerson-Revell 2007: 105).

Among the many fields Discourse Analysis has been dealing in the past couple of decades, Business English (BE) is a relatively new area of study. Still,

² ELF research is also rapidly growing, as we can see from the list of recent publication listed by Seidelhofer (2010: 365), which shows how far-reaching this process is.

³ Obviously, all terms and subdivisions of world Englishes related to international business communication (ELF, BE, BELF, EIB) quite often overlap so there is no need to painstakingly make rigid divisions here. For further details, check Rogerson-Revell's study on Business English (2007), where she lists and explains half a dozen more terms related to English used in international business.

discourse theory researchers find it increasingly intriguing and worth analysing. As Crafword Camicottoli states, 'there is a growing practical need for studying BE, because in today's globalised world the job competition is ever keener, there is also a growing demand for academic credentials in business studies' (2007: 1). There is a tradition in the Kachruvian inner circle countries (with the exception of the USA) for English for Special Purposes research (ESP), a subfield of applied linguistics interested in how language is used in a specific social context, such as an academic setting, in the doctor's surgery or in a business organisation (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007). While ESP research is motivated by pedagogical concerns, Business Discourse Studies are more interested in understanding how people communicate strategically in an organizational context. This type of research emerged within the subfield of applied linguistics and generally uses discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and genre analysis of various data such as business meetings, correspondence, application letters etc. Notable researches include F. Bargiela-Chiappini, C. Nickerson, S. Harris, M. Clyne, V. K. Bhatia, J. Holmes and others.⁴ But there is also another approach worth mentioning, namely critical discourse analysis, which analyses business discourse, among other types of discourse, to reveal relations of power, hegemony, and discrimination (Fairclough 2006, Fairclough and Chouliaraki 2001).

According to Seidelhofer, 'a significant number of multinational, but also national companies have adopted English as their company language, no matter whether they have subsidiaries in English-speaking countries or not' (2010: 358), which is why this kind of research is more and more necessary. Educational context is also of great importance because English is the most widely taught foreign language in the world, and it is emerging as the chief foreign language to be encountered in schools, often displacing another language in the process (Crystal 2003: 5), which is definitely an ignored negative consequence of a phenomenon that sometimes seems as a very practical and easy way of connecting people from all parts of the world. Croatia is not an exception here, with a notable decline of German and French being taught in schools, and used in business communication.

5. FUTURE OF ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS AND THE CROATIAN CONTEXT

Many question the future of English as a global language, chiefly because of the advancement of countries such as China, Japan, and Russia. Linguistic history shows us that lingua francas and international business languages change hand in hand with political and economic changes. There

⁴ See Nickerson (2010) for a more detailed list.

are several possibilities according to Crystal (2003). Other languages might replace English due to political and economical factors, as well as antagonism towards it. Because of the need to express community identity, English might cease to exist as a global language, fragmenting into mutually unintelligible varieties. In any case, those enormous changes surely would take more time. So for the time being, we can be certain that English as a lingua franca and Business English will keep their significant role in international business communication. This means we must pay attention to these processes because language in general is a very dynamic phenomenon and in case of important business and international communication it should not be neglected. Business English research and Business Discourse Analysis can be very useful from various perspectives; for professionals who teach it to newcomers, as well as for those who are new to the context of business language.

Of course, as a new member of the EU, Croatia will have to adapt to the slightly schizophrenic language policy mentioned earlier, which will clearly represent a challenge, considering the very debatable language policy of its own. Since BE, ELF, BELF and ESP studies, and even Discourse Analysis are quite unknown concepts in Croatian linguistics,

there is a growing need for their application in the process of Business English learning, since Croatia is, at least formally, becoming a significant partner in the political and economical sphere of the continent, which is undoubtedly always expressed and discussed in English.

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