A Discourse Analysis Of Business Letters Written By Iranians & Native Speakers

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Abstract
The advent of the 21st century has accompanied globalization in scientific, technical, and economic activities on an international scale, which has magnified the role of English language in international communications. Hence, in order to achieve better and more effective results in international trade, the relevant authorities in non-native companies should be proficient in using business English.

To conduct a discourse analysis of business letters written by native English speaking and non-native Iranian communicators, 25 authentic follow-up letters written by Iranians in four big companies in Tabriz, Iran, and 25 authentic letters written by native English writers were sampled. Through Halliday's (1985) notion of lexical density, the number of lexical and grammatical words was computed. Then, on the basis of the model of schematic structure, the "moves" and "steps" of letters were specified and, finally, the politeness strategies used in the letters were analyzed.

The analysis of corpus showed that the Iranian business letter-writers mostly focused on surface linguistic aspects of English language while
pragmatic aspects of language, such as using politeness strategies, were ignored in their letter writing.

Since the social and interpersonal aspects of language are of great significance for native speakers of English, any mismatch of linguistic forms such as interferences caused by Iranian writers may lead to misunderstanding and annoyance. Consequently, ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teachers should try to familiarize the learners of business English with social features and interactional aspects of the language and direct the learners to use the social sub-skills and pragmatic elements in their business letters.

1. Introduction

Due to the profound political and economical changes in the world, the commercial relations of different nations have noticeably increased and English language is now considered by many nations as an international language. According to Strevens (1987: 56) "English is used by more people than any other language on the earth, although its mother-tongue speakers make up only a quarter or a fifth of the total." Strevens (ibid.) estimates that the number of native speakers of English is around 350 million, but as many as 700 to 750 million people use English as a national, second, or foreign language, or as a language for commerce, industry, science, and other purposes.

To be involved in the world business, there is always a need for an internationally accepted language. While Zamenhof's effort to make Esperanto a global language did not succeed, the English language has attained that status. English is used in global business for transactions in goods and services, technical specifications, financial reports, and other purposes among non-native and native speakers throughout the world.

In spite of widespread developments in communication technology, business letters are still widely used in the world as a main channel of business correspondence. However, to achieve desirable results in communicating through business letters, the communicators should deal with two major functions of language termed by Brown and Yule (1983) as "interactional and transactional functions". It means that a
business letter, in addition to being scrutinized from the semantic and syntactic viewpoints, should also be acceptable in respect to sociocultural aspects. Concerning the interactional function of written language, Widdowson (1984) believes that written discourse, like spoken language, represents an interactive process of negotiation. But whereas in spoken discourse this process is typically overt and reciprocal, in written discourse it is covert and non-reciprocal. The person to whom the writer wishes to transfer information is absent and this means that the writer has to conduct his interaction by enacting the roles of both participants. The writing and reading of letters becomes more important when one party of business is a non-native of English, highlighting the potential sociocultural differences when reading business letters exchanged between them.

This study intends to investigate the differences between English business letters written by Iranian writers and those written by English native speakers in light of its discourse features.

2. Methodology
In order to analyze business letters written by native English-speaking (NE) communicators and those written by non-native Iranian (NNI) communicators, fifty business letters exchanged between four Iranian companies in Tabriz, Iran, and their business counterparts in England were sampled among selected letters. In the corpus, 25 letters had been written by Iranian writers in four big companies in Tabriz and the other 25 letters by native English writers in nine companies in England. The names of Iranian persons and companies in the letters were removed to preserve confidentiality and, then, the letters were numbered according to the nationality of letter writers.

The selected letters were 'follow-ups' which had been exchanged between companies to conduct international business. Maggio (1999: 185) explains such correspondence as follows:

the follow-up letter which relates to an earlier letter, mailing, conversation, or meeting, is an effective and courteous way to tie up ends, to encourage some action or to build on something already begun.
The follow-up letters written by two groups were mostly concerned with issues such as asking or giving information about the specification of goods, terms of payment, type of packing and delivery, and other points related to selling or purchasing goods or services.

According to Halliday (1985) spoken and written form of languages differ in the ratio of content words to grammatical or function words. Content or lexical words include nouns and verbs, while grammatical words include such things as prepositions, pronouns, articles, conjunctions, and finite verbs. The number of lexical or content words per clause is referred to as lexical density. In this study, following Halliday's notion of lexical density, the number of lexical, grammatical and total words in the letters were computed and the lexical densities of letters were calculated. Then, on the basis of Swales' (1990) model of schematic structure, the "moves" and "steps" of follow up business letters were specified. Finally, applying Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of politeness, the politeness strategies used in the corpus were identified and discussed.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. The Surface Features of Business Letters
The corpus in this study comprised 25 follow-up business letters written by native English-speaking writers and 25 business letters written by non-native Iranian writers. They consisted of a total of 2,313 and 1,539 words respectively. The average letter by the NEs had a length of 92 words, the longest 195 words and the shortest 19 words; however these figures in the NNI letters were 62, 187, 33 words respectively. The average lexical density of NE and NNI business letters were 0.38% and 0.36% respectively.

3.2. The Schematic Structure of Follow-up Business Letters
The linguistic approach to genre analysis has used the notion of schematic structure in mapping the macro-structure of texts (Swales, 1990). The concept of genre has been defined differently by linguists. Swales (1990) provides a definition of genre which focuses on the communicative purpose of discourse. According to his definition, a genre comprises of a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes
constitute the rationale for the schematic structure of discourse. Swales (ibid.) argues that from a language teaching perspective, it is useful to think of genre as consisting of a series of "moves". A move can be thought of as part of a text, which achieves a particular purpose within the text. Each move is taken to embody a number of constituent elements called "steps".

In a model of schematic structure, Swales (1990: 141) specified the following series of stages or 'moves' (along with their component 'steps') for the introductions to academic research articles (RA):

Establishing a territory claiming centrality and /or making topic generalization (s) and /or reviewing items of previous research

Establishing a niche counter-claiming or indicating a gap or question raising or continuing a tradition

Occupying the niche outlining purposes or announcing present research announcing principal findings indicating RA structure

In a similar model, Bhatia (1993) proposed the following schematic structure of moves and steps for sales letters in business communication:

Establishing credentials
Introducing the offer
offering the product or service
essential detailing of the offer
indicating value of the offer

Offering incentives
Soliciting response
Using pressure tactics
Ending politely

The survey of follow-up English business letters in this study indicates that the schematic structure of these letters is as follows:

**Move 1 Establishing a link**

Step 1 referring to previous contact
and / or
Step 2 acknowledging pieces of information

**Move 2 Soliciting information**

Step 1 requesting / specifying product / service details
and / or
Step 2 requesting / specifying transaction details

**Move 3 Prompting further contact**

Step 1 expressing expectation of reply / attention

Table 1 compares the occurrence of these moves and steps in the corpus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Move/Step No</th>
<th>NE Letters</th>
<th>NNI Letters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1. Distribution of Moves and Steps in NE and NNI Business Letters.*
Move 1 Establishing a link
This move may be realized by means of one or two steps:
Step 1 referring to previous contact and / or
Step 2 acknowledging pieces of information
In the corpus, out of the 25 NE letters, 12 had "referring to previous contact" step (48%) and 8 had "acknowledging pieces of information" step (32%). The rate of occurrence of these steps in NNI letters was 56% and 28% respectively.
For example:
- Thank you very much for your above referenced enquiry which is receiving our attention. (NE letter # 1)
- In reply to your fax dated 5 July 2002, we...(NE letter # 7)
- Referring to our telephone conversation please find attached the New Proforma Invoice. (NNI letter # 8)
- Thank you for your enquiry, unable to… (NE letter # 14)

Move 2 Soliciting information
In applying this move, one or two steps may be used:
Step 1 requesting / specifying product / service details
Step 2 requesting / specifying transaction details
An analysis of corpus showed that the occurrence rates of steps 2.1 and 2.2 were 32% and 72% in NE letters and 72% and 40% in NNI letters respectively.
For example:
-….. the terms of payment were in fact changed to irrevocable letter of credit.
  (NE letter # 7)
- Please note the existing valve is a British (PN Rating) valve where …
  (NE letter # 16)
- The goods has (a mistake in the original letter) been dispatched by flight No. 721 from Tehran today.
  (NNI letter # 1)
-….. Please arrange for air dispatch of any possible quantities available in stocks of your other sources of supply, … (NNI letter # 4)

Move 3 Prompting further contacts
Step 1 Expressing expectation of reply / attention
The survey of letters in the corpus revealed that 80% of NE letters and 84% of NNI letters included this step.
- Looking forward to receiving the revised P/I soon... (NNI letter # 2)
- Looking forward to hearing from you soon. (NNI letter # 9)
- If you have any queries or require further information please do not hesitate to contact us. (NE letter # 4)
- Your feedback regarding the above is greatly appreciated and is beneficial in helping... (NE letter # 5)

It is worth mentioning that the paragraphing of the letters does not necessarily correspond to the move boundaries (Bhatia, 1993). The following sample letter is an example in which we can trace two moves of follow-up business letter in a single paragraph:

In reply to your fax dated 5 July 2002, we can confirm that as per our revised quote number 2, the terms of payment were in fact changed to irrevocable letter of credit. (NE letter # 7)

As is evident in the above paragraph of a NE's letter, both "establishing a link" and "soliciting information" have been used by the writer. Also, in some NNI letters in our sample single paragraphs were found to include three moves of follow-ups (for instance NNI letters # 4, 5). This is, mostly, due to the paragraphing styles of NNI writers. In sum, though, it is clear that NNI writers attempt to follow the prototypes of business writing applied by native English-speaking writers.

3. 3. The Use of Positive and Negative Politeness Strategies

The most influential theory of politeness phenomena is that of Brown and Levinson (1987) who describe an interactional model consisting of two dimensions of "face": one positive and one negative. Positive face reflects the need to be accepted and to 'belong'. Using positive politeness strategies, the speaker seeks to reinforce the addressee's positive face by showing the addressee that the two of them are cooperators with common goals and expectations.

Negative face reflects the desire for independence, to be able to act freely and unimpeded by others. Respect is indicated with negative politeness strategies by showing that the speaker does not intend to limit the addressee's freedom of action.

Brown and Levinson (ibid.: 74) argue that three variables influence the degree to which an act might threaten one's positive or negative face: (1) the social distance between the speaker and the addressee;
(2) the "power" relative to each other; and (3) the "absolute ranking of impositions in the particular culture". If the speaker has less power than the addressee, for example, it is more likely the speaker will use negative politeness strategies to minimize the threat to the addressee's negative face.

### 3.3.1. Negative Politeness Strategies

As noted, negative politeness strategies are intended to reinforce the speakers' respect for the addressee, showing that speaker acknowledges the addressee's independence and freedom of action (Brown and Levinson, 1987). These negative politeness strategies can be indicated through indirectness of speech and modals.

**Indirectness**

Indirectness is considered a negative politeness strategy to show respect for the addressee. After commands ("Give me...."), some of the most direct linguistic structures are sentences that begin with "I" "you" or "my" (Upton & Conner, 2001). For example:

- **I believe you have already received ...** (NE letter # 18)
- **I hope this new arrangement would be helpful for you.** (NE letter # 19)

It should be mentioned that in just two letters written by an English writer, five sentences began with the pronoun "I" which was a direct linguistic structure. However, sentences that begin with words other than "I", "you" or "my" have a sense of indirectness. For example:

- **If you have any queries regarding this file, please do not hesitate...** (NE letter # 1)
- **Please could you send me sheets for ...**(NE letter # 6).
- **Would you please send me a copy of the original purchase order ...**(NE letter # 17)?

It is noticeable that the direct linguistic structure of sentences beginning with "I", "you", or "my" was not found in NNI business letters and sentences generally began with words other than "I", "you", or "my". For example:

- **We hope to use your service in ...**(NNI letter # 13)
- **Your kind and soonest reply would be ...** (NNI letter # 13)
- **So please contact with your bankers ...**(NNI letter # 3)
**Modals**

Modals that qualify statements have the effect of softening the idea being communicated. These types of modals fall under a category of modals called "socialinteractional" by Celce-Murcia and Larson-freeman (1999) because modal choice depends, to a large extent, on the speaker's perception of the social situation in which he or she is interacting. The use of qualifying modals in the corpus can be seen as a negative politeness strategy. Modals that frequently serve to qualify statements include: would, could, may, might, shall, and should. In Table 2 the number of occurrence of qualifying modals in the NE and NNI letters is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualifying Modal</th>
<th>NO. of NE</th>
<th>Occurrence NNI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shall</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Might</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of QM</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of Letters</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use Rate %</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Occurrence of Qualifying Modals in NE and NNI Business Letters.

As is revealed in table 2, native English speaking communicators applied more than three times the amount of qualifying modals in their letters in comparison to their non-native Iranian counterparts. The reason for this may be the lack of such forms as modals in the Persian language and the unfamiliarity of Iranian writers in applying them in the English language.

**3.3.2. Positive Politeness Strategies**

A speaker uses positive politeness strategies to emphasize the shared
goals and common ground between the speaker and addressee. These strategies are most effective when both the speaker and the addressee see themselves as equals or as colleagues. The risk in using positive strategies is that the addressee may not view the speaker as belonging to the addressee's group and may take offence. The directness of the speaker and also a sense of optimism are strategies of positive politeness (Upton & Conner, 2001).

**Directness**

Two common structures stood out in the data as rather direct and thus threatening to the independence of the addressee. These were sentences that started with the phrase "kindly +[action verb]..." and "please + [action verb] " both of which give the impression of commands, although politely. Table 3 compares the occurrences of these structures in two groups of corpus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Occurrence of Kindly + action verb</th>
<th>Occurrence of Please + action verb</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Rate of Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNI</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3. Occurrences of "Kindly + action verb" and "please + action verb " in the corpus.*

As can be seen in table 3, NNI letter writers used the aforementioned structures more than twice as many times as NE writers. The reason for using of these forms by NNI writers may be related to the patterns applied in formal letter writing of Iranians who usually end their formal letters with phrases such as "kindly / please + action verb." Consequently, NNI writers might transfer their first language patterns over to English letter writing.

**Optimism**

Optimism is considered a positive politeness strategy because it connects with the addresser's desire to have his or her needs met. It also demonstrates that the speaker is trying to minimize the distance between the speaker and addressee by showing that they have
common goals. Optimism was expressed through the phrase "look forward to" and the word "hope" (Uptown and Conner, 2001). Table 4 shows these expressions of optimism as they were expressed by NEs and NNI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&quot;Look forward to&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Hope&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NE</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NNI</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Optimism expressed by the phrase "look forward to" and "hope".

For example:
- We hope this answers your concerns. (NE letter # 3)
- We look forward to hearing from you. (NE letter # 5)
- We look forward to receiving your further information.
- (NE letter # 9)
- Looking forward to hearing from you soon. (NNI letter # 9)
- Looking forward to receiving the revised P/I soon. (NNI letter # 2)

In order to provide insights into the types of letters under investigation in this study, two sample business letters from each group of writers (native English speaking writer and non-native Iranian writer) are presented below.

**NE's Sample Letter:**

Dear Sir,

In reply to your fax dated July 2002, we can confirm that as per our revised quote number 2, the terms of payment were in fact changed to irrevocable letter of credit. Regarding the question of origin of goods, they will all be UK.

We look forward to receiving your official papers releasing us to supply the goods as requested.

Project Engineer

**NNI's Sample Letter:**
Dear Sirs,

Please be informed that with regard to HMC-630 machine concerning A/M L/C, no foundation drawing and writing information of the machine have been received so far. So please expedite dispatch, advising us of the result.

Best Regards,

Procurement Chief

Taking into consideration the number of lexical and grammatical words used in the sample letters, the lexical density of sample letter written by the NE writer is 0.59%, while the figure for the NNI's letter is 0.60%. However, the schematic structure of sample letters is rather different. While in the sample letter written by the NNI only the move/step 2.1. "requesting / specifying product / service details" has been used, the NE writer has used the following moves/ steps in the letter:

1.1. referring to previous contact
2.1. requesting / specifying product / service details
2.2. requesting / specifying transaction details
3.1. expressing expectation of reply / attention

In terms of the application of negative politeness strategies in both samples, there is no trace of the use of qualifying modals; furthermore, all sentences begin with words other than "I", "you", or "my" and, hence, are indirect. At the same time, the NNI writer, by using the phrase "please + (action verb)" and the NE writer, by applying the phrase "look forward to", have tried to benefit from the positive politeness strategies.

4. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

In this study the researcher has investigated some discourse features of business follow-up letters written by native English-speaking and non-native Iranian communicators. The study into the surface features of letters has shown that both groups enjoyed nearly the same lexical density and that the other differences in linguistic
features of letters may not be considered as a significant factor in creating barriers to communication. Meanwhile, Iranian communicators tended to share similarities in the patterns of moves and steps of follow-up business letters to establish a business relationship.

In order to reveal the pragmatic discourse features of business letters written by the two groups, the use of positive and negative politeness strategies in letters was investigated. This part of the study showed that the business letters written by Iranians bore a few traces of politeness strategies. By using more informal and direct language in their letters, the Iranian communicators intended simply to convey their messages without thinking of how to employ forms which are acceptable to their counterparts. Maier (1992: 189) suggests that "business writing by non-native speakers, even that which is grammatically flawless, may be perceived negatively by the reader because of the inappropriate use of politeness strategies."

It is interesting to note that letter writers in Iranian companies, in interview responses with the researcher, expressed that they were not familiar with the concept of politeness strategies in business letter writing. Taking into consideration the importance of cultural aspects of the language in the development of global awareness and international understanding, it can be claimed that pragmatic aspects of the language such as politeness strategies are often neglected in business English training in Iran.

This problem is also apparent in letter writing textbooks used at Iranian universities and in courses for English for Specific Purposes (ESP). These are often editions of textbooks written by, and for, native speakers of the language and so some concepts, such as clearness and courtesy in writing business letters, may be perceived as vague for the Iranian learners. To address this problem, business English course designers need to place an emphasis on presenting intersectional aspects of language into their syllabi.

As business letter writing is a social activity, a 'thick' description within sociolinguistic frameworks of business communication can
provide useful evidence for EFL and ESP researchers and teachers (Louhaila-Salminen, 2002). Teachers should try to raise learners' awareness of the power principle and the solidarity principle between interlocutors. In effect, the syllabus should pursue complex aims, besides those of teaching linguistic structures to learners. The implementation of tasks that involve active training through the use of authentic materials could represent one means to achieve this. Such activities should depart from simply the use of formulaic language learning and, instead, provide a bridge between the linguistic skills of learners and their professional knowledge goals. For today's business professionals it is insufficient to simply master the four skills in English. An authoritarian and teacher-centered style of teaching will certainly not come to terms with the objective of conveying interactional aspects of language through language teaching. Only a cooperative and learner-centered style will conform to the roles of both teacher (who becomes more of a facilitator and less of an instructor) and learner (as a discussion partner and ideas generator). After all, as Crystal (2000: 56) argues, "Language is an immensely democratizing institution. To have learned a language is to have rights in it."

References


