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Linguistic Issues of Email Discourse in Business Communication¹

This article explores selected linguistic issues concerning specialist email discourse in Business English as a lingua franca (BELF) conducted by professionals at the same level of the institutional hierarchy (project team members collaborating within a given global corporation). The article begins with a brief outline of characteristics of global project teams. It goes on to present technical and linguistic aspects of email. A separate section is devoted to the types of emails exchanged by team members. Finally, the findings of a study conducted in a global project team are discussed, with regard to specialist communication in BELF. The article finishes with a conclusion and an outlook towards future research.

Key words: email, global corporations, lingua franca, project team, specialist communication.

Lingwistyczne aspekty dyskursu e-mailowego w komunikacji biznesowej. – Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy wybranych lingwistycznych aspektów e-mailowego dyskursu specjalistycznego prowadzonego w biznesowym języku angielskim jako lingua franca (BELF) przez ekspertów o porównywalnym statusie w hierarchii organizacji (członków zespołu projektowego w określonej korporacji globalnej). Na początku artykułu autorka przedstawia krótką charakterystykę globalnych zespołów projektowych. Następnie omawia techniczne i lingwistyczne kwestie związane z e-mailami. W osobnym punkcie wylicza rodzaje e-maili wymienianych przez członków zespołu projektowego. Następnie prezentuje wyniki badań przeprowadzonych w globalnym zespole projektowym w odniesieniu do specjalistycznej komunikacji w BELF. Na zakończenie artykułu autorka podsumowuje swoje rozważania i zarysowuje perspektywę badawczą.

Słowa kluczowe: e-mail, globalne korporacje, komunikacja specjalistyczna, lingua franca, zespół projektowy.

Communication among professionals of different languages and cultural backgrounds has increased exponentially in the course of the past few decades. CHARLES (2009: 21) describes

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this new trend as “the powerful ascent of communication”. Changes in business communication are related to global work relationships, and are dictated by new work organisation. Nowadays, more work is done in interlingual and intercultural teams, also labelled ‘global project teams’ or ‘global virtual teams’, in order to reduce costs and increase productivity.

Background: characteristics of global project teams

In global project teams, fellow workers (project team members) work together for a specified period of time in order to achieve the defined goal (unique service, product or result) of a given project (see PMBOK 2008: 5). In this paper, I consider global project teams to be ‘pure’ project teams, i.e. “The team works directly for the project manager, and team members are actively communicating and collaborating with others since everyone is working as a cohesive unit” (see LEVIN 2009: 2). Moreover, project team members are experts in different fields, hence project teams are sometimes referred to as ‘multidisciplinary teams’. Project team members are led by the project manager who is responsible for the project. However, all project team members, including the project manager, are considered status equals, i.e. they are usually at or about the same level of institutional hierarchy. Furthermore, project team members are multilingual professionals, i.e. they “use two or more languages in their daily professional lives and are the backbone of the global and virtual economy” (see DAY/WAGNER 2007: 392). It must be understood that in business situations, in which discourse is conducted by professionals of two different languages, a third language (usually English) is used that is not the first language for discourse participants. This language is labelled Business English as a *lingua franca* (BELF). According to LOUHALA-SALMINEN et al.:

“BELF refers to English used as a ‘neutral’ and shared communication code. BELF is neutral in the sense that none of the speakers can claim it as her/his mother tongue; it is shared in the sense that it is used for conducting business within discourse community, whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not ‘non-native speakers’ or ‘learners’”. (LOUHALA-SALMINEN / CHARLES / KANKAANRANTA 2005: 403–404)

Project team members are usually based in different countries and work in different time zones. Therefore, they are bound to use Internet-based communication tools (also called online communication tools) such as email, communicator, audio- and videoconferencing, wiki, (discussion) fora, blogs / microblogs etc. It is worth noting that members of global virtual teams use at least a few tools in order to communicate (see KLEINBERGER GÜNTHER 2005: 306, FUNKEN 2008: 107, see also *multi-channeling* e.g. HOLLY 2006, *multimodality* e.g. BARGIELA-CHIAPPINI 2009: 12, NICKERSON / PLANKEN 2009: 18 ff.). Internet-based communication tools are not used interchangeably by discourse participants but, rather, simultaneously in order to “intensify communication” (see MEIER 2002: 69). In this paper, I focus on the linguistic aspects of business discourse conducted via email. Before I explore the linguistic issues concerning business email communication conducted among status equals, I present certain technical aspects of email and email discourse.

Email – technical considerations

Email is the main Internet-based communication tool used by members of global virtual teams. It is generally accepted that email communication consists of an asynchronous exchange of written messages between at least two employees using a computer and having access to the Internet. An email may be created in three ways: (1) to produce a text and send it to a given addressee/given addressees, (2) to reply to an email received from somebody (there appears automatically 'Re:' (a short form of the word 'Reply') in the subject line) by producing a text and sending it to the sender, (3) to forward a received email (in most cases with an additional text) to another person/other people (there appears automatically 'Fw:' (a short form of the word 'Forward') in the subject line, see Figure 2).

Taking Microsoft Outlook as an example, I would like to point out some technical possibilities, related to this software/application, with the help of which employees of global corporations receive and send emails. Microsoft Outlook is largely used as a mailbox consisting of several folders in which emails are mainly segregated into received, sent, drafts and spam. Microsoft Outlook enables users to create, send, read and archive emails. Microsoft Outlook is also an email management tool (see Microsoft Outlook: online), and it enables users to "manage information" (see BITTNER 2003: 142–143), as users may freely create and name additional folders, and sort emails into these folders. Additionally, users may define filters to sort incoming emails into specific folders. Emails (both incoming and outgoing) may also be sorted according to the date of their sending/receipt, to the sender/addressee, or to their subject. There is the possibility to search for a concrete word/expression in all or selected emails. Microsoft Outlook includes calendar software which enables users to schedule appointments in a quick and easy manner. Employees are granted the right to view the calendars of other co-workers, hence reducing the complication of finding an appropriate date for a meeting or conference, which in turn is of great importance to members of (global) project teams. Employees may accept or reject the dates proposed by their co-workers, and they can suggest their own ones. Alerts and reminders (notifications) for the meetings, appointments, conferences scheduled appear automatically on the computer screen. It is also possible to activate automatic alerts for incoming emails to be displayed on the computer screen. The alerts for incoming emails and approaching appointments may also be set in an acoustic form. In Microsoft Outlook there is also an option to create contact groups. A contact group consists of selected email addresses, and it is given a certain name. When contacting all people belonging to the group at the same time, the sender inserts the name of the group in the 'To:' line without typing each of the email addresses of these people. Creating a contact group is useful when specific people/employees are contacted simultaneously on a regular basis, e.g. in the case of global project teams. A contact group may include an indefinite number of email addresses which can be added to or removed from the group if need be. This option is useful to people collaborating on a given project. For instance, a contact group may contain the email addresses of members of a certain project team. In order to inform the project team about e.g. the status of the project, one needs to put the name of the group in the 'To:' line. Moreover, using the contact-group option reduces risk that any email address could be deleted or that it will be misspelt. Taking into account that members of

project teams may exchange messages very frequently, sometimes even several times an hour, it may prove practical to create a contact group in order to speed up their work.

(Specialist) Email – linguistic considerations

From a technical point of view, email is regarded as a tool. However, from a linguistic point of view other aspects of email need to be highlighted. In order to do this, some linguists label email as a ‘(communication) medium’ (see e.g. HESS-LÜTTICH / HOLLY/PÜSCHEL 1996: 8, HABSCHIED 2000: 139, SCHMITZ 2002, VOIGT 2003: 12 ff.). However, there are linguists who opine that the word ‘medium’ refers to the technical aspects of communication:

“[...] Kommunikationsmedien [lassen sich] definieren als diejenigen materiellen Hilfsmittel, die der Kommunikation über räumliche Entfernungen hinweg dienen (wie z. B. das Telefon).” (DÜRSCHIED 2003: 40)

“Da es zahlreiche Mediendefinitionen gibt [...], sollte man also genauer von einem <Trägermedium> sprechen, wenn man den hier favorisierten technologischen Medienbegriff zugrunde legt [...]. Das Faxgerät ist also ein Trägermedium, der Computer ein anderes. Beim Computer kommt hinzu, dass er nicht nur zur Übermittlung der Zeichen dient, sondern auch zu ihrer Produktion und Rezeption.” (DÜRSCHIED 2009: 40)

That is why email is also called a ‘communication form’ (see e.g. ZIEGLER 2002: 24 ff.; THIMM 2002: 5; BITTNER 2003: 133 ff.; DÜRSCHIED 2003: 42 ff., 2009) or ‘text type’ (see e.g. GÜNTHER/WYSS 1996: 64 ff.).

I regard emails as texts, and emails exchanged by professionals (e.g. project team members) as specialist texts. Within the meaning of anthropocentric linguistics (see GRUCZA F. 1983, 1989, 1992a,b, 1993a,b, 1997, 2010, GRUCZA S. 2006a,b, 2008, 2010) specialist emails exchanged by business professionals constitute a real means of specialist communication. Experts produce, send, receive and understand specialist emails on the basis of their real specialist languages. Realised in a graphic form, specialist emails represent certain specialist knowledge and specialist information, i.e. specialist emails are characterised by informative (content) speciality. They are also characterised by expressive speciality, i.e. by terminologicality and certain textual conventions (patterns) used by experts in a given field.

Specialist communication via email consists of exchanging specialist emails and may be labelled ‘specialist email discourse’. At least two professionals participate in specialist email discourse. They produce their texts spontaneously, without preparing them in advance. This means that specialist email discourse is unique. Moreover, specialist email discourse is coherent, i.e. specialist emails produced by employees are adjusted to one another in the communication process (RANCEW-SIKORA 2007: 42). At the same time, professional emailers use certain discourse conventions (e.g. greetings, openings, endings, closings) and standardised linguistic forms (e.g. politeness forms such as please and thank-you) (see VAN DEN EYNDEN MORPETH 2012: 40–46). What is more, the discourse conventions and standardised linguistic forms are rarely left out in workplace emails (see KANKAANRANTA 2005a: 339 ff.,

VAN DEN EYNDEN MORPETH 2012: 35 ff.). Further still, professional emailers hardly ever delete email history. Therefore, specialist email discourse may be depicted in the following threefold way (Figures 1a, 1b, 1c):

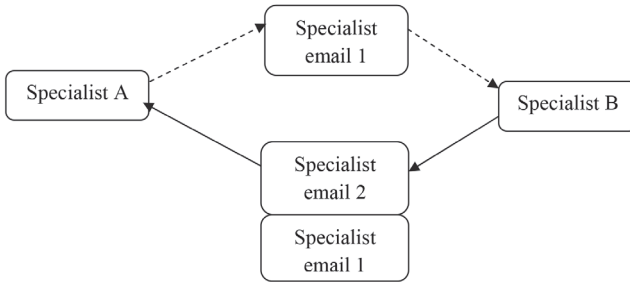


Figure 1a: Specialist email discourse

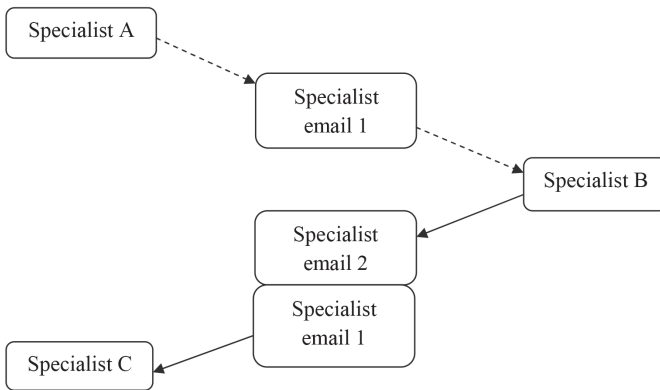


Figure 1b: Specialist email discourse

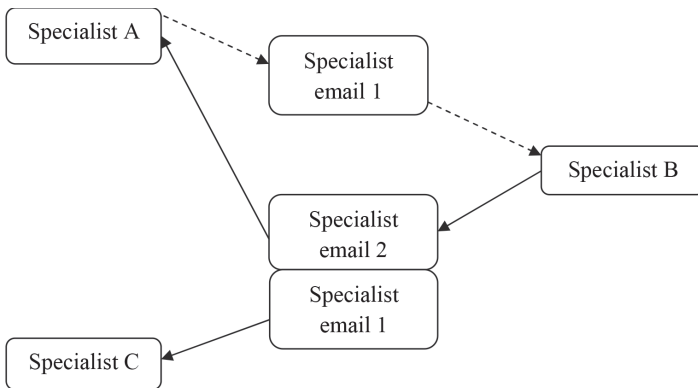


Figure 1c: Specialist email discourse

It is widely regarded that (workplace) email discourse contains characteristics of both oral and written discourse (see DÜRSCHIED 1999, 2003, 2006b; KLEINBERGER GÜNTHER / THIMM 2000; BITTNER 2003; VOIGT 2003; HOFFMANN 2004; SCHLOBINSKI 2006; FETZER 2010; DANIUSHINA 2010). However, drawing on recent findings by GILLAERTS (2012: 20) and VAN DEN EYNDEN MORPETH (2012: 48) as well as the findings of my own research (ZAJĄC 2012), I consider (specialist) email discourse to be characterised by certain distinctive features. These being, inter alia, specific structure, the use of emoticons, written dialogical character, etc. Email structure may be depicted in the following way (Figure 2):

<p>From: A Sent: Tuesday, February 01, 2011 6:59 PM To: X, Y *CC: Z Subject: RE: *Attachments: xx.doc, yy.jpg *Importance: High</p> <p>Container</p>

Figure 2: Email structure (* optional elements)

Types of emails exchanged by professional equals

Project team members may exchange as many as 100 emails every day. They use email from the start of a project until its closure. Generally, they are obliged to react swiftly to incoming email messages. More specifically, they may respond to emails within just seconds.

Drawing on the email classification proposed by KANKAANRANTA (2005b: 45 ff.), which reflects the purpose of email messages, project team members mostly exchange Dialogue messages, in which they share information on a given project. Project team members may also send to, and receive from, other team members the so-called Postman messages characterised by attached documents, to which references are made in the container (see Figure 2, line **Attachments:** xx.doc, yy.jpg). As regards the action which should be taken after an email message has been received, project team members usually exchange To-Do-E-Mails (see the email classification by VOIGT 2006: 23–24), on the basis of which they reproduce the information about the task that needs to be done. They also receive To-Read-E-Mails concerning mostly the status of the project at hand, and they exchange E-Mails einer fortlaufenden Unterhaltung when certain project issues need to be clarified.

Selected linguistic issues of specialist email discourse among professional equals

In this section I would like to present certain issues regarding specialist email discourse conducted by project team members working together on global endeavours. The selected aspects presented in this paper are part of my research project results. Conducted between March 2011 and September 2011, the research project was carried out on the authentic (email) data produced by concrete team members while collaborating on a certain (global) project. Being at a similar level of institutional hierarchy, all project team members communicated in Business English as a lingua franca. The company from which the data stems did not wish to reveal its name and forbade me to reveal any details about its operations, or to publish any data. Hence, I do not describe the data in detail in this paper or present examples.

In what follows, I sum up the aspects of specialist email discourse conducted by project team members. However, due to space limitations, I pay attention to selected aspects of professional email discourse among equals, which I regard as unusual in other types of (workplace) discourse.

1. All project team members communicated with one another via email. Hence, specialist email discourse in global project teams may be depicted in the form of the communication network presented in Figure 3:

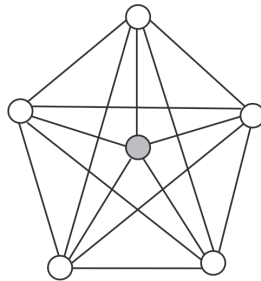


Figure 3: Communication network in a global project team

Holding responsibility for the project, and being the central figure who solves all problems, the project manager is marked in grey in Figure 3, though the project manager was (and usually is) a status equal to other team members.

2. In general, project team members communicated in an informal way. For example, in 95 per cent of emails they greeted one another using the word 'Hi' and the first name of the addressee(s), even though they had not met or worked together before. In only 2 emails out of 41, the greeting was missing. This is probably due to the generally accepted rule in the company that all employees of the company, except for the top managers (members of the Board of Directors), greet one another using the word 'Hi' in email communication. Moreover, the use of emoticons may also be regarded as a sign of informal communication. Emoticons were used twice in the research data—firstly, by a team member who had made several mistakes whilst delivering the project, when announcing the successful completion of the assignment in the final email (☺), and secondly by another team member when explaining the reason why he could not

- perform the task assigned to him (☹). In the former case, the emoticon may be regarded as an apology or a thank you to other team members for their patience. The latter emoticon was probably used by the team member to express his helplessness for not being able to take on a task due to somebody else's fault.
3. Even though project team members frequently exchanged emails (several times per day), they used the greeting, the closing and the signature (the first name only) in 95 per cent of messages. This might be regarded as a politeness indicator in professional email communication.
 4. When beginning the project, the project manager did not use any 'pick-up lines' (SIDNELL 2010: 197–198), which may be considered unusual due to the fact that project team members did not know one another. Such a situation is hardly possible in oral discourse. It does not happen commonly in email communication, either, unless emailers have met before.
 5. When carrying out the project, the team members could not exercise power over one another by giving 'proper' orders or directives, as they are considered to be equal. Therefore, they used certain techniques to get tasks done, to speed up work processes, and to ensure the high quality of the project result. The strategies applied are listed below:
 - a. Formulating straightforward questions with concrete alternatives: "Can you X or Y?"
 - b. Writing certain (important) words in capital letters so that other team members pay attention to them and carefully reconstruct their meaning properly.
 - c. Enumerating tasks assigned so that no task is forgotten.
 - d. Using the word 'still' to express annoyance.
 - e. Repeatedly asking (in one email) other team members to do something: "Please...".
 - f. Repeating requests expressed in previous emails and indicating the date of the emails.
 - g. Describing in great detail the task to be done.
 - h. Giving examples of how to deliver a certain part of the project.
 - i. Encouraging recipients to contact other team members in the case that something is unclear: "If you have any questions, just let me know".
 - j. Thanking (in advance) in order to hedge or mitigate the force of the order/directive given.
 - k. Using a different font colour, highlighting certain words/phrases in bold, to reinforce the task to be done.
 - l. Changing the subject of the discourse (see line 'Subject' in Figure 2) to speed up work and to indicate the mistakes which need to be corrected.
 - m. Using the minimiser 'just' to indicate the simplicity of the task.
 6. Project team members used various politeness speech acts and politeness techniques when formulating illocutionary acts, which confirms the statement made by HOLMES/STUBBE (2003: 41) with regard to workplace communication: "In general [...] attention to politeness concerns tends to increase as the 'right' of one person to give directives to another decreases." While orders, reminders and reasoning turned out to be the most important illocutionary acts in the email discourse researched, structural politeness indicators (greetings, openings, closings) and verbal politeness indicators

(especially words such as ‘thank you’, ‘please’) could be regarded as the most influential politeness techniques.

7. Surprisingly, from the purely linguistic point of view, the specialist email discourse under study may be regarded as successful. Although the team members made numerous mistakes and ‘modified’ the English language on occasions (e.g. spelling and grammar mistakes, incorrect word order or word choice), I have not noticed any miscommunication. In general, the team members opted for a rather basic English vocabulary, except for terminology which was industry-specific and hardly understandable for laypeople. ‘Problematic talk’ which appeared in the specialist email discourse could be ascribed to some individual characteristics of the team members.

Discussion and conclusion

The analysis of specialist email discourse conducted in Business English as a lingua franca by status equals testifies that professionals develop certain communication strategies/techniques when working together in the global environment. The techniques used depend on the context within which communication takes place, and are, to a great degree, selected individually. According to the results of other studies, it may also be concluded that the ‘organisational culture’ influences the choice of the techniques mentioned (see HOLMES/STUBBE 2003: 54, VAN DEN EYNDEN MORPETH 2012: 49). However, I would argue that this statement needs to be verified through further studies concerning business discourse conducted by fellow experts being at the same or similar level of the institutional hierarchy. I would also suggest narrowing future studies to a concrete group (team) of status equals. In this regard, in subject literature one may find the first remarks on ‘team language’ (PMBOK 2008: 230) and ‘project culture’ (LAUTERBACH 2008: 336) (see also ZAJĄC 2012). I would also recommend the exploration of politeness considerations with regard to interlingual and intercultural professional equals.

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