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(R)EVOLUTION IN INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH. SELECTED CONSIDERATIONS

This paper presents selected trends in undertaking research into intercultural business communication. It discusses the concept of ‘genre’ within business discourse and the growing interest in researching business email communication, internal company communication, communication in business lingua franca, and English in Asian business environments. Attention is also paid to undertaking linguistic research locally and to certain other aspects of linguistic approaches to intercultural business communication. The paper finishes with a conclusion of the situation of (business communication) scholars.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on (1) the findings of various research projects presented at two conferences and later compiled in two volumes “Genre Variation in Business Letters” (Gillaerts/Gotti 2008) and “Intercultural Interactions in Business and Management” (Salvi/Tanaka 2011) as well as on (2) the tenets of linguistics of specialist languages explained in the monograph “Fachsprachenlinguistik” (Grucza 2012). In my opinion, these three publications give an interesting overview of contemporary empirical and theoretical research into specialist (business) communication and display recent changes in this field of study. Moreover, I consider them complementary to one another, which I will attempt to prove further below. As such I have selected certain tendencies in the field of business communication presented in these publications and will discuss them in this paper. I would like to stress that the points formulated in this article have been chosen in a subjective way, and in no way do they exhaust the theoretical or empirical aspects of business communication research. I would also like to point out that the issues presented in this paper conform with the tenets of anthropocentric linguistics as developed and discussed by Grucza (2012: 109 ff).

1. GENRES IN BUSINESS DISCOURSE

To begin with, the terminological issues should be explicated. In the introduction to their volume, Gillaerts and Gotti (2008: 9 ff) refer to the genre theory, which has developed over the past two decades and has been found to be applicable to linguistic research in the business environment (see Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008: 61):

we strive to find appropriate tools for analyzing and understanding the context and nature of business discourse – and ‘genre’ has shown potential for this purpose.

(Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008: 55)

Gillaerts and Gotti aptly differentiate between the two understandings/meanings of the term ‘genre’: firstly, in everyday business environments and secondly, in discourse analysis. In the dynamic environment of everyday business life, ‘genre’ is regarded as a “rhetorical device for interlocutors in a business situation in order to respond adequately to a recurrent situation” (Gillaerts/Gotti 2008: 10-11), whereas in the more static context of discourse analysis, ‘genre’ introduces ‘intentionality’ and is used for analytical purposes in typified situations (Gillaerts/Gotti 2008: 11), and hence “aims at creating some ‘order’ from the ‘chaos’ of the business world” (Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008: 55). Furthermore, for analytical purposes Gillaerts and Gotti propose a rhetorical model of the business genre in which a genre is composed of a group of oral/written utterances (texts, discourses) that have in common their purpose, structure, and audience (Gillaerts/Gotti 2008: 13-14). In this model, the intended audience (in a given situation) is of vital importance, and hence the characteristics and criteria that determine the audiences’ disposition for attention, comprehension, and yielding should be clarified (*ibid.*). Gillaerts concludes that

[w]ithout a discourse community there is no genre; every text is embedded not only in a communicative situation, but also in a cultural environment because it belongs to a certain genre.

(Gillaerts 2008a: 283)

In general,

[o]ne can present the genres not as mere conventional forms, but as flexible responses to specific aspects of communicative situation.

(Shaw 2008: 278)

One should also take into account the fact that business genre changes, and the reasons for a change can be varied (see Jørgensen 2008: 147). For example, they may be related to technological advancements (Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008: 79), structural changes in the business environment (Jørgensen 2008: 147, see also Garzone 2008: 201), or be history- and culture-bound (Del Lungo Camiciotti 2008: 125-126). Within a given profession, characteristics of a given

group, i.e. of a community of practice¹, are also relevant and should be taken into consideration (see Poncini 2008: 216). This, in turn, implies that each genre analysis is *ad hoc* and case-oriented, and thus applied, which corresponds with the theoretical considerations presented in the monograph by Grucza (2012). In his work, Grucza presents the tenets of anthropocentric linguistics in the context of specialist (professional) communication. The author argues that linguistics of specialist languages (*Fachsprachenlinguistik*) should be divided into (a) linguistics of specialist languages dealing with real (specialist) languages and (b) linguistics of specialist languages dealing with (specialist) languages understood as intellectual models. It should be noted that in this distinction, the results of the linguistics dealing with real languages constitute the basis for the linguistics dealing with intellectual models (Grucza 2012: 116). What is more, the (linguistic) description/reconstruction of real specialist languages can be pursued on the basis of specialist texts (Grucza 2012: 132-134) and these are specialists who decide whether a given text is specialist or not (Grucza 2012: 133):

die Entscheidung darüber, ob ein konkreter Text als entsprechender (branchenbezogener/fachbereichsbezogener) Fachtext anerkannt werden kann, liegt bei den Fachleuten, die das entsprechende Fachgebiet der menschlichen Fachtätigkeit ausmachen (vertreten) . . . Sache eines Linguisten ist . . . die Rekonstruktion eines Fachidolekts, der der entsprechenden Person (dem entsprechenden Fachmann) die Erzeugung (und das Verstehen) von untersuchten Fachtexten ermöglicht (ermöglicht hat).

(Grucza 2012: 133)

This implies that primary (linguistic) research on specialist languages should be carried out on the basis of specialist texts produced and received by specialists. These texts are produced by individual specialists in particular situations, and hence are authentic and case-specific. In addition, they may be ‘incorrect or imperfect’ (see Grucza 2010: 52).

Furthermore, business genre research should be interdisciplinary in character (Gillaerts 2008a: 293). In fact, it is more often conducted by researchers representing various disciplines, which can be observed on the basis of “A Bibliography on the Business Letter Genre” compiled by Gillaerts (2008b: 369 ff) and the short introduction to this bibliography (*ibid.*). Email discourse presents a good example of the new approach to business genre analysis, which I discuss in greater detail in point 2.

¹ It is worth mentioning that Poncini follows Bhatia (2004) and differentiates between ‘discourse communities’ and ‘communities of practice’. Members of the former concentrate on lexico-grammar, texts and genres, while members of the latter focus on common interest and values, which is mirrored in communication practices. This differentiation may prove useful in linguistic considerations and be applied to research projects devoted to business communication and carried out from a linguistic point of view (see e.g. Zajac 2013b: 77 ff).

2. BUSINESS EMAIL COMMUNICATION

The approach to researching business email communication has become remarkably uncomplicated. While the editors of the volume published in 2008 pose the legitimate question: “the email is still regarded as a digital format of the paper business letter, but for how long?” (Gillaerts/Gotti 2008: 17) and are rather sceptical about “the establishment of a new genre” (Bondi 2008: 320, the exceptions being Gimenez 2008: 236 and Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008), the editors of the volume from 2011 go one step further and declare that email discourse could be considered “a new type of hybrid discourse” (Salvi/Tanaka 2011: 14):

[T]he multiplicity of the data sets indicates that the traditional distinction of written and spoken discourse has become blurred and possibly obsolete. For example, emailing – which combines elements of both spoken and written discourse – could be considered as a technically-mediated form of oral discourse or a new type of hybrid discourse.

(Salvi/Tanaka 2011: 14)

Poppi (2011: 237-238) is more explicit and defines the email as a genre (see also Gimenez 2008: 236, Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008). I consider the observations by the authors to be of great importance for further linguistic research conducted in the field of professional (email) communication. Indeed, (specialist) email discourse is a type of discourse whose features are exceptional and do not constitute a simple mixture of any other discourse characteristics (see Zajac 2013a: 145). This can be observed through the interesting approach to email genre proposed by Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2008: 68 ff). The authors identified three types of email messages (1) Dialogue genre, (2) Postman genre, and (3) Noticeboard genre, according to their communicative purpose, i.e. depending on the fact whether discourse participants (1) exchange information about the company’s activities, (2) deliver documents for information/comments, (3) inform other employees of the company’s activities, respectively. On the basis of authentic data, taking context into consideration, and using the mentioned differentiation, the authors carried out their linguistic analysis and presented the results of their analysis. However, due to fast changes in the business environment, especially the increasing speed of technological advancement, the authors underlined the unstable character of email genre (Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta 2008: 55, 78-80), which I consider a significant aspect of research on business email communication. Indeed, email genre undergoes constant change and is company-, team-, community- etc. specific (see also Poncini 2008: 227-228). Similarly, Gimenez observed the complex and non-static character of business email (Gimenez 2008: 236), which depends on the demands and needs of professionals, and suggested researching business emails with regard to their embeddedness and generic structure. It is worth providing the reader with the definition of ‘embedded emails’ composed by Gimenez:

[E]mail messages have become more complex in nature. As a result of the pressing exigencies of the business context (e.g. time and efficiency, which include ease of reference) and due to questions of accountability (who is to be held responsible for what), business emails now tend to have embedded in them the chain of messages which were generated in response to the original message.

The evolution of emails has thus created what I term ‘embedded emails’. Embedded emails are electronic mails which are made up of an initial message which starts the communication event, a series of internal, subordinated messages which depend on the first message to make complete sense, and a final message which brings the communication event to an end.

(Gimenez 2008: 235-236)

In my view, the author’s approach to business email research could facilitate and structure future studies into business emails. For example, in his research project, Gimenez listed certain internal elements and processes in embedded messages (see Gimenez 2008: 242-246), i.e. greetings, length, lexicality, topicality, which helped him understand and explain the value of communication practices within business entities (Gimenez 2008: 246-248) and formulate the pedagogical implications (Gimenez 2008: 248-249). In future studies, this list could be modified and extended dependent upon data, context, professional community, etc. However, it is interesting to note the approach developed by Gimenez to the research on business email as a genre.

New approaches to the analysis of business email communication testify to another tendency in business communication research, i.e. the analysis of internal company communication (see point 3), which so far has been neglected due to limited access to internal corporate communication and the lack of appropriate research data.

3. INTERNAL COMPANY COMMUNICATION

Nowadays more and more business genre analysis is conducted on the basis of internal company communication. This relates to the fact that more business communication researchers are gaining access to (authentic) internal data of companies, and thus in more research projects, concerning business communication, representative authentic data can be analysed (e.g. Bondi 2008; Gimenez 2008; Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaanranta 2008; Poncini 2008; Poppi 2011). This is mainly the result of the growing interest displayed by companies in obtaining results of scholarly studies of their communication practices. Hence, under certain conditions, such as the changing of names, dates, etc. in the analysed texts for confidentiality reasons, companies’ representatives may agree to share relevant materials, even if these materials are sensitive and confidential (see Zajac 2013a: 129-130).

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that studies devoted to internal business communications are still limited as far as data collection is concerned (see Gimenez 2008: 240; Poncini 2008: 212). It is not always possible for researchers to obtain a full picture of business communication. Data is usually limited to a certain project and time. For instance, when analysing business emails, researchers receive incoming emails but get limited, or no access to the outgoing messages (Poncini 2008: 212).

As business communication often implies companies working together within an international environment, the use of a foreign or a third language, also called *lingua franca*, becomes a must. Therefore, an increasing number of research projects are nowadays devoted to business *lingua franca*. I present the concept of business *lingua franca* in more detail in point 4.

4. COMMUNICATION IN BUSINESS *LINGUA FRANCA*

Due to the fact that nowadays, in an increasingly globalised world, business is to a great extent done in an international environment, the considerations of business genre should by necessity include intercultural and interlingual aspects. This has been observed by the editors of the volume “Intercultural Interactions in Business and Management” (Salvi/Tanaka 2011), in which articles were collected that were devoted to intercultural business communication conducted mainly in English as a *lingua franca* (ELF), also referred to as Business English as a *lingua franca* (BELF, see Louhiala-Salminen et al. 2005: 403-404). In the article the authors present their findings of the analysis of oral and written business discourse by native/non-native professionals in formal/informal and local/global contexts. Again, this confirms the anthropocentric approach to research proposed by Grucza (2012, see point 1). Also anthropocentric in nature is the authors’ approach to BELF (ELF), as they consider BELF to be a language functioning alongside, and not replacing, the native languages of communicating professionals (Poppi 2011: 248-249). Here, certain explanations are necessary. First of all, it should be clearly stated that specialist languages, BELF amongst them, cannot replace native (basic) languages, as specialist languages are, from a linguistic point of view, not autonomous languages (Grucza 2012: 136), i.e. they have phonemics, graphemics, morphemics, grammar, and lexis in common with basic languages, but they differ with regard to terminology and textemics (text patterns).

Wären Fachidiolekte vollständige (komplette) Sprachen im linguistischen Sinne des Wortes, bedeutete dies, dass jemand, der den polnischen Grundidiolet kann (beherrscht), beim Erlernen eines polnischen Fachidioleks, z. B. seine ganze Phonemik und Graphemik lernen (rekonstruieren) müsste, um Fachtexte erzeugen zu können. Folglich bedeutet dies

aber, dass Menschen, von denen man sagen kann, dass sie sowohl einen Grundidiolekt als auch einen Fachidiolekt beherrschen, über die doppelte Menge gleicher sprachlicher Konstituenten verfügten. . . .

Fachidiolekte sind also, im linguistischen Sinne, keine vollständigen (kompletten) Idiolekte. Von diesem Standpunkt aus betrachtet ist gewöhnlich jeder Fachidiolekt in einer gewissen Weise mit dem Grundidiolekt verbunden. Das, was Fachidiolekte mit dem Grundidiolekt auf der Ebene der Konstituente verbindet, sind in erster Linie Phonemik, Graphemik und (nichtbezogene) Lexik. Und das, was die beiden auf der Ebene der Konstituente von einander unterscheidet, sind die Fachlexik und Fachtextemik.

(Grucza 2012: 136)

Nevertheless, specialist languages are fully autonomous as far as their function (mainly cognitive function) is concerned.

Der grundsätzliche Unterschied zwischen den Fachidiolekt en und dem Grundidiolekt liegt darin, dass die Fachidiolekt e kognitive Funktionen erfüllen, die vom Grundidiolekt nicht erfüllt werden. Aus diesem Grund müssen die Fachidiolekt e in funktionaler Hinsicht als vollständige (komplette) Idiolekt e betrachtet werden, auch wenn sie das in Wirklichkeit solche nicht sind.

(Grucza 2012: 139)

In other words, specialist languages are not simply variants of general languages. It is impossible to translate a text in a specialist language into a text in a general language whilst preserving the same informative accuracy. In other words, the specialist language and the general language refer to varying scopes of reality (Grucza 2012: 139 ff), and thus they cannot replace each other.

It should be highlighted that dealing with BELF as used in the international environment, linguists are bound to take into account texts which are not only produced *ad hoc* (e.g. emails, chats) but also incorrect (see Bondi 2008: 303-304, Poppi 2011: 237, see also point 1).

Politeness is also an increasingly interesting aspect of undertaking research into business *lingua franca* interactions. Due to the fact that business professionals suffer from the absence of physical presence, for example in email and chat communication, they are bound to develop certain ‘new’ politeness strategies that differ from those available in their national cultures (Poppi 2011: 238):

Among the many different strategies which can contribute to managing cultural diversity in intercultural communication, politeness strategies hold a special position, in that they serve the purpose of developing positive and constructive attitudes, relieving the interactants from the need to worry about possible ‘incidents of rudeness’.

(Poppi 2011: 235-236)

I would like to point out that researching politeness issues in an international business context does not pose a new area of linguistic study. Politeness has already been examined by numerous researchers, who took into consideration various aspects of business communication. However, the aim of this paper is not to present an overview of literature devoted to politeness in business com-

munication, and therefore I do not discuss this issue in any greater detail. I have chosen to concentrate on the latest trends in business communication such as research into English within Asian business environments (see point 5).

5. ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF ASIAN BUSINESS (ELAB)

Interestingly, an important change in business communication research concerns the emerging tendency to conduct research into English as a Language of Asian Business (ELAB), which is an offshoot of English as a *lingua franca* (ELF). Until recently, it has been widely assumed that ELF is measured by the norms of either British or American English. This, however, as has aptly been observed, does not apply to business practice any more, in which a business objective, and not grammar, syntactic or lexical (hyper) correctness, is of the utmost importance:

one does not have to be a master at using a hammer to use a hammer to drive a nail. A solid construction is an achievement more important than mastering the art of hammering or detailed knowledge of a hammer's materials.

(Tanaka 2011: 213)

Especially within Asian business environments, English has gained a leading role in everyday business life. Used mostly by non-native English speakers with multiple cultural and lingual backgrounds, and being situational, ELAB is more and more often becoming the object of analysis, which in turn may contribute not only to responding to “the real communicative needs of millions of users who are currently still being offered ‘standard English’ as a one-size, fits-all language solution” (Bargiela-Chiappini 2011: 11), but also to developing new perspectives in research into English as a *lingua franca* in general, and Business English as a *lingua franca* in particular. These research perspectives imply the analysis of certain communicative strategies and again are anthropocentric in nature, as they promote situational and culture-driven analysis of texts produced by individual professionals (see also point 1). It is worth underlining that the analysed texts can be, and mostly are, incorrect (see point 4):

entailment does not require complete mastery of grammar and vocabulary, but rather a mastery of strategies that ELF participants activate to negotiate their mutual understanding. Such strategies could indeed be situational and worthy of further exploration.

(Tanaka 2011: 216)

This applies not only to the Asian context in particular but above all to the entire globalised world. Indeed, globalisation and glocalisation influence research into intercultural business communication to a great extent, and I decided to discuss them in point 6.

6. GOING LOCAL

‘Glocalisation’ is another buzzword in intercultural business communication research (see Turnbull 2011: 73). An ever growing number of global companies, also referred to as transnational/multinational/global corporations or transnationals/multinationals, do business and are present in almost every country. This has been noticed by linguists, who are more often than not willing to analyse communication conducted by these types of enterprises. As global companies are not always willing to share internal data for linguistic analysis, linguists have started examining, with growing interest, global companies’ external communication – available on these companies’ websites. Researchers of multinationals’ websites have observed that they must take a careful approach to social and cultural contexts, and the features of the companies’ audience (Turnbull 2011: 74; Denti/Giordano 2011: 148 ff). This has resulted in analysing certain websites available in specific countries (see Turnbull 2011; Cesiri 2011; Gatti 2011; Denti/Giordano 2011), i.e. going local with the analysis. Also considered are local training opportunities for employees working in international settings. An article composed by Nair-Venugopal (2011) presents an interesting analysis of training sessions in Malaysian Business with regard to language choice. There should also be a regional approach to teaching foreign languages (see Leonardi/Khoutyz 2011: 281). According to Leonardi and Khoutyz, it should include ‘the target culture’:

Traditional FL [= foreign language – J.A.] teaching tends to focus exclusively on the four language skills, namely reading, writing, speaking and listening without including culture which has often been and still is at times neglected, especially at university level.

(Leonardi/Khoutyz 2011: 281)

This also applies to a business context, as exemplified by small talk rituals:

If languages are taught for a business audience, then more elements come into play, that is, teaching involves specific intercultural business communication (IBC) strategies where the phenomenon of ‘small talk’, for instance, plays a very important role despite being neglected in most (business) language courses.

(Leonardi/Khoutyz 2011: 281)

It turns out that in order to conduct business successfully in international settings, professionals should not only have an excellent command of a given (foreign) language but also know, and properly apply, communicative strategies. As the development of a target language is culturally-based, learning materials should be audience-oriented (Leonardi/Khoutyz 2011: 291-293).

7. NEW APPROACH TO LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned changes in research on business communication, the methodology of modern linguistic research should be verified. In my view, certain modifications should be introduced:

1. Linguistic research on intercultural business communication should become ‘multimodal’ (especially in the case of analysing company websites, see Bargiela-Chiappini 2008: 103-105; Denti/Giordano 2011; Gatti 2011; Turnbull 2011: 85-87) and hence ‘multidisciplinary’ (see Salvi 2011: 40), i.e. it should be conducted together with scientists representing other disciplines such as IT-specialists, culturologists, multi-media specialists, etc. It should be noted that research into intercultural business communication is already, step by step, becoming interdisciplinary, as I have mentioned in point 1 above.
2. Linguistic research into intercultural business communication should be conducted with the help of a variety of methods (become ‘multimethodological’, Bargiela-Chiappini 2008: 103-105, see also Bowker 2011: 190 ff). In other words, linguists should apply different techniques, theories etc., for example ethnographic technique, quantitative and qualitative analysis, corpus linguistics, when conducting their analysis.
3. Operation/business unit managers and HR specialists should actively participate in preparing the research projects as well as in discussing and implementing their results. This will enable managers to get to know and trust scholars who, in turn, will have the opportunity to, and feel free in conducting ethnographic research and thus obtain better research results.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, I would like to reiterate that a clear shift can be identified in the recent perception of and approach to (intercultural) business research. In my view, nowadays intercultural business research is conducted in cooperation with business representatives and hence is gaining practical applications.

Nevertheless, certain limitations and drawbacks of intercultural business communication can still be observed. Bargiela-Chiappini (2011: 9) articulated them in a clear and straightforward manner, and I would like to repeat and develop certain statements made by this scholar on the current situation of research into intercultural business communication.

1. It is clear that the results of research within the field of intercultural business communication can be applied to improve business practice. However, this potential must be better promoted. In particular, intercultural business communication needs ‘marketing’ in a way that uses the language understood by managers

and trainers, and explains that although scholars' findings are not immediate, their practical value should not be neglected. This marketing would also enhance mutual trust between company representatives and researchers and create an environment in which better research results can be achieved.

2. Scholars dealing with business communication are overstretched, i.e. they either chase grants or sabbaticals in order to submit their research work or prepare teaching materials, and relatively spend a lot of time teaching students. Hence, they can conduct research only when they find the time and energy. This does not only cause delays in presenting the findings but may also reduce their quality.

It seems that intercultural business communication research is subject to constant change, as business itself changes constantly (see Louhiala-Salminen/Kankaranta 2008: 55). In order to be successful, companies apply new technological solutions, employ new people, accept new tasks, outsource certain jobs, change their internal structure. Logically, these changes are also reflected in communication conducted in and by companies. By the same token, research on (intercultural) business communication changes, too. This can be observed even within a short time span of three years in which the books on business communication discussed in this article were published (see the publication year of "Genre Variation in Business Letters" by Gillaeerts/Gotti 2008 and "Intercultural Interactions in Business and Management" by Salvi/Tanaka 2011).

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