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ESP and Business English: The Psychological Variable of Authority

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Abstract

The present paper aims at foreshadowing the role that the psychological variable of authority plays in business discourse. Firstly, a brief historical overview of the development of ESP is given and then the nature and properties of Business English are outlined. Then, the psychological variable of authority is thoroughly examined and its impact on both business communication and translation is assessed.

Keywords: English as a Lingua Franca, English as a Business Lingua Franca, business discourse, business translation, authority

Introduction: The development of ESP

The purpose of this section is to critically examine what is known about Business English by defining its relationship with English for Specific Purposes (henceforth, ESP) and providing a chronological path of the last fifty years. In doing so, a brief overview of the development of ESP will be given in order to place Business English in its historical context. This overview is not meant to be exhaustive but its primary aim is to form the background for the rest of the paper (for a detailed research history of ESP see Johns, 2013).

The origins of language for Specific Purposes are as old as language itself and in fact, "can be traced as far back as the Greek and Roman Empires" (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998 p.1). According to Nelson (2000, pp.38-39), it is in Pickett (1988, p.89)[1] that we find Winkyn de Worde's book (1498) entitled "*A Little Treatise for to Learn English and French*" which was written so that he could "*do [my] merchandise in France and elsewhere in other lands"* and we also have

[1] According to Nelson (2000, p.39), the source where Pickett found this book is not mentioned.

Meurier's business English book (1533) "which contains forms for making letters and other business correspondence" (Nelson, 2000, p.39). Of course, political, historical and financial factors also had a significant impact on ESP. It is worth mentioning Howatt's claim (1984) that there was a focus on Business English in the 16^{th} century due to the need to educate Huguenot and Protestant refugees in England. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.6), the financial power of oil-rich countries, and the growing number of overseas students in English-speaking countries brought about the emergence of English as a *lingua franca* since the need to accommodate for cross-cultural communication was eminent. The boom of ESP, however, was to follow the Second World War and to be firmly established in the second half of the twentieth century due to the economic dominance of the United States and the centrality of the learner in the educational process. These economic and educational changes led to the development of overlapping and fluid stages of ESP which in turn are directly related to the evolution and nature of Business English (Nelson, 2000, p.41).

A close look at the literature shows that there are five dominant stages in the development of ESP. In more detail, the first one, named *the Register Analysis approach*, launched from the early 1960s, holds that the situation the speakers are or the subject matter they are talking about pre-determines the choice of language. Hence, a special language or register could be found for these situations. Analysis of these registers has thus evolved the term *register analysis*. Some famous proponents of this approach were Barber (1962), Ewer and Latorre (1967) who created corpora of scientific texts and subjected them to a detailed feature analysis. Attractive and realistic as it may sound, this approach was soon found to be disappointing due to its mainly descriptive nature and its solely intra-sentential analysis.

Then, the next stage of development came, that of *Discourse or Rhetorical Analysis*. Acknowledging the way in which sentences were linked together to create a meaningful text, this approach moves beyond sentence level, thus encouraging students to think that language is used for a purpose. Some major proponents of discourse analysis were Henry Widdowson in Britain and the scholars of the so called Washington School, namely, Larry Selinker, Louis Trimble, John Lackstrom and Mary Todd-Trimble in the United States (cited in García Mayo, 1998, p.210).

A later development of this approach was the *Genre Analysis approach* pioneered by Swales (1981, 1990) who has defined genre as "*comprising a class of communicative events the members of which share some set of communicative* *purposes"* (Swales, 1990, p.58). The merit of discourse analysis is that it takes into account both the communicative context as well as the culture in which the discourse occurs. For this reason, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998, p.31) maintain that genre analysis is a very important development in ESP.

The third stage, which goes under the name *need analysis,* was initiated by Richterich's (1971) groundbreaking work for the *Council of Europe*, but it was Michael West in the 1920s who first used the phrase *'analysis of needs'* during his teaching of Indian civil servants. In 1976, Wilkins went a step further by proposing *Target Situation Analysis* in which a search to find those situations where students would need language and, consequently, the need to provide a definition of the language needed in those situations became dominant. According to Chambers (1980) "needs analysis should be concerned with the establishment of communicative needs and their realisations, resulting from an analysis of the communication in the target situation - what I will refer to as target situation analysis (TSA)" (1980, p.29).

The extreme application of *Target Situation Analysis* was realized in Munby's, *Communicate Syllabus Design* (1978), which included a taxonomy of target situations that students would be in need of. Even though his work is of great theoretical value, it was criticized as having little practical application in the real world. In fact, one of the main problems with his work is that he viewed students in an objectivist tight manner, thus disregarding the needs students might have in real life. It is worth mentioning that in the early 80's, approaches to needs analysis changed and needs were redefined in terms of means, lacks, and learning strategies and in the 90's, a further broadening of the concept of *need* was achieved since the computer was used to analyze students' requirements.

In the meantime, another major development in the 1980s was the focus on *skills*. Reading and writing skills were quite prominent in the register analysis period but this *skills approach* was broadened to cover speaking and listening skills. This focus on skills was also evident in Business English materials since a variety of books from the 1980s focused on skills work. As a consequence of *the skills approach, the Learning-Centered approach* emerged with the pioneering work of Hutchinson and Waters (1980, 1981, and 1987). They rejected previous approaches to ESP because they were "based on descriptions of language use" (Hutchinson and Waters 1987, p.14) and focused on language learning. Their primary aim has been the development of learner's competence, thus implying the dynamic nature of course design where students have an active role.

In conclusion, it can be seen how these five stages have formed the on-going development of ESP to present day. The question of the specificity of language in certain situations has been addressed and there has been a general consensus that no special languages exist as such, only a certain amount of specialist vocabulary and possible restrictions of language choice (Coffey, 1984, p.3). Hence, since the student focuses on the specific language of a discipline, the role of the ESP teacher is to consult their learners who are already considered experts in the given subject-matter. (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998, p.4).

Lastly, there is the *Modern Age* stage (Johns, 2013, p.13) from the nineties until present day where there is the introduction of new, highly influential journals in the field, such as *The Journal of English for Academic Purposes* and *The Journal for Second Language Writing* as well as the dominance of genre and corpus-based studies. For instance, there is the University of Michigan's corpus of spoken Academic English (MICASE) as well as a number of publications on the analysis of written academic genres. Many prominent researchers in the field such as Ken Hyland, Vijay Bhatia, Diane Belcher and Brian Paltridge have published influential articles and books, thus contributing significantly to ESP. Learner-centered approaches along with classroom-based research may open new horizons to both research and practice in ESP since as Johns (2013, p.28) insightfully argues four words are of critical importance when thinking the future of ESP, namely, variety, context, complexity and critique.

Setting the scene: On Business English

ESP has been traditionally divided into English for Academic Purposes and English for Occupational Purposes. One branch of the second division is Business English which is the focus of this paper. My aim is neither to provide a working definition of Business English nor to give a detailed analysis of the research done into Business English but to give the reader a grasp of the notions and problems intertwined with such concept so that an understanding of both its significance and complexity can be achieved.

A close look at the literature on Business English in the nineties reveals a relative lack of analysis of its linguistic features. In fact, Yli-Jokipii (1994) and St. John (1996) insightfully observe that even though there is an abundance of Business English materials and studies on Business English teaching, there are hardly any attempts made at any kind of linguistic definition. The first systematic attempt to note down the lexico-grammatical characteristics of Business English is made by Nelson (2000) in his doctoral thesis where a detailed description of real-life business lexis is made. Nelson (2000) came to the conclusion that Business English differed significantly from general English "in terms of its lexis, semantic prosody, clusters and the semantic 'meaning world' it is made up of" (2000:28). Similarly, published materials displayed significant differences from real Business English.

Before him, one major thinker of the nature and characteristics of Business English was Pickett who only published three articles appearing between 1986 and 1989 but his line of thinking still remains rather influential. In particular, he regards Business English as a part of ESP, though a more complex one, since both intra-and inter-group communication is required (cited in Nelson, 2000, p.63). He identifies three key areas that have a great impact on the nature of business language, namely, *the poetics of Business English, the ergolect* and, thirdly, *communication in business*.

With regard to the first key area it should be noted that poetics refers to the creation of specialist business lexis which is nonetheless drawn from general English and acquires a fresh meaning in business settings **(**cited in Nelson, 2000, p.29). Now moving on to the ergolect of business, we notice that Pickett refers to the concept of a *work language* and is mainly interested in delineating all these factors that influence the final choice of language input such as cultural differences, social roles and situations. Lastly, Pickett uses a three-way distinction in relation to communication in business, namely, *business to general public, business to business* and *business to other members of the same business area.* This is where need analysis comes into play in order to shed light on the different groups business people have to communicate with on a daily basis and the versatility of their needs. Given the variation of communication partners from job to job, this may ultimately, seem like a fruitless task, but if researchers, teachers and students have Pickett's categories in mind and manage to use them as umbrella terms they will hopefully be able to address central issues of Business English in a more productive way.

Understanding that flexibility is a prerequisite when dealing with business discourse, contemporary researchers such as Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken (2007) have offered us a more encompassing definition:

> Business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organisations in order to get their work done…we will view business discourse *as social action in business contexts* (my emphasis).
>
> (Chiappini et al. 2007, p.3).

Acknowledging that the skill of effective communication includes more than knowing the language, both researchers and teachers (e.g. Negrea, 2012; Loukianenko, 2014) have emphasized the significance of cross-cultural aspects of Business English. It is a given fact that our verbal and non-verbal behaviour patterns are heavily influenced by our culture, value systems and attitudes. Hence, it was only natural to have a shift in focus from the analysis of the language used in isolated written texts or speech events towards the analysis of cross-cultural aspects of Business English. In the last twenty years or so, there has been a plethora of academic publications focusing in business discourse. As Royce (1995, p.138) mentions, research into business discourse is divided into three categories: *micro-studies*, where the focus is on the syntactic and lexical aspects of business discourse; *macro-studies*, where attention is drawn to business discourse beyond the sentence including text analyses; and *educational studies,* which primarily centre on the analysis of business discourse for pedagogical purposes. As far as the educational studies are concerned, it is worth mentioning some influential publications. In particular, Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini published *The Handbook of Business Discourse* in 2009 whereas four years later, Bargiela-Chiappini, Catherine Nickerson and Brigitte Planken focused on exploring the benefits of incorporating business communication research into the Business English classroom (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken, 2013). In line with these studies, a number of other studies (e.g. Ilie, Nickerson and Planken, 2019) have highlighted the interdisciplinarity of the concept, thus stressing the important role of business discourse teaching.

In fact, business discourse studies involving the analysis of contextualized communicative events reveal the need of intercultural awareness in business settings (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2008). It is only through the recognition of our behavioural patterns that we can come into an understanding of others, or ideally, adapt to different business situations. Looking at broader communication systems rather than just language systems will enable business communicators to become effective, thus acquiring both personal and interpersonal skills. One way for this to be achieved is though the development of teaching materials for Business English. A close look at the literature reveals that there is a variety of published materials relating to English for Business. In particular, a quick search at the Amazon UK using the key words *Business English* and *English for Business* yields 100,000 published items.

The major debate on Business English materials in the nineties was whether subject-specific materials should be used or not. Some researchers such as Robinson (1991, p.98) and Hutchinson and Waters (1980, p.181) claimed that we should use general English in a business context whereas Pickett's concepts of poetics and ergolect favoured the opposite stance. In an attempt to provide a critical overview of the different categorizations that have been proposed, one might notice a variety of categorizations mentioning materials for business communication skills, business contexts, business studies, and English materials in a business setting. Nelson (2000, p.103) is careful to note that earlier Business English materials – especially those of the eighties and nineties – were too simplified and based on intuition rather than on authentic texts.

In conclusion, it can be seen that even though Business English materials produced in the nineties have certain limitations due to their oversimplified and unrealistic nature, current material dealing with Business English is much more up to date. In fact, researchers have started to realize that intuition alone does not suffice and they have started drawing from empirical work, thus creating practical, and, more importantly, teacher-and-student friendly materials. This growing need to discuss English as a contact language in business settings worldwide and produce attractive teaching materials has created the so-called BELF approach which stands for Business English as a Lingua Franca and is meant "to represent the business people who use ELF in the business context". This approach will be further analyzed in the next section.

Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF): Definition and characteristics

The term BELF was firstly used by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005) and was defined as "a language that is nobody's own but can be shared" and "is used in the business discourse community" (Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006, pp.31-34). Being a communicative tool among speakers "who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (Firth, 1996, p.240), English is positioned as the most prevalent and widely-shared language for international business communication.

According to Choi (2014, p.13) there are three distinctive characteristics of BELF, namely, *neutrality, practicability* and *cultural diversity*. The 'neutral' character of BELF mainly stems from the fact that it is used between non-native speakers whose end is to achieve communication rather than show proof of excellence in their English competency. Thus, being specific and accurate as well as knowing business-specific vocabulary can lead to successful communication. Secondly, practicality of BELF is evident on the fact that the focus of communication is on the mutual understanding among all parties and not on the assessment of linguistic/grammatical mistakes. So, the end result rests on achieving successful communication and not on linguistic correctness. Lastly, the communication that usually takes place between non-native speakers in various business settings is free from any cultural bias since there is no preference on a given culture over another. Hence, the third characteristic of BELF, that is, cultural diversity, is more than obvious in business communication where interlocutors try to play down any cultural differences and achieve their communicative goals.

Now, turning to the linguistic features of BELF, Seidlhofer (2005a, 2005b) argues that the focus of BELF is on "the function" and not on the "form" (cited in Choi, 2013, p.15). In fact, he claims that this tendency is realized by the extensive use of repetition and paraphrase as well as the simplification and the reduction of lexical and grammatical elements. Moreover, in phonological terms, it was shown in a number of studies (e.g. Smith, 1992; Jenkins 2000) that different phonological features, such as vowel length and cluster simplification, do not seem to pose a problem between interlocutors in business settings since the primary aim is to achieve communication. So, the implication drawn is that non-native speakers tend to be more careful listeners than English native speakers (Smith, 1992, p.88). Furthermore, in terms of pragmatics there is a clear tendency from the part of non-native speakers to cooperate, negotiate and accommodate so that efficiency and intelligibility are achieved (Firth, 1996; Connor, 1999; Pitzl, 2005).

Having outlined the main characteristics of BELF, the following section will focus on another characteristic of BELF, namely authority, which touches upon the psychological dimension of business communication.

The element of authority in business communication

According to Dudley-Evans (1993, p.224), economists tend to adopt an aggressive approach to argumentation in English, imposing ‘factive’ certitude and conviction on the phenomena described. This claim seems to be reinforced by earlier studies on the language of economics (Dudley-Evans, 1993) as well as more recent ones (McGinty’s, 2001; Piotti, 2009; Bielenia-Grajewska, 2016). In particular, Dudley-Evans et al. (1993) carried out a pragmatic analysis by examining the ways in “which politeness strategies (hedging, praise and acceptance) and deliberately provocative strategies (which he terms sneering) are used in developing the discourse” (1993, p.14). Although he maintains that each writer uses these strategies in different ways, he also claims that most writers are more likely to use provocative rather than politeness strategies (1993, p.149).

Moreover, Dudley-Evans (1993, p.150) argues that one of the most dominant characteristics of the discipline in question is the tendency not to redress face-threatening acts. This view is supported by Myers (1992) who says that the textbooks of many economists “reify and codify statements as facts” by making rhetorical and stylistic choices “that add ‘factive’ certitude and conviction to the phenomena described” (cited in Swales, 1993, p.224). According to Swales (1993), “the absence of hedging, the paucity of references to the primary literature, and the wide use of the present tense and of cross-references to the other parts of the author’s text” all “conspire” to transmit a sense of aggressiveness in argumentation, and, more importantly, an air of *authority* (1993, p.224). In fact, Swales' opinion seems to be reinforced by Klamer's statement that:

> Anyone who has had a chance to observe interactions among economists is likely to be struck by the passion and commitment of their arguments. Their communication frequently breaks down, as students may discover when they attempt to be critical inside the classroom. Frequent criticism often meets annoyance and is dismissed abruptly. Detachment does not appear to be a common phenomenon in the world of economists.
>
> (Klamer, 1984, pp. viii-ix)

This notion of *authority* is also reinforced by McGinty's findings (2001) that successful economists use 'language from the centre'; directing rather than responding, making statements, contextualizing with authority, contradicting, arguing and disagreeing, thus exercising a degree of control over the discourse (2001, p.11). In other words, economists gain the direct power of authority and the indirect power of influence through their possession and production of an informed and thorough knowledge of business discourse. The primary aims of the use of such authoritative language are leadership and control. Consequently, economists tend to use assertive and sometimes aggressive language, talking for longer and more often than other speakers.

Moreover, authoritative economists are able to take the floor and hold it by directing the conversation where they want it to go. They do not have to continually establish credibility through the citing of evidence. They are confident and present their ideas in a direct and forceful manner. They are perceived to be experts in their field and this licenses them to act like leaders who have authority. In McGinty's words "contextualizing a statement with a source of knowledge or authority adds substantial legitimacy" (2001, p.21). As a result, their directive and declarative claims are supported by facts such as numbers, statistics and reports and not personal assertions.

In light of the above, it could be argued that economists tend to adopt an aggressive approach to argumentation in order to establish credibility, neutrality and distance. As Dudley-Evans (1993, p. 149) insightfully observes "to put it in Brown and Levinson's terms (1987), the weight of the face-threatening act of criticism in a debate and the difference in power between the participants" override the need for using politeness strategies throughout the debate. In other words, the economists may not feel the need to engage in the previously mentioned politeness strategies because they perceive themselves as well-established figures in the field since they have their own distinctive voice. This prescriptive, imperative and authoritative tone that exists in business texts inevitably affects communication.

The element of authority in business translation

In the present context, the variable of *authority* could also be claimed to affect translation as follows: powerful participants in discourse (economists and business people in this case) have the tendency to express knowledge-claims using an impersonal, objective, precise, prescriptive, logical and explicit style, thus representing society's approved version of what can be thought of as 'true' and 'valid' knowledge. On the other hand, being aware of the seriousness of the business arguments proposed in the ST, translators do not want to transfer inaccurate or stylistically inappropriate arguments that are not in agreement with the text norms of the business press. In this respect, the ST author, that is, the economist or the journalist, could be said to be the leader or the one with the dominant behaviour and the translator could be argued to be the follower.

Leader-follower and dominant-subordinate behaviour are concepts that stem from the field of psychology (Doob, 1983; Hayes and Orrell, 1998). Not wanting to adopt any particular psychological approach or leadership theory, I will briefly outline the main characteristics of leaders and followers. In doing so, I will firstly define leadership. According to Yukl (2002) leadership can be defined as follows:

> Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives.
>
> (Yukl, 2002, p.7)

Leaders are perceived to be powerful, dynamic individuals who have the ability to influence others who are willing to follow them. Competent leaders are praised not only because they are confident and optimistic but because they encourage strategic thinking, innovation and action. Their influence tactics are such so they can achieve their goals. Their persuasive powers and the firm and solid way they cope with demands and constraints guarantee leadership success. More often than not, leaders find themselves planning, supervising, organizing, making decisions, controlling, representing, coordinating, administering, praising and criticizing. More importantly, they are assertive and kind with their employees and strive to communicate in a clear manner with the entire company, thus adapting their communication style to different cultural traditions.

On the other hand, followers, as the term itself suggests, tend to follow leaders and have a submissive attitude. In other words, commitment to and compliance with the orders and rules of their leaders seem to be the dominant characteristics of their personality. Challef (2009) makes a distinction between involuntary submission which is the result of fear most of the time, and voluntary subordination which presupposes respect, adoration and attraction on the part of the followers. In fact, he (Challef, 2009, p.3) has observed that the role of the follower is mostly negatively conceived because it assumes conformity, weakness and passivity, attributes that may have been reinforced by childhood experiences at home and at school. He goes on to argue (2009, p.3) that this characteristic of passivity and subordination is further encouraged in adolescence since leaders are older, more powerful and experienced, and, consequently, have a higher status because they are the established ones. However, Challef (2009, p.94) notes that a more positive conception of followers can be adopted by acknowledging the fact that followers should not always implement their leaders' decisions but they should also challenge them by assessing their leaders' competence and intentions.

Drawing from the field of psychology, these concepts could also be implemented in the field of business translation. In particular, ST authors, either from the viewpoint of the economist or from that of the journalist, tend to adopt a prescriptive language ideology in order to achieve precision, clarity and accuracy, and, more importantly, to claim authority. This notion of authority is also brought up by Cotter, a former Daily News reporter and currently a Professor at Queen Mary

University of London, in the School of Languages. According to her (2010, p.222), journalists inhabit the complex identity of the 'friendly authority' which is a mixture of opposing ends, such as solidarity and power, and connection and apartness. This authority is, in a sense, necessary in order to convince the reader of the correctness of their arguments. Consequently, power-difference is a presupposition in such cases and it is this power-difference that may make translators feel skeptical and unwilling to deviate from specific norms and rules that govern news discourse. They do not necessarily view themselves as subordinates who have to comply with the 'sacredness' of the ST but they consider themselves to be responsible and conscientious translators who do not want to convey the wrong meaning to the target readership, not at least voluntarily. For example, the formal tone of translated business written texts may not allow the extensive use of idiomatic expressions. Thus, this tendency may be realized translationally by the elimination of idiomatic/metaphorical expressions in business texts and the preference for literalization patterns (see Panou, 2006, 2014).

In conclusion, it is argued that economists and journalists, who are the source authors of business texts, have that air of expertise as well as the ability to play with language. In contrast, the translator's main concern is to avoid inaccurate statements that cancel the source author's intentions and threaten his/her expertise. Hence, the variable of authority points to a psychological view of business communication, and consequently, translation.

Conclusion

In this paper, an attempt was made to explain the nature and properties of Business English by firstly providing a brief overview of the history of ESP and by presenting the nature and basic characteristics of BELF. It was argued that apart from linguistic and cultural features that inevitably affect both process and product of business-oriented discourses and texts, the psychological variable of *authority* could also be claimed to affect business communication and translation.

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