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Business English from a linguistic perspective

Abstract

In very general terms, Business English is defined as a specialized area of English relating to the language used in business. However, this concise definition may sound too simplistic from a linguistic point of view and will, undoubtedly, lead to a number of questions: Is Business English really a language? Are there any native speakers of Business English? Can we apply linguistic theories to the study of Business English in the same way as we study natural human languages? In the paper, I will try to shed some light on these issues and present the validity of the concept of Business English from the perspective of a number of different, but in effect, complementary approaches.

Key words: applied linguistics, ELT, Business English, sociolinguistics, specialist language, variation

Introduction

The aim of the following study is to come to grips with one of the most elusive terms – Business English – from a number of linguistic points of view. I will try to present Business English as a theoretically coherent phenomenon which can be defined as a specialist language. *Specialist languages*, *special languages* (SL) or *languages for special/specific purposes* (SLP) are terms more widely used among practitioners than theorists. Yet, despite their enormous popularity, SL remain a little researched and ill-defined area of applied linguistics (Sobkowiak 2008, Grucza 2009, Lewandowski 2013, Wille 2014). The concept of SL is both usage-oriented and tightly connected to professional practices. SL seem to constitute an ontologically gradient phenomenon which generates a number of controversies. Some researchers discard SL as a construct for investigation, claiming that instead of languages we are dealing with terminologies. Others maintain that a specialist language includes “the totality of all linguistic means” and should be investigated at all linguistic levels (Hoffmann 1976: 170). Still in other approaches, SL are approached as semi-autonomous variants, jargons, technolects or sub-languages based on expert knowledge. In the cursory survey that follows I will classify these views as either teaching-based, variation-based, terminology-based, discourse-based or language-based. I will argue that treating Business English as a specialist language is fully justified and, as a result, Business English constitutes an interesting subject of study for theoretical as well as applied linguistics.

Business English as a specialism within ELT

The term *Business English* has developed out of and is still primarily related to English language learning and teaching. As such, it makes part of *English for Special/Specific Purposes* (ESP), which is a particular case of the general category of special-purpose language teaching called *Language for Special/Specific Purposes* (LSP). As a result of this classification, Business English, taught and learnt for a utilitarian purpose, is alternatively referred to as *English for Business Purposes* or *English for Business*. In fact, under the umbrella term of ESP, apart from *English for Business Purposes* (EBP), there is a number of sub-divisions, e.g. *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP), *English for Occupational Purposes* (EOP), and *English for Medical Purposes* (EMP), *English for Legal Purposes* (ELP).

ESP is a type of ELT (English Language Teaching) which began to emerge in the 1960s as a response to a growing awareness that there were certain types of learners who had specialized needs that General English courses did not meet. Soon this evolving practice of

teaching Business English, directly related to learners' and their employers' professional needs, started to be accompanied and guided by abundant theoretical literature. I will enumerate only a few examples in a historical order. Thus, Palmer (1964) mentions the selective concentration on particular language skills and abilities as an important characteristic of ESP, Strevens (1977, 1980) offers a comprehensive definition of ESP, Robinson (1980) writes a thorough review of theoretical positions and what ESP meant at that time, Coffey (1985) updates Strevens's work and puts ESP in the context of communicative language teaching.

Generally speaking, all ELT approaches to Business English are utilitarian, practical and goal-oriented. Business English is seen as a process, not as a product. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) believe that Business English and ESP in general should not be perceived as "specialized varieties of English" or as a special form of language different in kind from other forms. We can conclude from this cursory overview that in ELT Business English is neither a language, nor a particular kind of language, but it is rather a methodology of designing and running a special-purpose language course. Sobkowiak (2008: 23, 46) believes that Business English is merely a method of teaching "a specific language corpus" and "a particular kind of communication in a specific context".

Business English as a variety of English

Business English does not have to be restricted to the context of teaching English and it does not have to be approached from the classroom perspective of ELT.¹ What is more, Business English can be seen as a variety of language existing independent of learners and teachers. Here I will try to defend the view that Business English has naturally evolved into a language variety. Seen from this perspective, Business English constitutes a linguistic and social phenomenon in its own right.

One of the characteristic features of a natural human language is the fact that language is constantly changing. We must bear in mind that all living languages experience constant change and this intrinsic property should not be treated as corruption, deterioration or something that can be prevented (Grygiel and Kleparski 2007). Language is a dynamic system and as such it evolves along three basic directions – in time (historically), in space (geographically) and in stratification (socially). The divisions into separate national languages

¹ Notice that Pickett (1986: 16) acknowledges Business English as ESP, but writes that it is "a lot nearer to the everyday language spoken by the general public than many other segments of ESP".

such as English, Polish or German are a direct consequence of this process of variation. Most languages develop a standard form typically associated with the idea of a nation. A recognized national language further comprehends the notion of prestige, usually because those who speak this variety are the richest and most powerful while those who do not speak it are poorer and less powerful. Thus, the standard variety of a language is merely one of its dialects which happens to be in a more favorable position. From the purely linguistic and grammatical point of view, however, all dialects are equally as developed as the standard variety and equal in status.

Recent technology has introduced an entirely new dimension to the dynamics of linguistic change. Inventions such as radio, television, telephone and Internet increased dialect leveling and standardization of language. The phenomenon is occurring worldwide and in the case of English results in the rise of International Standard English – a hybrid between British and American variety (Fischer 1999: 174). While most of Earth's languages face imminent extinction, English continues to gain thousands of new speakers each day. According to Fischer (1999: 214), English is becoming “a natural world language”. In these circumstances, it does not seem surprising that some authors, such as e.g. Frenco (2005), classify Business English as a variety of International English. Another term – *Business English Lingua Franca* (BELF) – refers to English used as a “neutral and shared communication code” (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2013: 10). 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 the global community whose members are BELF users and communicators in their own right – not non-native speakers or learners.

The study of language variation and change constitutes the core of the sociolinguistic enterprise (Chambers et al. 2002). Sociolinguistics perceives language as heterogeneous, pluricentric and composed of varieties. A variety, also called a *lect*, is a specific form of a language. The term *variety* may refer to languages, dialects, registers, styles as well as the standard variety itself. According to Chambers and Trudgill (1980), the term *language* is, from a linguistic point of view, a relatively nontechnical term and it should be substituted with the more precise notion of variety:

“We shall use ‘variety’ as a neutral term to apply to any particular kind of language which we wish, for some purpose, to consider as a single entity. The term will be used in an ad hoc manner in order to be as specific as we wish for a particular purpose. We can, for example, refer to the variety ‘Yorkshire English’, but we can equally well refer to ‘Leeds English’ as a variety, or ‘middle class Leeds English – and so on” (Chambers and Trudgill, 1980: 5).

A register, on the other hand, is a variety of language used in a particular social setting (Ottenheimer 2006). Settings may be defined in terms of greater or lesser formality, or in terms of socially recognized events. There are also registers associated with particular professions or interest groups. Unlike dialects, which are used by particular spatially-bound speech communities and associated with geographical settings or social groupings, registers are associated with particular situations, purposes, or levels of formality. Lewandowski (2013) stresses that register studies have gained considerable attention in Anglo-American sociolinguistic thought, but the notion of register is practically non-existent in Polish sociolinguistic research.

Another very important theoretical contribution of sociolinguistics, which may turn out to be crucial in defining Business English, is the discovery of language continua (Chambers and Trudgill 1980). Any of the language varieties described above, including the standard variety, is never uniform and cannot be neatly separated from other border-line varieties. Language varieties tend to diffuse and form interrelated continua displaying cross- and intra-language variation. All of these properties can be observed in Business English as well. Chambers and Trudgill (1980: 7) claim that “we are used to thinking of linguistic varieties as discrete entities, but the fact that such continua exist stresses the legitimacy of using labels for varieties in an ad hoc manner”. Given that, we are fully entitled to treat Business English as a linguistic variety and to describe it in terms of a register, rather than a standard, dialect or style.

The idea of associating Business English with a particular type of register is not new.² Brunton (2009) writes that the first Business English courses designed in 1960s were based on register analysis, but they failed to meet desired outcomes and were replaced by target situation analysis in 1980s and needs analysis surveys later on. Sobkowiak (2008: 27) also confirms that, in ELT’s practice, “the presupposition that language variation implies the existence of identifiable varieties of language related to specific contexts of use proved to be unfounded”.

Business English as a professional jargon

Whereas the term *register* presupposes that we are dealing with a language variety with all structural components of a language system – phonetics, phonology, morphology,

² An extensive discussion of register theory with reference to specialist languages is offered in Lewandowski (2013).

lexicon, syntax, semantics, pragmatics – the term *jargon* refers to a quasi-language semiotic system or a communication mode similar to slang or argot. Jargons do not possess fully developed language structure, but they are restricted to specialized vocabulary, which often makes it difficult for outsiders to understand them (Chambers et al. 2002). While professional jargons may share with argots and slangs the fact that they are understood only within a particular speech community, their basic motivation is not secrecy or novelty, but highly restricted and specified subject matters. Specialized fields of inquiry by their very nature require *specialized terminology* in order to express the meaning in the most unambiguous and succinct way. This is the reason why Business English is very often associated not with a language, or language variety for that matter, but with a specialized terminology.

Business English can be perceived as a topic-based domain with business in the role of its pivotal element. This leads to the association of Business English with specialized terminology as its most characteristic feature. The task of precisely stating the field of its application, however, may turn out to be as problematic and elusive as an attempt to define it in terms of linguistic variation. In most general terms, *business* is an economic activity, which is related with continuous and regular production and distribution of goods and services for satisfying human wants. Thus, Business English is primarily concerned with the vocabulary of all sectors of market economy: setting up and running businesses, production, management, company structure, commerce, market structure, labor market, marketing, accounting, banking, financial markets, transport and logistics.

The lexical approach to Business English shows that, semantically, Business English can be hardly identified with a discrete and uniform entity amenable to objective description. It can refer to sometimes unrelated fields and a border line between specialized and non-specialized vocabulary is difficult to draw. What is more, a purely lexical analysis of Business English does not seem feasible from the linguistic point of view. The reason is that terminological units and their correspondences possess both paradigmatic and syntagmatic properties. In other words, terms not only represent specialized concepts, but also have syntax and collocational patterns within general language.

Treated as a professional jargon, Business English can also fall into a number of subcategories.³ For example, *corporate jargon*, variously known as *corporate speak*, *corporate lingo*, *business speak*, *business jargon*, *management speak*, *workplace jargon*, or

³ Pickett (1989: 11) calls Business English an *ergolect* (or *work language*), suggesting that “an ergolect operates at the level of lexis and at the level of transaction, hardly at all at the level of grammar”.

commercialese, is the jargon often used in large corporations, bureaucracies, and similar workplaces. It may be characterized by sometimes unwieldy elaborations of common English phrases, acting to conceal the real meaning of what is being said. The jargon is associated with managers of large corporations, business management consultants, and occasionally government. Reference to this type of jargon is typically derogatory, implying the use of long, complicated, or obscure words, abbreviations, euphemisms, and acronyms. For that reason some of its forms may be considered as an argot. Some of these words may be actually new inventions, designed purely to fit the specialized meaning of a situation or even to present negative situations as positive situations.

Another example is *marketing speak* used to promote a product or service to a wide audience by seeking to create the impression that the vendors of the service possess a high level of sophistication, skill, and technical knowledge. Such a type of jargon is often used in marketing press releases, advertising copy, and prepared statements read by executives and politicians. Marketing speak is characterized by its heavy use of buzzwords, neologisms, and terms appropriated from specialized technical fields which are eventually rendered almost meaningless through heavy repeated use in inappropriate contexts.

Business English as a business discourse

Discourse analysis is not only a linguistic, but also a more broadly understood social and communication discipline that covers a wide range of different sociolinguistic approaches (Dijk 1992). It aims to study and analyze the use of discourse beyond the level of a sentence, with a particular attention paid to language behaviors linked to social practices. As a rule, discourse analysts look not only at the basic level of what is said, but apart from the subject matter, take into consideration the surrounding social and historical contexts.

An approach based on discourse analysis, applied to Business English, replaces the abstract and idealized concept of professional jargon, construed as a type of language, with a much more objective study of writing and talk samples in commercial organizations. Business discourse has no pretences of being a language nor a variety understood as an objectively existing entity, but it can be defined as a social action taking place in business contexts. In this approach, the focus is shifted from the theory of language system to the realia and context in which discourse emerges and develops. Its thorough investigation allows the researcher to understand the relationship between human beings and the organizations they create.

Business discourse analysis concentrates on investigations of both authentic spoken and written language naturally occurring within the contours of business organizations, such as conversations, interviews, negotiations, business meetings, correspondence, reports, use of electronic media. Most of these studies are corpus-based or survey-based and the emphasis is put on quantitative analysis. Authentic examples of business discourse provide invaluable insights into how people actually communicate in organizations, but they also show that sometimes there is almost no correspondence between the language used by native speakers of English in business contexts and the language taught by Business English course-books (Williams 1988, Dudley-Evans and St John 1996, Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2013).

Business English as a specialist language

The notion of specialist languages was introduced in German linguistics in the 1970s.⁴ These studies coincided and drew much inspiration from the developments in text linguistics and theory of translation. Hoffmann (1979: 16) defines a specialist language (*Fachsprache*) as “a complete set of linguistic phenomena occurring within a definite sphere of communication and limited by specific subjects, intentions and conditions”. Claiming that a specialist language possesses “a complete set of linguistic phenomena” or “the totality of all linguistic means”, Hoffmann (1976: 170) implies that specialist language is not synonymous with specialized terminology, discourse or jargon but should be investigated at all linguistic levels as any other naturally occurring language. More specifically, Hoffmann (1979: 13) argues that syntactic and texlinguistic features cannot be neglected in a complex analysis of a specialist language.

I believe that Business English can be most appropriately described as a specialist language. First of all, Business English is most readily associated by its users with a special kind of language or a language variety. The name itself – Business English – has been coined to resemble such designations of generally recognized language varieties as British English or American English. Business English, however, is not entirely like those varieties because, as a specialist language, it is not a completely human natural language and possesses a number of properties typical of a language hybrid or pidgin.

Like pidgin, Business English or any other specialist language is a simplified, limited in size and use, vocabulary biased version of a natural language. It develops as a means of

⁴ Here I will use the term *specialist languages*, rather than *specialized* or *special languages*, because it emphasizes the fact that their users, in the first place, are experts in special work-related fields of human activity.

communication for a special occasion between a limited number of users who outside this exceptional situation turn to standard code. Notice that pidgins are most commonly employed in situations such as trade. Thus, Business English, as well as pidgin, is constructed and sanctioned by a special convention and ascribed to speakers performing specific roles. It accompanies a planned action between individuals or groups of people and is designed to reach some goals.

All these characteristics make Business English different from a natural human language which develops by and large unconsciously, spontaneously and without any planned human intervention. A pidgin is not the native language of any speech community, but it is instead learned as a second language. Similarly, even in the case of native speakers of English, Business English is not acquired in a way similar to mother tongue, but it must be taught at a secondary and tertiary level. This means that a good command of Business English may turn out to be out of reach for a large proportion of population. Alternatively, Business English can never become the first language and replace English in this function.

Business English is a hybrid because it possesses some properties of an artificial language like Esperanto, with a precisely defined vocabulary and preprogrammed conventions, but at the same time it must rely on a natural language like English to fulfill its communication tasks. Simultaneously, English is the building material out of which Business English is constructed, very much like Esperanto which was composed from a selection of components taken from a number of Indo-European languages spoken in Europe. The fundamental difference, however, is that Business English is an incomplete system. Therefore, the users of this hybrid semi-autonomous language have to switch between Business English and General English and elements typical of the two varieties are mixed together. To make matters more complicated, the two varieties are hardly ever separable. Thus, neither the language material nor speakers nor context of use, taken in isolation, are capable of making Business English what it is and define its unique qualities.⁵

The characteristics of an artificial language found in Business English include monoreferential and formal vocabulary (Gotti 2003). Recall that terminology constitutes the basic and most characteristic component of Business English. Its elements – lexemes – always refer to precisely defined concepts, are never polysemous and ambiguous, additionally, they do not have exact synonyms. Another typical feature is formal style and lack of emotions. In

⁵ Dudley-Evans and St John (1996: 5) observe that “there cannot be an easily definable body of lexis and grammar that distinguishes Business English from other varieties of English” and Pickett (1989: 6) calls Business English a “mediating language” between technicalities of business and the language of general public.

Business English, words have a fixed meaning and purely denotative function. Concepts are expressed in the shortest possible way. Within the confines of Business English, or any other specialist language, meaning is not context-dependent. Contextual independence means that the proper interpretation can be performed independently of context (Grucza 2004). That is why business terms can be studied in isolation and the recognition of Business English as a separate language variety is mostly associated with the occurrence of these technical, subject-specific, artificially devised or genetically modified lexical innovations.

As a hybrid phenomenon, Business English requires a hybrid methodology. Unlike business discourse, it cannot be limited only to the analysis of authentic data, because this could result in a bias toward a spontaneous, naturally occurring uses, sometimes marginal and unimportant for the overall model of Business English and its core characteristics. We must not forget that Business English, as a specialist language, is mainly used in a narrow S2S (specialist to specialist) communication channel. This demands conventional setting, formal style, well chosen and thought-out expressions and predominantly written mode.

All of these factors contribute to the fact that Business English tends to have many features of artificial languages which would be missed out in a study focused exclusively on impromptu, colloquial and informal conversations even if they were carried out within the business organizational contours. Moreover, business reference books, business textbooks and manuals are also a rich source of linguistic information and, at least partially, can be treated as instances of Business English. As a result, many researchers are more interested in simulated or even manipulated data rather than real business interactions. Sometimes a combination of different kinds of data is used in one investigation (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2013: 14). This seems to be fully justified because Business English is both a product and a process. Being a semi-autonomous hybrid, it cannot be isolated for fully objective investigation and its study needs a certain degree of idealization.

Conclusions

The study of Business English must follow the guidelines of applied linguistics in combining linguistic theory with praxis. Notice that this kind of theoretical investigation is not only geared toward enriching our knowledge about the phenomenon in question, but it is also motivated by very practical goal oriented tasks. They can be divided into three basic categories. First of all, the study of Business English can be pedagogically-centered (Sobkowiak 2008). As a result, many of the researchers involved in the investigation of

Business English are also active in teaching. The next major area of application is translation (Wille and Pikor-Niedziałek 2014). In this case, rather than language, a more precise object of analysis is a specialist text. Finally, many studies of Business English are prescriptively rather than descriptively guided. This means that their ultimate motivation is to discover how to improve business communication and how to use language to be more successful in achieving one's goals in business rather than simply describe the language of business.

Summing up, it is possible to conclude that Business English is investigated not as an end to itself, but largely to inform teaching, translation or training programs. By advocating the thesis that Business English is best described as a specialist language, I also strongly believe that its investigation should remain language-focused, descriptive, research-led and based on a solid linguistic theory.

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