Discourse strategies in professional e-mail negotiation: a case study

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to report on some of the preliminary results of an on-going study on the use of discourse strategies in e-mail negotiation. The analysis aims at showing how relations between the participants develop through the use of specific discourse strategies in their e-mail communication which covers a period of three months, during which the relationship progresses from initial contact to on-going business. Drawing on Hyland’s (2005) concept of metadiscourse combined with Charles’ (1996) categories of ‘old and new relationship negotiations’, this study provides insights into naturally occurring language in an e-mail communication between a Danish Company and its business contact in Taiwan. During the three-month period observed, the frequency in use of interpersonal strategies converges as the relationship progresses towards a more contextually stable and more personalised level of communication as trust has been established and power relations have become structured within the legal framework of the contract.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of the present study is to identify discourse strategies used in professional e-mail negotiation. The study is a single case study based on the analysis of a total of 46 e-mails, selected from a dataset of 135 e-mails, collected from the managing director (MD) of a small Danish security company while he was negotiating an exclusivity agreement with a potential Taiwanese supplier of electronic products to sell in Scandinavia. The e-mails were collected during a three-month period from 29 October 2004 to 27 January 2005, and were selected because they consisted of a sequence of authentic e-mails (25 Danish and 21 Taiwanese), all parts of a business communication sequence in which they follow one another sequentially and temporally. The e-mails were written in English by the same two people (apart from the first e-mail from Taiwan 1), both being non-native speakers of English. The Taiwanese writer was the female manager of the European Sales Division.

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1 The first e-mail from the buyer is directed to the senior vice president of the International Sales Division, who in his first e-mail redirects contact to the Manager of European Sales, who was present during the initial meeting between the buyer and the seller, which took place prior to the present e-mail communication.
The dataset in the present study is unique in the sense that it consists of uncensored e-mails, which are usually not accessible to researchers, and it enables the researcher to look into the use of e-mail in sensitive business negotiations. The e-mails will be analysed qualitatively and quantitatively.

1.1. Negotiation

Negotiation is a special type of social interaction. It is distinguished as a strategic process, carried out to accomplish instrumental goals. In fact, negotiation can be defined as a “communication process, characterized by the exchange of information, arguments, and strategic manoeuvres” (Putnam & Jones, 1982, p. 172), whereby two or more parties engage in a give-and-take interaction to reach mutually acceptable solutions. Both parties need to cooperate to attain settlements and both have the potential to block and interfere with the other party’s goal attainment (Putnam & Wilson, 1990). Although many negotiation theorists recognize that bargainers pursue goals through interaction, many use goal in a very restrictive sense, whereby goal is seen as predetermined and static (see Lewicki, Saunders, Barry, & Minton, 2003). Communication scholars, however, see ‘goal’ in a broader sense, suggesting that even though goal-setting often may occur prior to interaction, initial objectives will often be modified and new objectives emerge during interactions (Putnam & Wilson, 1990). This notion of negotiation as an interactive activity is also reflected in Lampi’s (1986) definition of negotiation:

With the addition of the crucial conflict aspect, a negotiation is...defined as an interactive activity between at least two parties who have conflicting interests, at least one mutual problem, and who are in the process of looking for a solution to the problem(s) and/or resolving the conflict (Lampi, 1986, p. 9).

Focusing on negotiation as a process of interaction between people where one important goal is to create lasting business relationships and to maintain those relations, Putnam and Wilson’s (1990) concept of ‘interaction goals’ seems an appealing one. They identify three primary negotiator goals, namely (1) instrumental goals, (2) relational goals and (3) identity goals. Instrumental goals are the actual distribution of resources, whereas relational goals involve the establishment and maintenance of relationship with the other party of the negotiation, highlighting the two important issues of power and trust. Power is seen as constituting the “changing dependency between negotiators that is exerted through the strategies and tactics that shape the direction of negotiations and the emergence of alternatives for a settlement” (Putnam & Wilson, 1990, p. 384), and trust is viewed as the “confidence, assurance, or credibility placed in the opponent’s behaviour” (Putnam & Wilson, 1990, p. 386). Building trusting relationships is thus associated with cooperation, friendliness and respect, whereas identity goals relate to image and face, and are associated with establishing an assertive image, which is an important goal in negotiation. The desire to create and sustain positive identities in the eyes of significant others has also been described as the goal of maintaining face, which is the social recognition of the other’s positive self-image, and the speaker’s own need to be respected (Goffman, 1967).

As negotiators can lose face if they do not appear trustworthy or competent in the eyes of their opponent or own constituents (Pruitt & Smith, 1981), negotiators have a strong incentive to defend their face, but as facework is also needed in order for negotiators to be seen as “firm” or “tough”, relational goals of power and trust are clearly connected to identity goals of image and face. As negotiators usually have multiple and sometimes conflicting goals, instrumental, relational and identity goals are interrelated and are likely to support each other.

So far most research on language used in negotiation has focused on face-to-face interaction, and with the exception of a few studies on technology-mediated negotiation (e.g. Nadler & Shestowsky, 2006), all of which were conducted in experimental settings, very few studies have looked at discourse strategies in e-mail negotiation in natural settings using English as a lingua franca (ELF).

1.2. E-mail in lingua franca negotiation

English is increasingly the language of international business, and the term English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is generally used to refer exclusively to the use of English between speakers whose mother tongue is
not English (Firth, 1996; Seidlhofer, 2004). House (1999, p. 74) defines ELF “as interactions between members of two or more different linguacultures in English, for none of whom English is the mother tongue.”

Studies on ELF have so far centred on ways to judge correctness, comprehensibility and intelligibility and on ways ELF differs from native English (House, 2003; Jenkins, 2000; Meierkord, 2002; Poncini, 2004). However, studies on ELF pragmatics (House, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004) appear to show that a great tolerance among ELF-speakers exists; they are less focused on form, more concerned with getting the message across. ELF is instrumental in enabling communication with others who do not speak one’s own language (House, 2003). According to House (2003), ELF is a useful instrument for making oneself understood in international encounters. It is instrumental in enabling communication with others who do not speak one’s own language (House, 2003, p. 559).

The spread of English as a common language in international business communication has been considerably facilitated by the increased use of e-mail within the last decade. As e-mail is not bound by personal schedules, geographical limitations, or time zones, it can be sent and received at the convenience of the participants, and the informal style of e-mails makes it less threatening to use when communicating in a foreign language, which makes e-mail very attractive for intercultural communication. A study conducted under the auspices of a Danish Research project ‘Global Communication in Danish Organizations’2 showed that about 90% of all communication in a multinational organization was conducted via e-mail (Jensen, Millar, & Day, 2007).

However, e-mail has been viewed as less personal than face-to-face communication, because it filters out body language cues and lacks social presence, thus rendering messages more impersonal. This view is supported by Nadler and Shestowsky (2006), who advocate the importance of establishing common ground before engaging in e-mail negotiation, to compensate for the absence of communication facilitators such as nods, eye contact, gestures and smiles during e-negotiation. Within the past decade there have been a number of studies on e-mail as a medium (Baron, 1998; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000; Herring, 1996; Millar, in preparation; Mulholland, 1999; Murray, 1995; Nickerson, 2000; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Van Mulken & Van der Meer, 2005), and so far they have led to the description of e-mail in the following terms: ‘informal’ (compared to ‘traditional’ writing), ‘encourages personal disclosure’, ‘can become emotional’ (Baron, 2000, p. 249), and resembling features of both spoken and written language. Baron (1998) also notes that e-mails, apart from being stylistically informal, usually tend to be shorter than telephone exchanges and often dispense with conventional opening and closing routines.

Within Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984), e-mail has been described as a ‘lean medium’ incapable of communicating rich information and suitable only for task-based informational messages. Galin, Gross, and Gosalker (2007) examined the impact that the type of negotiation media (face-to-face versus e-negotiation) has on the features of the negotiation process (duration and tactics) and on its outcomes. The study was conducted as an experiment, including 80 young students, and Galin et al. (2007) concluded that whereas the negotiation outcomes were barely affected by the media, i.e. face-to-face negotiation was no different to e-negotiation in terms of the final outcome, the negotiation process, in terms of duration and the use of hard and soft tactics, was significantly affected by negotiation media. E-negotiations were found to be substantially longer than face-to-face negotiations, and the number of hard tactics employed was found to be significantly higher in e-negotiation than in face-to-face negotiation.

Building relationships through computer-mediated communication has also been dealt with within Social Information Processing Theory. Walther (1995), for instance, found that 10 min of face-to-face conversation was comparable with 40 min of computer-mediated communication, since computer-mediated communication conveys social information more slowly than face-to-face communication. But given sufficient time and message exchanges for relational development, however, relational communication in later stages of computer-mediated communication will parallel that which takes place face to face. Murphy and Levy (2006) suggest that the decontextualised nature of e-mail and the brevity of e-mail may result in an altering of or reduction in the conventions of politeness normally associated with the more established communication forms. In addition, they suggest that a lack of social context cues such as certain body language messages, apparent in face-to-face communication, may result in diminished regard for face risk management in e-negotiation.

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2 The project ‘Global Communication in Danish Organisations’ is funded by the Danish Research Council for Culture and Communication.
1.3. Purpose of study

Placing negotiation within the framework of communication studies, and defining it as an interactive activity with particular focus on interaction goals (Putnam & Wilson, 1990), this study examines how interaction goals are reached in e-mail negotiation using English as lingua franca. This research focus should be seen in view of e-mail being frequently referred to as an information transaction medium rather than an interaction based communication system supporting interpersonal relations (Murphy & Levy, 2006).

2. Analytical framework

An analytical concept I found particularly useful for my study was the concept of the ‘professional face’ and ‘professional face saving strategies’, developed by Charles (1996), who builds on Brown and Levinson (1987). Their theory on politeness rests on three basic concepts, face, face threatening acts (FTAs) and politeness strategies, and they propose that face is the key motivating force for politeness, consisting of two related aspects, negative face and positive face. In her 1996 study, Charles combines discourse analysis with studies of negotiation, demonstrating how rhetorical moves and the use of face saving strategies were direct reflections of the relationship between the participants involved. In order to capture the tactical and professional nature of the status and role concerns of negotiators, the concept of professional face, an FTA to professional face and tactical (professional face-saving) strategies were introduced. The focus was on professional rather than personal and social face concerns and aimed at accommodating the tactical aspect of buyer/seller interaction in a professional setting (Charles, 1996, pp. 24–25), which suggests that Face Threatening Acts may be seen as tactical moves in professional negotiation. Charles defines status as referring to social positions, which are institutionalised, whereas role refers to social relations that are less institutionalised. The model was developed for the purpose of analysing strategies used in professional negotiation.

By dividing negotiations into two categories: new relationship negotiations (NRN) and old relationship negotiations (ORN), Charles was able to describe the progression of the discourse from status-bound discourse of new relationship negotiations, where negotiators rely on strategies saving professional face, to the personalized, role-enacted discourse of old relationship negotiations, in which participants rely heavily on personal and social face saving strategies. According to Charles (1996), the expectations of status-bound behaviour relate to the market situation and depend on the relative power positions that buyers and sellers occupy in relation to each other in that market.

Though a number of linguistic options can be used for managing face, and a number of scholars have identified interpersonal rhetorical strategies associated with writer–reader relationship (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and the development of business–customer relations (Nickerson, 2000; Planken, 2005; Van Mulken & Van der Meer, 2005), most research in negotiation has focused on negotiation as face-to-face or telephone conversations drawing on analytical tools such as conversation analysis (Firth, 1996), or by including the broader context of business, drawing on pragmatics such as politeness theory, speech act theory, etc. (Charles, 1996; Gibbons, Bradac, & Busch, 1992). Having anchored this study firmly within pragmatics, I found the concept of metadiscourse offered by Hyland (1998), Hyland (2005) to be an attractive and comprehensive framework for understanding written communication as social engagement, enabling me to focus on e-mails as a written medium and at the same time capturing the on-going activity of negotiation. The analysis of metadiscourse is a relatively new approach to understanding how written texts construct and negotiate social relations. Metadiscourse aims at “conceptualising interactions between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users” (Hyland, 2005, p. 1). However, so far, analyses of metadiscourse have largely focused on a limited number of academic genres such as research articles, textbooks, dissertations, as well as company annual reports, and, to my knowledge, limited research has been done within the use of metadiscourse in e-mail interaction (see also Nickerson, 2000; Van Mulken & Van der Meer, 2005). This study may therefore also be seen as a contribution to close a research gap in the use of metadiscourse to determine interactional features in emerging genres, by focusing on e-mail negotiation using English as a lingua franca in professional settings.
2.1. Metadiscourse

Hyland (1998) gives the following characterization of metadiscourse:

Based on a view of writing as a social and communicative engagement between writer and reader, metadiscourse focuses our attention on the way writers project themselves into their work to signal their communicative intentions. It is a central pragmatic construct that allows us to see how writers seek to influence readers’ understanding of both the text and their attitude towards its content and the audience (p. 437).

Hyland’s (1998) analytical framework is based on Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993), and distinguishes between the interactive and the interactional dimension of interaction (Hyland, 2005, p. 49): The interactive dimension concerns “the writer’s awareness of a participating audience and the ways he or she seeks to accommodate its probable knowledge, interests, rhetorical expectations and processing abilities.” The interactional dimension concerns “the ways writers conduct interaction by intruding and commenting on their message. The writer’s goal here is to make his or her views explicit and to involve readers by allowing them to respond to the unfolding text.” And, further, Hyland (2005, p. 49) argues that the interactional dimension concerns “the writer’s expression of a textual ‘voice’, or community-recognized personality, and includes the ways he or she conveys judgements and overtly aligns him- or herself with readers.” According to Hyland (1998, p. 438), “Metadiscourse is recognised as an important means of facilitating communication, supporting a writer’s position and building a relationship with an audience.”

My primary focus will be on Hyland’s interactional dimension of the e-mails, as interactional metadiscourse reveals the extent to which the writer works to jointly construct the text with readers. Sub-categories of the interactional dimension are hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention and engagement markers (Hyland, 1998, 2005).

2.1.1. Hedges

Hedges are items such as possible, might, perhaps, would and could. Hyland (1998) refers to hedges as items that mark the writer’s reluctance to present or evaluate propositional information and are applied to maintain the social relationship between sender and receiver. The use of hedges is also one of the negative mitigation strategies identified by Brown and Levinson (1987). Van Mulken and van der Meer (2005) and Nickerson (2000) also mention hedges as a rhetorical means of mitigation.

In this study, the category was expanded by including the traditional politeness softener please, because it was mostly used to mitigate direct requests.

2.1.2. Boosters

The purpose of boosters is to emphasise the force of the proposition, and Hyland (2005) points to a number of items that could be characterized as boosters, such as clearly, obviously, highly and demonstrate, allowing writers to close down alternatives, head off conflicting views and express their certainty (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). In addition, the use of emphatic ‘do’, as in “I did find your products of very high quality” (see example [1]) was included.

2.1.3. Attitude markers

According to Crismore et al. (1993), attitude markers are used to emphasise propositional content by allowing the writer to express his attitude to that content without showing commitment to it. For Hyland (1998), attitude markers can be signalled by attitude verbs, modals and sentence adverbs that express the writer’s affective attitude to textual information in a more varied way than hedges. For example, they are used to convey surprise, obligation, agreement and importance (Hyland, 1998, p. 444). In a study of e-mails, Nickerson (2000) found a number of attitude markers that were used by writers to emphasise their perspective on information, or in order to justify a certain action. Examples of attitude markers in the present dataset were understand: “I understood during our conversation”, see example [1], as well as interested, welcome, and glad: “Thanks for your calling and glad to talk with you. I am interested in doing business with you, and welcome you to be our distributor in your area”, as in example [2] below.
2.1.4. Self mention

Personal projection through first person pronouns is a powerful means of self-representation. Self-mention refers to the degree of explicit author presence in the text measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives (I, me, mine, exclusive we, our, ours).

Within the category of self-mention, the use of personal pronouns may in some cases be seen as an indicator of the extent to which the author identifies with the corporation (use of institutionalised we) or undertakes a personal responsibility (the use of I). The difference between the uses of we versus I may therefore also reflect levels of formality in the communication. Hyland (2005), Nickerson (2000), and van Mulken and van der Meer (2005) mention the roles and interplay of the first person pronoun and the company name. In the process of creating the impression of a corporate image, the use of we to refer to the company and the writer indicates that the respondent identifies himself with the company in question. The use of I versus we was interpreted as a signal of a more personal relationship, indicating that the sender feels more personally responsible, whereas the pronoun we when used to refer to the organization indicated that the writer identified himself or herself with the organization (see also Van Mulken and Van der Meer, 2005, p. 104).

2.1.5. Engagement markers

Engagement markers are devices that explicitly address readers, either to focus their attention or include them as discourse participants. The use of engagement markers may be seen as a way of “involving the reader by selectively focusing attention and emphasizing relationship” (Hyland, 1998), and according to Planken (2005, p. 393), “the assumption underlying you-attitude is that it can make (written) messages more persuasive.” Engagement markers focus on reader participation and include second person pronouns (you), imperatives, and question forms. Expressions like looking forward to were included, as in: “I look forward to hear from you”, (see example [1]), and thanks as in ‘Thanks for your calling...’ (see example [2]).

The coding scheme in Table 1 is based on the above categorisation, and the categories will be used in order to describe discourse strategies used by the participants in order to reach goals in negotiation. Metadiscourse, however, only deals with surface features that can be clearly identified in the text (Hyland, 2005, p. 58), which means that a classification scheme can never be a precise representation of the complexity of natural language use.

3. Analysis

The selected e-mails were all written during the first three months of a new business relationship. The Danish company is a relatively small enterprise compared to its Taiwanese business contact, a world-renowned manufacturer of electronics. The Danish company is looking for products to sell in Scandinavia and is requesting an exclusive distribution agreement for Scandinavia. Issues at stake are: (1) sales territory, and (2) sales volumes. The e-mails follow a meeting that took place at a trade fair during which common ground was established prior to the e-mail communication.

In this particular context, buyer is approaching seller with the goal of settling an exclusivity agreement for his company, negotiating the largest possible sales territory with the least possible commitment to sales quota. In addition both seller and buyer aim at establishing a long-term business relationship, which apart from power issues emphasises the important aspect of trust- and image building as well as face management. This

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>Engage the reader in the text</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>Withhold writer’s full commitment and open dialogue</td>
<td>Might, possible, would, could, please</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>Emphasize certainty or close dialogue</td>
<td>In fact, definitely, it is clear that, did, highly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td>Express writer’s attitude to proposition</td>
<td>Questions, welcome, understand, interested</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self mentions</td>
<td>Explicitly reference to writer(s)</td>
<td>I, we, my, me, our</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement markers</td>
<td>Explicitly build relationship with reader</td>
<td>Consider, note, you can see that, thank you, looking forward to, question forms (how?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
means that we can expect to find a number of tactical strategies related to achieving interactive goals from both buyer and seller.

According to Lampi (1986, p. 9), “Any concepts used to study negotiation activity should focus on the two main aspects: interaction and phases/developments in the problem/conflict (re)solving process”, and in order to capture the progression of rhetorical strategies within the e-mail communication when the relationship advanced from NRN to ORN (Charles, 1996), I identified three main periods, the contact phase, the negotiation phase, and the in business phase.

The contact phase, during which initial contact between the companies was established, includes the first four e-mails (first two from buyer and the first two from seller), as seller redirects the contact from the senior vice president of the International Sales Division to the Manager of European Sales, immediately after the first e-mail. The first e-mail was sent from Denmark on October 29 (example [1]):

[1] Buyer e-mail 1:
Sent: 29 October 2004 16:20
Dear Mr.
We met you at the [...] Show and discussed our interest in Importing your Pro CCTV LCD Monitors for Denmark and the Scandinavian market.
We are manufacturing an distributing Matron DVR as well as distributing Security Products in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic Countries and South England (We have an office in London).
See our homepage www.matron.dk.
I did find your products of very high quality and I understood that you could supply the CCTV LCD Monitors from 01-11-04.
I would like to place our first order soonest possible.
I understood during our conversation that we could take over distribution in our region of EEC (The European Union). Please send us your Pricelist and a Draft for your Distributor Agreement, and let me know which of the Countries mentioned above you would like us to distribute your products in.
We are participating in the [.. ] Security fair in Copenhagen 3.-4.11.04, the Fair is especially for Scandinavian security Companies.
I look forward to hear from you.
Best Regards

The response e-mail from Taiwan came on November 3, 2004 (example [2]):

[2] Seller e-mail 1:
Sent: 3 November 2004 10:43
Dear Mr.
Thanks for your calling and glad to talk with you.
I am interested in doing business with you and welcome you to be our distributor in your area.
Since we already have distributors in Finland, Norway and the Baltic Countries for our LCD Monitor, so we can grant you the Area are only in Denmark, Sweden, and South England only.
As for the delivery, per my explanation on the phone, most of our CCTV LCD Monitor are selling under OEM brand with Exclusivity. In order to promote Sampo brand and take some No brand orders, we have developed a new series design and It will be available in middle of Jan, 2005. I will forward the new Drawing to you for your reference later. We can take the order now and deliver it in Jan.
If you want to test our samples, we can send our OEM models to you. The specification is all the same, the difference is only out looking design.
The draft agreement and relevant documents will be forwarded to you by my European Sales Ms. Sylvia Yeh. I will ask her to contact with you for relative business and you are free to contact with me if you need my service or assistance.
Denmark is a good place, I like it very much. I do hope to see you there.
Best regards
Placing this within the concept of professional face (Charles, 1996), we can identify the relationship as being new (NRN).

The negotiation phase is the period during which the terms of the agreement were negotiated: The e-mails categorised as negotiation were identified in the Danish dataset as e-mail DK 3-12 and in the Taiwanese dataset as TW 3-14. They were all written during the period from November 4 to December 15, and were requests for additional information and discussions of details related to the ‘terms of contract’, such as transportation costs and annual sales volumes to be met in return of exclusivity.

In business was the period that followed after the signing of the final agreement. E-mails related to in business are the Danish e-mails DK 13-25 and the Taiwan e-mails TW 15-21. The e-mail signalling that the two parties were now in business was dated December 15, and contained the following statement: “I’m very glad that we’re in business together for next year and looking forward to provide you with our services” (see example [3]).

3.1. Interactional features of the e-mails

Table 3 presents overall frequencies of interactional metadiscourse in both seller and buyer e-mails in the three phases, contact, negotiation and in business. Frequencies of interactional markers are reported as absolute numbers and as percentages of the total number of words within each period for buyer and seller, respectively.

Within the group of self-mention I decided to make a further distinction between the use of I versus we in all three phases, contact, negotiation and in business (Table 4).

3.1.1. The contact phase

According to Charles (1996), the market situation determines the status-bound expectations of buyer/seller behaviour, and accordingly a number of tactics from both buyer and seller can be expected (p. 23). In this case, buyer’s goal in the contact phase is to obtain distribution of seller’s products in his region, and since power is usually based on the market-situation, and seller in this case is a world-renowned Taiwanese company with products of much interest for the Danish buyer, relative power is likely to be with seller (i.e. seller’s market).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Buyer (DK) e-mail no.</th>
<th>Total no. of words</th>
<th>Average no. of words per e-mail</th>
<th>Seller (TW) e-mail no.</th>
<th>Total no. of words</th>
<th>Average no. of words per e-mail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>418</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>3–12</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>3–14</td>
<td>1209</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In business</td>
<td>13–25</td>
<td>516</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>15–21</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1445</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2101</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[3] Seller e-mail 15:
Sent: 15 December 2004 09:04
Dear Mr.,
Acknowledged. I’m very glad that we’re in business together for next year and looking forward to provide you with our services.
I will send the two copies of original via TNT as soon as possible.
Kindly send one copy back to us after you’ve signed it.
Thanks in advance.

Placing this within the concept of professional face (Charles, 1996), we can identify the relationship as being old (ORN).

The number of e-mails and the length of the emails counted in number of words within each period are listed in Table 2.
One tactic of particular relevance to this situation is that buyer is expected to accept seller’s control of the situation, which is likely to be reflected in what Gibbons et al. (1992, p. 165) refer to as a ‘low-power communicative style’, characterized by frequent use of hedges. According to Hyland (2005, p. 52), hedges withhold the writer’s full commitment to statements, and indicate his decision to recognize alternative voices and viewpoints, and therefore open writer’s position up for negotiation. From Table 3 we see a more frequent use of hedges in buyer’s contact e-mail (4.1%) compared to his use of hedges in the other two phases (1.7% in the negotiation phase and 1.4% while ‘in business’), as for instance: “I would like to place our first order soonest possible,” and “I understood during our conversation that we could take over …”, and “Let me know which of the countries mentioned above you would like us to …” (see also example [1]).

Buyer (in seller’s market) is expected to show interest, bring out positive features of the product being sold, and bring out his or her trustworthiness and desirability as a cooperation partner (Charles, 1996, p. 23). According to Hyland (2005) successful persuasion depends on the writer’s ability to create an effective ethos. Metadiscourse is a means by which the writer can project himself into their writing to present a competent, trustworthy and honest persona (p. 78). Aspects of metadiscourse which contribute most to buyer’s credibility appeals in this context are boosters, engagement markers and self-mention. In the opening statement of the contact e-mail, buyer writes: “We met at […] and discussed our interest in importing…”, showing a clear interest in the relationship with seller, while at the same time attempting to establish common ground with seller (example [1]). This interest is further emphasised by the use of the booster ‘did’ in the following: “I did find your products of very high quality.” The use of engagement markers reflects an orientation to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Interactional metadiscourse in e-mail.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Words</td>
<td>Contact Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>9 4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>3 1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td>3 1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Mention</td>
<td>21 9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>16 7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>52 23.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seller</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Contact Frequency</th>
<th>Negotiation Frequency</th>
<th>In business Frequency</th>
<th>Total Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hedges</td>
<td>5 1.2%</td>
<td>19 1.6%</td>
<td>4 0.8%</td>
<td>28 1.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boosters</td>
<td>1 0.2%</td>
<td>2 0.2%</td>
<td>4 0.8%</td>
<td>7 0.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude markers</td>
<td>15 3.6%</td>
<td>23 1.9%</td>
<td>8 1.7%</td>
<td>46 2.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Mention</td>
<td>28 6.7%</td>
<td>62 5.1%</td>
<td>21 4.4%</td>
<td>111 5.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>26 6.2%</td>
<td>95 7.9%</td>
<td>32 6.8%</td>
<td>153 7.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75 17.9%</td>
<td>201 16.6%</td>
<td>69 14.6%</td>
<td>345 16.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Person markers in e-mail.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>Contact Frequency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>6 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>15 71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seller</th>
<th>Contact Frequency</th>
<th>Negotiation Frequency</th>
<th>In business Frequency</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>13 46%</td>
<td>35 56%</td>
<td>14 67%</td>
<td>62 56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We</td>
<td>15 54%</td>
<td>27 44%</td>
<td>7 33%</td>
<td>49 44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reader, “addressing them as participants in an argument” (Hyland, 2005, p. 54), which is particularly present in the recurrent use of the second person pronoun ‘you/your’ in the e-mail (example [1]), as in, for instance, “[...] let me know which of the countries mentioned above you would like us to distribute your products.” This can also be compared to Brown and Levinson’s positive politeness strategies, a kind of social accelerator, where the sender indicates that he wants to ‘come closer’ (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 103). Also the high frequency of self-mention is important as it projects the author into the text. In this case we see a particularly frequent use of the institutionalised we (71%) in buyer’s contact e-mail, which indicates that buyer is identifying himself with the entire organization, thereby increasing his negotiation power and his trustworthiness, (see example [4]):

[4] Buyer e-mail 1:

“We are manufacturing an distributing . . . (We have an office in London).
See our homepage www.matron.dk.”
We are participating in the [...] Security fair.

By building an image of him and the organization as competent, professional and of a relative size (reference to website, an office in London, participation in an upcoming trade fair), buyer constructs himself and the organization as powerful and trustworthy in the eyes of seller. From the above we may conclude that in order to reach the instrumental goal of obtaining distribution of seller’s products, the primary focus of buyer’s contact e-mails was to establish a connection with seller, showing interest and conveying a trustworthy image. But also acknowledging that power is with seller.

Compared to buyer’s behaviour, seller is also expected to show interest, but also to exert a degree of control over the situation (Charles, 1996, p. 23). This is done by signalling a polite interest in his prospective cooperation partner, which is particularly reflected in the use of attitude markers and engagement markers (see also Table 3). Self mention can explicitly contribute to the development of a relationship with the readers when it collocates with attitude markers (Hyland, 2005, p. 83), as in “Thanks for your calling and glad to talk with you”, and in “Denmark is a good place, I like it very much. I do hope to see you there” (example [2]). But also “I am interested in doing business with you and welcome you to be our distributor in your area” demonstrates seller’s interest in a future cooperation. Seller, however, establishes control over the situation by restricting the sales territory “…we can grant you the area are only in Denmark, Sweden and South England only” (SIC).

Also, we observed a high frequency of self-mention in seller’s e-mail. However, contrary to buyer’s e-mail, we noted a more balanced distribution between the use of I (46%) and we (54%), which may suggest a more personal focus and less need to associate himself with the organization, which is also reflected in more personal comments (see above).

To sum up, during the contact phase both buyer and seller focus on the prospective cooperation by frequent use of interactionals, which is particularly salient in buyer’s contact e-mail (buyer 23.9% versus. seller 17.9%). Buyer clearly acknowledges that power is with seller, which is reflected in buyer’s frequent use of a ‘low-power’ communication style, characterized by a frequent use of hedges. On the other hand, buyer also needs to establish himself and his company as powerful, competent and trustworthy. This is reflected in buyer’s use of metadiscursive elements such as boosters, engagement markers and self-mention, particularly in the form of the ‘institutionalised we’, whereby sender identifies himself with the entire Danish organization, using his status within the organization to boost his negotiation power. Seller responds with a similarly frequent use of engagement markers showing his interest in a future business relationship, while still displaying his control over the situation.

3.1.2. The negotiation phase

The negotiation phase starts with Buyer’s email no. 3, (dated November 4), in which he suggests quantities to be included in the agreement, (see example [5]).

3 In this case the personal pronoun ‘I’ seems to be left out (as in I am glad to talk with you), which may be a feature of the use of English as lingua franca, or a sign of the minimalist language use we often find in e-mails.
After having examined the samples by us and some of our customers we will decide if we are going to sell all 3 types. My opinion today is that there also is a market for the 15.”

The year of 2005 will be a year of business development therefore it is difficult to estimate number of units, however I estimate at least 100 units per month from August 2005. The sales volume of the year 2006 should be at least 200 units per month.

At this stage of the negotiation it is important for buyer to signal strength, ensuring that the Danish company can reach reasonable sales volumes while on the other hand not having to commit to too high sales quotas. From the analysis of the e-mails written by buyer during the negotiation phase, we observe a marked decline in the use of interactionals compared to the e-mails written in the contact phase; in particular we note a decrease in the use of engagement markers and hedges combined with the use of a more assertive language, as for instance “After having examined the samples by us and some of our customers we will decide if we are going to sell all 3 types” and “The sales volume of the year 2006 should be at least 200 units per month” (see example [5]).

Seller on the other hand now seems to ‘bend’ towards buyer, showing empathy, as for instance “Hope this is the beginning of a long and prosperous business relationship between us. Feel free to contact me if you need anything.” (See also example [6]).

Power symmetry is facilitated through a chain sequence pattern that consists of a question followed by a short, abrupt response that monitors information flow and then by additional questioning (Donohue & Diez, 1983, as cited in Putnam & Wilson, 1990). In this e-mail sequence buyer ignores seller’s attempt to control the information flow, thereby retaining his power, which can be seen from example [7], where seller is requesting additional information related to sales territory, a request that is ignored by buyer in his response e-mail (see example [8]).
In order to be able to test the freight prices (US$ 790.00) I need the dimensions and weight of the two wooden boxes mentioned in your E-mail.

But we also see that buyer deliberately delays communication. Usually e-mails were responded to within 1–2 days, but from the dataset it became clear that buyer at some stage in the negotiation decides to leave seller ‘hanging’ for some time before responding to requests (see example [9]). By taking control of the flow of communication by showing disinterest towards the seller, buyer’s tactic seems to be to temporarily ‘withdraw’ from the negotiation, which indicates what Charles (1996) refers to as a “strategic downplay of interest” (p. 34), and may be interpreted as a way of saving his professional face and asserting power.

[9] Seller e-mail 5:
Sent: 29 November 2004 11:09
Dear Mr.
I have been trying to reach you ever since the last e-mail that you’ve sent me more than two weeks ago. Regarding your decision on introducing our CCTV Pro LCD monitors into your market, have you reached a decision or do you need me to provide you with additional information. Our manager especially instructed that I reserve 20 units of [...] to support your sample order as we are very eager to start a long and prosperous business relationship with you.

From example [9] we see that seller is now competing for buyer’s interests and attempting to develop trust between seller and buyer”. Offering to provide additional information and offer support.” Seller also combines self-mention with attitude markers and boosters “we are very eager to start a long and prosperous business relationship...” in order to emphasise his appeal to the buyer. In sum, during the negotiation phase we observe a shift in power relations compared to the contact phase. Buyer is signalling strength by taking control of the information flow and thereby pursuing an avoidance strategy, which is reflected in delayed response time, and a marked decrease in engagement markers, whereby he signals a tactical restriction of interest in seller’s products. Seller on the other hand seems to pursue an achievement strategy, reflected in his unsuccessful attempt to control the communication flow and his increased use of engagement markers and attitude markers during the negotiation phase.

3.1.3. The ‘in business’ phase

According to Charles (1996), buyers in old relationships (ORN) communicate a range of good feelings about the seller; they communicate empathy and goodwill. During phase three (in business) it is clear that interactional markers from both parties are becoming more personal. The e-mails often end with more friendly and personal closings, as well as more personal opening sentences, as illustrated in (example [10–12]).

[10] Seller e-mail 17:
Sent: 22. December 2004 09:27
Dear Mr.
My OS crashed a few days ago and everything is in a mess.

[11] Buyer e-mail 22:
Sent: Wednesday, January 05, 2005 11:32 PM
I hope that you had a joyful new years evening and a god start in 2005.

[12] Seller e-mail 21 and buyer’s embedded reply:
Sent: 7 January 2005 07:58
Hope you have come back to office all refreshed from the holidays as well, yes thank you.
Sorry for the late reply. I got a bad cold and was too sick to come to work yesterday.

When we look at the overall use of interactional metadiscourse in the e-mails across the period of three months, we see how the frequency of interactionals stabilizes as the relationship progresses towards a more contextually stable level within a well-known frame of mutual understandings of roles and relations, as the signing of the contract formalizes power and trust relations. This is supported by Charles (1996), who found that
Business is envisioned as a mutual project... the two so far largely conflicting statuses – that of the Buyer and that of the Seller - seem now to converge in ORNs. In these events, the Seller’s behaviour largely corresponds to Buyer’s, both see the negotiation as a mutual project... (p. 31).

But also, we found a notable decrease in the use of *we* versus the use of *I* (see Table 4) in both seller and buyer e-mails across time, which indicates that the relationship developed from the corporate level to a more personal relationship at a more informal level, more *I* than the institutionalised *we*.

The e-mails did not show any signs of communication problems or misunderstandings that could be related to language problems, and both the buyer and the seller seemed to be fairly competent in English. However, the specific characteristics of the e-mail medium, such as use of informal conversational style (Gimenez, 2000), were found in the e-mails used for this study, particularly salient in the ‘in business’ phase (see examples [10], [11] and [12]). This, combined with the minimalist language use often found in e-mails, makes typing errors and linguistic errors, (as for instance in example [2], “Thanks for your calling and glad to talk with you”, and “...we can grant you the area are only in Denmark, Sweden and South England only”, and in example [6], “Thank you for your prompt reply” (my emphasis)), much more acceptable compared to formal business correspondence. Therefore, for the purpose of identifying to what extent the use of English as lingua franca affected the interactive development of the negotiation process, I was faced with the problem that any features that could be identified as characteristic to ELF (see Seidlhofer, 2004) also could be interpreted as characteristic to the e-mail medium. This, however, may support the notion that e-mail is a medium that highly facilitates non-native use of English as ‘a language of communication’ with its greater tolerance in respect to correctness (House, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004).

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to identify discourse strategies used in professional e-mail negotiation. Placing negotiation within the framework of communication studies, and defining it as an interactive on-going activity evolving over time with particular focus on interaction goals (Putnam and Wilson, 1990), this study examined how interaction goals were reached in e-mail negotiation using English as a lingua franca, despite the prevailing theory that e-mail is considered an information transaction medium, rather than an interaction based communication system (Murphy and Levy, 2006). The e-mails were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. As I was only analysing 46 e-mails from two persons in different professional roles (the role of buyer and the role of seller), the observations cannot warrant sufficient statistical credibility, but should however, be regarded as a contribution to studies of professional communication using authentic e-mails as data. By using Hyland’s (2005) concept of metadiscourse, with particular focus on his *interactional* dimension, in combination with Charles’ (1996) categories of ‘old and new relationship negotiations’, the quantitative analysis enabled me to identify patterns of progression, i.e. how the frequency in the use of interactional metadiscourse developed and subsequently converged as the relationship progressed towards a more contextually stable and more personalised level of communication as power relations became structured within the legal framework of the contract. The analysis thus illustrated how metadiscourse could be used to highlight the development of the relationship between buyer and seller as the relationship progressed from initial contact (new relationship) to on-going business (old relationship) within a three-month period.

The qualitative analysis showed how the same rhetorical metadiscursive devices, such as engagement markers, boosters and self-mention may perform different functions relative to the context. The analysis enabled us to identify the tactical behaviours of buyer and seller across the three phases, and it illustrated how relational goals interacted with identity goals (Putnam and Wilson, 1990), and how these, in turn, served to achieve instrumental goals when trust building, power relations and the creation of positive identities surfaced in the rhetorical strategies. The findings thereby support the notion that far from being ‘lean’ e-mail is capable of conveying rich information, i.e. e-mail can be used to reach interaction goals and build long-term business relationships. Further, the findings suggested that features characteristic to ELF communication could also be identified as characteristic of the e-mail medium, which may merit further research into the assumption that e-mail as a medium highly facilitates non-native use of English as ‘a language of communication’ (House, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2004), and since e-mail has almost replaced ordinary business letters in most contexts, it...
becomes increasingly important for us to understand how this new medium affects international communication. Finally, the analysis contributes to future research within the use of metadiscourse and how it enables researchers to capture the interactional features of this new medium.

References


