

LINGUISTIC FRAMEWORKS AND TOOLBOXES IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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Abstract

Linguistic theories provide explanatory frames for business communication in two ways: some theories are loose frames in that they apply to all human linguistic communication while others are tighter, applying only to the kind of communication typically found in business. Linguistic theories and analytic techniques are often used in business communication research as tools for analysis without regard to whether the theoretical frame is loose or tight. We exemplify this 'toolbox' use from the literature. It is then suggested that business communication can be regarded as a (perhaps open-ended) set of genres and the field of Business Communication as the field which studies these genres. Some of the ways in which such an approach might be productive both intellectually and practically are then explored.

[Organisational and Management Communication]

Introduction.

The study of language use has a complex set of interrelationships. Research into speech production, perception and language acquisition is normally conducted as part of psychology. The way language is used by humans for particular purposes involves an interaction between the user of a language, the objectives of the uses, and the social context. Not surprisingly, given the complexity of such an interaction, numerous approaches have evolved for this area of linguistic research. It is to these areas that Business Communication research not infrequently turns, characteristically using them as a toolbox, from which analytic methods can be sourced for shedding light on business communication situations and genres. We illustrate this toolbox use through a brief survey.

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Leech, 1983) is used in a number of studies of business communication. For example, Cherry (1988) investigates its applicability in written communication. Campbell (1990) shows that the politeness strategies listed by Brown and Levinson can be used to explain the nature of messages which are unwelcome to the receiver. A negative message can be interpreted, using Brown and Levinson's terms, as a face-threatening act. That is what makes it a negative message. So the kinds of strategies which Brown and Levinson claim mitigate such face-threatening potential are predicted to be in evidence in negative messages in a business context. It appears that

they are. Rodman (2001) uses politeness theory to illuminate 'you-attitude'¹, suggesting that 'some of the insights on politeness, tact and deference found in the work of Brown and Levinson, Leech, and Fraser and Nolan can enhance our discussions of you-attitude' p.22). Crombie and Samujr (1999) show that a 'bad news' approach can be used strategically in CEO's letters in order to involve shareholders in the company's situation and attempt to prevent them from ceasing to support it. This involves a kind of 'you attitude' in that it attends to the face needs of stockholders, both those stockholders who might be critical of company policy and those who supported it, at a time when the company is doing badly.

Another way in which the modeling of the addressee manifests itself, is in accommodation behavior. Such linguistic behaviour has been studied by Howard Giles and his associates (Giles & Powesland, 1975) and others. Studies of linguistic behavior show that speakers tend to increase the frequency of their use of given linguistic variables, such as certain words or sounds, in proportion to their use by their addressees. Again this is manifestation of 'you attitude' and its applicability in a business communication situation is explored with regard to gender accommodation by David and Baker (1994). They presume that as women in management become more senior they should accommodate to men's management styles and vice versa. Whether this is a matter of should or will is an interesting unanswered question. Carbone (1994) also examines 'you attitude' from the perspective of accommodation theory.

Accommodation behaviour in the form of audience design as outlined by Bell (1984) shows that style shifting is a kind of audience design. Speakers unconsciously adjust their speech style to accommodate to their addressees. Levin and Behrens (2003) use Bell's audience design concept to analyze the way in which a corporation seeks to adjust its image to its audience.

Since business communication involves the production of discourse, discourse analysis has been taken from the linguistics toolbox and used to explore business communication. There are a number of varieties of discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) examines discourses for power asymmetries. It has been taken from the linguistics toolbox by Livesey (2002) in an analysis of what is now often termed 'greenwashing', the use of public information campaigns by corporations involved in industries which are regarded as harmful to the environment. She uses critical discourse analysis to examine a petrochemical company's response to environmental concerns about global warming.

Studies by the Language in the Workplace project at Victoria University of Wellington (Holmes, 2000) have used discourse analysis on a large number of business texts showing, for example, how female managers structure their discourse to give directions to staff (Vine, 2001).

Stewart (1991) provides an instance of narrative theory used to explain the case study report used in the teaching of Management Theory. Narrative theory is a sub-type of discourse analysis dealing with story telling. The structure of natural narratives has been

studied by various theorists including linguists such as Labov and Waletzky (1967). Stewart shows, insightfully, both what is the same about case study narratives and narratives in general and what is different. In pointing out in detail what these characteristics are she is able to map the nature of a perhaps unique business communication genre.

Hyland (1998) examines CEO's letters in annual reports from the perspective of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is a kind of discourse analysis, which focuses on those parts of the discourse, which point to ways in which the discourse is to be read. In a largely quantitative study of a corpus of CEO's letters, Hyland draws attention to the utility of metadiscourse analysis suggesting that 'it opens up a new area of study of business discourse' (p.241). This is a clear call for another linguistic tool to be added to the toolbox for the study of business communication.

Park, Dillon and Mitchell (1998) show, by looking comparatively at Korean and American business letters of complaint, that discourse analysis can be used for the cross-cultural analysis of a business communication genre. They also draw on politeness theory since letters of complaint clearly have face-threatening potential. To achieve their ends they use a contrastive analysis of two corpora of letters of complaint.

These illustrations of the toolbox approach have overarching similarities. A theory from linguistics, for instance general pragmatics, politeness theory, discourse analysis or narrative theory, makes claims about human communication in general. Thus it makes predictions for business communication in particular. These predictions are found to be supported, normally with reference to a particular genre or communication situation.

Linguistics as frame in business communication research

We want next to suggest that there is an additional step that could be of benefit to Business Communication research approaches which use linguistics as a toolbox. We have suggested that various theories of linguistics may act as frames. Let us take a frame to be any theory which has *a priori* predictive power over an empirical domain. Let us further suppose that a frame has a *loose* fit if the theories it consists of make predictions about the whole of human communication and therefore, by definition, the domain under scrutiny. Politeness theory is a loose frame in that its theories make predictions about all interpersonal communication. Similarly discourse analysis can be performed on all discourses. To put it in the reverse, loose frames are not narrowly confined to the kinds of communication situations which are characteristic of business communication.

There are linguistic frames that are a tighter fit. We suggest that seeing business communication as encompassing a set of genres is a more tight-fitting use of linguistic theory. Why should we opt for this approach? There are certainly factors which should give us pause. The construct 'genre' is much contested. Almost every conceivable approach to the analysis of language use has made a contribution to our understanding of what it means to be a genre (Partridge 1997: 5-46). Sometimes such contributions are discipline internal as in the case of systemic functional linguistics where theorists follow Hallidayan modes of analysis (Martin 2001; Hyon 1996). Performance theory has its

view of genres since many genres are performed (Bauman and Briggs 1990). The New Rhetoric theoreticians in the USA have developed views on genre which are based on the principles of rhetoric (Miller 1994). It is not our purpose here to review all of these approaches. For thorough reviews see Atkinson & Biber 1994, Askehave & Swales 2001; Hanks 1987 and Partridge 1997.

However we feel a strong case can be made for supposing that business communication is a set of genres. To support that view we will outline a theory of genre which we feel draws on the literature in a coherent way. A number of approaches share the view that genres are both text types narrowly conceived of as sets of texts which share features of linguistic form, and the social context which both creates these texts and makes them categories of encoding, perception, and decoding. For example, Paré and Smart (1994: 147) define a genre as 'a set of texts, the composing processes involved in creating these texts, the reading practices used to interpret them, and the social roles performed by writers and readers.' Clearly intent and purpose are important since 'communicative genres are solutions to *specifically* communicative problems. Along with the command of language itself, such solutions are available in the social stock of knowledge' (Bergmann and Luckmann 1995: 289). This latter view is echoed by Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995:3) when they suggest that 'genre knowledge is best conceptualized as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities.' But intent and the discursive problem to be solved do not constitute the whole story. Askehave and Swales (2001: 209) make a persuasive case that genre categorization is a matter of 'extensive text-in-context inquiry'. Let us suppose therefore that genre analysis is of value in understanding business communication because business communication typically occurs where 'an organization has a stable mandate and well-defined structure' and 'where recurrent problems or exigencies arise, each of which calls for a different type of discourse and knowledge' (Paré & Smart 1994: 146). As a result, 'conventional discourse genres arise which are part of the linguistic habitus that native actors bring to speech' (Hanks 1987: 685).

Genre in business communication research

So how might one apply genre theory to business communication situations and if so which of the innumerable approaches should one utilise? For many theorists (e.g. Martin 1987) the central requirement in genre analysis is to establish what it is about the situation and purposes of the interlocutors which makes this regularly recurring, i.e. institutionalized, situation distinctive. Various frames have been proposed which may be used for this purpose (Hymes, 1968; Crystal & Davy, 1969; Biber, 1994). We will use that of Biber since it is one of the most extensive taxonomies of context. Biber (1994, p.40-41) suggests that situated varieties may be analyzed in terms of the situational variables below.

I. Communicative Characteristics of Participants

- A. Addressor(s):
 - Single/plural/institutional
- B. Addressee(s):
 - 1. Self/other

- 2. Single/plural/unenumerated
- C. Audience:
 - yes/no

II. Relations Between Addressor and Addressee

- A. Social role relations—relative status and power of addressor and addressee:
 - Addressor has more power/equal status/addressee has more power
- B. Extent of shared knowledge
 - 1. Specialist knowledge of topic:
 - high/low
 - 2. Specific personal knowledge:
 - high/low
- C. Interactiveness:
 - extensive/slight/none
- D. Personal relationships:
 - like, respect, fear: kin, friends, enemies, colleagues, etc.

III. Setting

- A Characteristics of the place of communication:
 - 1. Private/public
 - 2. Domain:
 - Business and workplace
 - Education and academic
 - Government and legal
 - Religious
 - Art and entertainment
 - Domestic and personal
 - Other
 - 3. Audiovisual mass media (television/ radio/cinema)
- B. Extent to which place is shared by participants:
 - Immediate/familiar/removed
- C. Extent to which time is shared by participants:
 - immediate/familiar/removed
- D. Specific place and time of communication

IV Channel

- A. Mode (primary channel):
 - written/spoken/signed/mixed/(other)
- B. Permanence:
 - recorded/transient
- C. Medium of transmission:
 - If recorded:
 - 1. Taped/transcribed/typed/printed/handwritten/e-mail/other
 - 2. Published/unpublished
 - If transient:
 - 3. Face-to-face/telephone/radio/TV/other

- D. Embedded in a larger text from a different register:
yes/no

V. Relation of Participants to the Text

- A. Addressor—production circumstances:
revised or edited/scripted/planned/on-line
- B. Addressee—comprehension circumstances:
on-line/self-imposed time constraints
- *C. Addressor's and addressee's personal evaluation of text:
important, valuable, required, beautiful, popular. etc.
- *D. Addressor's attitudinal stance toward the text:
1. Emotionally involved/removed
 2. Reverence/everyday
 3. Excitement
- etc .
- *E. Addressor's epistemological stance toward the text:
belief, conviction, doubt. etc.

VI. Purposes, Intents, and Goals

- A. Factuality:
(Purported to be) based on fact/speculative/imaginative mixed
- B. Purposes:
1. Persuade or sell: high/medium/low
 2. Transfer information: high/medium/low
 3. Entertain, edify: high/medium/low
 4. Reveal self (including expression of personal feelings, attitudes, or efforts at enhancing interpersonal relations): high/medium/low

***VII, Topic/Subject**

- A. Level of discussion:
specialized/general/popular
- *B. Specific subject:
finance, science, religion, politics, sports, law, people, daily activities etc .

*Parameters that are not specified as closed sets

Since most genre studies see the form of the particular genre as arising at least in part out of the exigencies of the situation, the analysis of situation comes prior to the study of its resultant textual effects.

Using parameters of situational constraint.

To illustrate how such a taxonomy of context might be used in the study of business communication we will use Biber's situational parameters to analyze a single business communication text.² then draw conclusions about how such an analysis might be extended. The example text includes an element of apology from business organizations to clients. We have used these texts because the letter of apology is a traditional business

genre. They are not strictly negative messages in that the 'bad news' has already been conveyed but techniques used in negative messages, e.g. buffers, distancing, lexical hedges (Thomas, 1997; Limaye, 1997) are used. We want to both retain the integrity of the individual texts in the analysis and tacitly draw attention to their commonalities in line with later arguments in this paper.

Apologizing in writing

The sample letter is on paper headed with the name of the bank and the address of the branch, relates to the consequences of a fraudulent withdrawal from a joint bank account.

1 May 2003

Mr M and Mrs N Young
54 Colombo Street
Newtown
BALMORAL

Dear Mr and Mrs Young

Thank you for your recent call, regarding the difficult time you been through (*sic*) with your accounts and cards.

I wish to apologise for the inconvenience you have experienced. Please find enclosed the statements/invoices you forwarded. Reversal of credit card interest has been credited to your cheque account.

If you have any further queries, please do not hesitate to contact myself on direct line 964 2973.

Yours sincerely
(signed)
Philippa Mackay
Branch Manager
Cashmere

Biber's parameters of situational constraint refer first to the *communicative characteristics of the participants*, alerting us to the institutional role of the addressor and the role of the joint addressees as clients of the institution so that the 'you' addressed in the letter is plural. There is no indication of the letter being copied to others so there is, presumably, no audience although it is likely a copy would be filed and may be read at a later date.

The *relations between the addressor and the addressees* have a professional basis, the branch manager of the bank holding a professional position but owing an apology to the customers because of the failure of bank systems and the consequent inconvenience caused to the addressees. Both parties share knowledge of this inconvenience but the bank manager needs to acknowledge *the difficult time you been through (sic) with your accounts and cards* and to inform the addressees that the matters she promised to attend

to have been rectified. Each sentence contains at least one *you* or *your*, the first sentence having four *you* or *yours* in eighteen words, suggesting that the writer's keenness to show she was aware of the recipient/s. References to the writer are limited to one use of *I* and one of *myself*. The emphasis is on the recipients with the writer suggesting if they *have any further queries*, they should *not hesitate to contact myself on direct line 964 2973*. However the message is not interactive since it is not clear whether or not the recipients of the letter are likely to take up this offer.

The *setting* for the writing of the letter was a bank, i.e. business premises. The letter was received probably a day or two later at the residence of the recipients so, although the parties are members of essentially the same community, the distance between both the time and place of sending and receiving that usually occurs with letters, was present. The date style, 1 May 2000, with day, month, year is English rather than American, as is congruent with New Zealand usage.

Although the original communication was spoken as shown in the reference to *your recent call*, the channel is a written one. The writer had to initiate certain actions before responding in full to the requests made and letters are a conventional way of conveying an apology in business, both because writing a letter creates a record and because it conveys a sense of greater effort in terms of acknowledgment and in making amends. The letter has been word processed with open punctuation. There are some signs of less than professional standards *to contact myself* and *the difficult time you [have] been through*, though the letter follows the standard apology format of greeting, acknowledgment of the situation, report of action taken and a closing which offers further help if necessary. As the letter is fairly simple *the relationship of the participants to the text* is relatively straightforward in that the writer has attempted to convey an apology and some information in a conventional manner. We cannot tell from the text whether it was well received or not.

The *purposes, intents, and goals* are, as has been suggested, those of a relatively uncomplicated business communication with the main aim of transferring information, with the *topic/subject* relating to financial transactions of a kind which fits into a known area, and which therefore presents little challenge to the writer in terms of requiring original thought or expression.

Biber's categories which we have used here to cover the relation of the participants to the text and topic/subject include parameters are not closed sets. They can be used in similar fashion to elucidate the features of this, or other, texts and expanded to cover situations, attitudes or genres relevant to a particular set of communications. A genre analysis would furthermore say that such parameters would, over time, lead to the conventionalization of a text type to deal with such recurrent situation.³

Discussion

We have briefly illustrated above the utility of a genre approach to an individual business communication situation and text. We aimed to show that genre study is necessary, not just desirable, for understanding business communication situations and texts. That is

because business communication as a domain is composed essentially of registers and genres. We can therefore define the domain of business communication as that set of genres which are characteristic of business communication. That domain is the possession of a discourse community which 'has developed and continues to develop discursal expectations. These may involve appropriacy of topics, the form, function and positioning of discursal elements, and the roles that texts play in the operation of the discourse community' (Swales, 1990, p.26). The field of Business Communication is therefore the field that studies these genres within the context of their discourse community. We are aware that this limits the field but we think this delimitation is useful. By defining the domain in this way we exclude, for example, casual, non business talk on business premises, private phone calls home at lunchtime, gossip, joking behaviour and many other kinds of talk which goes on in the workplace. But we believe that these kinds of talk, although surely important, are not the central matters that Business Communication has to understand in the first instance. They are also not what make Business Communication a distinct domain. We therefore assign them to the broader field of the sociolinguistics of workplace communication.

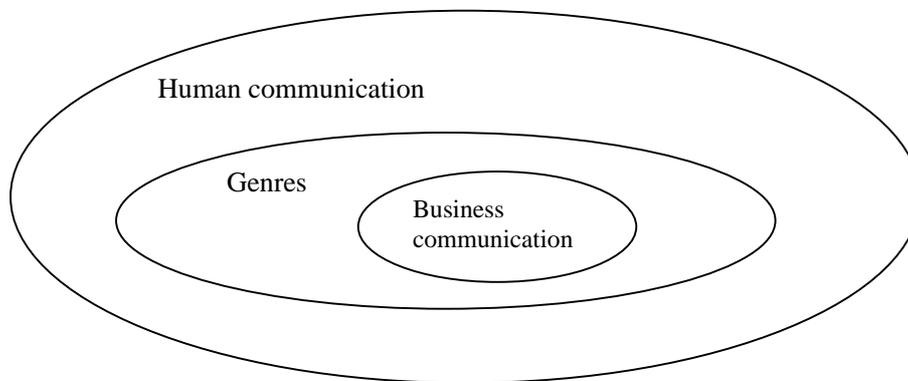


Figure 1: Business communication as a subset of genres

The case study we used to illustrate this approach to business communication was relatively fine-grained. Such fine-grained analyses can be generalized so as to extract from multiple studies just those parameters of situational constraint which give rise, for example, to answer phone message replies to inquiries from customers, or CEO's letters in annual reports, auctioning as a genre or any number of other business communication situations and genres. This involves abstracting away from the individual differences from text to text through aggregating analyses of sample sets of such texts to laying bare what is unique about a whole genre.

The question then arises as to the limit on such aggregation. Can we aggregate and generalize further to, say, all kinds of sales talk? No doubt that is possible but something is also lost. The immediacy of studying livestock auctioneers in Canterbury, New Zealand is lost when one generalizes to all auctioneering in the English tradition (Kuiper, 1996). There are a number of ways one could test the validity of such higher level generalizations. The first is to see whether someone who was adept in one genre would easily make the transition to another. Would a bank officer who wrote our sample letter

make a letter writer in the complaints department of a large department store? Would a fine art auctioneer be proficient at selling sheep? Not necessarily. The second way of test such validity is to see whether the genres are considered by practitioners of them to be variant forms of the same thing. Here folk taxonomies in the form of the beliefs and nomenclature of the practitioners themselves may play a significant role. Perhaps also the utility of the higher level generalizations are doubtful for other reasons as we will suggest later and as also suggested by Hanks (1989: 100).

If we remain in the mid-range of specificity, we might ask how many kinds of business communication genre exist? This is essentially to ask what is the 'communicative budget' of business communication (Bergmann and Luckman 1995)? That is an empirical question that may not yet have been answered and, as such, constitutes an essential research program for the field of Business Communication. There are a number of potential approaches, each of which has empirical significance in itself. First one could study whole workplaces for the range of institutionally recognized genres in common use. A whiteware assembly line construction company might hold meetings of various sorts, send out letters of various sorts, write reports, assembly instructions, toolmaker specifications and so forth. A period of some months as a participant observer would probably yield tens of distinct genres that are in common use in such a company. The company probably would also have a folk taxonomy of these genres which careful questioning would elicit, as suggested by Biber (1989:5). We suspect that secretaries at the factory recognize the difference between taking meeting minutes and phone messages. We know of no study of folk taxonomies of this kind in Business Communication. In this we follow de Beaugrande (1993)

Future work must include having everyday speakers describe the registers they know and the ways they use them. This kind of fieldwork will not provide all the data we need to understand how registers arise and how they are put to work. But we urgently need a more general perspective than any one linguist or school of linguists can bring to bear by attacking the problem amongst themselves (p.18).

A second approach is to shadow individuals in the workplace to look at their communicative repertoires (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998). Each such repertoire would involve knowledge of and skill in a set of distinct genres. For example, an attorney holds meetings with clients, has telephone conversations with clients, meets with colleagues to discuss a case, provides directives to paralegals and secretarial colleagues, writes legal briefs, reads but does not write law reports, writes lawyer's letters, draws up wills, represents clients in courts of various kinds, and so forth. In the sense of Bakhtin (1981), an attorney is heteroglossic, the heteroglossia lying in being in command of a host of genre varieties.

Yet another form of aggregation is that of genre systems as outlined in Yates and Orlikowski (2002). This aggregation sees sets of genres as being sequentially related in business processes such as employing a person. In such a process the placement of a job advertisement is followed by a job application, which is followed by receipt of application letter, which is followed by an invitation for interview letter which is followed by an interview and so forth. The business process of employing someone is

thus a sequential type of aggregation of genres. Aggregation can also be done over time since 'communicative genres are ... open to change' (Günther and Knoblauch 1995: 6). That being so, aggregation of diachronically selected texts and discursive practices can be attempted to see how current discursive practices have evolved as has been done for auctioning (Kuiper, 1992) and for the business memo (Yates 1989).

Contrastive studies at the individual workplace level can be attempted since 'we often find different organizations displaying their unique identities through their organizational preferences in matters of their choice of generic forms' (Bhatia, 2001:67).

Conclusion

Linguistic framing studies show that no theory projects on *all* business communication, and *only* on business communication. Does this mean that the domain of business communication is incoherent and thus that research in Business Communication research may be in vain, as Ghadessy (1993) suggests by supposing that '[I]t is almost impossible to define what is meant by the expression BUSINESS COMMUNICATION due to the many variables that are involved.'? (p.149). Far from it, as we have suggested by adopting the approach, suggested by Ghadessy, that 'it may be possible to limit this kind of social activity by discussing some of the characteristics that can easily be identified.' (1993, p.149).

Defining business communication as a set of genres is an intuitively plausible proposal. Like so many other sets of genre varieties, each variety in business is worth understanding in its own right. Studies of genres can also be aggregated in various ways and generalized over. This has practical value. For instance, once one understands how those who are masters of the practice perform as against novices, then one can provide guidance to the novices. Of course that advice can only be part of the process of learning to 'do' business communication since 'learning the genres of disciplinary or professional discourse would be similar to second language acquisition, requiring immersion into the culture and a lengthy period of apprenticeship and enculturation' (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995:13). Communication needs analysis is an important preparation for such advice. Furthermore there are situations where the parameters of linguistic choice make it clear that certain ways of communicating are normative in the business community. Where there is a failure to understand these parameters, miscommunication or worse may result (Herndl, Fennel & Miller, 1991). Communication audits of businesses can uncover such maladapted practices.

We have therefore shown how the tight frame of genre studies provides an apposite set of tools for the study of business communication practice. We do not claim genre studies should be used exclusively. Both tight and loose frames, from linguistic and other toolboxes, supply descriptive tools that can illuminate business communication practice. We have attempted to show that genre theories have particular applicability both in theory and in practice. We have used this applicability to define the domain of business communication in an intuitively satisfying way and as a result show the field as having certain central tasks. These tasks, such as documenting all the genres of business communication, seem to us to be the central goals of research in Business

Communication since genre knowledge in business cultures, is centrally, 'knowledge that professionals need in order to communicate in disciplinary communities' (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995: 24). If the resulting objectives are successfully addressed, then Business Communication will be a unified field and will be practically useful for practitioners in business communication.

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Notes

¹ Rodman uses the term 'you-attitude', although 'you attitude' is more commonly used.

² It is used with the permission of the addressee who provided the contextual information about the communication. The name of the writer and of the business have been changed.

³ In turn, this genre could become a subject of instruction in Business Communication classes. Texts such as the above, and analysis of them, would be suitable exemplars in such instruction.

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