SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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Context of the study

Communication helps people go beyond the sea of misunderstanding and brings them closer. It is a bridge that connects countries and people; it is the most powerful tool human beings have in order to express their ideas and feelings.

In the past people lived in small groups in order to hunt and find food, to establish families and raise children, but also to defend themselves; while individuals that preferred to remain alone were vulnerable.

Some researchers consider that communities represent the survival strategy of the mankind. Each type of knowledge is associated with the experience of communities, shaping this way the people's behavior and relations and influencing the development of each society. Although in the past the members of a group were only a few, nowadays we talk about organizations with hundreds or thousands of members, of employees. The scope of the current organizations is different from the ones in the past: today if we talk about organizations we mean also objectives, productivity, competition, performance and of course profit. But in order to accomplish all these we need communication.

"Despite the ongoing explosion in communication technology, we often still miss the mark when it comes to communicating face-to-face or in writing. I believe the main reason for this is that we confuse information and communication, which are not the same thing at all. While information can be a one-way flow, there is no such thing as one-way communication. For every message sent out, whether spoken or written, someone somewhere must receive and understand it – or there is no communication" [Wilkie, 2001: 7].

We communicate in order to inform, motivate, instruct, stimulate the generation of ideas, debate and change opinions or to build the pillars for a future development.

Theoretical Framework and Objectives

In my paper I cut out a part of reality, separate it from the rest of the world and subject it to my analysis. This part of reality is communication within the dynamic business environment. Therefore the object of my research is communication; it is related to human beings acting in organized communities in order to reach common goals.

The semantic and pragmatic aspects mutually interact, as a division between semantics and pragmatics is by no means universally accepted in linguistics.

My pragmatic analysis is a realistic one (it does not cultivate doubt), that tries to merge traditional views with modern ones, focused on the truth values similar to any scientific research. I direct special attention to "shapes" as well as "content"/ "meaning", to practical side of the analyzed object; my analysis belongs to human sciences and it contains a theoretical framework as well as applications on the corpus.

Theoretical aspects indicate us how communication within the business environment should be, while practical research indicates us how the communication process really is. Therefore the main objective of my paper is to deepen my research beyond theoretical aspects through a case study that contains a dual analysis: a corpus-based analysis and a survey among the employees. Only such an analysis can lead to a satisfactory conclusion and useful recommendation.

We all agree that communication is influenced by social structures, as it is a social interaction process. It occurs at both levels of social order. We verbally interact and therefore we use communication – and this belongs to the microlevel of this order. On the other hand, an interaction characterized by dominating a social group or influencing people occurs at the macrolevel. But in everyday life they co-exist and they are a unified whole.

If we speak about critical discourse analysis we need to speak about its central notion, namely power. Here power means social power of certain groups or in other words the control exercised on acts and minds of less powerful and vulnerable groups. The control over acts of people pertains to action, for example by limiting their freedom of action; while the control over the minds of people pertains to cognition. Modern

control, and often the most effective one, is mostly cognitive and based on different strategies to change the mind of individuals in one's interest.

To be able to perform this control it is necessary to have a power base. This base sets its foundation on certain social resources, for example money, information, knowledge, authority. Power may take the shape of laws, norms, regulations or habits. Therefore it may be considered "a natural situation" so after a while it becomes less obvious, so less "negative". On the other hand power is stronger when it is refers to groups; the power of individuals is seldom absolute and it does not last forever.

Another resource for power base is the effective control over communication. At a microlevel each individual can easily control the communicative actions he is involved in; but at a macrolevel he has a passive control over the process.

In the business environment, corporations exercise control over certain groups related to their activity due to authority, knowledge and money. Van Dijk considers that in this case "*ordinary people are more or less passive targets of text or talk*" while the entity exercising control over them "*simply tells them what [not] to believe or what to do*" [Van Dijk; 356]. We are entitled then to say that corporate communication has an important role in the production of dominance, at a company level. Work flows often legitimate control; because norms and regulations are required to be imposed for the adequate completion of work process.

This dominance may be explained also as inequality: people that are part of management teams have more power than their subordinates. And this is not always something bad; due to the fact that the lack of a manager will most probably lead to a state of lawlessness and disorder. But when it comes to communication, it takes two entities for the process to be successfully completed, as communication means exchange of information.

The control over a group and *access to certain resources* are general notions. "Thus, if discourse is defined in terms of complex communicative events, access and control may be defined both for the *context* and for the *structures of text and talk themselves*" [Van Dijk; 356].

In case of corporate communication, context – or social situation – is the performance of operations in the respective business or industry, the work process itself. Each business entity and its management have the authority, knowledge and money to give people instructions; they shape the context according to their objectives and in the same time they shape the communication process with all their stakeholders. And this refers also to the types of communication, genres and text structures used in each situation. As Van Dijk explains: "top business managers have exclusive access to executive board meetings, in which the most powerful is usually associated with the chair, who also controls the agenda, speech acts [e.g. who may command whom], turn allocation [who is allowed to speak], decision-making, topics and other important and consequential dimensions of such institutional talk. At the same time, managers have access to business reports and documents, or can afford to have those written for them; they have preferential access to the news media, as well as to negotiations with top politicians and other top managers" [Van Dijk; 256].

Structure of the Paper

My paper is divided into 9 chapters. **The first chapter entitled General Aspects of Business Communication** begins with the definition of communication. Communication is defined by Clutterbuck as "*a contract between individuals, the organization and each other. Communication only works when people are willing to engage with others. The quality of communication depends on whether the 'contract' is one of listening, discussing or genuine dialogue*" [Clutterbuck, 2002:13-15]. In my paper I will focus on the communication with the two most important categories of people related to a company's activity, namely its customers - external communication - and its employees - internal communication. Further I outline the objectives of communication that require the involvement of both employees and employers, in order to achieve stretch performance objectives.

My research will be focused on the written communication with internal orientation, as my corpus includes memoranda, letters to associates/ information letters, monthly reviews, minutes, internal use documents and messages, all written in English language and belonging to large companies activating in Romania as well as worldwide.

Throughout my work, I will identify the entities and elements involved in this process, as well as the skills necessary to make communication effective and successful, as good communication depends not so much on how well we say things, but more on how well the things we say are received/ perceived.

The analysis of written communication will focus then on the forms of business communication, outlining their characteristics as well as their uses. Due to the fact that *business writing must earn a reading* [Forsyth, 2008: 113], after presenting these examples I will also discuss a few aspects regarding the assurance of quality in business writing.

The second chapter is entitled Pragmatics of Business Communication. It starts with a critical discourse analysis. If we speak about critical discourse analysis we need to speak about its central notion, namely power. Here power means social power of certain groups or in other words the control exercised on acts and minds of less powerful and vulnerable groups. The control over acts of people pertains to action, for example by limiting their freedom of action; while the control over the minds of people pertains to cognition. Modern control, and often the most effective one, is mostly cognitive and based on different strategies to change the mind of individuals in one's interest.

In this chapter I will focus on my corpus, while the survey and the findings will be explained and detailed in Chapter 4.

Regarding the communication process, one of Grice's principles is the Cooperative Principle. It includes several general maxims that govern this rational interchange of information together with some recommendations in this respect.

Another idea included in this chapter is that a narrative is a message that tells the particulars of an act or occurrence or course of events. In corporations, the narrative reproduces the organization itself, and as Charlotte Linde believes, its role is to "*reproduce or challenge its power structures, induct new members, create the identity of the institution and its members, adapt to change, and deal with contested or contradictory versions of the past. We may understand this as the way an institution uses narrative to create and reproduce its identity by the creation and maintenance of an institutional memory*".

The last discussion here refers to text and context; various properties of context include the dynamic character of each context, the participants and the relations between them.

Chapter 3 is entitled Semantics of Business Communication. The first idea analysed here refers to synonymy or meaning identity. Synonymy is a part of the metalinguistic stock-intrade of ordinary speakers of English: people often refer to words as 'having the same meaning'. However, they usually restrict the statement of the synonymy of several words (or phrases) to the utterance level: When questions of sameness of meaning arise for unsophisticated speakers, no appeal is made to an abstract entity of 'meaning': a given word or phrase is accepted as having the same meaning as another word or phrase if its substitution for the other in the given context yields an utterance which they will accept as having the same meaning as the first utterance [Lyons, 1968: 75].

Some researchers consider synonymy a context-bound phenomenon, two or more words being synonyms in a certain context, whereas others consider it context-free (synonym words are identical in meaning in all contexts). There are numerous disagreements concerning the question of synonyms and the grammatical context

Another part included in this chapter refers to MECE principle. According to Victor Cheng, MECE (pronounced "me see") is "a principle often used by management consulting firms to describe a way of organizing information. MECE principle is popular because it allows the communication of complex information in a way that eliminates confusion and ensures thoroughness; it can be applied to every decision taking. All the factors that people need to take into consideration related to a decision can be grouped into a MECE structure. Based on *The structure of grouping items in a message*, I analyzed several documents included in my corpus to see if this MECE principle is applicable in case of corporate communication process too.

The last part of the chapter is related to metaphorical meaning in business communication. According to cognitive linguistics, metaphors are "used automatically during people's production and understanding of conventional expressions and novel metaphorical language". They are "a phenomenon of the mind" [Tendahl, 2009: 155], a substitution of one thing for another and they are "regarded as just one particular kind of

the *loose use* of language" [Tendahl, 2009: 2]; metaphors are not just "a kind of artistic embellishment, at the rarefied end of linguistic usage, divorced and isolated from everyday communication", but "a basic phenomenon that occurs throughout the whole range of language activity" [Knowles and Moon, 2006: 1].

Chapter 4 includes the Case Study. The Overview describes the first and the second part of my survey as well as some general information regarding the respondents and their companies.

This case study makes use of a survey research method. I consider this an important step in my entire analysis: I started my paper with a theoretical background regarding communication, followed by a corpus-based analysis, an analysis of the documents generated by companies. But in order to have a clear and real picture of Internal Communication I deliberately chose to include here the participation of the receivers of the corporate messages; because only together these elements make evident the difference between theoretical aspects of business communication and its implementation/ results and help me reach a correct conclusion.

The Survey Regarding Internal Communication focuses on the 15 questions and the structure of answers for each question. The results are presented with the help of charts and graphs and followed by a personal interpretation.

Chapter 5 includes Communication Theory and Law. This part of my paper will focus on the features that mould the English and Romanian legal discourse and the way they establish new legal relationships and generate legal consequences.

Legal English has conquered the world and nowadays it is the most important language used in commercial communication, especially in contracts.

Legal discourse is enforced through language. As Maley explained: *"in all societies, law is formulated, interpreted and enforced…and the greater part of these different legal processes is realized primarily through language. Language is the medium, process and product in the various arenas of the law where legal texts, spoken or written, are generated in the service of regulating social behavior"* [quoted by Cao, 2007: 12].

The main part of this chapter focuses on the characteristics of English and Romanian Legal Language: terms with foreign origin, the use of *shall,* synonymy, polysemy, reduced number of pronouns, modality, precision versus flexibility, structure and style in legal texts.

Chapter 6 is entitled Translation in Business Communication. In order to establish and maintain the business relationship with our partners first we need to understand their needs and then to respond to their requests – therefore we need to communicate. And from the domestic market to the European market and then to the Global market we communicate via translations.

In an increasingly globalized world, translations need to cope with a high level of demand that fluctuates in response to political imperatives. The process of text production and reception is therefore opened towards a large number of countries and cultures and it applies to practically all spheres of human interaction.

A well-known fact is that English has become a lingua franca in numerous communicative contexts [for example political and commercial purposes or academic exchanges]. The concept of lesser translated languages is based on its dominance among the translated languages.

Translation policies of organizations which include a large number of nations (for example United Nations, European Union, NATO) focus on the complex interaction between their actors. The European Union's language policy stipulates the principle of multilingualism – everybody has the right to use his or her national language when communicating with the EU bodies. As a consequence of this equality of languages, translations have become more or less invisible and replaced by *language versions.*

In this chapter I will talk about translations for legal purposes and about the language of law, about translators that need to understand the source language and to be able to use the target language so as to transmit the same information in a different language.

Justice and translation are both ways of talking about inter-human relations, as a language's meaning and roots are deeply social. The source text (the original) and the

target text (the translation) are very much connected to each other, like a pair of dancers, as Boyd White explains: "*we can think of an expression, then, not as a way of conveying a message or idea, as a "vehicle" with a "content", but as a gesture the meaning of which is indissolubly tied to its immediate and unique context: to its language and culture, to the social relations out of which it emerges and upon which it acts, to the prior texts that its author and audience use to establish and understand its terms, to its location in a particular place in the physical world, and so on. Our responses to such expressions, whether "interpretations" or "translations", are not to be thought of as replicating the originals or conveying their "content", but as gestures themselves; as if the first expression were a piece of dance, an invitation to make a dance together, and as if our responses to it were answering movements. There is to such a gesture no single right response but an infinite number of possible responses, many of them good ones, many not so good; in evaluating them we should not speak of accuracy so much as appropriateness*" [Boyd White, 1990: 236].

Chapter 7 is the Conclusion regarding my research **– Semantic and Pragmatic Aspects of Business Communication.** This chapter includes besides the conclusion the recommendations for the entities responsible for corporate communication.

Chapter 8 APPENDIX includes the Survey regarding Internal Communication and also print screens from the statistical analysis software – SPSS Statistics – I used to process the answers to my survey.

My paper ends with Chapter 9 - it includes the bibliography used for the preparation of my paper.

The circle of the scientific knowledge is never closed; therefore a researcher must not limit the horizon of knowledge, but to continue his work. However, at the end of the research, the nature and meaning of the main object are only partially revealed. So beyond this research there is another horizon waiting to be discovered. Therefore my work is only a door opened into the world of unknown.

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