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Investigating Pragmatic Failures in Business Letters of Kazakhstani Professionals

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Abstract

In recent years, the economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan has undergone considerable changes and development. As a consequence, many international business transactions are carried out between the representatives of different languages and cultures. This article focuses on pragmatic failures detected in the collected corpora of 100 business letters written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals to their international partners. A number of examples has been identified which clearly demonstrates noticeable discrepancy between cultural and linguistic contexts of speech units making communication process complicated. In the study, we have identified several reasons for pragmatic failures in communication through business correspondence including a mixture of different cultural standards of the structural and linguistic processing of business correspondence, a mixture of different genres in one business text with a combination of several communicative purposes, a lack of language skills of the authors of business letters in English (spelling, grammar, lexical errors), etc.

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1. Introduction

In the current worldwide trade context, many companies are involved in international business activities. In this setting, effective cross-cultural communication is becoming an integral part of contemporary business world. Since, as many researchers assert, sometimes the cultural norms of the target language and the first language writing conventions are transferred to the second language resulting in pragmatic failure (Ziran & Zhuang, 1986; Ya &

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Ling, 2002; Ya, 2001; Zamborlin, 2007; Zhenbin, 2007, etc.), i.e., miscommunication and misunderstandings or “the failure to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (Thomas, 2006, p. 24). Taking into account the area of cross-cultural communication breakdown Thomas (2006) identifies two types of pragmatic failure, i.e., pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. In most cases pragmalinguistic failures occur “when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2”, whereas sociopragmatic failures are “the result of a failure to identify a situation correctly” (Umale, 2005, p.20). These communication breakdowns are especially crucial in business communication since improper interpretation of business messages may lead to the failure of business transactions, waste of financial asserts, or the legal responsibility. For example, in accordance with the ELISE (1996-1998) and the ELUCIDATE (1999-2000) projects’ findings the lack of cross-cultural skills of European trade managers become one of the main reasons of a considerable business loss (Hagen 2001). Some scholars (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Adler, 2002; Ferraro 2010) believe that communication breakdowns in intercultural settings are mostly caused by the inability to decode and recognise “different ways of thinking and behaving, rather than by inadequate professional practice (Garcia-Yest, 2013, p. 197).

The purpose of this study is to explore pragmatic failures and communication breakdowns in business letters written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals to their international colleagues. The research is aimed at identifying possible reasons of detected pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures explained by specificity of national and cultural features of the letters’ authors.

This paper will first introduce the reader with the research methodology and the main findings of the analysis in relation to the communication strategies used by Kazakhstani business professionals. Extracts will be quoted from the corpora to illustrate the most striking examples. This article will end with the main conclusions, followed by an examination of the relevant limitations and suggestions for further research and study.

2. Methodology

In this paper the collected business letters are written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals, who are working in international, national and foreign companies to their English-speaking business partners. The pragmatic failures are investigated qualitatively from contrastive text linguistic and pragmalinguistic perspectives. In general, between January 2013 and November 2014, 550 business letters were collected and analysed, which turned out to be written in 4 financial, 5 manufacturing, and 3 service companies located in Astana, Almaty, Atyrau and Aktau. Out of this number, 100 business letters were selected where different types of communication breakdowns had been identified.

3. Results and Discussion

In this study, we identified some most frequently occurred pragmatic failures arising during the implementation of the discursive strategies and communicative intentions of Kazakhstani business professionals in the context of intercultural settings. These communication breakdowns were most clearly represented in the texts of business correspondence written in English by Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking business professionals.

In this study, a pragmatic failure is understood, on the one hand, as the construction of statements out of context, situation and traditions of a particular cultural and linguistic space and, on the other hand, misinterpretation of statements of partners communication in decoding the meaning of these statements. On the basis of existing classifications of the main causes of communication failures (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Thomas, 2006). The following factors of communicative and pragmatic failures are relevant to our study:

- The lack of language competence of business professionals
- National and cultural differences of participants of business communication, i.e. cognitive aspects of individual business communicators, who belong to different national cultures
- Various pragmatic factors (discursive failures)

We have identified a number of examples which clearly demonstrate noticeable discrepancy between the cultural and linguistic context of speech units, which make the process of communication more complicated. Pragmatic

failures include the use of incorrect statements that have a different interpretation in a particular language or not true communicative intent communicant, incorrect response business communicators on this or that statement, etc. For example:

3.1. *Improper use of greetings and polite endings of business letters*

This pragmatic failure does not always lead to communicative breakdowns, but can be regarded as a fairly sharp and straight for native speakers of English. There are some examples:

- Omission of the word “Dear” when referring to the addressee
- Misuse of social and professional status of the recipient, for example, “Mrs.” instead of “Dr.”
- Use of only the first recipient’s name, such as “Dear Dr. James after the showing of the socio-professional status (full name of the addressee John Clark)
- Mentioning social status and position of the recipient, such as “Dear Mr. Director”, etc.
- Use of greeting phrases (e.g., Hello, Hi, Good afternoon, etc.), which is not peculiar to the official business correspondence in English business culture
- Absence of any form of greeting

The non-standard final phrases refer to the use of the speech means inappropriate to the official style of business correspondence (for example, “Sincerely” or “Cordially yours”), since such verbal constructions are mainly used in informal situations in which the addressee and sender familiar with each other.

3.2. *The use of direct strategies request information*

Using direct expression strategies requests, not specific to the English-language business correspondence, also leads to pragmatic failures and communication failures, as the recipient may regard this statement rude and too straightforward. Thus, in the example below, the implementation of tactics motives business partner to current Kazakhstan manager used quite categorical request form, which led to the communicative failure:

*Dear [First Name]!
Immediately send an invitation to the cost of tuition and accommodation.*

It is obvious that this business message is unacceptable to the English-speaking business culture because of its extreme directness. There is an incorrect use of an exclamation mark after the salutation, and a direct form of request “*Immediately send an invitation*” without politeness marker “please”, which has an effect of order rather than a request. The incorrect use of the adverb “Immediately” (immediately) instead of the conventional in English business correspondence stable phrase “as soon as possible” (As soon as possible, as far as possible) should be also noted, which is obviously due to a lack of linguistic competencies of business correspondence. In other texts of business requests such direct questions have been also used, which are not specific to the English-speaking business communicators as “Did you get my project?”, “I need to know...” et al., or elliptical sentences: “Any news?”, “Any comments?” and so on. Although the direct type of requests for business texts in Kazakh and Russian languages is appropriate, in English business communication this can lead to communicative and pragmatic failures. This is confirmed by a letter of reply, where the English-speaking business professional responded in accordance with accepted standards of his business culture:

*Dear [First name],
Usually to prepare documents takes 2 week, I'm doing this in 2 days, so please respect my work and be patient.
Also, send me the address please where should I send the documents for visa.
Regards,
[Full Name]*

3.3. Improper use of active and passive voice

The use of the passive voice constructions is very common in the English language, especially in the texts of business correspondence with negative tone to keep a friendly tone of business correspondence. In some business texts written by Kazakhstani business professionals, the use of active voice has been reported in constructing sentences in accordance with generally accepted traditions of writing business letters:

You promised to complete the project outline within a week, and you have put us to considerable inconvenience through the long delay.

Despite the fact that the meaning of the claimed business message is clear for the English-speaking business professionals, yet it causes some communicative discomfort. This communicative dissonance happened due to the fact that this expression was considered too direct of his guilt and resentment from the perspective of the native speaker of English. In terms of features of English business culture, in this situation it is more acceptable to use the passive voice:

The project was promised to be completed within a week, and we have been put to considerable inconvenience through the long delay.

As you can see, in this case the focus is on the problem itself, not on the people responsible for this question. Consequently, the business message is less direct and excludes categorically.

3.4. Improper construction of business text

Despite the fact that the specific business correspondence is a special focus on the essential details of the subject matter, it is not always the case when all the details mentioned in the business text relevant:

Good afternoon, dear [Full Name]!

Having a gas processing facility in the Kyzylorda region, “[Company Name]” LLP has proceeded to business, where one of the raw materials is a fraction of pentane-hexane.

Due to the fact that your organization has developed ILLI Kazakh ready standard organization «pentane-hexane fraction» ST TOO 165-1943-07-01-2011, we wrote an official letter to the website of “[Company Name]” LLP ref. Number 101 of 13 July 2012 with a request to give your permission to use the above mentioned standard by our organization, but the answer is still not received.

Please send us a formal response to our request.

Sincerely,

[First Name]

This text contains business syntactic constructions difficult for the English-speaking business professionals. In one proposal several communicative tasks are included: 1) to inform the addressee about running for operation of a gas processing facility; 2) to inform the addressee about the lack of response to the previous request. In contrast to business texts in Kazakh and Russian languages, English business letters are different by simplified syntactic constructions and simplicity of style. Effect of perception is achieved by breaking down complex business text into separate, simple in composition and construction of phrases.

4. Conclusion

The collected corpus of business correspondence during the study confirms the increasingly expanding the role of the English language in written business communication in Kazakhstan. To sum up, the analysis of illustrative material showed the following:

- Business correspondence Kazakh specialists who are non-native English language is different from the letters of native speakers – in a communicative, pragmatic, composite, graphic and genre and stylistic aspects

- Business correspondence English speakers generally strictly sustained in conventional methods of writing business correspondence in English, non-English letters than communicants
- Non-native English language, particularly, Kazakh business professionals, often make mistakes in interpreting the expectations of its international destinations and in the understanding of the cultural context.

These conclusions are confirmed by different scholars' view (Bhatia, 1993; Kaplan 1966, Zhu, 2005) that for effective written communication non-native English language must also have a good understanding of national-cultural features of reading. Thus, the basis of language structures is a sociocultural structure. Overcoming a language barrier is not enough to ensure effective communication between people of different cultures. To do this you need to overcome the barrier of national and cultural differences. Linguistic identity and symbolic semantics are formed in a particular socio-cultural space, defines the principles of worldview, including by means of verbal character code.

In the study, we have identified several reasons for failures in communication through business correspondence:

- a mixture of different national and cultural standards of the structural and linguistic processing of texts business correspondence;
- a mixture of different functional styles in one business text with a combination of several problems of communication;
- a lack of language skills of the authors of business letters in English (spelling, grammar, lexical errors).

As the results of the study, the main reason was usually the first one. It is a mixture of national and cultural standards of the structural and linguistic processing of documents leads to the creation of misconception about the writer. In other words, if the recipient does not evaluate such confusion as an attempt to adapt the sender to the recipient's cultural traditions. Specificity of drafting the text of business correspondence at the level of the composite scheme of linguistic design communication strategies and tactics, as well as the pragmatic structure of the text has a significant impact on the effectiveness of business communication. Despite the fact that conducted the study is limited to communication media and non-native English into professional-business level, the results confirm the need for academic teaching business communication in a non-native speaker's of Kazakhstan reality.

Such communication errors are mainly due to extralinguistic reasons. In this regard, the study of socio-cognitive features of the Kazakh, Russian and English and cognitive consciousness representatives considered crops will solve practical problems to overcome communication failures. It is the cognitive basis of any cultural and linguistic community is a repository of the cultural phenomena that best reflect the value orientation of community members and dictate their system of social behavior. Mastery of the basic components of the cognitive base of the Kazakh, Russian and English cultural and linguistic communities would, in our opinion, to avoid conflicts in intercultural business communication.

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