DEFINITION AND MAIN FEATURES OF BUSINESS ENGLISH WITH A SPECIAL REGARD TO DIFFERENCES WITH THE LANGUAGE OF ECONOMICS

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Abstract

Although English for Specific Purposes has now a consolidated role in language teaching and specialized discourse has been analysed by many scholars, Business English still has some definition problems. In my article I try to provide the reader with an overview of the studies in this field, by identifying the main features of Business Discourse/Business English (BD/BE) based on previous studies. I also try to identify similarities and differences between Economic Discourse/English for Economics (ED/EE) and BD/BE by starting from the premise that economics and business are two related but different disciplines.

1. Introduction

In this article I will try to illustrate what Business English (BE) is and what it is not, and the connections between BE and English for Economics (EE). This will be based on previous research material both drawing from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as well as from discourse analysis and it will give rise to the results that I have personally reached investigating into the subject.

When we use the expression Business English (BE) we refer to a very wide area of study and applications used mainly in the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), concerning the use of English in the working environment. As such, it may require very versatile and complex linguistic and extra-linguistic skills, because it is used in many situations, in both oral and written interaction. The most common contexts in which BE appears are the following: attending business meetings and shareholders' meetings, drawing up intra-company documents (memos and reports) and inter-company papers (letters, offers and advertising material), communication between colleagues, arrangement of commercial contracts, participation in negotiations and business phone calls.

The number of educational texts published in the domain of English Language Teaching (ELT) has grown dramatically over the last few decades, due to the increasing market demand for studying specialized areas of the language, such as English for economics and trade. Teaching material is available both in print and online and it mostly falls into a broad category called Business English. However, the need to respond to market needs for specific purposes has led to specialization in both publishing and training, and this is evident from the increasing number of text books aimed at dealing with each business sector as a separate entity from the others: English for banking, English for the tourist industry, English for accounting, English for marketing, English for human resources, and so on. Each of the fields makes use of its specific technical vocabulary and imitates situations in which learners can actively practise the language skills that are required for the specific job. Despite their differences, most of them share common features because the business world tends to have common goals such as the sale of a product or a service. But can we also include EE in the same wide area of study and application? What are the connections between the two types of language? Or is there just one type of language that we call BE and which includes what should be considered to be a separate type of language, namely EE? I will try to answer these questions.

One of the most striking characteristics of BE outside teaching is that research on the subject appears to have been relatively limited until two decades ago. In fact, scientific research into business and economic discourses had mainly focused on teaching rather than on the distinctive features of business discourse (BD). Nelson (2000: Ch. 3) attributed this alleged lack of research literature on the subject to two main reasons: the first and most practical one was the shortage of resources and time from private language schools, for whom English is "a business, not an academic pursuit", to carry out research. The second reason had to do with the lack of available data, because business information is usually hard to access for reasons of secrecy and consequently research work often becomes complicated (*ibid.*). Ellis and Johnson (1994: 3) also pointed out that BE was often an area of language neglected by researchers given that they preferred to focus on other areas of special English considered to be easier to define. Moreover, as observed by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), BE started as a materials-led movement rather than a research-led movement, a fact that encouraged the creation of several textbooks and teaching materials.

2. Specialized discourse

Discourse is language in use, in communication, rather than examples of how an abstracted system is structured in order to teach a language or literacy (Cook 1989: 6). This might lead us to think that if discourse has the pragmatic sense of language in use in all contexts, business discourse has more to do with the practical language of doing business rather than the academic language of economics. In traditional literature there has been much disagreement on the notion of specialized discourse as well as on the other labels used to define these special forms of English as opposed to General English. At a more general level the acronym LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) has been used for two areas in applied linguistics, namely 1) second or foreign language education and training on the one hand, and 2) research on varieties of a language that members of a specific subject field (discourse community) use with regard to genre, style and technical vocabulary. Relating to the second usage, academics have referred to this type of language forms by using terms such as 'restricted language' (Firth 1968: 106), 'special language', 'specialized language', and so on, but their classification may vary depending on the author's view of the topic. However, most scholars use these expressions to refer to domain-specific forms of the language including academic, scientific and technical uses which require specialized knowledge.

In Italy there has been much debate on the issue and many scholars have focused on the different features of languages for specific purposes. Sobrero (1993) calls them *lingue speciali* (special languages) and splits them into two kinds based on their level of specialization. He labels them as *linguaggi specialistici* (specialized discourse, SD) and *linguaggi settoriali* (microlanguages); the former group characterizes disciplines with a high degree of specialization and intrinsic nomenclature, such as hard sciences, medicine, computer sciences, linguistics and law, while the latter portrays less strictly specialized professional sectors or spheres aimed at a wider audience, e.g. the language of newspapers, advertising, fashion, political militancy, bureaucracy.

The main features of SD are 1) monoreferentiality – a word-meaning link that ensures conciseness and semantic uniqueness – 2) an informative purpose (excluding any aesthetic or emotive element), 3) peculiar rules in word formation and text structure, 4) conciseness. The central norms of SD are stated by Sager *et al.* (1980: 323) as being economy, precision and appropriateness.

Microlanguages have less stringent principles because they are based on a smaller number of specific lexical items, they do not follow special rules as they are often connected with general discourse, and they address a wider public who are not necessarily specialists. With regard to the domains of economics and business Sobrero (1993) states that they have the characteristics of a technico-scientific LSP, i.e. a rigorous exclusion of ambiguity, a specialized vocabulary, the use of abbreviations and acronyms, a tendency towards nominalization and a rigid text structure.

3. The need to circumscribe a field of research

We said that BE is also a part of ESP, a sphere of ELT and in turn a part of applied linguistics. ESP became an object of research in the mid-20th century, when scholars started to regard specialized discourse as an element of the language that was not simply part of the functional style of General English. From the 1970s and 1980s, linguistic studies (especially pragmatics) started to move away from simply describing the typical features of a language only from a grammatical point of view; instead, they began to focus on the ways language is used in real communication. So linguists became more and more aware that language changes depended on the context and consequently they tried to identify the main characteristics of such specific contexts in order to establish the basic language requirements for learners' courses.

Pickett (1986: 1) declares that business and trade are much closer to the language spoken by the common people – the public – because BE is the interface between the public and the producer; this is the result of the proximity that exists between the company and its reference market. It goes without saying that intra-company language is more specialized, depending on the type of business involved, especially in terms of vocabulary but also in textual elements (*ibid.*). Pickett (*ibid.*: 4) compares BE to doctor-patient interaction: when doctors talk to each other they use a technical language but they are clearly able to interact with patients by means of a more understandable, mediated code.

From this perspective, some scholars have introduced the concept of a horizontal-vertical framework in language variation. The horizontal variation focuses on the topic or domain, whereas the vertical variation describes the degree of specialization. One of the most successful models is suggested by Cloître and Shinn (1985), who identify four communication levels of scientific knowledge, establishing the relationship between participants in the communication process, as it is a sender-receiver-oriented model. The four levels of specificity are not categories *per se*, but conceived as a *continuum*:

> Intra-specialist level
> Inter-specialist level
> Pedagogical level
> Popular level
> (Cloître and Shinn 1985: 31-60, *passim*)

This classification ranges from expert speakers (intra-specialists), who use the same language and terminology in interaction with each other, to a second level where we find people who make use of simplified language forms and concepts for specialists communicating across fields. The third group of speakers is represented by a public that has not mastered this language yet (e.g. students), and the fourth level of communication corresponds to the most accessible and popular one which takes place when specialists communicate with non-specialists.

However, as has been previously outlined, it is evident that mastering a language does not necessarily mean that the agents involved in communication possess the cross-sector skills required for successful interaction. Ellis and Johnson (1994: 3) affirm that:

> Business English differs from other varieties of ESP in that it is often a mix of specific content (relating to a particular job area or industry), and general content (relating to general ability to communicate more effectively, especially in the business situations).

So BE is characterized by both specific professional content and by the more general content related to effective business communication, though the two coexist together. Therefore, linguistic proficiency is not sufficient to enable speakers to manage the subgenres that some exchanges require (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997). Moreover, since English has become the language of international business, we cannot but notice the intercultural question it poses, given that differences may already emerge in merely interactional conversations in which there is only a referential or informative purpose. We can easily imagine how discrepancies may be more evident in transactional interaction, which is often characterized by a persuasive goal such as in trade agreements, mergers and contracts. This is why Ellis and Johnson (1994: 5) outline the importance of social skills and remark that it "is hard to ignore the influence that good behavioural skills have on successful communication".

Pickett (1989) argues that BE is a technical language defined by the activity, occupation, subject and situation. He calls it an 'ergolect', though most linguists use the term 'register'. The new term, he says, refers to the English language used in business, a work language (*ibid.*: 5). In addition, he states that "an ergolect operates at the level of lexis and the level of transaction, hardly at all at the level of grammar" (*ibid.*: 11).

We could also use the terms 'register' and 'genre' since some scholars use these terms interchangeably, and only a few attribute different nuances to them. In fact, "both terms have been used to refer to varieties associated with particular situations of use and particular communicative purposes" (Biber *et al.* 2007: 7).

Swales (1990: 58) regards genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share the same communicative purpose", and Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 64) identify seven communicative events which may partially correspond to genres, five of which belong to oral language – telephoning, socializing, making presentations, taking part in meetings, negotiating – while two are part of the written language, namely corresponding and reporting.

In dealing with genres here we are referring to ways of speaking or writing used by a community and to socially recognized and defined elements "used in typified social circumstances" (Dudley-Evans 1987: 1). As Giménez Moreno (2010: 80) summarizes:

> the main characteristics of a genre (a group of texts) should be related to a common communicative purpose, form, structure and target-audience which lead to any written or oral example to be identified as prototypical of a certain genre.

For example, the wide category or genre of "business letters" shares most features such as form and structure – it is highly formulaic, formal and rather rigid (Dossena and Fitzmaurice 2006: 7), but it often presents different traits as regards the purpose and the target-audience. Business letters may be intended to persuade, inform, complain or even intimidate – they therefore have potentially different purposes: the recipient could be a customer, a lawyer, a supplier, a bank, another company – with potentially different target-audiences.

4. Business English versus English for Economics

My aim now is to highlight the differences and similarities between EE and BE, since they are sometimes regarded as the same thing. According to the definitions given by the *OED*, economics is defined as:

> [t]he branch of knowledge (now regarded as one of the social sciences) that deals with the production, distribution, consumption, and transfer of wealth; the application of this discipline to a particular sphere; [...].

On the other hand, business is described as:

> [t]rade and all activity relating to it, esp. considered in terms of volume or profitability; commercial transactions, engagements, and undertakings regarded collectively; an instance of this. Hence more generally: the world of trade and commerce.

The first eye-catching element of distinction is that economics is a scientific discipline, whereas business is an activity, as outlined by Wells (2011) in an article about what he calls "the art of business and the science of economics". He states that:

> [e]conomics concerns systems and general principles and is therefore a theoretical subject eminently suitable for academic study in a university, while business is a practical craft that does not belong there.

From the point of view of discourse analysis, whilst recognizing lexical and textual differences between economic and business discourse as well as different syntactic features from General English (GE) (Gotti 2003), we can say that they are to some extent connected to each other. Crawford Camiciottoli (2007) states that business discourse should be divided into two distinct categories: business discourse proper and economic discourse. In the first case we refer to a professionally-oriented language, while in the second to an academic code (Crawford Camiciottoli 2007: 25). As has been observed, "business is the real life equivalent of theoretical Economics" (Giménez Moreno 2010: 43) and this is why there is interrelation between the two. The same author (*ibid.*: 44) states that:

> on the one hand, Business English feeds on English for Economics (Academic language) which offers the necessary theoretical support and explanatory apparatus. On the other, it develops into [...]: Commercial English and Financial English (Professional languages) which put into practice the theories devised by the science of Economics.

Therefore, the two professional languages of commerce and finance would be the practical outcome of English for Economics, a scientific and academic language. According to Boettke (2006), economic discourse can be divided into:

> technical economics that goes on in the professional journals, policy economics that goes on in think-tanks and government agencies, public intellectual economics that goes on in the newspapers, magazines, radio and TV, and now-a-days (sic) to a considerable extent blogs.

Public intellectual economics, through circulation among non-specialists, closely relates to the more mundane idea of economics, that is, business. In fact public intellectuals bring the knowledge of the academia to the general public in a language capable of reaching this audience because such intellectuals are involved in public communication rather than in academic or scientific discourse.

Economic discourse (ED) as an academic code or a scientific language has been analysed by both economists and applied linguists. As Dudley Evans and St. John observe (1998: 50), research into EE has focused on the textbook, the abstract language and the use of metaphors in the description of economic models and theories. Instead, as regards business discourse (as a professional-oriented language), one of the most appropriate definitions is offered by Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (1999: 2), who define it as "a process of talk and writing between individuals whose main work activities and interests are in the domain of business and who come together for the purpose of doing business". The sense of purpose is actually deeply-rooted in BE: "language is used to achieve an end, and its successful use is seen in terms of a successful outcome to the business transaction or event" (Ellis and Johnson 1994: 7).

In a previous study, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997: 15) had also remarked that "business discourse is not a single or simple genre but consists of both sub-generic types and clusters of discourse resources in which are embedded underlying ideologies". Other scholars also underline the social and cultural aspects of BD, such as the presence of internationally accepted ways of doing things, the widespread use of formulaic language, a polite but short and direct style and the desire to build good relationships (Ellis and Johnson 1994: 8). In more recent times, the way business language is used has been studied starting from various approaches and involving many disciplines (Bargiela-Chiappini *et al.* 2012). The resulting definition is that "business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done" (*ibid.*: 3).

5. Business English lexis

The analysis of BE vocabulary deserves special attention as many scholars regard this as a distinctive feature of specialized discourse. Aurner (1940: 15) defines BE vocabulary as "that wide, inclusive, vigorous, and sometimes technical group of English words used for the purpose of making business operations efficient and successful". Also Garzone and Viezzi (2001: 26) claim that although the difference between specialized communication and common language does not merely emerge from a lexical point of view, qualitatively speaking it is the truly distinctive element of special languages, as it is additional to common language. This view is shared by Sager *et al.* (1980: 230), who maintain that "the lexicon of special languages is their most obvious distinguishing characteristic". Guffey and Seefer (2010: 441) think that in the world of business, accurate communication is particularly important and uphold that there is an explicit connection between size of vocabulary and job performance, i.e. in the working environment the difference between skilled workers, supervisors and executives is also shown respectively by a wider range of lexis and a more precise knowledge of the meaning of words. Also Thoma (2011: 101-102) is convinced that:

> business English vocabulary is accordingly the most distinctive feature of business English. Business English is a linguistic variety that is used to communicate efficiently in business settings and that is caused by the structure of economic situations and ultimately the mental representations of these situations in the form of specific content knowledge.

With regard to the analysis of BE lexis, Nelson (2000) wonders, among other things, whether there is an entity that can be defined as Business English lexis and what it is formed by. To do so, he creates a specialized corpus, the Business English Corpus (BEC), based on actual material from newspapers, TV, mail, business reports, faxes, records of meetings, negotiations and telephone calls. With the help of an abridged version of the British National Corpus (BNC), which is much more generic in nature, he analyses the extent to which BE differs from GE. His survey is based on the criterion of 'keywords', which he divides into positive keywords, i.e. "words that occur significantly more than in a reference corpus" (*ibid.* 2000: Ch. 9.3.1.1), and negative keywords, which have the opposite trend and appear much less in his corpus than in the BNC.

Through the typical processes of computational linguistics as well as by means of personal initiative, Nelson (*ibid.*) defines a small number of typical semantic categories of BE, such as 'business people', 'companies', 'money', 'business events', 'modes of communication', etc. The semantic boundary between the lexis of BE and GE can be constructed around a series of dichotomic oppositions, through which the author notes that:

> the key lexis of Business English was found to be overtly positive in nature [...]. It was also found to be dynamic and action-orientated and clearly non-emotive – most of the adjectives were obviously referring to things, e.g. products and companies, rather than to people (*ibid.*).

In addition to highlighting the positive connotation of BE lexis – showing the good or useful qualities of someone or something – as well as other distinctive features, Nelson also shows that BE is quite far removed from the vocabulary relating to personal and social matters, the family and words typically connected with negative states and expressing emotions and feelings.

In this regard, Koester (2010: 51) maintains that the fact that in the BEC few words are negative or have a negative connotation emphasizes the difference between the 'language about' business and the 'language doing' business. In the first instance, "the emphasis will be often on successes and positive developments, whereas when actually engaged in doing business, the focus is often on problem-solving of some kind" (*ibid.*).

Nelson (Ch. 7) isolates a thousand words which occur more frequently in the BEC than in the reference corpus, but in order to make the lexical analysis easier he limits them to fifty words divided into five semantic categories.

At the conclusion of his work, he states that his research “has shown that there exists a clearly definable set of lexis that is statistically linked to Business English” (2000: Ch. 9.3.8), but the ‘keywords’ of BE “sit on top of a vast amount of ‘ordinary’ language – the same language, in fact – as general English” (*ibid.*). So he claims that BE lexis, despite its specificities, does not exist as a separate entity, but rather is nourished by GE, which in turn is fed by it. This is connected with Pickett’s (1989: 9) idea that specialist terminology is layer-based. He thinks that GE merges into BE, acquires new meanings and enters into new combinations. He recognizes the following six gradations of terminology: general, transparent, guessable, misleading, obscure, opaque. So BE does not only consist of technical and specific vocabulary, but also of common words that take on new meanings in some contexts and especially when they are combined with other words. Undoubtedly, within ESP, word frequency analysis can help identify vocabulary grading and selection in language learning, as “the more frequently a word occurs, the more important it is for a learner to know” (Thoma 2011: 107).

6. Conclusions

What has emerged from the analysis of the studies in BE is that there seem to be some differences between what we call specialized discourse and professionally-oriented discourse, so that we can talk about two classes from the point of view of discourse analysis: ED and BD. From an ESP perspective we can talk about EE and BE in order to refer to special uses of language which have to do with the function they play and the context in which they are used, therefore special languages are functional varieties of a natural language (Cortellazzo 1988). The former is a technico-scientific language, mainly used in universities and in research, whose main purpose is intra-specialist and inter-specialist communication. The latter is (partly) the practical result of the academic language and it is used in business activities, so it includes interaction among professionals but also among professionals and non-professionals (e.g. company/client) and communication among non-professionals only, at a popular level (e.g. client/client).

Both ED/EE and BD/BE have a deep connection with GD/GE, as the latter designates English language that has no special content and is used to communicate in everyday life and situations, from very simple contexts to very complex ones. In fact, specialized discourse/English and general discourse/English are not two different languages but the same language used in different ways and contexts.

All types of special uses of the language that can be ascribed to BE – when intended as professionally-oriented – outline a multifaceted part of the language characterized by many genres and employed in heterogeneous contexts, though most of them share a common goal: doing business. BE is therefore – as Pickett (1989) observes – a work language, with specific content (the technicalities of a job area or industry) and general content (the rules of effective communication), which is spoken/written by agents who establish a relationship because they have a common or complementary purpose. So, the communication context may vary from business to business, business to public, public to business and others, and participants may differ in knowledge (from professionals to non-professionals). Lexically speaking, words are still considered by many linguists to be

ECONOMIC DISCOURSE and ENGLISH FOR ECONOMICS	BUSINESS DISCOURSE PROPER and BUSINESS ENGLISH
Language is used in limited ways and contexts (e.g. academia)	Language is used in limited ways and contexts (e.g. workplace)
Economics is the theoretical support and explanatory apparatus of Economic English	Business activities (commerce and finance) are the practical implication of Business English
It is an academic and scientific code used at specialist and interspecialist level	It is a professionally-oriented language or a work language mainly addressed to a wider public and not necessarily to specialists
It involves a high degree of specialization and specific nomenclature	It is divided into genres and subgenres due to the manifold activities it includes
Its main purpose is informative, so it excludes any aesthetic and emotive element	It may involve a high degree of specialization and specific nomenclature depending on the genres and subgenres considered
Its main lexical features are: Monoreferential vocabulary: it allows for conciseness and semantic transparency (disambiguation)	Its main purpose is practical because it is the interface between the public and the producer or people who come together for the purpose of doing business. It may emphasize aesthetic and emotive elements
Abbreviations and acronyms are very common	Its main lexical features are: A smaller specific vocabulary and less stringent rules in word formation and text structure depending on the genre
Peculiar rules in word-formation: as in most scientific languages new words are often derived from Latin and Greek	Main norms may be conciseness, precision and appropriateness (e.g. letters) but some genres are different (e.g. brochures, buyer-seller interaction) and based on persuasive language and rhetorical devices
Peculiar and rigid text structure	Register is often formal but it may depend on the genre
Main norms are conciseness, precision and appropriateness	
Register is formal	
GENERAL DISCOURSE and GENERAL ENGLISH	
Language is used in all ways and contexts	
General English is used to designate the English language that has no special content and is used to communicate in everyday life and situations, from very simple contexts to very complex ones	

Figure 1. The distinctive features of Economic discourse, Business English and General English

the main distinctive element of BE, though in many cases BE is accompanied by GE, and common words may often become more technical in order to refer to a particular thing or meaning. There are genres (e.g. meetings, reporting) and subgenres (e.g. a staff meeting, a board meeting, a financial report, a market research report) which present different text structures and are characterized by linguistic variation and register (which stands for language in context).

This paper may be summarized as shown in Figure 1, where the similarities/differences between ED/EE and BD/BE as well as their connection to general discourse are presented.

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