

Bargaining positions in business e-negotiation

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Abstract

The study explores the context in which interactional metadiscourse markers in English are used in business email negotiation. Occurrences of these linguistic devices are shown in comparative frequencies supplemented with data from written observations and interviews with a company manager to observe the dynamics of business interaction and buyer-seller relationships which vary across time and stages throughout the course of e-negotiations. Findings reveal that the interpersonal linguistic features that realize personal engagement and attitude are common and frequently found in the middle of the negotiation when the business relationship is at stake while self-mentioning is commonly found with the purpose of solving logistics problems in the final shipping stage. This paper argues that interactional devices should not be viewed in time dimension alone but contexts in which they are used.

Keywords: business e-negotiation, business English, discourse analysis, metadiscourse

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาการใช้อภิวาทกรรมในบริบทต่างๆ ระหว่างการเจรจาธุรกิจผ่านจดหมายอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ โดยนำเสนอความถี่เชิงเปรียบเทียบของข้อความที่แสดงอภิวาทกรรมพร้อมข้อมูลเสริมจากการบันทึกข้อสังเกตและบทสัมภาษณ์ผู้จัดการบริษัทเพื่อศึกษาถึงความสัมพันธ์ทางการค้าระหว่างผู้ขายและผู้ซื้อซึ่งเปลี่ยนแปลงตลอดเวลาและขั้นตอนต่างๆของการเจรจาผ่านจดหมายอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ ผลการวิจัยพบว่ามีการใช้ข้อความแสดงอภิวาทกรรมประเภทการแสดงความผูกพันระหว่างบุคคลและทัศนคติเพิ่มสูงขึ้นในช่วงกลางของการเจรจาซึ่งเป็นช่วงเวลาที่ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างคู่เจรจามีความสำคัญสูงสุดเนื่องจากมีผลประโยชน์ของคู่เจรจาเป็นเดิมพัน ในช่วงท้ายของการเจรจาซึ่งเกิดปัญหาในการส่งมอบสินค้าพบว่ามีการใช้สรรพนามแสดงการกล่าวอ้างถึงตนเองเป็นจำนวนมาก งานวิจัยนี้บ่งชี้ว่าการใช้อภิวาทกรรมแสดงปฏิสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบุคคลนั้นไม่ควรมองในมิติของเวลาและขั้นตอนเพียงอย่างเดียวแต่ควรมองที่บริบทของเหตุการณ์ระหว่างการสื่อสารด้วย

คำสำคัญ: การเจรจาธุรกิจผ่านจดหมายอิเล็กทรอนิกส์, อังกฤษธุรกิจ, การวิเคราะห์สัมพันธ์สาร, อภิวาทกรรม

Introduction

Ninety percent of business communication is done by emailing (Jensen, 2009: p. 6) for it is fast, convenient, let alone its evidential value. However, international traders do not always share the rhetorical conventions regarding issues of politeness and formality (Bjørge, 2007: p. 76). It is suggested that the skills in business emailing be incorporated into educational syllabuses (Cho & Yoon, 2013). The question is how this can be done when very few cases of business communication have been studied due to difficulty of gaining access to archive of business negotiations (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2007: pp. 141-142).

Studies of interpersonal linguistic features in business communication that rely on language corpora include Koeſter's (2006) analysis of office talk, Jensen's (2009) study of communication strategies in business emails, Fu's (2012) study of interactional metadiscourse markers in job postings, Cho and Yoon's (2013) analysis of company final reports and Koeſter's (2014) analysis of business negotiations. However, data compiled in the corpus are from different sources, so social-cultural backgrounds of the communicators are left unmentioned. Such absence can be supplemented by data collected in naturalistic or ethnographic observation in the form of case studies to triangulate the data as suggested by Dressen-Hammouda (2012).

Literature review

The notion of interactional metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005) was given attention in the study of business discourse as the framework covers hedges, boosters, affective attitude markers, self-mentions and engagement markers, all of which are commonly found under several speech functions required in business communication: making inquiries, requests, offers, giving advice and assurances (Emmerson, 2013). Traders do negotiate prices to play down their wants versus what they can afford. This involves lots of techniques in positioning oneself appropriately and strategically (Pinet, 2011). Hedges help sellers to mitigate their imposition on the customer (Koeſter 2006: pp. 96-97), while boosters help them to exaggerate needs of their products. Buyers at the same time may play down that needs to keep the price low. Attitude and engagement markers as well as first person pronouns are common in business negotiations, as they allow the speaker's statements to be conveyed in a personal rather than institutionalized manner (Santos, 2002: p. 181).

Traders from different cultures have different approaches towards formality and politeness (Dignen & McMaster, 2013: p. 127). English native speakers tend to introduce the main request early on while Thais prefer to provide more contexts before making a request in the middle part of the communication (Chakorn, 2006). However, research has also shown that perceptions on business formality of individuals from the same culture regarding the high-context and the low context cultures is rather transient (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2007: p. 134). Drawing upon Charles' (1996) progression of the business discourse from new to old relationship negotiations, Jensen (2009) further categorizes business email negotiation into stages in order to observe the progression of buyer-seller relationship. These stages are (1) the contact phase, (2) the negotiation phase, and (3) the in-business phase.

Data collection, methodology and analytical framework

In the third quarter of the year 2015, a Thai importer was looking for a new manufacturer of a series of products to be distributed in Asia, so he contacted an American exporter. All the 88 emails were written by a Thai buyer together with his logistics team and an American seller with her shipping agents. Neither side knew each other before their initial contact. They collaborated to ship the consignment from the United States to Thailand. All names and industry-specific terms in the email messages were encoded, and the encoded data were approved before a consent form was given. Interviews were conducted with the Thai manager and notes are taken in the daily log.

All the emails were sorted in time and stages adapted from Jensen (2009). The contact phase covers just the first 15 emails written in 2,172 words where the buyer introduced himself and his company to create business credentials and made small talk. The in-business negotiation phase covers 18 emails and 1,794 words starting from the discussions of special business deals

and promotions to make a bargain and to settle cash payment in advance. Communication after that such as tracing the goods, acknowledging payment, making complaints and claiming compensation is regarded as part of the shipping phase. This takes up as many as 55 emails (4,166 words) in this final stage.

This study applies Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse framework to analyze the frequency of the linguistic interpersonal features that realize interaction in communication. The framework has been used in studies of business communication (e.g. Jensen, 2009 and Fu, 2012). As the total number of words in the three phases are different, the frequency of occurrences of interactional metadiscourse markers (henceforth IMMs) are normalized for the benefit of comparison. All IMMs are annotated with the abbreviated tagsets of IMM types shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Tagsets of interactional metadiscourse markers (IMMs).

IMMs	Tagsets	Function/form	Examples of metadiscourse markers (IMMs)
Hedges:	<H:GR>	Modal auxiliaries	<i>can, could, may, might, should, would</i>
	<H:LX>	Lexical hedges	<i>a bit, maybe, possible, probably, rather, seem</i>
Boosters:	<B:GR>	Emphatic 'do'	<i>(I) do (understand)</i>
	<B:LX>	Lexical boosters	<i>absolutely, always, certain, much, really, very</i>
Attitude markers:	<A:NN>	Evaluative nouns	<i>apologies, best, enthusiasm, interest, thanks</i>
	<A:VV>	Evaluative verbs	<i>apologize, appreciate, like, hope, thank, want</i>
	<A:AJ>	Evaluative adjectives	<i>best, disappointed, nice, perfect, sorry</i>
	<A:AV>	Evaluative adverbs	<i>hopefully, ideally, preferably, unfortunately</i>
	<A:XC>	Exclamation marks	<i>Oh!, Oops!</i>
Self-mentions:	<S:PN>	1st person pronouns	<i>I, me, mine, my, (exclusive) we, our(s), us</i>
Engagement marker:	<E:PN>	2nd person pronouns	<i>you, your(s), (inclusive) we, our(s), us</i>
	<E:QS>	Direct questions	<i>?</i>
	<E:DR>	Directive speech acts	<i>Could you ...?, Feel free to ..., Let me know...</i>
	<E:OM>	Obligation modals	<i>be supposed to, have to, must, ought to, should</i>

Annotation was done manually to avoid possible errors from automatic tagging. For example, *can/could* used in requests is tagged as an engagement marker (<E:DR>), not a hedge (<H:GR>). The annotated tagsets of IMMs are then searched and retrieved from the corpus by a computer software AntConc Version 4.3.2. This study is an exploratory and naturalistic by nature, so the following research questions are open-ended.

1. In which phase of this email negotiation are IMMs used most frequently?
2. What role do IMMs play in this email negotiation at different phases?

Findings and discussion

The normed frequency of IMMs is shown in Figure 1, and their progression in Table 2.

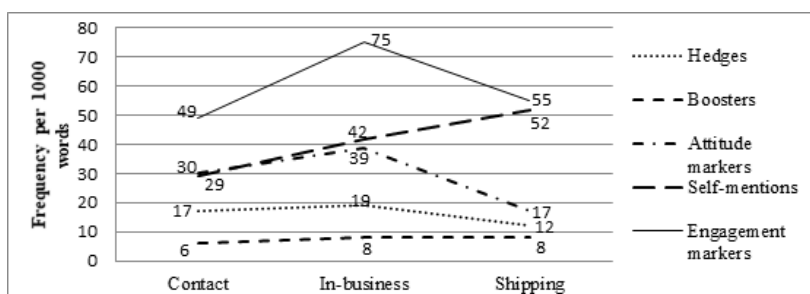


Figure 1. Density of each type of IMMs in relative frequency.

Figure 1 shows that all types of IMMs increased in frequency from initial contact to in-business negotiation. This seems to suggest the inclination from institutional to interpersonal business relationship during the first half of the business communication. At the shipping phase where problems occurred however, engagement markers, attitude markers and hedges dropped. Only self-mentions increased at this stage. Some important events that take place in each phase are selected from the daily log and shown in Figure 2 below.

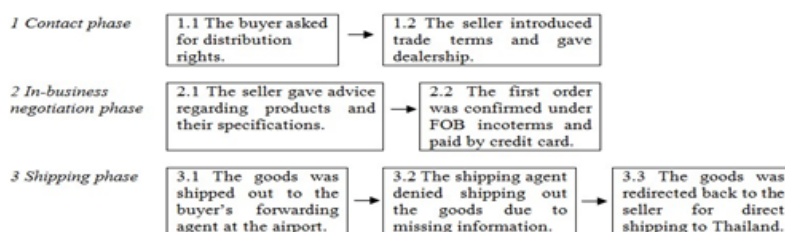


Figure 2. Key events selected from the daily log.

Table 2 below shows the frequencies of IMMs found at different stages of this business case study.

Table 2 Frequency of use of interactional metadiscourse markers (IMMs).

	Contact				In-business negotiation				Shipping						
	Total words = 2,172								Total words = 4,166						
	Buyer		Seller		Buyer		Seller		Buyer		Seller				
	1,236	1000	936	1000	648	1000	1,146	1000	2,525	1000	1,641	1000			
H:GR	8	6.5	15	16	10	15.4	11	9.6	17	6.7	16	9.8			
H:LX	6	4.9	8	8.5	4	6.2	9	7.9	9	3.6	6	3.7			
	14	11.3	23	24.6	14	21.6	20	17.5	26	10.3	22	13.4			
B:GR	2	1.6	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	3.0			
B:LX	2	1.6	10	10.7	7	10.8	8	7.0	15	5.9	13	7.9			
	4	3.2	10	10.7	7	10.8	8	7.0	15	5.9	18	11.0			
A:NN	5	4.0	5	5.3	5	7.7	6	5.2	20	7.9	5	3.0			
A:VV	6	4.9	8	8.5	8	12.3	15	13.1	20	7.9	8	4.9			

A:AJ	10	8.1	22	23.5	4	6.2	22	19.2	7	2.8	8	4.9
A:AV	1	0.8	2	2.1	0	0.0	1	0.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
A:XC	2	1.6	3	3.2	1	1.5	8	7.0	0	0.0	3	1.8
	24	19.4	40	42.7	18	27.8	52	45.4	47	18.6	24	14.6
S:PN	48	62.5	14	58.3	28	43.2	47	41.0	110	43.6	108	65.8
E:PN	43	34.8	52	55.6	24	37.0	75	65.4	109	43.2	49	29.9
E:QS	0	0.0	0	0.0	4	6.2	8	7.0	20	7.9	6	3.7
E:DR	6	4.9	4	4.3	10	15.4	10	8.7	28	11.1	6	3.7
E:OM	0	0.0	1	1.1	1	1.5	2	1.7	4	1.6	5	3.0
	49	39.6	57	60.9	39	60.2	95	82.9	161	63.8	66	40.2

The difference between the buyer and the seller's use of IMMs does not concern frequencies alone, but speech functions in which they appear. Typical examples of the use of IMMs are shown in contexts and presented in the following three sections.

1 The contact phase

1.1 Seller's negative politeness and positive evaluation

Clearly, the seller used more hedges than the buyer in first encounter (Koeßer, 2006: p. 96) and hedging is the sign of negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Given that the seller is the one who proposed in offering services, her proposal was written formally with care to be polite, not offending the buyer as suggested by Pinet (2011: p. 31).

- I<S:PN> was wondering<H:LX> if you<E:PN> might<H:GR> have some time this week or next that we<E:PN> may<H:GR> meet online ... we<E:PN> may<H:GR> be able to talk on webcam, if you<E:PN> like. [Seller]

- They [our logistics team] are wonderful<A:AJ> and very<B:LX> responsible. [Seller]

The buyer also used boosters much less frequently than the seller (3.2 vs. 10.7/1000 words) who used them to express her eagerness and to make the buyer confident in her service. The seller's appreciation of the buyer's offer can be observed not only in her use of boosters, but also positive attitude markers (e.g. good, best, great, fine, wonderful), which are used together with her boosters as in very nice, very much. This is not surprising given the role of boosters to intensify evaluative comments in service encounters (Koeßer, 2006: p. 98).

1.2 Buyer's polite requests for professional advice

Though the frequency of occurrences of first-person pronouns was only slightly different between the buyer and the seller, the use of second-person pronoun 'you' by the seller was clearly more (55.6 vs. 34.8/1000 words) making it the addressee-oriented text as mentioned by Fu (2012: p. 409). This is because most occurrences of 'you/your' are semantically associated with commitments, suggestions and recommendations, all of which are related to seller behavior. No direct question was found at this initial phase. Instead, questions came in the guise of polite requests for instructions. It is the seller's task then to give all the directives required as to what buyer needs to do to open trade accounts. The act of requesting is naturally performed by the buyer, while giving directions is more likely the language of the seller.

- Could you<E:PN> please let us<S:PN> see your<E:PN> catalogues, details of trade terms and how we<S:PN> can place order with you<E:PN>?<E:DR> [Buyer]
- If you<E:PN> care to meet her [seller's representative], you<E:PN> could<H:GR> see all the products before you<E:PN> order.

Negotiations tend to be smooth when both parties start with positive experience (Pinet, 2011: p. 170). During the interviews, the buyer accepted that smooth and successful communication would be the first step for him to open trade account with the seller and this would allow him to enter the new market and gain advantage over other local competitors in his area as a result of his greater varieties of product types.

2 The in-business negotiation phase

2.1 Seller's hedged statements in fulfilling negotiation purposes

Negotiating sales volume is essential because the seller does not want the buyer to feel that she is asking the buyer too much in placing large orders. Her upper role as the one who provides product knowledge put her in the upper position, and power is relative to contexts (Brown & Levinson, 1987: p. 78). It is this strategy that facilitates the seller to win over the bargaining (Vuorela, 2005; Koester, 2006: p. 97).

- It's a good<A:AJ> size, versatile and very<B:LX> complete. Maybe<H:LX> five for your<E:PN> shows?<E:QS> ... The Birdy Bag is used to ... so to have one on it's own is probably<H:LX> not needed. [Seller]

- Personally<H:LX>, I<S:PN> suggest<H:LX> you<E:PN> order more ... our<S:PN> most popular item ... [Seller]

2.2 Seller's showing solidarity and buyer's expressing thanks and commitments

The seller intentionally opted for informal positive attitude markers in order to make the relationship closer by emphasizing that both of them share some wants, so belong to the same social group, a strategy in conveying positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987: pp. 103-106). This includes her use of colloquial positive attitude markers such as great, cool, okay many times. She also makes judgment and gives compliments on the buyer's plan for future marketing strategies as in her expressive act 'That really makes me happy!'. The buyer seems to accept his lower position as his main use of attitude markers (8 of the 18 occurrences) concern thanking function in collocation with boosters such as 'very', 'so' and 'much' used repetitively as in 'thank you very much'.

- How wonderful<A:AJ> that you<E:PN> are wanting<A:VV> to promote Magic Boxes at your<E:PN> booth at the Education Fair next month. That really<B:LX> makes me<S:PN> happy<A:AJ>!<A:XC> [Seller]

- Thank<A:VV> you<E:PN> very<B:LX> much<B:LX> for the information. [Buyer]

While the buyer simply used the singular first person pronoun I, the seller used both the singular I and the plural inclusive we to include both parties, with the intention to create good rapport with her new customer. About half of all the first person pronouns used in the buyer's emails at this phase appeared with modal verbs especially the root ones. This suggests that the

buyer is prepared to commit himself in his duty as an appointed dealer. On the other hand, the seller's self-mentions collocate with lexical main verbs such as believe, know, hope, suggest, and want to give support, encouragement and build confidence for her new dealer.

- I<S:PN> will do my best<A:NN> to launch open your<E:PN> Magic Boxes. [Buyer]
- I<S:PN> may<H:GR> have to<E:OM> have them shipped by airfreight this order [Buyer]
- I<S:PN> want<A:VV> to make sure you<E:PN> are okay<A:AJ> with your<E:PN> order. ... I<S:PN> hope<A:VV> this is helpful to you. [Seller]

Instead of negotiating extensively over prices, quantities and other terms like most cases (Vuorela, 2005; Jensen, 2009), the buyer in this study does not make much attempt in doing so. The buyer himself admitted during the interview that his company is an SME; simply displaying the seller's new products in his booth at a national trade fair is already a success as this will give him the upper position in the local competition among dealers of the same product types, especially when a contract for sole distribution rights is signed.

3 The shipping phase

3.1 Buyer's stressing and seller's showing awareness in urgent shipping

At this final shipping phase focused more on having the merchandise delivered than expressing feeling and judgments as they did earlier. This can be seen in the seller's reduction of attitude markers. Twenty nine out of all the 47 attitude markers used by the buyer concerned thanking. Under FOB pre-paid terms, the responsibility on carriage from the U.S. port is on the buyer. That was why the buyer was the one who initiated turns and elicited others to take actions for fear of damage, delay or loss of goods in transit. This is done through asking for help and thanking people in logistics operation. Lexical boosters too play a role to highlight urgency of this delayed shipment.

- This shipment is very<B:LX> important and urgent, the reason why I<S:PN> changed from my normal seafreight to airfreight ... we<E:PN> really<B:LX> have no time. [Buyer]
- I<S:PN> do<B:GR> understand and am trying to help!<A:XC> [Seller]

The problem was that the buyer's freight forwarder refused to deliver the goods to Thailand saying that the goods had not had enough shipping data to go through customs formalities. The buyer then asked his forwarder to ship the merchandise back to the seller so that she could arrange for a direct dispatch to Thailand. The seller's first-person pronouns were used with auxiliaries including be (in present continuous tense), have (in present perfect tense) and be going to (in conveying intention). The combination of these tenses and aspects allows the seller to report on what has been done, what is being done, and what will be done to sort out the shipping problem (Grussendorf, 2009: p. 62).

- We<S:PN> are trying our<S:PN> best<A:NN> to make this work for you. [Seller]
- I<S:PN> have spoken to Domenic at AHA ... we<S:PN> have reached an impasse [Seller]
- I<S:PN> am going to ship your<E:PN> order FedEx International Priority ... [Seller]

3.2 Buyer's directives and seller's obligatory roles

Another kind of engagement markers used much more by the buyer is direct questions with the comparative frequency of 7.9 vs. 3.7 per 1000 words. Requests and imperatives are also important at this phase, so they too were used much more by the buyer (11.1 vs. 3.7/1000 words). Of all the 28 directives, as many as 11 occurrences appeared in the collocational patterns 'let me know' and 'keep me updated', 'could you', 'can you', suggesting that the buyer was very much worried about the delay of this delivery. Obligation markers were used more by the seller and in greater variety (e.g. have to, need to, must, be required to). This reflects the seller's obligation in the delivery of this shipment.

- Please keep<E:DR> me<S:PN> updated and let<E:DR> me<S:PN> know when it is shipped out. [Buyer]

- Could you<E:PN> please talk with Ian, my freight forwarder so that this shipment could<H:GR> be shipped out immediately?<E:DR> [Buyer]

- So your<E:PN> packages did<B:GR> arrive back to us<S:PN> today but they will need to<E:OM> be repackaged so they will not shipped out this morning. [Seller]

Conclusion and recommendation

The increasing trend of IMMs from the contact to in-business negotiation phase seems to suggest the change from the relationship at corporal level towards one at personalized level. This is in line with Jensen's (2009) findings showing a drop of institutionalized we and an increase in the first person pronoun 'I' during e-negotiations and supports Charles (1996) patterns of progression in business negotiations. This study also finds that exclusive we in the second phase (e.g. our products) was changed into that of inclusive one in the third phase (e.g. our problem). While Jensen's (2009) findings ended at the in-business phase, this study explores further the communication at the final shipping phase. At this phase we observe drops in three of the five types of IMMs due to logistics problems. This shows that the use of IMMs cannot be viewed in the light of stages and time alone, but contexts in which they are used. The study of IMMs in business communication should therefore be conducted naturally in case studies and many more of them are needed.

It is hoped that this preliminary analysis of interactional metadiscourse markers in business email negotiations will raise awareness for Business English teachers and teaching material designers of how important these interpersonal linguistic features are for the pedagogy of business English. Findings from this study may give ideas on contexts to prompt learners to use IMMs more effectively. Learners need not only know how they are used but also be given a chance to exercise them in order to enhance their pragmatic competence. For the IMMs to be practiced, teachers need to know when, how and why certain IMMs are used before they can design the kind of activities where these pragmatic devices can be exercised.

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