

Paulina POTĘGA

University of Rzeszów

e-mail: paulinapotega@vp.pl

A LINGUISTIC ACCOUNT OF BUSINESS ENGLISH

Abstract: Business English is a rapidly growing field of language study which concerns an increasing number of scholars. In short, it is associated with specialised area of English related to the language employed in all types of business contexts. Therefore, a new and urgent need for not only practical applications of Business English has appeared, but also its theoretical accounts that opens new opportunities and research vistas. Although the term itself has long been the subject of interest of academics and language teachers, the concept still seems to pose a number of controversies and frequently leads to confusion. In this paper an attempt will be made to shed some light on the linguistic structure of Business English by identifying its main features and providing an overview of the area, especially in the field of grammar and vocabulary.

Key words: Business English, specialist language, grammar, vocabulary.

Introduction

The purpose set to this paper is to reflect on and describe the phenomenon of Business English. Because of the fact that this elusive notion has many faces, and thus generates a number of controversies it needs to be viewed from a number of different standpoints. First of all, the study of Business English is primarily related to English language learning and teaching and, therefore, is very much pedagogically-centered. Business English can also be perceived as a specialist language because it is associated by its users with a special kind of language. Other crucial components of Business English are its grammar and its vocabulary of typically monoreferential and formal nature.

Pedagogical approach

By and large, the term *Business English* is mainly related to English language learning and teaching. To be more specific, Business English is a part of *English for Special/Specific Purposes* (ESP), which in turn is a case of a more general variety called *Language for Special/Specific Purposes* (LSP).¹ According to Ellis and Johnson (1994:3), *Business English must be seen in the overall context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as it shares the important elements of needs analysis, syllabus design, and materials selection and development which are common to all fields of work in ESP.* Note that this classification places Business English within *English for Business Purposes* or English for Business, as it is taught and learnt for a utilitarian purpose. It should be highlighted that ESP, does not only include *English for Business Purposes* (EBP), but also it is also divided into other subsectors, for example: *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP), *English for Occupational Purposes* (EOP), *English for Management, Finance and Economics* (EMFE), *English for Academic Science and Technology* (EST).

As suggested by Sobkowiak (2008:11), *ESP is a type of ELT (English Language Teaching) which began to evolve in the 1960s in response to an awareness that certain types of learners had specialized needs that wide-spectrum EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses did not meet sufficiently or efficiently.* Before long, a great development in teaching Business English, which was directly connected with learners' and their employers' professional needs, started to be directed by relevant theoretical literature. It can be stated that this area of Business English has been particularly important in the development of ESP and has attracted interest more among practitioners than theorists. As noticed by Grygiel (2015:3) [...] *all ELT approaches to Business English are utilitarian, practical and goal-oriented. Business English is seen as a process, not as a product.* In turn, Sobkowiak (2008: 23, 46) claims that *Business English is merely a method of teaching "a specific language corpus" and "a particular kind of communication in a specific context"*.

Business English from the perspective of specialist language

Business English can also be investigated from the perspective of a specialist language. Before going into details, let us now focus our attention on the notion of specialist language itself. A definition of the term can be presented in the following manner:

¹ On this issue see, among others, Sobkowiak (2008), Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), Ellis and Johnson (1994), Paltridge and Starfield (2014).

Specialist language is the totality of all linguistics means that are applied within a certain communication area that is limitable by subject specification, in order to ensure understanding between the people engaged in this area (and the popularization of the subject specific contents as well as the contact with certain non-professionals) (Hoffmann 1976).²

According to the quotation given above, one may say that the concept exceeds the specialist terminology and should be perceived as a way of communication taking place between professionals.

Grygiel (2015:8-10) propounds a strong view that the phenomenon of *Business English* can be most properly characterised as a specialist language. The nature of this problem is accounted for by the researcher in the following way:

[...] Business English is most readily associated by its users with a special kind of language or a language variety. The name itself – Business English – has been coined to resemble such designations of generally recognized language varieties as British English or American English (Grygiel, 2015:8-10).

The author goes deeper into the issue and compares Business English with pidgin, highlighting that both concepts are simplified, restricted in size and use, and a terminology biased version of a natural language. Here it is pointed out that pidgin is primarily used in trade, therefore both Business English and pidgin are formed and sanctioned by a specific convention and attributed to individuals performing particular roles. Yet another aspect that should be of concern in this context is that both Business English and pidgin are learned as a second language, and they can be taught at the secondary and tertiary level. Consequently, Business English will never become the first language of any speaker.

Pursuing the issue of Business English, Grygiel (2015:9) treats the targeted term as a hybrid, since it possesses some characteristics of an artificial language, like Esperanto, with a clearly defined terminology and preprogrammed conventions. However, simultaneously it must be based on a natural language, like English, in order to accomplish its communication tasks. The author further explains that English provides the basis on which Business English is constructed, much in the same manner like Esperanto which was constructed with the selection of various elements taken from different Indo-European languages. However, the major difference is that unlike Esperanto is largely an incomplete system (Gygiel 2015:9).

Thus, the speakers of this *hybrid semi-autonomous language* must swap between Business English and General English and components which are typical of both varieties are mixed together. As suggested by the same source, the notion of Business English *being a semi-autonomous hybrid, [...] cannot be isolated for fully objective investigation and its study needs a certain degree of idealization.*

² Translated and quoted by Wille (2014:12).

As can be seen from the above sketchy review, all these approaches differ in their understanding of Business English. Therefore, it needs to be emphasised that such a theoretical study aims at expanding speakers' knowledge of the target term and it is highly inspired by very practical goal oriented tasks. As can be seen from the above sketchy review, all these approaches differ in their understanding of Business English.

Business situations

Yet another aspect that should be discussed in this context is that Business English possesses a number of distinctive features. The most important of which is the business context. Business people perform a variety of tasks within specific business contexts, and for business aims, starting from socialising, predicting and negotiating, to telephoning, investigating and many others. Frendo (2005:7) draws our attention to the fact that not only is vocabulary essential but certain specific techniques to get their message across, namely skills which are indispensable. The author stresses that *business English is used together with business communications skills* (Frendo 2005:7).

Frendo (2005:7) makes an attempt to clarify the idea of another important skill which frequently takes place within business situations. As suggested by the author, *although we know a lot about how people interact and the sorts of things they say to each other, there are many areas of business English or ESP where there is not much reliable information on what people actually say*. An obvious example that can be quoted here is *small talk*, which on one hand, seems not to provide much information about speakers, however, on the other hand it fulfills the function of building relationships between people. It is an easy way to get to know someone, create a favourable first impression, and gain self-confidence when we meet someone in the corridor, or when we bump into someone in the car park. Such conventional and polite types of discourse are fundamental to Business English learners who need to establish a strong relationship.

Let us now turn our attention to Rasmussen (2001:213-214) who suggests a somewhat different viewpoint on language in business contexts. The author makes an attempt to clarify that not all actions in business interactions are connected with the business environment. At times, for example, individuals in face-to-face business interactions engage in small talk or are involved in discussions in which the work setting has no influence on the manner of acting and employing language. However, on the other hand, certain actions, for example negotiations over the price of a product, are connected with a business setting and it is through such actions that the individuals create that setting. Additionally, a certain business setting is realised via these very actions, and these can pertain to specific business settings and the company or areas they represent, for instance: marketing or production. As noted by Rasmussen (2001:213):

Business language and business actions are thus produced interactively in response to situational constraints, at work in the wider context: the identities of the participants (business people), the section of the institution they represent (marketing or production), and those aspects of the local context, namely the activity that they are about to construct, such as the negotiation of a price (Rasmussen, 2001:213).

Generally speaking, the language of business is made up of activities in which the business setting acts as a resource, and also as a framework for interpreting these actions in various ways. The available evidence seems to suggest unambiguously that language in context covers a wide range of different concepts. We must bear in mind, however, that Business English is far more than talking about either business or language, but it also regards communicating and conducting business in English. It is particularly true that the language of Business English depends on the general and specific contexts where it is being used, and also on other aspects, such as communication skills and communicative competence. In very general terms, the study of language in business contexts is interdisciplinary and builds on diverse disciplines and subdisciplines within economics, the humanities and social sciences.

Linguistic analysis of Business English

Among the issues that seem to call for the attention is analysing grammar and vocabulary within the scope of Business English.³ However, at the very outset it should be pointed out that despite the powerful position of Business English, its terminology and grammar, remain not thoroughly investigated, which can be confirmed by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:65) *there is, as yet, no identifiable core grammar and lexis for Business English*. Nevertheless, there are certain areas and questions that can possibly be discussed.

Vocabulary of Business English

It should be stressed here that distinguishing the body of lexis that characterises Business English is hardly possible. However, there is certain research that ascertains several lexical features specific to the English language used in business contexts. There are lexical items and phrases that are not technical, and can be freely used in General English, nevertheless their frequency of occurrence is higher in Business

³ As postulated by Brieger (1997:35), pronunciation should not be taken into consideration, due to the fact that there are no any particular regulations concerning the pronunciation of Business English.

English.⁴ While discussing distinctive features of Business English it has been found that the term *supply* most commonly occurs as a verb in General English; however, in economics it rarely functions as a verb.⁵ Yet another contribution to Business English was made recently by Guffey and Seefer (2011:441). The authors claim that in the world of business, where precise communication is absolutely essential, there is an explicit correlation between terminology size and job performance. For instance, skilled workers, in the majority of cases exhibit a wider range of vocabulary and a more accurate knowledge of the meaning of words in comparison to unskilled workers. In turn, Thoma (2011:101-102) defines Business English in the following way:

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 (Thoma, 2011:101-102).

Yet another work concerned with the problem of Business English terminology is Grygiel (2015). In his view such terminology possesses a monoreferential and formal nature. The author maintains that:

[...] terminology constitutes the basic and most characteristic component of Business English. Its elements – lexemes – always refer to precisely defined concepts, are never polysemous and ambiguous, additionally, they do not have exact synonyms. Another typical feature is formal style and lack of emotions. In Business English, words have a fixed meaning and purely denotative function. Concepts are expressed in the shortest possible way (Grygiel, 2015:9-10).

The author further clarifies that in either Business English or any other specialist language, communication does not depend on the context. Here it is pointed out that contextual independence pertains to the fact that correct interpretation can be conducted independently of context.⁶ Thus, business vocabulary may be acquired in isolation, and the perception of Business English in terms of a separate language variety is commonly connected with the appearance of technical, subject-specific or artificially created terms or phrases.

When scrutinising and describing the vocabulary of Business English, it is worth referring to six categories of vocabulary, which are all related to *EAP*:

a. *Items which express notions general to all specialised disciplines;*

⁴ Pickett (1986:6) quoted in Dudley-Evans and St John (1996:5).

⁵ For more detailed discussion, see Basturkmen (2006:63-67).

⁶ Grygiel (2015:10).

- b. *General language items that have a specialised meaning in one or more disciplines;*
- c. *Specialised items that have different meanings in different disciplines;*
- d. *General language items that have restricted meanings in different disciplines.*
- e. *General language items that are used to describe or comment on technical processes or functions in preference to other items with the same meaning, for example occur rather than happen;*
- f. *Items used to signal the writer's intentions or evaluation of material presented (Baker, 1988:92).⁷*

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:82) put forward the view that the categories overlap to a great extent, and as a consequence two overarching areas can be suggested. The first one concerns vocabulary items that are traditionally viewed as general language, but have a greater frequency of occurrences in certain specialised and technical disciplines and the second one refers to terminology that possesses specialised and restricted meanings in particular fields of knowledge and which can differ in meanings across subject fields.

The overall impression gained from the analysis suggests that Business English vocabulary is not only composed of technical and specific terminology but also of general terms which gain new meanings in specific contexts. It goes without saying that word frequency analysis can certainly be helpful in specifying vocabulary characteristic within a particular subject environment and in language learning. As suggested by Thoma (2011:107) *the more frequently a word occurs, the more important it is for a learner to know.*

Grammar characteristics

Much less research has been published in the field of grammatical constructions typically associated with Business English. However, the amount of work is growing and will certainly increase substantially within the next few years. Nevertheless, there is not as yet an established 'common core' of business language in the way that there is in EAP (Dudley-Evans and St John 1998:xiii). Brieger (1997:36) is rather skeptical and casts doubt on the existence of such a concept. The nature of this problem is outlined in the following manner:

I do not think that there are any language categories specific to Business English. Business English can utilise all the language forms which exist in General English: the nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and determiners; none are excluded. Similarly there are no new categories which have been created for Business English (Brieger, 1997:36).

⁷ Quoted in Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:82).

It should be noted, however, that certain grammatical forms appear more frequently than others. On the other hand, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:79) postulate that a list of grammar areas which Business grammar reference books distinguish can be prepared. An assumption that follows is that considerable attention is placed on verb forms, particularly tense and voice, after that on modals and also verbs of saying, reporting and the disparity between make, have and have got.

Wilberg and Lewis (1990:104-107) go deeper into the issue of Business English grammar and select twenty-four 'business' verbs whose forms should be practised. The following Business English verbs can be enumerated: *accept, advise, agree, confirm, consider, explain, invite, object, offer, order, point out, propose, query, recommend, refuse, reject, remind, reply, respond, say, speak, talk, tell, and wonder*.⁸

Another important aspect that should be of concern in this context is the fact that there is a certain list of some key functions of Business English and also several grammatical realisations for each one of them. The list includes a number of well-known functions that one could expect to encounter, for instance: *ability* and *inability, agreeing* and *disagreeing*; these are related to general English courses and also Business English courses as further noted by Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:79):

*There are also interesting additions to the standard list of functions that are clearly very relevant to a BE course, 'assertion' and 'downtoning' and 'checking' and 'confirming' [...]. The features of nominalization noted as a feature of academic English are also characteristic of certain more formal genres in Business English, such as reports, contracts and some letters (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998:79).*⁹

Let us now turn our attention to another approach towards Business English grammar, suggested by Ligara and Szupelak (2012:144) (2012:143-144). The author postulates that in order to outline the scope of Business English grammar one can analyse the content of Business English course books. The following books can provide an important point of reference: *The Macmillan Business English Program* (Badger and Menzies 1993) or *New Edition Market Leader – Upper Intermediate Business English Course Book* (Cotton, Falvey and Kent 2006). The latter course book specifies a wide range of sectors of grammar which are of interest in the study of Business English. They can be presented in the following way:

- a. *noun compounds and noun phrases,*
- b. *multi-word verbs,*
- c. *present and past tenses,*
- d. *prefixes,*

⁸ Wilberg and Lewis (1990:104-107) quoted in Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:79).

⁹ For detailed information see Dudley-Evans and St John (1998).

- e. *passives*,
- f. *adverbs of degree*,
- g. *conditionals*,
- h. *modal perfect*,
- i. *dependent prepositions*,
- j. *gerunds*,
- k. *noun phrases with and without 'of'* (Cotton, Falvey and Kent 2006).¹⁰

However, according to the same source, apart from seeking inspiration in Business English course books, teachers frequently either take into account their own experience when selecting particular areas of grammar for a course, or focus on the grammar issues that would be of most use in communication. What is more, there is a great variety of books which are oriented towards teaching grammar on the market, for instance *Business Grammar Builder* (Emmerson 2002). The book is not only based on business language and authentic materials from the trade press, but also includes realistic situations from the business world. The scope of material and the way of organisation of Business English Course books frequently do not exhibit a considerable difference in comparison to grammatical materials intended for general language teaching. It is suggested that there are certain grammatical categories which are common for specialist language and language for general purpose, for instance tense, active/passive voice and modal perfect.

The evidence seems to suggest that various approaches are adopted by researchers in discussing Business English grammar. However, it should be noted that a large amount of the grammar research that has been undertaken goes beyond traditional sentence-level study to include knowledge about the use of grammatical forms in particular contexts. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998:80) share an important premise that the context determines what element of grammar is suitable. Certain specific contexts entail very particular uses of grammar, and the ESP teacher needs to be sensitive to these contexts.

Concluding remarks

The noun *business* in the context of Business English not only refers to broadly understood economic activities, but is also pedagogically oriented. However, any attempt to provide a detailed definition of the concept on the basis of the above considerations becomes very complex. On the basis on the above-mentioned issues one can conclude that business indicates an activity that directs us towards a scientific discipline, namely economics. Nonetheless, the reference to the issue of economics does not exhaust the intricacy of the issue. Moreover, any attempts

¹⁰ Quoted from Ligara and Szupelak (2012:144).

at defining the concept of Business English cannot ignore the problem of specialist language, which encompasses terminology and concepts used by specialists within the fields related to business, for instance: trade, finance and international relations. An essential aspect is that all those areas overlap with each other. The analysis proposed here suggests that the notion of Business English refers to people who are preoccupied with professional activities. The above-mentioned concepts, issues, and areas of knowledge point to the impossibility of formulating a homogenous conception of the analysed term. One may assume that the definition of Business English necessitates reference to various fields of science. However, the basic distinctive feature of Business English is related to semantics, namely, an understanding of specialist terminology, which is strongly linked with broadly understood expertise.

References

- Badger, I. and P. Menzies.** 1993. *The Macmillan Business English Program*. Hemel Hempstead: Macmillan.
- Baker, M.** 1988. "Sub-technical vocabulary and the ESP teachers: an analysis of some rhetorical items in medical journal articles:", [in:] *Reading in a Foreign Language 4 (2)*, pp. 91-105.
- Basturkmen, H.** 2006. *Ideas and options in English for Specific Purposes*. USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Brieger, N.** 1997. *Teaching Business English Handbook*. York: York Associates Publications.
- Cotton, D, D. Falvey and S. Kent** 2006. *New Edition Marker Leader – Upper Intermediate Business English Course Book*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited
- Dudley-Evans, T. and M.J.St John.** 1998. *Developments in English for Specific Purposes A multi-disciplinary approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dudley-Evans, T. and M.J.St John.** 1996. *Report on Business English: A Report of Research and Published Teaching Materials*. Princeton: The Chauncey Group International.
- Ellis, M. and C. Johnson.** 1994. *Teaching Business English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emmerson, P.** 2002. *Business Grammar Builder*. Oxford: Macmillan Education.
- Frendo, E.** 2005. *How to teach Business English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Grygiel, M.** 2015 "Business English from a linguistics perspective", [in:] *English for Specific Purposes – World, Special Issue 1*, vol. 16, pp. 1-12.
- Guffey, M. E. and C.M. Seefer.** 2011. *Business English*. Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning (10th edition).
- Hoffmann, L.** 1976. "Towards a theory of LSP. Elements of a methodology of LSP Analysis", [in:] *Fachsprache 1 (1-2)*, pp. 12-17.
- Ligara, B. and W. Szupelak.** 2012. *Lingwistyka i Glottodydaktyka Języków Specjalistycznych na Przykładzie Języka Biznesu. Podejście Porównawcze*. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, Vol. 3.
- Paltridge, B. and S. Starfield.** 2014. *The Handbook of English for Specific Purposes*. Chichester: Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Pickett, D.** 1986. "Business English: Falling Between Two Styles", [in:] *COMLON 26*, pp. 16-21.
- Rasmussen, G.** 2001. "Business Language", [in:] R. Mesthrie (ed.) *Concise Encyclopedia of Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 212-214.
- Sobkowiak, P.** 2008. *Issues in ESP: Designing a Model for Teaching English for Business Purposes*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM.

- Thoma, D.** 2011. *Strategic Attention in Language Testing: Metacognition in a Yes/no Business English Vocabulary Test*. Peter Lang.
- Wilberg, P. and M. Lewis.** 1990. *Business English: an Individualised Learning Programme*. Hove: Language Teaching Publication.
- Wille, L.** 2014. "On controversies surrounding specialist languages", [in:] L. Wille and M. Pikor-Niedziałek (eds.) *Specialist Languages in Use and Translation*. Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo UR, pp.11-21.