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Dr Frank Bezzina
University of Malta
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Dr Vincent Cassar
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Mixed Qualitative Methods in Conducting Business Communication Audits

Justyna Alnajjar
University of Warsaw, Poland
justyna.alnajjar@uw.edu.pl

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss methods for conducting communication audits in business environments, from a linguistic perspective. The introductory part of the paper is devoted to the general characteristics of communication audit research. It focuses on the definition, scope, and process of communication audits in business settings. Then, a collection of qualitative methods utilised for the purposes of data collection and data analysis in business communication audits is presented and explained. With regard to data collection, the focus is on interviews and participant observation, whereas regarding data analysis, the author shows how different approaches to discourse analysis can be applied to data analysis. The paper refers to existing findings and discussion on communication audits by scholars from such disciplines as management, and cultural studies. However, the perspective of the business communication audit is broadened by linguistic considerations and thus calls for interdisciplinary collaboration of practitioners and scholars representing various fields of study.

Keywords: business, communication audit, discourse analysis, ethnography, linguistics, qualitative methods

1. Introduction

Business communication audit is a relatively new field of research. It has been featured in the literature for around 20 years. However, the concept of the communication audit was born in the 1950s. In 1952, Keith Davis introduced and discussed a method called 'ecco analysis' in his PhD dissertation (see Pacilio and Rudolph, 1973), which, amongst others, could "be used for either periodic or continuous audits of communication in a company" (Davis, 1953: 311). In 1954, George S. Odiorne proposed to apply 'communications audits' in practice and described the communication audit process within a corporation (Odiorne, 1954). It should be added that Odiorne used the term 'communication*s* audit', not 'communication audit'. It is worth noting that the first attempts to conduct communication audits took place in business settings as early as the 1950s. In the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of the communication audit was applied within various organisations (see e.g. Hamilton, 1987; Wiio, Goldhaber and Yates, 1980). In fact, the empirical studies carried out in selected organisations at that time contributed to the development of theoretical considerations on the communication audit. Therefore, in this period of intensive research into the communication audit one can speak of an 'organisational communication audit' (Wiio, Goldhaber and Yates, 1980: 84). Then, in the last two decades of the 20th century business activity became more intensive, though this period saw a limited number of studies on the communication audit. Research activity was mainly undertaken as part of tertiary courses for pedagogical purposes (Conaway, 1994; Shelby and Reinsch, 1996; Zorn, 1989). It was not until the beginning of the 21st century that research into communication audits carried out mainly in the business environment gathered momentum and slowly started to yield more empirical studies (see amongst others Downs and Adrian, 2004; Hargie and Tourish, 2004, 2009; the Special Issue of "Management Communication Quarterly", Vol. 15, 2002). That is why, nowadays it is legitimate to use the term 'business communication audit'.

Nevertheless, research into the communication audit in general, and into the business communication audit in particular as carried out in the last 15 years can hardly be regarded as intensive. In fact, it enjoys relatively little attention. A rather modest body of empirical studies and theoretical assumptions reported in literature on the subject has been compiled by scholars representing management/business/organisational communication studies and cultural studies, as well as by practitioners (see Downs and Adrian, 2004; Hargie and Tourish, 2004, 2009; Wolf, 2010). There is, however, a lack of interdisciplinary projects or attempts to research business communication audits. Linguists, who based on their interest in language and communication should at least participate, if not have a decisive say on the aspects and methodology of the (business) communication audit, have hardly been active in this area so far. On a more optimistic note, the first linguistic considerations on communication audits and business communication audits have recently been formulated by Polish applied linguists (see Alnajjar, 2013 and 2014, also in reference to project management see Grucza, 2014a and 2014b; Grucza, Alnajjar and Grucza, 2014, see also the Research Center for Business Communication Audit: online).

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This paper offers a linguistic approach to conducting business communication audits, at the same time taking into account the potential of other perspectives. In particular, attention is paid to qualitative methods that can be utilised in business communication audits. Thereby, the paper expands existing perspectives on business communication audits and identifies the need for interdisciplinary collaboration in the field of business communication audits. The considerations discussed in this paper have been developed on the basis of my own experience from business communication audits and literature on the subject. They do not refer to any particular case study because data gathered and analysed for the purpose of business communication audits is highly sensitive, and thus can hardly be quoted.

2. Background: Characteristics of the business communication audit

Let us begin with defining the meaning of the term 'business communication audit' and its scope. Since the 1950s, when the communication audit started attracting researchers' attention, researchers have been dealing with the general term 'communication audit' (and not 'business communication audit') and have suggested various definitions of this term. For example, 'communication audit' has been defined so far as 'an organizational communication measurement system' (Wiio, Goldhaber and Yates, 1980: 84), as 'a package of tools/instruments to assess internal communication' (DeWine and James, 1988: 144), as 'a study/an investigation of selected aspects of a given organisation, related to communication practices within this organisation' (Emmanuel, 1985: 50; Tourish and Hargie, 2004: 23; Wolf, 2010: 154), as 'a report on/a practical assessment/a survey of the company's internal communication' (Hamilton, 1987: 3; Kopec, 1982: 24; Litwin, 2008: 89–90), as 'an assessment process' (Antonis, 2005: 138; Hamilton, 1987: 3). These definitions, however, do not pertain to the actual nature of the communication audit. Some of them refer merely to some general instruments (e.g. measurement system, package of tools) or selected methods (e.g. survey) that can be applied to the communication audit process. Some point to the possible outcome of the communication audit (e.g. report) or to a certain part of the communication audit process (e.g. 'assessment' (evaluation) takes place only after certain data has been collected). The words 'study' and 'investigation' proposed by Emmanuel (1985), Tourish and Hargie (2004), and Wolf (2010) provide the most general description of the communication audit, similar to one of the first definitions of the communication audit provided by Odiorne (1954: 235).

From a linguistic point of view, the communication audit is a metacommunication process, during which the state of communication activity is investigated at a given time. Communication audits can be performed in various settings, also referred to as context or communicative situation. In the case of the business communication audit, the context is named explicitly in the term itself—it is the business context. The business context is here broadly understood as settings in which all activities undertaken are profit oriented. The results of the business communication audit are usually documented in a report. Recommendations for the future constitute an essential part of this report.

In order to investigate communication in given business settings, the communication auditor inevitably collects and analyses actual communicative events (language samples) of the auditees, i.e. their actual communication behaviour. As well as real communicative events, certain documents describing the structure and principles of communication (the so-called 'facts') should also be taken into consideration. In addition, the opinions and perceptions of the auditees' on the communication activities should be included in the analysis. Indeed, the facts in tandem with the opinions and perceptions give a better overview of communication practices adopted by auditees in a given business context, and they can help the communication auditor to better understand the meaning of particular communicative events constructed by them. This means that the scope of the business communication audit encompasses 3 elements: communication behaviour, facts and perceptions (opinions) on communication activities/practices that are gathered and analysed.

This, in turn, implies that the process of the business communication audit should consist of two basic stages[1], i.e. data collection and data analysis, both with a focus on the three elements of the scope, i.e. communication behaviour, facts and perceptions (opinions) of communication activities/practices. Evidently, all three elements concern various aspects of communication perceived from different perspectives (the perspective of the auditees, of the communication auditor/researcher, and if possible of third parties). In addition, data collection and data analysis are carried out with the help of a 'linguistic toolkit', as presented in Section 4 below. As such, the business communication audit is by nature a metacommunication process that includes both the etic and

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[1] In addition, the business communication audit usually encompasses one more stage, related to the preparation of recommendations based on the audit's results. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to present the third stage of the business communication audit in detail.

emic approach to communication activities under study. Moreover, it depends to a high degree on the methodological choices made by the communication auditor. A methodologically well organised and pursued process leads to an informative audit report and recommendations useful for future communication. Therefore, let us now briefly discuss the role and tasks of the communication auditor (Section 3) and subsequently present the methods that the communication auditor can apply to the business communication audit (Section 4).

3. Communication auditor

In general, the communication auditor examines communication in given (business) settings and formulates recommendations for future communication activities in these settings based upon his/her investigations. During the process of the business communication audit, the communication auditor works empirically. It may be concluded that the communication auditor acts as a researcher who, based on his/her knowledge, i.e. being equipped with theoretical constructs, models, and definitions, attempts to empirically investigate communication in given business settings. Figure 1 depicts the empirical fieldwork of the communication auditor:
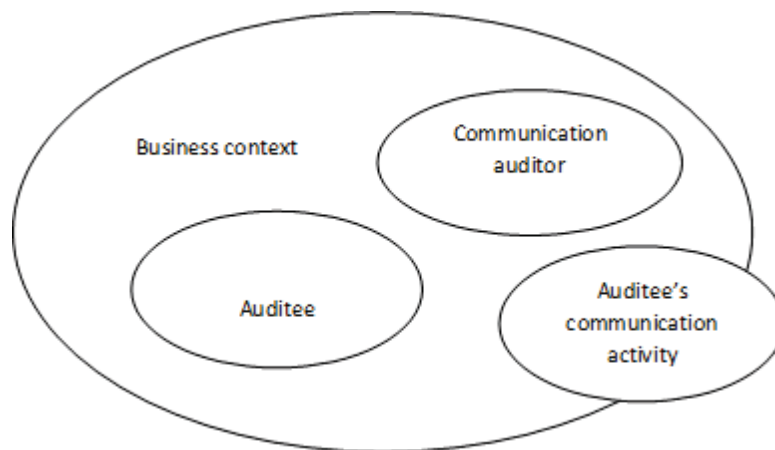

Figure 1: Empirical fieldwork in conducting business communication audit (based on Busch, 2013: 371)

According to Figure 1, which was developed in order to present the empirical research field of intercultural communication (Busch, 2013: 368–386), the communication auditor (one or more) examines the communication activity of the auditee(s) in a specific business context by accompanying (observing) the auditee(s) in their daily work. However, not all aspects of the auditee's communication activity are fully accessible to the communication auditor by way of observation. Certain aspects of the auditee's communication activity relate to other contexts, situations, and time spans, which are not shared between the communication auditor and the auditee (cf. Busch, 2013: 372). Except for actual language samples (communication behaviour) which can be directly, empirically observed, the communication auditor relies on certain accounts of communication activity made by the auditee themselves or by their colleagues/supervisors (perceptions and opinions), and on information (facts) collected from documents. These accounts are subjective, and allow for indirect observation of the communication behaviour. Similarly, the documents offer an indirect observation of the communication behaviour. As a result, the communication auditor must directly observe the communication behaviour of the auditee in question, interview the auditee, and go through relevant documents in order to obtain an in-depth overview of the auditee's communication activity. Relying solely on observations or on interviews may give only a fragmentary picture of the communication activity. Thus, it can be concluded that business communication audits depict an interaction between language and professional work. In other words, they encompass the relations between linguistic means (language samples from communicative events) and professional meaning (based on facts and perceptions). This combination implies that business communication audits are to be researched/conducted empirically, on the borderline between ethnographic and linguistic description. So let us now take a look at the methods that the communication auditor has at his/her disposal when conducting business communication audits.

4. Mixed qualitative methods

The list of methods that are recommended in this paper to conduct business communication audits include qualitative methods that can/should be used in combination across different stages of the business communication audit. Despite the low popularity of the practice of working with the use of qualitative-

qualitative (qual-qual) blends among researchers (Pritchard, 2012: 132–133), I consider qual-qual combinations to be of great use in the process of the business communication audit. Their potential shall be explored in greater detail below. I will discuss the selected qualitative methods to be applied to the process of the business communication audit by dividing them into two groups. The first group encompasses methods that can be utilised at the stage of data collection, while the second group focuses on the methods to be used at the stage of data analysis. However, I would like to point out that both stages often take place simultaneously, and thus the methods from each group may be used in parallel. This is due to the fact that the business communication audit is a dynamic and interpretative process that requires of the communication auditor a strong sense of reflexive engagement throughout. Let us now present the methods in detail.

4.1 Data collection

During the stage of data collection, the following methods can be applied: observation and participation, interviewing, and elements of surveying. While observation for the purposes of business communication audits can be unstructured, semi-structured and structured, interviews are semi-structured and unstructured.

A communication auditor usually starts a business communication audit with some form of observation of the business settings, in which the auditees fulfil their daily duties. Taking a walk in the building in which the auditees work and/or in which they meet is the easiest and most efficient way to obtain an overview of the given professional setting. Even if the auditees work as a virtual team, there is always a location in which part of the team works and in which the entire or part of the team meets regularly. This initial walk, aimed at becoming familiar with the physical location in which business is conducted, can be referred to as the 'walk-around'. A walk-around may take the form of unstructured or semi-structured observation, and thus it enables the communication auditor to grasp the general climate in which business activity is undertaken. During the walk-around, the communication auditor can plan certain time slots dedicated to semi-structured conversations (interviews) with selected managers or employees of the HR department. These initial conversations usually concern the structure of the company and general work patterns, and they help the communication auditor to get an insight into work patterns and habits of the auditees in question. Interviews during the walk-around, especially with the representatives of top management, should be arranged in advance. Some employees may also decide to give a brief account of their work *ad hoc.* In addition, the walk-around can also be used to have a quick look at the types of documents with which the auditees work and/or documents in which the work structure is presented.

Having obtained an initial picture of how the auditees arrange their daily work, the communication auditor can plan the next step of the communication audit, i.e. a more structured observation of the auditees' work. The structured observation can take place, for example, during the meetings in which the auditees participate. Such meetings can be observed *in situ* or over the telephone or video-/audio-conference. It is recommended that the communication auditor takes audio recordings during the meetings that can later be played again and/or transcribed for the purpose of communication analysis. It is also advisable to take field notes, as not all of the aspects of the meetings can be recorded or remembered. It can also happen that the recording device or equipment will not work at the time of a given meeting. Thus, field notes may turn out to be the only source of data for analysis.

If it is possible, the communication auditor will spend a certain amount of time in the enterprise and accompany the selected auditees in their daily work. Of course, this risks unnatural behaviour by the auditees. However, the longer they are accompanied by the communication auditor, the more they get used to his/her presence and taking notes, and after some time they will return to behaving normally. The amount of time that the communication auditor spends in the company usually depends on the financial resources dedicated to the audit.

Interviewing is the next step at the data collection stage. It is advisable to conduct interviews with the auditees after the walk-around and when at least some of the structured observations have been completed. This ensures that during the interviews the communication auditor is better prepared to discuss the communication issues in question and better understands the aspects of communication raised during those interviews. In principal, interviews and observations can be conducted in parallel, though it is recommended to begin interviewing after the first round of observations has been completed. The initial interviews should focus on more specific, formal and organisational aspects of the auditees' work. Thus, their aim is to elicit factual information on how

communication process is organised. The interviews of the first round are semi-structured and last for around 60–90 minutes. Due to the fact that they take a relatively large amount of time, they are usually performed with selected auditees (one or two persons) who hold a high position in the group of the auditees and are well informed about various aspects of the work under study. Initial interviews often take place in person, where possible in front of the auditee's computer, so that the necessary documents, software, tools, etc. used by the auditee at work, can be better visualised and explained to the communication auditor. This round of the interviews constitutes the so-called 'primer' (Pritchard, 2012: 137), i.e. the results from the interviews are used to prepare an interview guide or rather a set of topics to be discussed in the second round of interviews.

The second round of interviews is conducted with all the auditees under study. The communication auditor should try to apply open-ended unstructured interviews at this stage so that the auditees have more room to express themselves. The purpose of these interviews is to obtain information on the auditees' perceptions and opinions concerning communication at work. Aimed at receiving rather sensitive data, the interviews should take place in a separate room to ensure privacy. The communication auditor should, at the outset, briefly explain the objectives of the interview and ensure confidentiality of data. In order to "break the ice" with the interviewee and create a climate of trust, it is recommended to begin by asking the interviewee around 5 straightforward questions about, for instance, their name, position in the company, years of experience. By being able to answer these questions, the auditee will feel competent to contribute to further discussion (Dörnyei, 2007: 137). Having established an initial rapport with the auditee, the communication auditor may start posing more elaborate questions related to communication activity. One way to make the auditees explain their experiences and opinions in detail, is to ask them open-ended questions by using verbs and expressions such as "please describe", "please tell me about". It is also worth asking for (1) explanations/clarifications, (2) exemplification, (3) counter-exemplification, (5) relevance, (6) contradictions/doubts. Furthermore, in order to collect as much information as possible about the auditees' perceptions and, if possible, about the facts related to communication practices, occasional questions to elicit information about behaviours, opinions, values, feelings, knowledge, and background details can be helpful. If interviewees agree, the communication auditor can record the interviews. If this is not the case, the communication auditor must take notes. This, however, significantly slows down the auditor's reactions and thus the entire interaction between the auditor and the interviewee.

During the stage of data collection, the communication auditor should also gather language samples that can give an objective account of actual communication activity. The language samples can be in the oral and/or written form. The oral language samples come from meetings. The oral discourse that is held during the meetings is recorded and subsequently transcribed. It is also possible to play the recordings a few times and to transcribe only the parts that are relevant from the point of view of the communication auditor (partial transcriptions). The transcriptions are then collected in the form of a corpus for further analysis. The written discourse, on the other hand, is directly compiled as a corpus and further processed during the stage of data analysis. The written discourse is mainly composed of emails and official documents that are usually stored in an electronic format within the business context.

It may be concluded that at the stage of data collection various materials are gathered that can give the communication auditor an in-depth picture of the communication activity of the auditees. In the course of this stage, the communication auditor should have collected facts and perceptions/opinions on communication as well as language samples that reflect the actual communicative events and communicative acts (communication behaviour) produced by the auditees.

4.2 Data analysis

As mentioned above, the stage of data collection is strongly connected with the stage of data analysis. In fact, the distinction between these two stages is rather formal. In practice, to a certain extent these two stages often take place in parallel. Inevitably, the first analysis is performed during the stage of data collection. The communication auditor analyses the organisational aspects of a given company or part of it and the possible relations between these aspects and communication practice/discursive interactions of the auditees. Therefore, the first analysis is performed during the walk-around and the observations, and their results are then utilised for the purpose of subsequent interviews. Also *ad hoc* analysis is performed during the interviews. The communication auditor listens to the answers/statements given by the auditees, and based on them poses further questions or asks for clarification, examples, etc. These first analyses carried out during the walk-around,

observations, and interviews, however, are often performed naturally and intuitively and are not specifically structured.

Data analysis that requires knowledge of specific instruments, in particular the so-called 'linguistic toolkit', is performed systematically with regard to the language samples collected at the first stage of the business communication audit. In order to analyse the language samples with a special focus on communication aspects, the communication auditor may apply the tools offered by discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is considered "an interdisciplinary field of inquiry" focused on the use of language in a variety of institutional and professional settings (Bhatia, Flowerdew and Jones, 2008: 1, see also Keller, 2011: 20). There are different approaches to discourse analysis developed within various disciplines, such as linguistics, social studies, ethnomethodology, cultural studies, etc. The main approaches can be depicted in the following way:
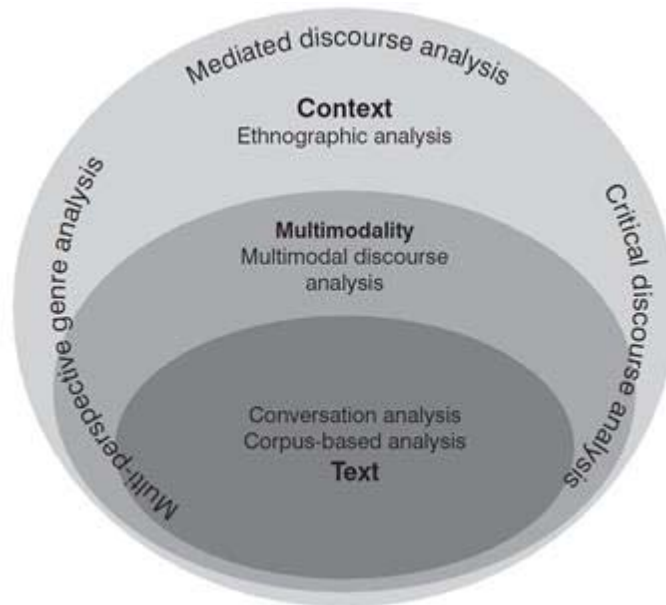

Figure 2: Approaches to discourse analysis: text, context, and semiotic mode (by Bhatia, Flowerdew and Jones, 2008: 14)

Following the model by Bhatia, Flowerdew and Jones shown in Figure 2, it can be concluded that each approach covers the aspects of text, context, and/or semiotic modes to a different extent. Whereas conversation analysis and corpus-based analysis pay attention to the aspects of text as a construct of discourse, multimodal discourse analysis regards text as one of the many semiotic modes to be analysed. Thus, multimodal discourse analysis also encompasses other semiotic modes, such as visual images, document layout, music, gestures, proxemics, etc. Ethnographic analysis, on the other hand, focuses almost entirely on social and cultural contexts as central aspects of communication. Multi-perspective genre analysis, mediated discourse analysis, and critical discourse analysis each pay varying attention to text, context, and semiotic modes. In addition, in the case of the last three approaches it is recommended to apply a combination of frameworks and methodologies, depending on the purpose of analysis and on the context. In fact, all approaches distinguished by Bhatia, Flowerdew and Jones influence one another and draw on one another's findings and methods (2008: 13).

In the case of a business communication audit, it is worth utilising the elements of various approaches to discourse analysis, as they complement one another and enable the communication auditor to better understand the community studied. Let us take an example. If the language samples gathered at the stage of data collection are composed of business emails, it is necessary to organise them as a corpus following the standards and tools of corpus-based analysis. Next, following the tenets of conversation analysis, it is necessary to define the basic unit of analysis. In the case of email discourse, the analysis may focus on the so-called 'email chains' that consist of business emails exchanged in a given matter by certain emailers. An email chain starts with a chain initiator (the first message to be written) and finishes with a chain terminator (the last message to be written). The emails produced between the chain initiator and the chain terminator may be called 'embedded emails' (Gimenez, 2006). According to the ethnography of communication, an email chain can be defined as a communicative event that is produced within certain settings, also referred to as context or communicative situation. This context should be defined before further analysis of the email chains (communicative events) in

question can be conducted. It is worth adding that a class of communicative events can be defined as a genre on the condition that the communicative events have a specific communicative purpose and exhibit various patterns of similarity as regards structure, style, and content (Swales, 1990: 58; see also Bhatia, 1993: 22–40). This implies that business emails can be analysed within the constraints of genre analysis. In other words, one can distinguish certain repetitive moves within business emails. Let us take a look at the following email initiator:

Table 1: Generic email structure as exemplified by an email initiator (cf. Kankaanranta, 2005: 273)

Email[2]	Move description	Move
Subject: […]: new trouble_[…]	Identifying subject	Move I
Hi Justyna,	Salutation/addressing	Move II
I get more and more complaints on […].	Providing information	Move III
Can you please check, why aren't we proceeding on that issue? Please check and address accordingly.	Requesting	Move IV
Best regards,	Closing	Move V
Miriam	Signature	Move VI

In the email quoted in Table 1, six moves can be distinguished, i.e. Identifying subject, Salutation/addressing, Providing information, Requesting, Closing, and Signature. However, depending on the context and the aim of the business communication audit, the communication auditor may identify various moves, which number may vary, too. Within the moves, more detailed communicative acts can be annotated and studied (for more information about business email annotation and business email communicative acts see De Felice et al., 2013). In particular, Move IV (Requesting) may consist of various communicative acts, as "the illocutionary effect of a request comes not from a single sentence but from the entire sequence of utterances" (De Felice, 2013: 92). For instance:

Table 2: Communicative acts within the requesting move (cf. De Felice et al., 2013)

Requesting move	Communicative act
but he is ill	third person statement
(don't know when he is coming back).	first person explanation
Hence	boundary marker
I please you to send me a description of what you have currently (what is clear and planned to do) and what are the open questions.	direct request
I try to provide answers before [date].	first person commitment

From the linguistic point of view, business emails may further be analysed on the intratextual level (words, phrases, propositions, texts) and/or the transtextual level (entire discourse). For example, the communication auditor may focus on the unusual or ambiguous phrases and words (corpus-based analysis) used by the auditees or on the semiotic mode of the emails, e.g. email layout (multimodal discourse analysis). Discourse Linguistic Multi-Layered Analysis (DIMEAN) developed by Spitzmüller and Warnke (2011) provides researchers from various disciplines with concrete ideas and gives orientation what aspects can be included in linguistic discourse analysis, yet it does not limit them with selected methods or steps.

Furthermore, for the purposes of empirical studies of specialist communication (in intercultural settings), it is recommended to follow the guidelines of anthropocentric linguistics as developed by Grucza (2010: 40 ff) and summarised in Zając (2013: 164–165). These guidelines, as opposed to the above-mentioned approaches to discourse analysis, go beyond the description of text, context, and semiotic modes, and focus on the description of distinctive properties of individuals (idioproperties). According to them, during the analysis the communication auditor should concentrate on real specialist languages (and not on specialist languages understood as mental constructs) and especially on the reconstruction of specific properties of specialists, i.e. their text-production, text-analysis, and discursive properties, on the basis of the texts (e.g. business emails) that they produce, externalise, receive, and understand in specific contexts. By focusing on the idioproperties of the auditees, the communication auditor may move on to develop certain codes, especially discursive codes, in the collected language samples (e.g. email chains). In general, the codes can be divided into thematic codes and discursive codes. The thematic coding does not have to be exact, especially because the topics discussed by the specialists in the business context might not always be fully comprehended by the communication auditor. Therefore, it is necessary to concentrate on developing discursive codes. The initial coding may refer to (a) the

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[2] This is an original business email that was masked for research purposes.

plane of text and discourse patterns (the manner in which the auditees e.g. initiate and close business email discourse, address, allocate, and title business emails) and (b) the illocutionary plane in the identified genres (how the auditees employ selected communicative acts related to e.g. ordering, reminding, argumentation, politeness, see Zając, 2013: 169–2013). After the descriptive coding of the discourse has been completed, the communication auditor may go on to refine and subsequently categorise/sort the codes, so that final analytical coding across various language samples and other data gathered can be developed. This, in turn, will lead the communication auditor to write up the audit's results and prepare the recommendations for the auditees and the company in question.

5. Conclusion

This paper has showcased the features of the business communication audit from a linguistic perspective, and as such it expands the existing understanding of the business communication audit and the methodological approach to conducting the business communication audit with linguistic considerations. The paper has suggested the linguistic definition of the business communication audit which is inevitably followed by changes introduced to the scope and to the process of the business communication audit that have been proposed so far. The changes in the process, in turn, require alterations to the methods applied to business communication audits. In this paper, a mix of qualitative methods developed by ethnographers and linguists have been offered to overcome the limitations of access to specific data. It has been postulated that the communication auditor should accompany professionals in their daily work in order to better understand how professionals communicate in a given business context (ethnographic approach). By being in close proximity to local settings for a specified period of time, the communication auditor collects qualitative data by watching (observation), asking (interviews), and examining (documents, language samples) and studies this data with the help of his/her linguistic toolkit developed on the basis of various approaches to discourse analysis.

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