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Specialist Email Communication in Global Virtual Teams: Selected Facets of Politeness

Abstract

In the globalisation age, work is more often undertaken in the form of projects, and (global) project management has become a key concept for professional activity. This applies to both business and academic settings. It is widely agreed that project team members spend the majority of their time communicating with one another. Effective communication, therefore, is a decisive factor for project success.

Successful communication in global project management ties in with the active application of two principles: the cooperative principle and the politeness principle. This paper focuses on the politeness principle, which is of vital importance in intercultural email communication among professionals who work together using ICT tools and never have a chance to meet face to face. Politeness issues are analysed on the basis of email discourse conducted in Business English as a *lingua franca* by a concrete global (virtual) project team, as exemplified by material drawn from a transnational corporation. It differentiates between verbal politeness indicators and structural politeness indicators, with the help of which politeness speech acts may be produced. The conclusion is that in teams consisting of members enjoying a similar professional position, the development and application of politeness strategies, and the use of politeness speech acts greatly influence the effectiveness of the communication process and the project success. It is also relevant to consider the individual features of team members when analysing the aspects of politeness.

Key Words: email, politeness, project, specialist discourse, virtual teams

Introduction¹: Communication in global virtual teams

The increasing globalisation of trade and corporate activity makes the use of virtual teams a necessity for various organisations. Virtual teams are mainly built in global corporations but they are also formed, in increasing number, in academic settings.

While in companies virtual teams are built in order to deliver certain projects and, hence, boost income, in academic institutions researchers work together within the international arena to develop, enhance, and maintain academic exchange, i.e. to execute specific research projects. In both types of organisations, virtual teams may be labelled ‘global virtual teams’ (see Zakaria & Amelinckx & Wilemon, 2004: 17) or ‘far-flung (virtual) teams’ (see Majchrzak & Malhotra, 2003:7), as team members are geographically and/or organisationally dispersed, represent various cultural properties and speak different national languages. Furthermore, they hardly ever work (communicate) face to face; instead they use a combination of information and communications technologies:

Far-flung virtual teams, or far-flung teams, or FFTs for short, take the concept of virtual teams the next level – they are teams of individuals spread across the globe, working collaboratively to innovate, with minimal or no face-to-face interaction. Thus, FFTs are characterized by added complexity over commonly deployed virtual teams. (Majchrzak & Malhotra, 2003:7)

[...] we use the term ‘global virtual teams’, which adds a more intricate phenomenon, but not a strangely different concept from both the meaning of virtual and global teams. [...] global virtual teams are not only separated by time and space, but differ in national, cultural and linguistic attributes, and use information and communication technologies as their primary means of communication and work structure. (Zakaria & Amelinckx & Wilemon, 2004: 17)

In this paper I use the term ‘global virtual teams’, as I consider it to be more apt and to the point than the term ‘far-flung teams’.

Similarly to traditional (co-located) teams, members of global virtual teams collaborate for a definite period of time in order to create a certain, usually unique, product, service, or result (see PMBOK Guide, 2008: 5). In other words, members of global virtual teams share a common purpose, i.e. the goal of a given project. However, in contrast to co-located teams, some specialists list a number of challenges/drawbacks associated with global virtual teams. One of these is ineffective communication ‘in the absence of rich

face-to-face communication' (Kuruppuarachchi, 2009: 22) and the necessity to use a common language. On the other hand, communication is of vital importance for the successful execution of projects by global virtual teams, as illustrated by the following comments:

There is a view that communication is a less important skill than planning and doing project management. This is not so. If you communicate badly, your project will fail. (Nokes & Kelly, 2007: 246)

[...] with the benefits of a virtual team also come the challenges---the biggest of which is communication. [...] For virtual teams [...] communication is even more critical and even more difficult. In fact, communicating with your virtual team members should be considered at least four times as challenging as communicating with those sitting right outside your office. (Riley, 2008: 1)

[...] they [= communication skills – J.Z.] can be considered as even more fundamental than learning the various disciplines and processes that make up a project manager's toolkit. They may be missed because they are obvious, or because they are thought of as rudimentary rather than fundamental. (Newton, 2009: 19–20)

It is worth noting that members of global virtual teams usually use the so-called 'Business English as a lingua franca' (see Louhiala-Salminen & Charles & Kankaanranta, 2005; Charles, 2009: 19) and apply multiple means of communication (see Kleinberger Günther, 2005: 306; Funken, 2008: 107; see also *multi-channelling* e.g. Holly, 2006, *multimodality* e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini, 2009: 12; Nickerson & Planken, 2009: 18 ff.) in order to communicate effectively, i.e. they rely on Internet-based communication tools (also called online communication tools) such as email, communicator, audio- and videoconferencing, wiki, (discussion) fora, blogs/ microblogs etc. In this paper I concentrate on the discourse carried out by members of global virtual teams via e-mail. I pay particular attention to politeness issues, which may be reproduced on the basis of specialist e-mail communication in global virtual teams.

Basic terms within the meaning of anthropocentric linguistics

A. Specialist email discourse

Drawing on the basic tenets of anthropocentric linguistics developed by Grucza F. (1983, 1989, 1992a,b, 1993a,b, 1997, 2010) and Grucza S. (2006a,b, 2008, 2010), I regard emails exchanged by members of global virtual teams as specialist texts, and specialist communication conducted via email ('specialist email discourse') as an exchange of specialist emails. Specialist emails are produced, sent, received and understood by specialists (team members) on the basis of their real specialist languages, i.e. their specialist idiolects, and their specialist cultural properties, i.e. specialist idiocultures. The collection of the team members' specialist idiolects may be labelled 'specialist polylect' or 'team language' (see PMBOK Guide, 2008: 230; Zając, 2012), whereas the collection of their specialist idiocultures may be referred to as 'specialist polyculture' or 'team culture' (see more in Zając, 2012).

B. Politeness

The issues of politeness are usually explained on the basis of the politeness theory developed by Brown and Levinson (1987) drawing on Goffman's (1967) 'face' theory (see Blum-Kulka, 1997: 50; Reiter, 2009: 166). The Brown and Levinson model is considered to be the dominant, best known, approach to linguistic politeness (Fraser, 2001: 1408–1423). However, in the context of intercultural and interlingual professional discourse, the Brown and Levinson model should be verified and extended (see Meier, 1997; Fraser, 2001: 1420–1423; Lüger, 2002: 9; Darics, 2010: 132). One of the problems with this model lies in the authors' claim for its universality (see Meier, 1995: 388, 1997: 22–23). Hence, in this paper I have adopted the anthropocentric approach to politeness following Meier's view of politeness as appropriateness (Meier, 1997: 24 ff) and the tenets of anthropocentric linguistics. The former advocates the so-called anthropological approach to politeness, in which the complexity of contextual and situational factors is of utmost importance. In intercultural encounters, cultural assumptions (awareness and sensitivity) underlie the perception of the contextual and situational factors (see also Blum-Kulka, 1997: 54 ff; Günthner, 2002: 267), which "can never be adequately captured by a list of cultural rules or by a recipe for every, or even most, possible constellations of contextual factors" (Meier, 1997: 25). Situational variables (context) and cultural variability are also the focus of anthropocentric linguistics, according to which 'politeness' should be regarded in terms of 'politeness

strategies’, i.e. as a set of certain (communicative) principles which a given person (specialist) needs to acquire (e.g. during communication workshops or in on-the-job situations) in order to successfully collaborate with other people, e.g. to successfully deliver projects in global virtual teams. This implies that a given person’s politeness strategies (idiostrategies) must be differentiated from the politeness strategies of a specific group of people (polystrategies), which Bonacchi (2011) underlined in her book:

Mit „Höflichkeit“ wird im kulturologischen Sinne die Gesamtheit von Gesprächsstrategien und Umgangspraktiken bezeichnet, die eingesetzt werden, um kommunikative Akte zu regulieren [...]. [...] „höfliches Verhalten“ [unterliegt] sowohl idioskulturell als auch polykulturell einer bestimmten „Grammatikalität“, d.h. expliziten und stillschweigenden Regeln, Geboten und Verboten, die die „Syntax“ des konkreten Kommunikationsaktes bedingen. (Bonacchi, 2011: 202–203)

What is more, politeness strategies are applied by team members in accordance with the principle of ‘recipient design’, i.e. by considering other members of the team (Liddicoat, 2007: 227; Sidnell, 2010: 207). Hence, there are no universal or general rules of politeness that can be applied to all professional situations (Meier, 1997: 24).

Literature review

Aspects of politeness in connection with specialist email discourse in global virtual teams have not been discussed to a great extent in literature on the subject. However, two recently conducted studies concerning politeness and email discourse may be mentioned.

Certain remarks on politeness in internal email communication conducted by employees of selected Swiss companies are presented by Kleinberger Günther (2002). In her article “Sprachliche Höflichkeit in innerbetrieblichen *e-mails*”, the author elaborates on the form, content, and speech acts with regard to politeness and internal emails. She differentiates between employees at the different levels of the organisational hierarchy and status equals. Van den Eynden Morpeth (2012), on the other hand, analyses issues of politeness and gender in organisational (business) emails exchanged by employees of

the Belgian branches of two international companies. In her paper “Politeness and Gender in Belgian Organisational Emails”, the author analyses her data on the basis of email structure, verbal indicators of politeness (please and thank-you forms), selected speech acts, and socio-emotional cues (social questions, emoticons, exclamation marks).

Research questions

On the basis of the studies mentioned above and the adopted tenets of anthropocentric linguistics, the following research questions may be posed:

- A. What politeness strategies are used by members of global virtual teams when they conduct email discourse?
- B. Which politeness speech acts are used by professional emailers working in the international environment?

Data and methodology

The data consists of 41 authentic emails exchanged by concrete team members—four employees of a global corporation coming from various countries, i.e. speaking different mother tongues and representing different cultural properties, while collaborating on a certain project. The members of the global virtual team communicated in Business English as a lingua franca, and gradually developed a common team language. On the basis of the content of the email discourse under study, I divided the discourse into three parts: initial, middle, final. The company from which the data stems did not wish to reveal its name and forbade me to publish any details about its operations. Hence, I do not describe the company in great detail.

The methodological approach of this study is based on the qualitative technique and the ethnographic method, as I established contact with the team members and was able to collect certain background information about the work processes and the participants. For the first research question, about politeness strategies that may be identified in professional email discourse, I drew on Bunz and Campbell’s (2002) differentiation between verbal and structural politeness indicators in email discourse. For the second research question, I followed the division of politeness speech acts presented by Bonacchi (2011: 266 ff). According to Bonacchi (*ibid.*), there are three types of politeness speech acts taking into consideration the communicative balance/equilibrium

that enables participants to build interpersonal relations when accomplishing certain tasks:

- (a) presentative – usually used at the beginning of communication in order to establish the rules of communicative balance;
- (b) reparative – used in order to avoid conflicts or misunderstandings, and to restore communicative equilibrium;
- (c) supportive – helps to build interpersonal relations and maintain communicative equilibrium.

In intercultural and interlingual encounters, specialist senders often perform communicative activities which contradict the expectations of specialist recipients (Bonacchi, 2011: 296 ff). This may affect the communication process in a negative way. The politeness speech acts listed above are used to mitigate the negative effects of such communicative activities. With regard to all types of politeness speech acts, paraverbal and verbal rules of communication are of great importance (Bonacchi, 2011: 288). However, in specialist email discourse these rules are limited to the formatting and layout of emails, the use of emoticons etc.

Results

A. Structural politeness indicators

Structural politeness indicators may be observed on the basis of (1) salutations and sign-offs, (2) introductions and closings.

(1) The members of the global virtual team greeted their colleagues in every email, and they also signed off every email, even though in some cases they exchanged emails at short intervals. Both salutations and sign-offs may be treated as presentative speech acts as they were used in order to initiate a conversation which aim was to start the performance of collaborative activities (salutation) and the self-presentation (sign-off).

When greeting one another, the team members usually used the word ‘Hi’ in tandem with the first name of the recipient of the email. There were two exceptions to this rule: (a) when the sender used solely the name of the recipient, and (b) when the sender skipped the entire salutation. When a given email was intended for two recipients, the sender either put a conjunction ‘and’ between the first names of the addressees, e.g. *Hi*

A and B (appeared once) or used a collective noun, e.g. *Hi Guys* (appeared twice), *Hi guys* (appeared once), *Hi Everyone* (appeared once), *Hi All* (appeared once). It is worth noting that the first letters of the collective nouns listed (except for *guys*) were written in capitals, which may also be regarded as a politeness indicator. However, native speakers of the English language may not necessarily consider the words mentioned to be polite (see Sax 2012). In three cases, the sender addressed two receivers separately in one email, i.e. the sender formulated two texts beginning with the word ‘Hi’. However, the sender signed off both texts together. The sign-offs that appeared in emails consisting of two texts were the same as the sign-offs used in emails sent to one recipient and in emails addressed to two recipients simultaneously. The team members usually used the expressions *Regards* and *Best regards* in their sign-offs. The salutations and sign-offs mentioned may be regarded as the traits of respect demonstrated by the senders for the receivers. It is worth mentioning that the expressions *Regards*, *Best regards* often followed such words as *Thank you*, *Thanks*. For example *Thanks and regards* (appeared five times in the final phase of the discourse), *Thank you. Best regards* (appeared five times). On two occasions an email (request for performing a task) was ‘signed off’ solely with the expression *Thanks!* In some cases the sign-offs were more complex in order to:

- a) reinforce argumentation (also to mark the roles played in the project):

Thanks for your understanding.

Best regards

Hope that makes sense

Regards

Thank you for your understanding.

Best regards

- b) express a request once more:

Thanks a lot once more.

Best regards

In all email closings the senders put their first names, leaving out their formal signatures with the name of their position and contact information.

On the basis of the examples illustrated above, it may be concluded that salutations and sign-offs are used in specialist emails composed by the team members for formal

reasons in order to demonstrate respect for one another and to create the grounds for working together. They are also used to build interpersonal relations, which may be noticed on the basis of such informal words as *Hi* (instead of e.g. *Dear*) and *Regards* (instead of e.g. *Sincerely yours*). The reconstruction of the sign-offs in specialist emails indicates that sign-offs may also be used for other reasons, i.e. in order to express a request, to reinforce one's arguments, to turn down a request, to close the discourse in a polite manner, and hence, to build communicative equilibrium. To conclude, it can be noted that in specialist email discourse, structural politeness indicators are often used in tandem with verbal politeness indicators (see Section B below).

(2) Similarly to salutations and sign-offs, introductions and closings were used as part of politeness strategies. Concerning the introductions of specialist emails, the phrase *Please find . . .* or expressions conveying similar meaning were commonly used:

Please find attached . . .

I have prepared . . . You can find it on below location . . .

Please find . . . at the location below . . .

I have uploaded . . . on following locations . . .

We have everything on . . .

We have . . . on . . .

Attached is . . .

Requested . . . were uploaded to below location . . .

Please find updated . . .

Please find completed . . .

Please find . . . uploaded . . .

These . . . are ready . . .

I have uploaded . . .

I updated . . .

We have . . .

Please note the below . . .

The project team members used the expressions listed above at the beginning of their emails, and in this way they assigned the tasks in the project or informed other team

members that the tasks had been accomplished. The highest degree of politeness may be assigned to the expressions with the word *please*.

One of the team members used the word *please* at the beginning of his emails in order to make explicit requests (most often for a given task to be performed):

Please create . . .

Please let me know . . .

Due to the fact that these expressions constituted the entire body of an email, they may also be considered to be concluding expressions (closings). Sometimes the word *please* was used by the team members to finish a given email:

Please, prepare . . .

Please, follow the instructions given by . . .

The words *Thank you/Thanks* were also used in the introductory part of specialist emails. When using these words at the beginning of a specialist email, the project team members:

a) confirmed safe receipt of an email message/files or informed that they were working on an assigned task:

Thank you for . . .

Thanks for information.

b) thanked for the job done by another team member:

Thank you . . . in the meantime we had discussion . . .

Thank you . . . please . . .

Thank you. . . . is fine and requirements are met.

To finish off their emails, the team members used the following expressions:

If you have any question, just let me know.

Kindly let me know if there any concerns.

Kindly let me know if there any concerns. ☺

Kindly confirm.

If you have any question, just let me know.

Please acknowledge safe receipt.

Let me know if you have questions or if anything is unclear.

These expressions may be regarded as reparative speech acts as they were used in order to prevent conflicts and communicative problems during the execution of the project. Through the use of these expressions, the senders made an attempt to encourage the receiver(s) to contact them in case of any issues. It is worth noting that the team members used emoticons indicating an informal character of the discourse under study. The emoticons appeared in both the reparative and supportive speech acts. With the use of the emoticons, the participants announced a delay or apologised for mistakes made. In general, the introductions and closings appeared mostly in specialist emails exchanged in the middle part of the discourse. They were used in order to build an interpersonal relationship and to reach optimal communicative equilibrium. Their use was optional and depended on the context and on the aims that the sender attempted to reach. Similarly to the salutations and sign-offs, the introductions and closings were often used in tandem with verbal politeness indicators (see Section B).

B. Verbal politeness indicators

The words 'thank you' and 'please' are among the verbal politeness indicators used in the specialist email discourse. The word 'thank you' was used in 56 per cent of the emails, mainly in the final phase of the discourse, and the word 'please' in 66 per cent of the texts, mostly in the initial phase of the discourse, which may be considered logical. At the beginning of the project, the team members asked one another to perform certain tasks using the word 'please' and at the end of the project thanked for their performance. In some emails the verbal politeness indicators were used more than once. Moreover, one of the team members did not use any verbal politeness indicators, while another used half of the total verbal politeness indicators appearing in the entire discourse. The team member who used the highest number of verbal politeness indicators was the central person in the project. Although he was not the project manager of the project, he was held responsible for the project outcome. Therefore, he tried to build and maintain communicative equilibrium and good relationships with other team members. This may be concluded not only on the basis of the amount of verbal politeness indicators that he used but also by considering the number of emails he produced (around 35 per cent of all exchanged emails). Another team member, who used about 30 per cent of all verbal politeness indicators in the whole discourse, caused a number of 'difficult' situations and made numerous mistakes, which threatened the

project's success. By using the words 'thank you' and 'please', he most probably tried to soften difficult situations and to avoid potential conflict with other team members (reparative speech acts). The differences in the use of verbal politeness indicators cannot be explained with 'cultural differences', as the team member who used the second highest amount of verbal politeness indicators and the one who did not use any verbal politeness indicators represent the same country of origin. Hence, it may be concluded that the use of the words 'thank you' and 'please' is first and foremost an individual issue, and cannot be related to the role played by the team member or to cultural differences. This testifies to the anthropocentric approach to communication adopted in this paper.

Conclusion

In the foregoing paper, I have discussed the selected aspects of politeness in specialist email discourse, relevant for project teams in an international environment. The results indicate that politeness cannot be defined as universal politeness rules, but it has to be ascribed to the individual features of emailers. Hence, the thesis of politeness as appropriateness developed by Meier is confirmed. Taking into consideration the situation and intercultural context of the email discourse under study, one may also conclude that politeness indicators helped its participants to soften difficult situations and to reach success in the project. In summary, I advocate following the anthropocentric approach in future studies on politeness.

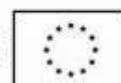
Notes

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