

STYLISTIC FEATURES OF BUSINESS WRITING

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Abstract: *Style is a crucial element of business communication, since the writer has to manage to obtain a balance between being pleasant and being polite. People use business writing to ask for a job, to inquire about different opportunities, to ask for price quotations, to get into business with partners etc. It is to the writer's advantage to learn how to write in a business style because it is an important part of most people's everyday life. Nowadays, due to the development of international business partnerships, business people in Romanian and not only are faced with the necessity of writing and translating official business papers from English into Romanian because English is considered the language of world business relationships. In comparison with literary texts, the texts of official documents are highly standardized. This refers to both the structure of the whole text and the arrangement of special paragraphs. The language of business documents is characterized by specific terms and expressions and also by certain grammatical and syntactical patterns. The literature in the field has showed vastly subjective approaches, yet these approaches are not all the time in accordance with existing rules of formal English. Also, there are no accepted criteria for changes that should be taken into consideration. Therefore, the main problems of people who write business documents are: how should they write it to sound correctly? How formal should they be in the content of documents, if even English-speaking people have difficulties drawing a line between formal and informal English? The aim of this paper is to investigate the stylistic peculiarities of official business documents. It starts with introductory notions regarding style and stylistic and it continues with the relation between language and its function in social settings. The second part of the paper provides a stylistic analysis of the most common features seen in business documents.*

Keywords: style, stylistics, stylistic analysis, business discourse, business documents

JEL classification: Y8; Y9.

1. Style, stylistics and Business English

Business English as a language of international communication and exchange has become an important element of the business activities. With the economic development, especially after Romania's accession to the European Union,

Romania's cross-border business activities have become increasingly frequent. International business transactions are carried out at an unprecedented rate in the rapid development of the economic and commercial fields. At the same time, more and more enterprises begin to target the Romanian market, to expand their international market for economic benefits. Therefore, Business English is more and more important for people and subsequently written English used in business documents. As Bruce, Hirst and Keene (1995) put it, "today's world of business lives on written documents" (p. 1). Written communication relies on heavily stylised and standard expressions and, in order to carry out a stylistic analysis of business documents it is important to define style, stylistics and stylistic analysis.

Styles has been defined by different scholars differently at different times. According to *Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics* (2002), style is the manner of expression in writing or speaking which changes all the time according to different situational elements, e.g. the participants, time, place or subject of the communicative event, from very formal to very informal. According to modern stylistics, style can be defined as the habits of language use of a person or a group of people in a particular situation. Different situations require different ranges of a language that, in return, show different linguistic characteristics and therefore style may be seen as the various characteristics of language use in various contexts.

Stylistics is the branch of linguistics which studies the principles and the effect of choice and usage of different language elements in expressing thought and emotion in certain communication situations. Subsequently, it deals with:

- the aesthetic function of language;
- expressive means in language
- synonymous ways of expressing one and the same idea (a change in meaning taking place with the change of wording);
- emotional colouring in language;
- a system of special devices called stylistic devices;
- the division of the literary language into separate systems called style;
- the interrelation between language and thought;
- the individual manner of an author in using language. (Apud www.durov.com/study/moi_shpory_stilist-1034.doc)

Stylistics was defined by Widdowson (1979) as "the study of literary discourse from a linguistic orientation and I shall take the view that what distinguishes stylistics from literary criticism on the one hand and linguistics on the other is that it is essentially a means of linking the two".(p.67)

According to Chris Baldick in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1996), stylistics is defined as "a branch of modern linguistics devoted to the detailed analysis of literary style, or of the linguistic choices made by speakers and writers in non-literary contexts." F.de Saussure introduced one of the fundamental concepts in linguistics, that of the contrast of "language and speech" (*langue - parole*). Saussure considers that language is a system of elementary and complex signs: phonemes, morphemes, words, word combinations, utterances and combinations of utterances. Saussurean contribution was to dissect the total phenomenon of language (*langage*) into: a) actual speech production (*parole*), including the role of the individual will, and b) the socially shared system of signs (*langue*) that makes production and comprehension possible. (Koerner; Asher, 1995:234)

Stylistic analysis in linguistics refers to the identification of patterns of usage in

speech and writing and in literary studies is usually made for the purpose of commenting on quality and meaning in a text. Its aim is to “bring to light patterns in style which influence readers' perceptions and relate to the disciplinary concerns of literary and linguistic interpretation.” (<http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/>)

1.1. The Relation between Language and its Functions in Social Settings

The key to a successful written communication is the balance between knowing general rules and being aware of certain features of different writing situations. Writing involves three elements, present in any act of communication: the writer, the reader, and the subject. The emphasis may fall on each of these, depending on the type of message sent. When the emphasis is placed on the reader, the message is persuasive, specific to newspaper articles or advertising, being probably the most common form of business writing. Persuasion involves directing or making a reader do something or not. Business examples include job applications, proposals, sales messages, etc. The fact that the emphasis is placed on the reader means that the writer is not in charge. In the case of advertisements, for example, the reader decides whether to or not to carry out an action, make a decision, etc.

Writing in organizations is complicated by the fact that an organization is changing all the time. Sometimes change is anticipated, other times it is unexpected. But in any event, accepting change is essential and the correspondence should continue, adapted to the conditions of changes.

The official-business style refers to a certain style of documents used in international and national trade such as: international agreements, legal documents, instructions, official correspondence, business papers, etc. Different types of business documents have different forms of representation and disposition of the material which facilitates and simplifies their use. For example, addresses on envelopes are written in a certain order, according to the rules specific to each country, yet in a well-established order to make it easy for both the sender and the post office employees.

One way to examine written communication is from a structural perspective. Words are a series of symbols that communicate meaning; they combine in specific patterns. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and articles are the structures used to compose written documents. Another way to examine written communication is from the perspective of the objectives established, where specific documents have in view certain objectives and have rules and formats that are anticipated and expected. Not complying with these rules, customs, or formats can have a negative impact on the way these documents are received. According to McLean (2012), “colloquial, casual, and formal writing are three common styles that carry their own particular sets of expectations.” (“Business Communication for Success” <http://2012books.lardbucket.org/pdfs/communication-for-business-success.pdf>)

The style that the writer uses depends on the audience and whether the communication is going to be read only by those in the writer's company (internal communications) or by those outside the organization, such as sales people, customers or clients (external communications). Generally, external communications are more formal, just as corporate letterhead and business cards which are more formal than the e-mail and text messages that are used for everyday writing within the organization.

We consider that in business writing two crucial elements, stylistically speaking, are the purpose of the document and the audience as it is important to establish a connection between language and the social settings. One branch of linguistics dealing with this subject is SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics). According to Nordquist (2012), systemic functional linguistics is the study of the relationship between language and its functions in social settings. It studies the peculiarities of various functional styles, including official business. (<http://grammar.about>)

Trask and Stockwell (2007) define systemic linguistics as "an avowedly functionalist approach to language, and it is arguably the functionalist approach which has been most highly developed. In contrast to most other approaches, SL explicitly attempts to combine purely structural information with overtly social factors in a single integrated description. Like other functionalist frameworks, SL is deeply concerned with the *purposes* of language use. Systemicists constantly ask the following questions: What is this writer (or speaker) trying to do? What linguistic devices are available to help them do it, and on what basis do they make their choices?" (Trask & Stockwell, 2007:293)

In *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics* (2005), Eggins states that "[w]hile individual scholars naturally have different research emphases or application contexts, common to all systemic linguists is an interest in *language as social semiotic* (Halliday 1978) - how people use language with each other in accomplishing everyday social life. This interest leads systemic linguists to advance four main theoretical claims about language:

- that language use is functional;
- that its function is to make meanings;
- that these meanings are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged;
- that the process of using language is a *semiotic* process, a process of making meaning by choosing.

These four points, that language use is functional, semantic, contextual and semiotic, can be summarized by describing the systemic approach as a *functional-semantic* approach to language." (Eggins, 2005:3)

In business communication, linguistic forms are the constituents of a semiotic system which the communicators select to create their reality while having in mind the establishment of an interpersonal relationship with respect to power and solidarity.

2. The Style of Business Documents

The main feature of business writing common to all forms (letters, emails, documents) is the style. Regardless of the documents written, the aim should be conciseness, clearness and an efficient way of transmitting information. There are many types of business communication styles that influence how companies, corporations, governments, and institutions communicate with each other and share information. Nowadays, businesses carry out their activities both online and offline, sharing information via letters or via email. One of the most important elements in business writing, according to the majority of scholars, is formality since each document has to be treated as a legal document, and should be considered the image of a company or organization's communication system. For this reason, many types of business writing are considered official documents, thus

more and more companies care about how they write and how others perceive them through the documents written. Formality in business writing brings a level of seriousness to the advertisements, for example, and makes the documents seem official. Business documents as correspondence (letters), enquiries, offers, complaints and contracts are of legal importance. It has been noted that the official business language differs from other kinds of the English language, the style of official documents being the most conservative one. All emotions and subjective modality are forbidden in this style. It maintains the structural forms and the use of syntactical constructions. Addressing documents and official letters, signing them, expressing the reasons and considerations leading to the subject of the document are regulated lexically and syntactically. Like other styles of language, the objective of this style is communication and, therefore, has its own system of interrelated language and stylistic means. Business style has its own unusual terms, phrases and expressions, which differ from the terms of correspondence, phrases and expressions of other types of this style. Unusual features common to all stylistic varieties of official documents are the following: the use of abbreviations, conventional symbols and clipped words; the use of formal words; absence of emotion; general syntactical mode of combining several ideas into one sentence.

2.1.1. The use of abbreviations, conventional symbols and clipped words

Initials and abbreviations are one of the most common methods in business correspondence writing. Usually these abbreviations are technical terminology or abbreviations of a company or an organization. For example, L/C (=letter of credit), B/L (=Bill of Lading), FOB (=Free on board), CIF (=Cost, insurance and freight), CFR (=Cost and freight), and IBM (=International Business Machines), P&G (=Procter & Gamble), HP (=Hewlett-Packard).

The advantage of the notice provided by the symbols is that it enables others to respect and not infringe intellectual property, deters them from attempting to use the name or mark for their own business, and prevents confusion in the marketplace about the identity of a product or service. For example, the most common symbols are TM (trademark, for products), SM (service mark, for services) and ® (registered trademark). They notify the world and the competitors that a particular company claims trademark rights in the mark or name using these symbols. Clipped words mean to abbreviate and intercept a part of the word, mainly the suffix, prefix of the word. For example, biz (=business), Corp (=corporation), Ad (=Advertisement), PC (=piece), NO (=Number), etc. People in business use the abbreviations to avoid lengthy explanation and simplify the process of transaction, and improve work efficiency, in accordance with the requirements of saving time and improving efficiency in international business. Thus it is frequently used in business correspondences and documents.

2.1.2. The use of formal words

As we have mentioned above, formality is one of the main features of business documents. Business correspondence writing belongs to the formal style, therefore words must be formal. These words have the feature of being accurate in meanings and they make business correspondence writing more formal. Formal language rigorously follows Standard English conventions and it tends to avoid personal opinions, feelings, and experiences from private life. It also avoids idiomatic language. This is the most acceptable level for most published or broadly

disseminated documents, business documents, and academic documents. The formality of business correspondences is mainly expressed by the aspects presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Formality in business correspondence

Informal	Formal
Verb phrases	Verbs
say sorry	apologize/apologise
come up with	arrive
bring about	cause
think about	consider
get in touch with	contact
keep on; go on	continue
find out	discover
look at	examine
deal with	handle
add to	supplement
Prepositions & Conjunctions	Prepositional phrases
according to	in accordance with
for	for the purpose of
if	in the case of
about	with reference to; with regard to
so	therefore; thus
but	however
also	moreover; furthermore; additionally
anyway	notwithstanding
Emphasis words	
lots of/ a lot of	much; many
tons of; heaps of	large quantities of; a number of
totally	completely
really; very	definitely
Letters	
Hi	Dear Sir/Madam
Just wanted to let you know	I am writing to inform you
Love,	Yours sincerely,; Yours faithfully,
Hope to hear from you soon	I look forward to hearing from you

Source: <http://www.engvid.com/english-resource/formal-informal-english/>

2.1.3. Absence of emotion

Emotions are “a mental and psychological state associated with a wide variety of feelings, thoughts and behaviour. They can bring about great intensity in the performance of an action.” (Melé, 2009:106) In face-to-face conversation, the subject matter and its emotional content is enhanced by tone of voice, facial expressions, and nonverbal cues. It is not the case with written communication/digital communication.

The philosopher Aristotle once wrote of three different modes of persuasion - three different ways of appealing to the audience. The first two are logic (logos) and emotion (pathos). Many forms of business writing use one or both of these modes of persuasion, the third being to a certain extent underestimated. Yet, it has been argued that the third mode of persuasion is of the greatest importance for an appeal to credibility (ethos) directly concerns the way that the audience perceives the speaker.

Despite the fact that many believe that business writing should lack any sign of emotions, emoticons, or combinations of symbols that “loosely depict the human face, have made their smiley way from tween texts to the outboxes of legitimate business people. Obviously, there are arguments against them. They are childish, lazy, and also indicate that the writer of the message does not trust the reader to understand the written language.” According to the same article in Huffington Post published in 2011 on the use of emoticons at work, Emerson, the author of the article, states that emoticons “may be a necessary evil, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a right way and a wrong way to use them. First off, smiley faces are the only kind of emoticon allowed in business correspondence. No shocked faces. No winks. And no frowny faces.” (“Emoticons at Work: Unprofessional or Necessary Evil?”, 2011)

This is because as far as email is concerned, sarcasm or any other tone just does not exist. Emails are necessarily one dimensional which makes it almost impossible to express subtlety. Supporters of emoticons have several reasons why these “faces” should exist. They consider that emoticons can help create emotional connection between communicators from both sides. In other words, they bring the two sides involved closer. During communication via plain text such as chatting online with customers, the message is usually neutral while the tone is absent. It is very likely for the customers to look at the message in a negative way. Therefore, emoticons are necessary to clarify the tone. On the other hand, opponents believe that it is not professional to use emoticons during a business conversation and it only makes the person writing the message seem childish. Also, emoticons may offend some of the customers who feel uncomfortable to see such icons during a business conversation and think they are not taken seriously. They strongly believe that well-structured writing is clear enough and has no place for any emoticon.

Whether or not emoticons are used in business communication, the writer’s aim should be to make sure that the messages are correctly interpreted by the customers thus reaching good customer satisfaction.

2.1.4. General syntactical mode of combining several ideas into one sentence

Sentences provide the framework for the clear written expression of ideas. The aim in writing is always to write in complete sentences which are correctly punctuated. Sentences always begin with a capital letter and end in either a full stop, exclamation or question mark. A complete sentence always contains a verb, expresses a complete idea and makes sense standing alone. Clarity in writing is one of the most difficult skills to master. (<http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/grammar/grammar-guides/sentence>)

From a syntactical point of view, business writing style is made up from compositional patterns of variants of this style which have their own designs. A sentence is a unit of thought. The longer the sentence, the more ideas the reader

must keep in mind at the same time. Considering its stylistic structure, the business document is one sentence. It looks like separate clauses often divided by commas or semicolons, and not by full stops, and they are often numbered. Every predicate construction begins with a capital letter in the form of a participial or an infinitive construction as it can be seen in the following examples:

1. *In case of non-conformity of the quality of the goods actually delivered by Sellers with the contract specification, any claim concerning the quality of the goods may be presented within two months of the date of delivery;*

2. *No claim to be considered by Sellers after expiration of the above period;*

3. *No claim presented for one lot of the goods shall be regarded by Buyers as a reason for rejecting any other lot or lots of the goods to be delivered under the present contract (King 1997, c. 31).*

4. *No amendment, change or modification of this Agreement shall be valid unless in writing signed by the parties hereto.*

(<http://hrcouncil.ca/docs/samplecontract.pdf>)

On the other hand, the use of short sentences may make for clear and concise writing, but “it can also make your writing seem simplistic, choppy, angry or monotonous.” (Levinson, 2000:66) The advice would be to vary the kinds of sentences used: short sentences with longer and more intricate ones. Other ways would be to join the sentences with a colon, to start with dependent clauses or transitional phrases or to invert the normal word order:

e.g. Particularly important is the emphasis on self-sufficiency.

Mixing different types of sentences the writer can create a rhythm that encourages the reader to follow his thoughts. According to Levinson (2000), “[v]ariety in sentence structure, length and rhythm ... represents the true relations among thoughts more accurately than a series of sentences will.” (p.66)

3. The Tone of Business Documents

Business writers should also consider the tone of their message, whether they are writing a letter, report, or any type of business document. Tone is present in all communication activities. The tone of a message is a reflection of the writer and it does affect how the reader will perceive the message. Thus, the tone used in business documents is very important. Tone, as Obber (1995) states, refers “to the writer's attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of a written message affects the reader just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in everyday exchanges. [...] The business writer should strive for an overall tone that is confident, courteous, and sincere; that uses emphasis and subordination appropriately; that contains nondiscriminatory language; that stresses the “you” attitude; and that is written at an appropriate level of difficulty” (Ober, 1995:88).

The only major exceptions to these principles are when the writer prepares a negative business message, such as denying a job offer or a customer request. Some general rules that the business writer has to keep in mind when considering what kind of tone to use in the business documents and how to present information

in that tone are: confidence, courtesy and honesty, the use of appropriate emphasis and subordination, the use of non-discriminatory language, the emphasis on the benefits for the reader and the use of an appropriate level of difficulty. In this view, there are many strategies to emphasize an idea or to subordinate it. To emphasize an idea, a short sentence should be used. A short and simple sentence will most effectively express an important idea. To subordinate an idea, this should be contained in a compound sentence. Ideas placed in the first paragraph of a document receive the most emphasis, followed by information placed in the last paragraph. Also, the writer should use active voice to emphasize the person or thing performing an action and passive voice to emphasize the action that is being performed. The different types of tone used in business writing are dependent on several different factors:

- audience –the tone used should appeal to the people addressed;
- message – the writer should think about the actual content of the writing and which types of tone are most appropriate. For example, the language used to promote a product is exciting and energetic. On the other hand, an apology for a returned product would use a more serious tone.
- medium – the platform where the writing will appear should be taken into consideration. For instance, the tone used in the press release of a company would be professional and informative. (Apud <http://www.printwand.com/blog/importance-of-tone-in-business-writing-and-how-to-use-it>)

All these factors contribute to the creation of a model for a tone that makes business writing more effective. Establishing the right tone for any document is related to an individual's ability to understand readers and adapt the communication to their needs. Writing from the reader's point of view is always helpful that is why the writer of the message should choose the tone that is most appropriate to the reader. Also, when deciding the tone, it is important to take into consideration the person's previous correspondence and use the same tone.

4. In conclusion

Business English writing has a very important role in all the business activities. Most professionals spend at least 15-20% of their time writing for business: emails, memos, business letters, reports and other business correspondence. Learning business writing skills can have a positive impact on an individual's career advancement and also on the image of the company on behalf of which the document is written. Effective channels of communication make an organization run appropriately. Professional quality writing sent through these channels improves productivity and the ability of all functional areas to work together, especially in an increasingly global workplace where collaboration is of outmost importance. Whether we refer to a small business or a multinational corporation, employers and employees communicate with each other or with business partners, suppliers, etc. most often in writing. Obviously, there's email and the traditional business letter, but most business people are also called on to write presentations, memos, proposals, business requirements, grant proposals, and a wide range of other documents. The aim in writing business documents is to send a clear, concise, effective message. Formal style of English has as main characteristics conventionality of expression, absence of emotions, encoded character of the

language and general syntactic mode of combining several ideas within one sentence. Informal language is more commonly used in situations that are more relaxed and involve people we know well. Written Business English style has borrowed from both formal and informal English, in spite of the fact that there are many believing that this particular style should be formal in essence.

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