

## TENSES SPECIFIC TO BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** *A question of simplicity versus correctness seems to emerge quite often when discussing proper use of tenses in business communication. Several commentators argue that Business English texts are by their intrinsic nature rather direct and focused on rendering clearly and straightforwardly specific information, tending to employ the simplest of ways when doing so. Nevertheless, researchers can find voices that advocate for accuracy with respect to grammar rules implying, among others, the use of tenses, as this grammaticalness is, after all, in itself a minimal sign of the professionalism so much valued in the business fields. If simple tenses, basic forms, are seen more often than perfective aspects, this obviously makes sense from the specificity of the text analysed, from meeting's minutes or financial reports to business plans or contracts, for instance. However, tense consistency and mixed tenses are not a debatable issue when they appear to be resorted to, as their usage is surely implied for comprehensibility reasons, i.e. to facilitate correct transmission of the meaning intended. This article assumes to put forward examples of authentic texts in English from various fields of Economics and Business, showing what verbal tenses are most often used in these texts, bringing the arguments of the specialists involved and presenting own views on the matters discussed. Expectedly, it shall be seen that simple present and simple past are the tenses with the highest circulation in the specific texts presented, but the occurrence of other tenses and aspects will be analysed and justified. Though the article is just a mere overview, showing only a few examples from the very vast panel of texts in Business communication that make use of the grammar aspect of tenses, the discussions brought about will not only be of use for teachers of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), in general, and of Business English Communication, in particular, but they can also prove of relevance for students in economics, for economists and others in the business fields.*

**Keywords:** *English for Specific Purposes; Business Communication; common tenses; grammar specifics.*

**JEL Classification:** Z13.

### 1. Preliminary Observations

Consideration of grammar is obviously less of a preoccupation with authentic texts in LSP (Languages for Specific Purposes), in discourses of a lucrative purpose, of specific data presentation or of a deal oriented character and others as such, than in an academic or literary one. That is obviously not from a lack of care for the language rules if not from the particular nature of the information that is rendered by texts of this type and the direct way of its exposition, which do not normally need complex grammar structures.

## **2. Language Features of Business Communication**

### **2.1. Nature of Texts**

There is of course much variation of the types of texts encountered in the fields of business and economics, each entailing specific particularities. We can consider here any text that implies use of Business English of a certain nature, from business contracts to the ancillary business documents, from texts bringing some breaking news to informative data or financial statistics, from the standard language of management, organization, presentations, meetings, negotiations to that of transportation, tourism, travel, shipment, from commerce and trade to marketing and promotion, from accounting to banking a.s.o.

### **2.2. Grammar Consideration**

No doubt, it largely depends on the nature of the text and the degree of its complexity, but more often than not, the grammar structures in Business English discourses tend to be reduced to a intermediate, though, most certainly, a decent level, within the limits of and, more likely, rather focusing on the text's clarity and comprehension.

It is not very likely to find a complex grammar structure where a more straightforward expression would do and, much in the same way, it is rather rare that a future perfect or a past perfect continuous may pop up in a sentence from a business text. A propensity for certain temporal aspects comes natural taking into account the quite limited necessities of such texts with respect to the distinction of particular tenses.

## **3. Time Representation in Business English**

### **3.1. Temporal Aspects on Text Categories**

Researchers put forward various examples and bring their arguments with respect to the specificities of the texts they discuss.

For instance, Gaertner-Johnston (2007) considers that sometimes, i.e. in the case of the minutes of meetings, the use of tense rules for the indirect speech might be not so advisable, as it could take the readers somewhat out of the context. Instead, she claims, keeping the tenses of the direct speech will give them a real sense of participation in that particular meeting as if they were attendees.

Thus, for meeting notes and minutes, the author of this article prefers variants A of the following (Table 1), regardless of their inconsistency with the clear grammar rules of sequence of tenses. She nevertheless remarks that this holds true if the minute is written at the appropriate time, so that the use of future tense for instance would still be valid considering the actual temporal reference.

Business plans, on the other hand, are considered to be properly written in present or future (Proofreading Pal, 2015), with a focus on either its coming into being or its preparation, as shown in Table 2.

Adverbials of time will also be represented in such texts by a restricted panel, for the same reason of focusing on simplicity and generally on rendering a pragmatic presentation of facts, figures and outcomes.

**Table 1.** Tense in Meeting Minutes

A. John said the next meeting will be on October 1. B. John said the next meeting would be on October 1.
A. Min reported that the new shipment arrived today and is ready for processing. B. Min reported that the new shipment had arrived that day and was ready for processing.
A. Stella said we need to seek a legal opinion. B. Stella said we needed to seek a legal opinion.

*Source:* own concept and design of table, based on text content in the reference (Gaertner-Johnston, 2007)

**Table 2.** Present or Future for Business Plans

Professors and potential investors have different views on what tense a business plan should be written in, but definitely you should be using either future or present tense. Some people argue that you should always write a business plan in future tense because you're talking about your future plans.

But there's another school of thought that recommends using present tense instead because this will allow your plan to stay current as you develop it and you develop your business. In other words, as you develop your business, you develop your plan, and it stays current with what you're doing.

*Source:* own concept and design of table, based on text content in the reference (Proofreading Pal, 2015)

### **3.2. Basic Rules with Verbal Tenses in BE**

Regardless of the category of the text or the field it belongs to, it is agreed that basic and consistent verb tenses should be used for the main line of the discourse and the changes in time frame are to be properly and clearly rendered by tense shifts (Newman, 2018), as explained in table 3.

It is a sign of seriousness, adequacy and care to use the tenses accurately and appropriately, especially as the business discourse itself generally requires mostly rather uncomplicated tenses, as remarked in Table 4. The advice given by this specialist (Marco, 2007) to those new in the field is to make no rebate from this one basic rules of convenience that may constitute a measure of the assessment and evaluation of their professionalism.

**Table 3.** Verb Tense Consistency

Writers will generally maintain one tense for the main discourse and indicate changes in time by changing tense relative to that primary tense. Even apparently non-narrative writing should employ verb tenses consistently and clearly. When a passage begins in one tense and then shifts without warning and to another, readers can be confused. [...]

A paragraph or complete work should have one basic tense with shifts to other tenses to indicate a change in time frame to the reader. Your basic tense will probably be past, present, or future.

Source of table: own design based on text content in the reference (Newman, 2018)

**Table 4.** Use of the Correct Tense

When writing a business document, it is important to use the correct tense. Whether you are putting together an email, a memo, a business plan, a report, or any other type of business-related writing, using the correct tense will help to keep the document clear and understandable.

For example, if you are writing a report or a summary about a meeting or a conference, since it already occurred, the verbs should be in the past tense, as in "The meeting *started* on time, with introductory remarks *made* by Mr. Smith."

Of course, any comments that relate to ongoing activities need to be in the present. An example of that is "Efforts to *maintain* our market share *are proceeding* in a satisfactory manner."

Obviously, references to future actions should be written in the future tense, as in the following example: "The new plan *will be implemented* within 90 days."

Not to complicate matters, but, within a sentence, you might need to use past, present, and future tenses. The following is an example of that: "Bob *said* (past) that what we *are doing* (present) now *is* (present) sufficient, and we *will not need to change* (future) our procedure any time soon."

Source of table: own design based on text content in the reference (Marco, 2007)

#### 4. Authentic Examples

This study undertook to bring some examples of texts of an economic nature featuring tenses most commonly used in Business English, to analyse them, to discuss the findings and draw some conclusions relevant to learners, instructors, users and other stakeholders.

## **4.1. Use of Basic Tenses**

### **4.1.1. Present and Past**

Most commonly used tenses shall of course be the present simple and the past simple. For instance, in financial reports, when the actual movement of various economic indicators is presented, simple past is normally used, as seen in the following text: "Total operating expenses increased by 4% to \$4.4 billion. Compensation expense (i.e., salaries, wages and benefits), which represents approximately half of the University's total operating expense, increased 5% from \$2.1 billion in fiscal 2013 to \$2.2 billion in fiscal 2014. Salaries and wages increased by 6%, or \$87 million, to \$1.6 billion in fiscal 2014 due to the University's budgeted merit programs." ("Financial report", p.7)

However, explanations such as on what certain indicators mean or how they are calculated will generally be given in present simple, either passive or active constructions, such as in the example: "The expected return on pension plan assets is determined by utilizing hmc's capital markets model, which takes into account the expected real return, before inflation, for each of the pension portfolio's asset classes, as well as the correlation of any one asset class to every other asset class. This model calculates the real returns and correlations and derives an expected real return for the entire portfolio, given the percentage weighting allocated to each asset class. After calculating the expected real return, an assessment is made to accommodate the expected inflation rate for the forthcoming period. The final expected return on assets is the aggregate of the expected real return plus the expected inflation rate." ("Financial report", p.42)

This distinction is quite natural, as long as actual reporting obviously refers to a past fiscal year or other period of time clearly established, already finished and being right under analysis at the time of the report, while methods of calculation and work processes are of a permanent, repeatable, general nature.

Much in the same way, contracts and agreements will be based on the same aspect of simple present tense. For exemplification, we can consider the following fragments of a sales contract: "Seller agrees to transfer and deliver to Buyer, on or before [date], the below-described goods: [...]. Buyer agrees to accept the goods and pay for them according to the terms further set out below. [...] Buyer agrees to pay for the goods: In full upon receipt; In instalments, as billed by Seller, and subject to the separate instalment sale contract of [date] between Seller and Buyer; Half upon receipt, with the remainder due within 30 days of delivery. [...] Goods are deemed received by Buyer upon delivery to Buyer's address as set forth above. [...] Buyer has the right to examine the goods upon receipt and has [...] days in which to notify seller of any claim for damages based on the condition, grade, quality or quality of the goods. Such notice must specify in detail the particulars of the claim. Failure to provide such notice within the requisite time period constitutes irrevocable acceptance of the goods. [...] Until received by Buyer, all risk of loss to the above-described goods is borne by Seller. [...] Seller warrants that the goods are free from any and all security interests." ("Sales contract")

### **4.1.2. A Touch of Future**

Nevertheless, a future simple may come of use in some fragments of various sales contracts or lease agreements, as specifications regarding payment can be well put as future, as seen in the following fragments of an apartment lease agreement: "The

agreement will be for a term beginning on [...] and ending on [...]. The Tenant will pay Landlord a monthly rent of [...] for the term. Rent will be payable in advance and due on the [...] of each month [...] Rent will be paid to Landlord at Landlord's address [...] and will be payable in U.S. Dollars." ("Lease agreement")

#### **4.1.3. Some Perfective Aspect**

Findings of various departments of a business, into human resources, know-how, research and development, latest in technology, as well as various conclusions of the management division concerning the business strategy or direction, and others like such, are very probable to contain present perfect and simple present or future as they logically present a situation that has recently developed (along the time of the analysis) and may come up with solutions or plans of action. An example of the mixed use of present perfect tense and simple present tense can be seen as follows: "By now, most organizations have concluded that they face the threat of disruption. Some have even started to realize that because technological advantage degrades every year, standing still means falling behind. Hence the interest in innovation, complete with hip innovation labs complete with fancy coffee machines. But done right, innovation requires a rigorous process. It starts by generating ideas, but the hard work is in prioritizing, categorizing, gathering data, testing and refactoring." (Blank and Newell, 2017)

#### **4.2. Mood of Addressing**

It is evident that most business documents, being particularly of the form of some templates where only some customised data or figures have to be introduced and not requiring much syntax, will have the predicates - if any, for various explanations - in the simple present tense: "Gross profit is obtained by deducting the cost of goods sold from sales [...]" Net earnings is the amount to be transferred to the retained earning section of the balance sheet" ("Bank Incomes Statement"), or, "The transportation of currency or monetary instruments, regardless of the amount, is legal." ("Customs declaration").

Most likely, documents such as profit and loss accounts, bank statements, waybills, customs declarations, balance sheets and others of the kind will only feature some instructions in the form of verbs in imperative mood or phrased by help of a modal verb such as 'should' or 'may': "Use this worksheet to prepare your income statement" ("Bank Incomes Statement"); "Any borrower who is a self-employed or an independent contractor should complete this form" ("Profit and Loss Statement"). If we consider business presentations, product launch, service introduction a.s.o., we again can note that these are based on addressing the audience and eliciting participation. They are focused on the participant and the discourse is thus built on imperative mood structures, aiming at keeping public's attention, gaining trust and raising interest. Even the verbs are such chosen so as to serve this purpose of having listeners involved and convinced: 'imagine, keep in mind, don't forget, let's consider, have a look at, think, compare, be honest' would probably be some of them and the mood is clearly that of 'buttonholing' the target spectators.

#### **4.3. Use of Mixed Tenses and Registers**

Though relating to business, if texts belong to the journalistic style for instance, the use of tenses differs much. Tenses will be used now to emphasize aspects, quotations are common and comments on them as well, so the temporal aspects will

have to follow these specificities.

We find future simple intermingling with present, past and present perfect, passive and active voice in a short BBC announcement of a business opening: " It has taken more than two years to build, but on Friday, Starbucks will open its first Italian outlet. The company's Milan "roastery" goes far beyond the usual latte production line. The marble-floored store will offer a "theatre of coffee roasting, brewing and mixology", as well as cocktails, pizza, bread and ice cream. Local businesses said they were "not afraid" of the competition, and emphasised that high-quality coffee was already widely available in the region." ("Starbucks")

A mix of direct and reported speech, of base tenses and modal verb constructions can be seen in the following note about an interview: " 'It looks like the thing that separates out the capable students from the really successful ones is not so much their knowledge...but their persistence at something,' Google chairman, Eric Schmidt said. For some people, college is just really easy. They can play 10 rounds of beer-pong until 4 a.m. and still ace an organic-chemistry exam the next day while their studious roommate is up to their eyeballs in color-coded flash cards and squeaks by with a B. A college degree can't tell Google whether an applicant is naturally smart or is a hard worker. Apparently, Google would rather mold someone with grit rather than someone who is a lazy high-achiever." (Ferenstein, 2014)

Breaking news or short reports, on 'selling' stories, though on a provocative tone so as to attract readers, do however tend to keep it simple, on a more informative than grammar pretentious note: " Hurricane Lane, which drenched Hawaii with four feet of rain, is a reminder of the devastation hurricane season can bring. Only one year ago Hurricane Harvey ravaged Houston, followed closely by Irma and Maria, which left a trail of destruction across Florida and Puerto Rico. Despite the private and government aid provided after these disasters, thousands continue to struggle even today. However, not everyone is struggling. In fact, some actually benefit economically from these extreme weather events." (Howell, 2018)

Continuous aspect, simple present, simple past, modal verb constructions, future simple, direct and indirect speech nicely blend in the following article on comparing employees: "When people are competing against each other, they often fail to work with each other. Because of this, innovation often halts or slows. 'The collaboration goes away, the teamwork drops, and everyone starts to try to score points all by themselves,' said Glassett. In this type of environment, productivity might increase in the beginning, he added. But after some time, the culture becomes toxic and unsustainable. Instead, employers and employees alike should celebrate strengths and pair up teammates who complement each other. 'This will create collaboration and a team dynamic instead of a bunch of mavericks running around trying to one-up each other,' said Glassett." (Caramela, 2018)

Quite rich in diverse tenses and styles is also the following text from an article on Twitter bias, containing as much as a future in the past and a past perfect, besides all the other tenses, voices and types of speech mentioned with the previous examples: "Broadcasting on Thursday through the Periscope account of @WarRoomShow — which is the name of an online video show hosted by an Infowars colleague — Mr. Jones said: 'They're scared of us. They're scared of the populist movement.' He added, 'They know their bans of not just me but millions of other people have angered folks, so they're moving aggressively.' Periscope is Twitter's live-streaming video app. While Twitter's permanent ban affects the Periscope accounts for Infowars and Mr. Jones, the company temporarily suspended

@WarRoomShow after Mr. Jones appeared on its broadcast. In a tweet, the company said it would take action "if other accounts are utilized in an attempt to circumvent" the ban of Mr. Jones and Infowars. A day earlier, Mr. Dorsey had testified before Congress about election interference and allegations of political bias on Twitter." (Coger and Nicas, 2018)

Still, as mentioned before, the vast majority of texts in the fields of Business and economics mostly confine to the use of basic tenses and temporal aspects, with a focus on the information.

## 5. Discussions and Conclusion

Professional language has after all to make good use of the specific terminology and render specialised meaning as clearly and straightforwardly as possible, rather than excel in peculiarities of philology, complex linguistics or sophisticated grammar structures. It only comes natural that Business English texts, by their specificity, shall use some of the verbal tenses more often than others.

We can however note that a constant in most business texts is, and should be, the focus on the information at stake, on the clarity, transmissibility and directness of the message, to ensure accurate perception and interpretation, rather than on a complicated syntax and a composite structure, just for the sake of strictly following all grammar rules, which, due to a complex linguistics, might even hinder attention and impede comprehension.

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