

POLITE REQUESTS VS. SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT IN KAZAKH, RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

In today's business world the data about the social status of the participants of business communications is of particular importance, since it is regarded as priority information for future successful business transactions. In other words, regarding business written communication, the clearer and more truthful picture of the reader, the less effort is needed to make in the future to provide feedback. Since a reliably drawn image of the addressee allows to get a sufficiently accurate prediction of communicative and pragmatic effect. This paper explores the use of polite requests in three main languages of contemporary business communication in Kazakhstan, i.e. Kazakh, Russian and English. The analysis focuses on 60 business letters written by business professionals who are Kazakh, Russian and English native speakers giving a special attention to the interpersonal variables of power, social distance, imposition and, in particular, status in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. It is found that abovementioned social and cultural characteristics of business letters' authors have a statistically significant impact on linguistic choice and polite requests in the Kazakh, Russian and English corpus. The research findings showed that the degree of social distance ("senior management – junior management", "junior management – senior management", "colleague – colleague") of Kazakh, Russian and English authors varies depending on business professional's particular cultural and linguistic background.

Keywords: Business correspondence, polite requests, socio-cultural context, Kazakhstan, social status.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper the nature of socio-cultural context of business correspondence writing is primarily considered in terms of analysis of national and cultural background specifics, types of business relationships in a hierarchical chain between superior and subordinate, their role status, social distance, the nature of the business text construction and other aspects. At the same time sociocultural context is impossible to limit by abovementioned characteristics, since the main areas of the present analysis does not set boundaries of this conceptual categories. Nevertheless, the proposed social factors more or less determine the format of writing business correspondence in various cultural and linguistic communities.

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the use of polite requests in three main languages of contemporary business communication in Kazakhstan, i.e. Kazakh, Russian and English. The analysis focuses on 50 business letters written by business professionals who are Kazakh, Russian and English native speakers respectively giving special attention to the interpersonal variables of power, social distance, imposition and, in particular, status in Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. It is aimed to explore the impact of the abovementioned social and cultural characteristics of business letters' authors on linguistic choice and polite requests in the Kazakh, Russian and English corpus.

The structure of the paper is organised in this manner. It first will introduce the reader with the research methodology and analytical framework. Second, the main findings of the analysis in politeness phenomena and its main factors as power, distance and the weight of imposition will be presented. Extracts will be quoted from the corpora to illustrate the most striking examples. Finally, this article will end with the main conclusions, followed by an examination of the relevant limitations and suggestions for further research and study.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 Data collection

The corpus for this research was collected in international, national and foreign business companies based in Kazakhstan, which has at least three languages of their business communication, i.e., Kazakh, Russian and English. Selected business letters contain a wide spectrum of goods and services, including insurance, healthcare, oil and gas, telecommunications, financial services, etc. To develop a representative corpus for data analysis in this research, attention was paid to ensure that the business correspondence would be taken from managers of a different corporate level in the company (i.e., both senior and junior management).

2.2 Data selection

Out of a total of 2,557 business letters collected, 60 request letters (19 Kazakh, 21 Russian and 20 English) were randomly selected for detailed analysis. In the process of text selection, specific criteria were at work to help distil a corpus of business requests, from which a random selection was conducted. Thus, following Bargiela-Chiappini's (1992) classification, all the analysed business correspondence was divided into two categories:

1) routine correspondence (repeated many times and the traditional business correspondence, in which both sender and recipient have enough information on further progress correspondence, and having a large amount of shared knowledge);

2) relational correspondence (includes long and complex texts, such texts sometimes contain more than one query, and usually relate to the issues that should be decided by the head of the company) (Bargiela-Chiappini, 1996, p. 642).

In this study, the analysis focuses on the letter of request in which the above-mentioned social characteristics are most pronounced (See Table 1).

Table 1 - Characteristics of request letters in Kazakh (K), Russian (R) and English (E)

Business correspondence	Internal									External								
	To Colleague			To Senior Management			To Junior Management			To Colleague			To Senior Management			To Junior Management		
	K	R	E	K	R	E	K	R	E	K	R	E	K	R	E	K	R	E
Routine	2	2	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2
Relational	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	2	1	2
Total (requests)	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4

2.3 Data analysis

In this research, we analyze the collected business requests paying special attention to such interpersonal factors as power, social distance, and imposition and, in particular, status in accordance with Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness. It is generally accepted that the degree of politeness increases with increasing social distance between the communicants and to the upgrading of the status of the reader writer. It also increases with the degree of imposition to "face" (Locher & Watts, 2005, p. 9-33.).

To categorize the social distance between the communicants three types of business communication relationships are identified:

- 1) between colleagues (“*colleague – colleague*”, “*partner – partner*”);
- 2) with superiors (“*junior management – senior management*”);
- 3) with subordinates (“*senior management – junior management*”).

Such a social characteristics as *imposition* refers to the degree of certain obligations on the recipient, while the *social distance* within a business correspondence is understood as the distance between the addresser and the addressee, in terms of their degree of acquaintance within the organization (*internal business correspondence*) or between organizations (*external business correspondence*). It should be noted that in a business context the social distance is often correlated with social status.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, to illustrate the specific features of business communication we analyzed all the selected business requests to explore how business letters writing vary according to the social status of the sender and the addressee, the social distance between them, the degree of imposition between the business professionals. As we observe, such interpersonal variable as the degree of social distance depends on the business professional’s belonging to the particular cultural community. These variations can be found in the example below illustrating “senior management – junior management” relationship. This letter is a business request written in the Kazakh language by the Deputy Director and a commercial manager about the business project:

Құрметті [Full Name]!

Сіздің бас директорының атына жазған өтініш хатыңызды қарастырып, өз құзіреті шеңберінде төмендегіні хабарлайды.

Дегенмен, Сіз ұсынып отырған жобаның техникалық-экономикалық негіздеме екендігі сөзсіз және оны осы саладағы мамандар арасында саралаудан өткізу қажет деп есептейміз.

Компанияның келісімі бойынша директорлар кеңесінің 2010 жылғы 17 қарашадағы № 527 ережесіне сәйкес есептің 3 данасын, жабдықтың техникалық сипаттамаларын ұсыну қажет. Бұл туралы толық ақпаратты жоғарыда аталған департаменттен алуға болады.

Бас директордың орынбасары [Full name]

The tone of this business letter is quite reserved and formal. This type of business correspondence is external and has a relational character. The main communicative purpose of the author is the request for additional documents necessary for the further advancement of the feasibility study of a commercial. Since the status of the author (in this case - Deputy Director) is much higher than the reader, the writer uses the speech acts closer to the imperatives such as “*жабдықтың техникалық сипаттамаларын ұсыну қажет*” (“*you need to present technical specifications of the equipments*”). A considerable social distance between the author and the recipient of this letter is also seen at the level of depersonalisation in the business text: “*өз құзіреті шеңберінде төмендегіні хабарлайды*” (“*the message below is within the authority boundaries*”), “*толық ақпаратты жоғарыда аталған департаменттен алуға болады*” (“*it is possible to find full information from the abovementioned department*”), as well as the preference of so-called “we-approach”: “*өткізу қажет деп есептейміз*” (“*we consider it necessary to conduct the selection process*”).

It should be noted that a similar situation can be observed in business correspondence in Russian. The tone of routine business requests in the Russian language from senior to junior management is also quite laconic and very formal. In addition, the lack of concluding moves with polite ending of business letters demonstrates the social distance between the writer and the reader. Nevertheless, in the context of this business culture this fact does not cause any communicative discomfort, but demonstrates the seriousness and official character of the topic in these business texts. However, in comparison with Kazakh business correspondence, Russian language business requests were formulated from the 1st person (“*В связи с чем, прошу Вас предоставить по 1 (одному) кандидату из расчета на 10 работников...*”) (“*In this connection, I ask you to provide one (1) candidate at the rate of 10 workers ...*”), which slightly reduces the social distance between the senior manager and his subordinates.

The same business correspondence in English, corresponding to the ratio “senior management – junior management” relationship is somewhat different from writing such business letters in the Kazakh and Russian languages. The English-language social distancing effect between business communicators are often created by the conditional verbs and the effect of uncertainty with the use of the word “one” or the plural pronoun “we”, the sender thereby creates “a metaphorical space” (Haverkate, 1992, p. 505-522.), which mitigates the effect of data guidelines and approvals. Here is an example illustration of this social status of business communicators below:

Dear Colleagues,

Here’s my first draft of the project outline.

Critical Discourse Analysis. How do key stake holders (people in key positions, e.g. teachers; public figures/celebrities; professionals) and ordinary people (young and old, people of different educational levels) respond to the Company’s policy? – Interviews and Questionnaires on attitudes.

Next step:

Start working on Abstracts, 500 words each and plan each of the 5 cases. Try to aim to give me a draft within May.

I will comment and suggest more ideas and we revise the abstracts together. We will agree the final plan for each of the studies by the end of June to start data collection, transcription and analysis from July to end of the year.

Start drafting the papers from January, aiming to have the first draft of all the papers by end of May, in time for the Singapore Expo.

I will send you key references to be recommended for ordering by the company’s library in a separate email.

I am very excited by the project and I am confident that it will be a success!

Best wishes,

[Full Name]

Project manager

In this example, the writer (project manager) outlines the general plan of the work to his subordinates (project implementers) with detailed instructions for each step. The letter includes the following speech acts: greeting, introductory offer, the overall work plan the next steps of the plan, an expression of confidence in the success of the project developed by them, and a friendly ending. The social distance between writers and readers are also evident in the expression and emphasizes the imperative without the use of markers of politeness “please”, presented in the form of a numbered list (1. *Start working on Abstracts ... Try to aim to give me a draft within May.* 2. *Start drafting the papers from January...*). However, despite these categorical instructions, yet the social distance between the addressee and the addressee is felt considerably less than between Kazakh and Russian business communicators. This can be primarily explained by the author’ use of a special communication strategy for the completion of polite letters, which significantly reduces the degree of imposition: 1) an expression of confidence in the successful completion of the project and that the emphasis of its ownership in the common cause (“*I am very excited by the project and I am confident that it will be a success!*”); 2) the choice of ending more informal business correspondence (“*Best wishes*”).

Next, we consider the business correspondence between the writer and the reader with a relatively equal social and professional status in more detail, for example, in a situation of “colleague – colleague”. It should be noted that the specifics of writing business letters is somewhat different from the above samples of business communications. They range from the belongings of the writer and reader to a specific national business culture. First, in case of the corpus of business correspondence in the Kazakh language between the manager and employee of the company, with equal social and professional status, the the writer usually addresses his colleagues by only his or her first name (e.g., *Сәлеметсіз бе, Дархан (Hello Darkhan)*), which significantly reduces the social distance between the communicants. However, despite the daily use of business correspondence and relatively equal social status of business communicators, the general tone of business text keeps a respectful and formal character with the use of valid polite forms of the pronoun “You” (i.e., “*Сіз*”, “*сізде*”, “*сізде*рдiң”) and polite finishing letter (*Құрметпен, Анар (With respect, Anar)*).

As for Russian business requests, the social distance between the communicants is also reduced with a help of friendly welcome and address only by first name (Добрый день, Иван!), polite personal questions (Как дела? Как успехи? (How are you? How's it going?)), the use of specific business jargon and acronyms, peculiar only to business correspondence with familiar contacts (Ministry of Finance of Russia, startup, pitching, the Ministry of Finance of Kazakhstan). However, in the same way as in the sample in the Kazakh language, in this business message respectful and formal tone ("С уважением и симпатией..." ("With respect and sympathy...")) is left. In formulating requests degree of imposition is considerably reduced by the use of such turns of speech as "Очень прошу", "Очень хочется в этот приезд встретиться в..." ("Looking forward to meeting you soon...").

Meanwhile, in the English business requests the degree of imposition varies depending on the choice of a variety of lexical means, syntactic forms, imperatives with softening politeness marker "please" ("please find the copy of bank account as an attachment"), via performatives, e.g., "suggest" ("I suggest you to enclose a copy of agreement...") and such phrases as "perhaps we could" ("perhaps we could arrange for this next Monday..."). The effect of "positive" (maximization of support) and "negative" (minimizing the degree of imposition) politeness is achieved by lexical items such as "please", "grateful", "appreciate", "worthwhile", etc., modal verbs "would", "could", "perhaps", "may", etc.

The next types of business correspondence with "junior management – senior management" relationship demonstrate even more diverse speech strategies and linguistic resources, emphasizing respect and esteem, social status of the recipient, the distance between the communicants and minimize the degree of imposition. Thus, in business correspondence in Kazakh the tone of the business letter is highly discreet. If the previous business message in the Kazakh language can be called as semi-official, the official character of these business texts is obvious. Since this type of business requests is addressed to the higher management the appropriate speech forms of address are selected by the writer, such as "Аса құрметті Бауыржан Хасенұлы!" ("Highly respectful..."), friendly ending of the letter "Құрметпен..." ("With respect..."), that according to the results, is much rarer in a situation of "senior management – junior management". In some business letters a longer size and intertextuality (address to the decision of the previous expert committee) also emphasizes the formal and social distance between the business communicants. The degree of imposition can be reduced by the use of such polite requests formulation as, for example, "...коэффициентін бекітуге рұқсат етуіңізді сұраймыз".

As for business requests in Russian, the influence of the social status of business communicators is also observed in the specifics of business text writing. The same as in Kazakh business letters, the sender pays special attention to the address to the reader (Многоуважаемый господин Иван Петрович! (Highly distinguished Ivan Petrovich!)), who has higher positions and therefore has a higher social status. The general tone of this type of business correspondence is also highly discreet and formal. In some cases, the author uses a special introductory paragraph to demonstrate respect for the recipient, and underscores the social distance, as in the following examples: "[Company Name] выражает Вам свое почтение и желает успехов в работе»" ("[Company Name] expresses its respect and wish you success in your work") and closing courtesies: "Надеемся на плодотворное сотрудничество. С уважением, директор" ("We hope for fruitful cooperation. Sincerely, Director"). In addition, the size of the letter and attention to the details are much higher than the previously mentioned examples of business correspondence.

Analysing a corpus of business correspondence in English with social relations between junior and senior management, it should be noted the usage of a special introductory move, e.g., "We appreciate the opportunity to introduce our services to [Company's name]"; polite phrases at the end of the letters completion, e.g., "We look forward to the possibility of working with you and others within [Company's name]. Yours sincerely". However, in this type of business correspondence "we-approach" is much more frequently than in the previous letters of senior management to junior management, e.g., "We focus exclusively...", "We believe...", "We appreciate...", "We regularly place...", "We were honoured...", "We are so confident...", "We look forward to...". In addition, unlike business letters in the Kazakh and Russian languages, it contains a large number of emotionally colored vocabulary (e.g., uniquely qualified, extensive knowledge and experience, exceptional coverage and measurable success, focus exclusively, have been happily acquired, successfully gone public, We were honoured, etc.).

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the above it follows that social factors such as power, status, distance and degree of imposition influence the features of preparing a business correspondence of all the languages. Overall, in all business communities the lower the social status of the writer, the more social distance between the junior

management and upper management is. This factor is also reflected in the features of business correspondence between them, in particular in the letter of request addressed to persons holding high official position. Requests are polite and considerate as possible through the use of markers of politeness "please", modal verbs and other mitigating phrases.

Thus, the analysis of the trilingual corpus business correspondence within the parameters of the socio-cultural context leads to the following conclusions: 1) national-cultural background of the native environment of business correspondence's writers, socio-cultural, organizational, and interpersonal factors or the business community have an impact on the further development of mental models that influence the preparation of business correspondence. They include the use of historically established traditions business letter, the use of marketing strategies, culture and specificity of the construction business and personal relationships; 2) it is necessary to take into account the social characteristics of the data producers and recipients of business correspondence, which significantly reduces the possibility of discomfort or pragmatic communicative failures business professionals in the context of different cultural and linguistic communities.

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