

The sociolinguistic aspects of the business presentation and its importance for the teaching

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Abstract

The increasing internationalisation of business, industry, science and academia has led to greater importance being given to the ability to present ideas and concepts to an international audience, using English as the language medium. This applies to large conference gatherings but also to business presentations .

Through my somewhat unusual background as a manager from industry who later became a teacher of English as a foreign language, I have always been intrigued by the status awarded to people who can perform well in business presentations. I hold multi-disciplinary qualifications in Electrical Engineering (Diploma), Business (B.Ed. and MBA) and Applied Linguistics (MA and Post Grad. Diplomas in TEFL and TOESOL), and these have provided a unique window with which to view the business presentation and the skills needed to be successful.

The basis of the paper

It is suggested that the skills required for a successful business presentation by non-native speakers, are rooted in both linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects. These then combine with elements of cultural awareness and non-verbal signposting. Through an analysis of the speech act, speech community and speech norms, it is argued that business presentations in many large international companies contain set phrases and non-verbal signals which are similar, irrespective of the subject presented. Many of these phrases and signals are used naturally by native speakers. However, they need to be taught to non-native speakers through awareness raising and process methods.

Keywords: : Business presentation, international companies, non-native speakers, cultural awareness, nonverbal supporting, speech acts, speech community, teaching methods.

Background and aim of the article

The globalisation of world business, technology and trade has brought about a huge increase in the demand for all types of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching. One area is the teaching of oral presentation skills, within a business environment. The aim of this article is to examine the nature of the business presentation within a sociolinguistics framework. By doing this it is hoped to identify the features which make up the sociological context, the expectations surrounding the language of the presenter and the expectations of the listeners. Can they be defined as a "speech community ?" If so, what are its conventions ? Does it matter if these conventions are broken ? Can we teach these conventions and if so, do they make the presentation more acceptable to the listeners ?

Very little research has been carried out in relation to the field of business English within a sociolinguistics framework. The work that has been done has tended to be related to gender or advertising, and focused on language more than context. However, sociolinguistics concerns both language and context and views them as an interaction to bring about good communication. By analysing the sociolinguistic nature of the business presentation and identifying its "speech community" and "speech acts", it may be possible to develop approaches to help non-native students from different cultures. These approaches could consist of not only the use the correct language functions but also the sociological context of their use.

Why are business presentations so important ?

A business presentation is uniquely important for the second language speakers of English, for three main reasons. Firstly, it is a forum where communication is of crucial importance- they must get their ideas across accurately. Secondly, it may be a uniquely stressful language situation - it is usually time bound and the time limits are quite short. This may give rise to high levels of language anxiety. Lastly, it may be an extremely socially stressful situation, for example, the performance of a manager during a presentation can have a major impact on his or her career.

In this context it can be seen that non-native speakers of English have a double disadvantage. Not only do they have to learn the language to a high level but because of cultural and other differences, they cannot rely on their normal strategies of translation and vocabulary building. Misunderstandings may therefore occur not only at the linguistic level but the sociological level too.

Defining Sociolinguistics - Macro and micro levels

There are many acceptable definitions of sociolinguistics but for my purposes I will use the one given by Trudgill (1983 : 20)

"Sociolinguistics, is that part of linguistics which is concerned with language as a social and cultural phenomenon. It investigates the field of language and society and has close connections with the social sciences, especially social psychology, anthropology, human geography and sociology."

Pragmatics, ethnomethodology, psycholinguistics and philosophy could also be added to this list but the main point is that sociolinguistics brings together many disciplines. It basically describes what was said, why it was said, what did it mean to the speaker and what did it mean to the listener. Bringing these questions together are the concepts of "speech community" and "communicative competence" which are central to sociolinguistics. See Romaine (1994 : 22).

Sociolinguistics also consists of macro and micro levels. I will be looking within the macro-linguistic field of business English but examining the micro-linguistic area associated with presentations. Not only does business English exist in its totality but also there are expected types of language and behaviour that are relevant only within a given context. I would cite the business presentation as such a context.

International speakers of business English as a speech community

A speech community is often associated with the macro level of sociolinguistics and there are many definitions associated with it. Almost every writer seems to have their own variation based on several core components. Some of these components are considered to be: a form of common socialisation, regular interaction during which norms are established and reinforced, a shared body of words to mean certain things and a certain type of verbal behaviour. All of these interact to create a feeling of belonging (however loosely) and exclusivity (they understand the meaning of what is said but outsiders may not). These two elements of wanting to belong and being recognised as one of the group, are seen as crucial for conformity. Indeed, anyone from outside the speech community would immediately be recognised and judged on their level of language, use of terms, appropriateness of functions and conformity to the sociological and behavioural norms. However, a precise definition of a speech community is difficult to formulate and it would be very foolhardy to try to establish firm boundaries as to who does or does not belong [See Figueroa (1994 : 56-57) for a bringing together of the main issues.]

Despite the problems of definition and delimitation there is a need to establish the presence of a speech community in which business English is the appropriate language. The immediate objection to this may be that business English speakers, within a second language context, may speak many different native languages and therefore cannot be regarded a speech community. Romaine (1994 : 22) offers some help :

"The notions of "speech community" and "communicative competence" are fundamental to understanding the ways in which social groups organize their linguistic repertoires.

A speech community is not coextensive with a language community. A speech community is a group of people who do not necessarily share the same language, but share a set of norms and rules for the use of language."

It is therefore possible for the international speakers of business English to be considered as a speech community, providing it can be proved that a shared set of norms and rules for the use of language exists.

What are the Norms and Rules of the Business English Speech Community ?

There are many rules and norms associated with business English but I will consider only two of particular sociolinguistic importance - the use of professional language and the social features associated with it.

The Use of Professional Language.

"All professions are conspiracies against the laity."

George Bernard Shaw 1906, (1971 : 72)

In many ways Shaw encompasses the common belief (particularly concerning doctors or lawyers) that the language of the professions is deliberately designed to prevent the public from understanding what is going on. Work done by many scholars such as Halliday, point to a less sinister process of the borrowing and compounding of words in order to endow them with a specific meaning within that context. Hughes (1992 : 37) when talking of the historical development of professional language comments on :

".. the division of register in the English lexis, whereby native terms (which are generally transparent and readily comprehensible) have increasingly been displaced in professional language by opaque borrowings."

Most linguists accept that there is a natural process of words taking on specific meanings within a given professional context. This is seen as a good aid to communication which avoids confusion and increases the available terminology for use. The business profession, and its use of business English, is no different than any other profession and its eagerness to welcome new words and set phrases. Knowing these words and phrases, and having the ability to use them appropriately is a symbol of belonging to that speech community. They therefore take on a social significance.

Social features associated with the use of professional language

The social stereotype of the dark suited male (and recently the grey suited female) still holds for much of the business community. It signifies that you are a member of a 'club' and the 'uniform' is a symbol of that membership. This is a stereotype that is promoted (see CNN, whose programmes and commercials are predominately targeted at the international business person), and is clearly of sociological importance. Of equal social importance is being able to say the right thing, in the right way, at the right time.

Trudgill (1983 : 4) in his chapter on language and context brings out this importance:

"The same speaker uses different linguistic varieties in different situations and for different purposes."

I would argue that within business, there is an almost infinite variation of situations which require an appropriate form of language behaviour. In many of the set situations such as letter writing, there are often clear rules to follow depending on the type of letter (for example a letter requesting the payment of an overdue account will be different to that welcoming a new client). In all these situations there will be a clear social expectation about the language to be used (often set phrases), its level of formality, politeness and form. As stated earlier, there may also be tremendous pressure on the writer to "get it right." Large contracts may be lost and the company's (and the individual's) future, may be at risk.

Pressure to conform to the speech norms

Having accepted that the group can recognise the "appropriacy" of the language there is much evidence and little contradiction concerning the role that the group plays in exerting pressure to conform to language behaviour norms. They are a "powerful influence on speech," Romaine (1994 : 81). Not only are they aware of the "correct" language behaviour of a business presentation but they may also attribute social prestige and even ability, based on the speaker's performance. This has been proved in social

attitude testing in general cases (See Labov in Pride and Holmes (1972 : 185) and many others), and there is little reason to doubt that the need to conform exists in the high pressure forum of the business environment.

Fishman, writing about bilingualism, referred to "domains" as being the micro level at which a certain form of language is used. Other authors such as Pride and Holmes (1972 : 29) and Romaine (1994 : 43) broaden this to include elements of context, social grouping and social expectations. I would therefore like to refer to the business presentation as a "domain" in which a certain type of language performance is expected and received. Conformity to this norm is guaranteed by the nature of the speech event and the small group arena in which it is given.

At this point in the article it is accepted that business English belongs to a speech community and that within that community there are linguistic, social and behavioural norms which apply in general. On a micro-linguistic level and within the domain of the business presentation, there will be further norms which are specific to that type of event. It is also accepted that conformity to those norms is important. It is now necessary to move on and examine the business presentation as a "speech event" and try to identify the behaviour and language which would appear to be appropriate to that domain.

The business presentation as a speech event

The purpose of the communication is to persuade or inform. Some would argue that to achieve this there should be elements of entertainment and humour. Generally however, and certainly within the use of English as a second language, humour is rare and often seen as a distraction from the main task of getting a large amount of information across in a very short time. The aim of the presentation, from the speakers perspective, is to inform or persuade. The aim from the listeners perspective, is to obtain information in order to make a decision at some point in the future. The presentation could then be described as a 'speech event' which is made up

of 'speech acts', Fasold (1990 : 43). For more on speech acts see Burkhart (1990).

The forum for presentations

A business presentation usually takes place within a small group setting of up to 16 people although larger presentations are also given. Generally they take on a broader communicative approach and often include the use of visual aids, gestures and other techniques such as eye contact, to supplement the act of speaking. Supporting documentation in the form of reports or handouts, may also be a feature.

The timing for presentations

The length of the event varies between 2 - 30 minutes although generally, in the course of my observations over a long period of time, an average of around 8 - 12 minutes is usual. This does however depend on the situation, the availability of the audience and their relative status within the organisation. The more important the audience is within the hierarchy of the company, the less time they tend to allocate to a presenter. (A colleague from industry was once allotted four minutes to present a restructuring package to a board of directors. The package involved the spending of many millions of pounds and reducing the work force by several thousand).

The parts of the business presentation - the speech acts

Over the last ten years or so, I have observed a definite trend away from the old "bluff and blunder" approach (as it is known in industry) to a more 'professional' style which includes various social rituals, expectations about the language to be used and the format of the presentation. This "convergence", and I use this term in its strict sociolinguistic sense (Romaine 1994 : 78), has led to expectations about the form, behaviour, language and the creation of a model which consists of a number of parts.

There appears general agreement on the recognition and even the naming of the these parts among the text books currently available. (See the text book listing) My observations based on many 'real life' presentations have found similar divisions. Not all of these are present in every case but they do constitute the main 'speech acts'. They are: introductions, giving information, persuading, describing

visual aids, handling questions and making conclusions. I will now examine the main two - introductions and conclusions.

Introductions as speech acts

There are set routines which various presenters use to open their business presentation. From a structural point of view, typical examples would be: welcoming the audience, introducing the presenter, introducing the subject and over viewing the main parts of the presentation. From a linguistic point of view each of these routines would consist of a series of set phrases which are readily recognisable and used by "good" members of the speech community.

Conclusions as speech acts

These would again consist of various structural features such as: the summary or conclusion itself, the call for questions and the thanking of the audience. Once again a series of set phrases are used which are recognised, and generally approved of, by the audience.

How to teach presentation skills in the light of the sociolinguistic evidence

In order to suggest a strategy for how to teach presentation skills, it is necessary to return to one of the main features of sociolinguistics and the notion of "communicative competence" (Romaine 1994 : 24 & Bell 1976 : 62). This consists of a mixture of the social factors - the speech community's expectations, and the linguistic factors - the "appropriacy" (Burgoon (1990 : 59) etc.) and the authenticity of the language used. Hudson (1980:231) supports and expands this :

"It is a truism that speech occurs in a social context, which is why the social perspective of sociolinguistics is indispensable to the study of language or speech. The social context in which speech occurs encompasses a large number of factors, including the social group or groups to which the speaker belongs, the social relations between the speaker and the hearer, the structure of their interaction (in terms of entries, exits, turn taking, etc.), the type of interaction (a business transaction, a chat, problem-solving, etc.), and the shared knowledge of the participants, which will be both general ('cultural') and specific (concerning the present interaction)."

Hymes, quoted in Figueroa (1994 : 58) states that a member of a speech community knows not only the language but what to say and when to say it. It is therefore important that students from many different cultural backgrounds be given examples of what to say and the contexts in which to say it (e.g. for an opening or closing remark). Therefore we can infer that students need to work with accurate and authentic samples of what to say and be given the realistic settings to practice how to say it.

Hudson (1980 : 113) suggests that "measurement against the speaker's intentions," is the only true indication of that success. The task of the teacher is to improve communicative competence - that is to help the student or business person, to get their message across to their audience. As communicative competence is made up of both social and language content it is important to focus on both.

Language Input

Generally, students who require business presentation skills are expected to have achieved intermediate to advanced learner levels of proficiency in English. Teachers should therefore make sure that language foundations such as spoken grammar, vocabulary range and pronunciation are in place. In practical terms, this should be done in the language lab by individual testing for phonetic problems and then solving these. I would refer to these as "hygiene" factors because they need to be present before development of the higher range of skills can take place.

As a second stage the students should be exposed to good samples of the language which are often used in the course of the key speech acts. These consist of the standard set phrases associated with introductions, conclusions, etc., although I would suggest that it is probably best to focus on one speech act at a time. A natural progression would be to build the necessary proficiency in introductions, moving on to the phrases needed during the main part of the presentation and then on to conclusions. This order allows the student to start using the phrases in a complete speech event fairly early on in the course.

Other speech acts such as the handling of questions and the language associated with the use of visuals, can be introduced as proficiency levels and confidence increases.

This form of individual approach is not sufficient by itself and for each hour in the lab or the classroom an equivalent hour should be spent within a small group setting developing the sociolinguistic input with an emphasis on practice and observation.

Sociolinguistic input

Having accepted the importance of the social context to communicative competence, the aim of the teacher should be to create conditions that are as close as possible to the actual speech event (Hartley (1993 :83) Learning should therefore be carried out in small groups of ten, in small seminar type rooms equipped for presentations. Students should perform several presentations of varying lengths while others observe both social and language features and feedback through guided discussion. Each student should be involved in observing as well as presenting. The focus for feedback should be not only on the use of set phrases but also the appropriate use of pausing, a feature which has been found to be a neglected sociolinguistic aspect of such speech acts (Kruse and Thimm (1992 : 220))

In addition to the work in the coaching groups, guest presenters may be brought in and arrangements made to visit various authentic presentations in the local business community. These provide good opportunities for observation of the skills, valuable role models and hopefully some insights into the difficulties encountered.

At the end of a course students should be required to give an 8-10 minute, teacher assessed presentation, on a business topic of their choice to the whole class. Their coaching group observes and comments, and the teacher provides an input during the individual feedback session. This includes comments on both linguistic and social features.

Summary

"Speech is one of the most important ways in which one presents a personal image for others to evaluate, both through what one says and the way one says it."

Brown and Levinson (1978)

The above quotation is true in any social setting and it could be argued that it is even more relevant to the international business person faced with the daunting task of giving a presentation in a second language. It is therefore important for them to be prepared for the language within the sociolinguistic setting.

"The study of sociolinguistic categorization processes provides a method of relating verbal behaviour to social processes, adding an important dimension to the linguist's grammatical analysis."

Gumperz 1970 (quoted in Pride and Holmes 1972 : 206)

Teachers therefore have a responsibility not only to teach the language correctly but also to ensure that students are aware of the social situation and the appropriacy of the language to use.

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