



Lexical variations in business e-mails written by non-native speakers of English

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Abstract

English is the lingua franca used in business communication. Therefore the number of non-native speakers of English already outnumbers native speakers provided that worldwide enterprises use English for international communication. The Internet has also increased the use of English as an international language, in this way; it is used by speakers with different linguistic backgrounds. This variety of authors produces differences or variations in language use. In this paper we contrast business e-mails written by Spanish agents who work in an exporting company in India and China. Our main aim is to analyze the possible variations due to the mother tongue and the socio-cultural context and to classify lexical variation in business English used as a global working language by non-native speakers. We intended to determine the causes of variation and their influence on discourse. We analyzed and contrasted sixty e-mails written by two groups of non-native English speakers. Group A was composed of native speakers from Pakistan and Group B was composed of native speakers from China. The corpus analysis was carried out manually. We classified the occurrences in categories depending on the cause of the variation. After the analysis, we observed that the lexical variations found were caused by sociolinguistic and cultural influences.

1 Introduction

There is no doubt nowadays that English is the lingua franca for the global business world. Europe has seen the growth of English and, as a consequence, it has become the dominant language in the European Union (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2002). In Asia, the English language is used as a lingua franca for the international relations, although the Chinese language is gaining importance being China one of the greatest economic potencies in the world.



In this study, our main aim is to classify the lexical variations that may be found when contrasting the language used by non-native speakers of English. In this sense, we have chosen a genre in which communication is crucial: a business environment. We have also considered interesting to analyse the expressions used in electronic communication. The immediacy of messages in business contexts could provide variations in the use of the English language as writers may not revise the message being sent. In e-mail communication linguistic and cultural backgrounds are more evident as the main intention of the writers is to take decisions or send orders as quickly as possible (Crystal, 2005; Kessler, 2010). In this way, after the contrast of the e-mails written by business workers from Pakistan and China, variations were detected and classified in order to show that standard English is not a reality in a multicultural and ever changing world.

We have also considered that the widespread of the English language has been caused mainly by two facts: the colonization of the British Empire from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century in Africa and Asia, and the strong American influence in the finance and commerce contexts during the twentieth century. Therefore, all over the world, people use more and more varieties of English in ever-increasing numbers (Kirkpatrick, 2007). These different English varieties that have flourished along the years have their own features. They share history and their affinity with either British or American English, but there are also some aspects that are unique to each variety, particularly in terms of accents, in their idiomatic use of vocabulary, their application of grammar and their discourses strategies (Jenkins, 2006).

Another important factor is that technology changes the way business workers are in contact and this new communication environment implies changes in language use as well as changes in the business trade itself (Crystal, 2005; Mateo, 2007: 196). More precisely, the Internet has revolutionised the way enterprises communicate. The communication is immediate and fast, the style is more direct, the discourse is presented in a simple and dense way and an instant answer is frequently expected. Furthermore, there are not linguistic barriers; i.e. people with different linguistic backgrounds communicate in English that is considered as a lingua franca.

International business discourse, as any type of discourse, is culturally-situated and, therefore, context-dependent. All these three aspects, i.e. discourse, culture and context, play a key role in the communication process (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2002: 31-34). The use of the English language by international writers in business' exchange of ideas is a phenomenon that causes changes in writing even in those texts which are most expected to follow standard guidelines (Crossley and McNamara, 2009; Carrió and Muñiz, 2010; Ädel and Erman, 2012).

Despite the fact that English is a lingua franca in the business and trade contexts we have also to take into account that writers express in different ways even in a standardised context as business. Writers from different backgrounds write in different ways and variations can be found due to their cultural and linguistic antecedents. Variation is considered in this study as the differences in the synchronic use of a language due to several causes: interlanguage (Ellis, 1999), rhetorical aspects (Samraj and Monk, 2008; Durrant, 2009), genre variation (Charles, 2007; Ozturk, 2007), and the use of language by native and non-native speakers (de Haan & van Esch, 2005; Moreno & Suárez, 2008; Hinkel, 2009; Schleef, 2009). In this study we analyse the last aspect, variation caused by the different linguistic background of the speakers.

We should also take into account that variation in intercultural communication has increased due mainly to second language and culture learning (Alptekin, 2002) and global



communication technologies (Thatcher, 2005). Some researchers have also analysed the different ways of communication through e-mails in a business context (Nickerson, 2005; Waldvogel, 2005, 2007; Kankaaranta, 2006; Jensen, 2009). Nevertheless, we should highlight the fact that there is still a lack of research in the specific area of English intralanguage variation related to international business communication (Rivers, 2008).

In this study, our analysis is focused in finding the lexical variations in business e-mails written by non-native writers. We focus our research in business English, as it is a genre with lexical patterns internationally established in order to communicate fluently. Business English lexis is a structured and relatively homogenous whole. Little appears in the lexis of business English by chance and it is framed by an infrastructure that grows out from the level of the word through collocation, clustering, colligation, semantic prosody, genre and on to a supra-generic ordering, until it meets general English. It is relevant for businessmen to communicate fluently with companies all around the world and this is the reason why the vocabulary tends to follow standard patterns. Nonetheless, in this study we would like to confirm if cultural or mother tongue influences manipulate the way international writers communicate.

In this paper, we analysed if some features of communication change due to the mother tongue and the socio-cultural context of the writers in virtual business. Our main objective is to classify the lexical aspects that change. A further objective is to detect the lexical variations in those that are caused by the mother tongue influence or by the sociolinguistic and the cultural context of communication.

2 Methodology

2.1 The corpus of the research

In order to extract our results, this study used a corpus of authentic sixty e-mails written by non-native English speakers with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. One group speaks English as a foreign language (texts from China) and the other group speaks English as a second language because it is a former British colony (texts from Pakistan). These e-mails were all written during a period of two years, from 2009 to 2011, by the Chinese and Pakistani employees of a Spanish exporting company. Due to privacy concerns, this corpus of real life e-mails was not constructed for public use; it was only used for this study.

This enterprise is specialized in the manufacturing of high technology laser machines, which are used for the finishing of denim. Moreover, one of the main activities of this enterprise is selling and exporting this equipment worldwide. Nowadays, many American and European manufacturing companies have outsourced their productivity to the Southeast of Asia. Therefore, this company's major customers are in this part of the world, where Pakistan and Chinese buyers are its most important clients. The Sales Department is managed by the Sales Manager, who supervises the negotiations and agents located in different countries dealing with customers worldwide. Presently, the area of most commercial activity for this enterprise is the Asia-Pacific region, where the cost of labour is lower than in other parts of the world.

English is the language used for business communication and the most usual way of exchange of ideas inside and outside the company is through e-mails, which are sent through a laptop or smartphone, which allows communication to be almost instant. This way of communication is very useful for the business professionals under study who are out of the office most of the time.



The majority of the e-mails compiled in the corpus are usually sent or received within the Sales Department. All the participants are non-native English speakers although their lingua franca is English. In addition, the use of English is compulsory even among workers with the same mother tongue, so that everyone can communicate fluently.

We noticed, after a general reading of the corpus, that the sociolinguistic background of the writers of the e-mails was very different. They are all native speakers of Mandarin and Urdu. However, their linguistic competence in English varies due to the way they acquired English. For instance, the Chinese writers learnt English as a foreign language, as an optional subject in their educational system; meanwhile, the Pakistani writers learnt English as a second language, and it has a central position in their national life (Kachru, 2005). The role of the English language in Pakistan has been an essential one ever since the foundation of the country in 1947. It is used in the contexts of education, economy, business, political life, mass media, science and technology. English is the language of communication at the level of trade and commerce as well as in the global industries. Therefore, it plays an important function not only in the business context itself but also in the country's development (Tahir, 2004).

As for the situation of the English language in China we can add that after the official access of China in the World Trade organization in 2001, the Chinese business and trading communities adapt to international markets and the popularity of English seems to have reached a new position with government policy-makers, educationalists and the Chinese public (Bolton, 2003).

2.2 The analysis of the corpus

The corpus of sixty e-mails was selected from a larger corpus of one hundred and twenty e-mails collected from the exporting company. The e-mails were selected considering the mother tongue of the sender of the message. The managers of the company receive mails from workers from different Eastern countries, such as India, China, Pakistan, etc. The e-mails included various subjects such as invitations to fairs, arrangements for trips, sales, etc.

The analysis was carried out manually because our main purpose was to detect the lexical variations in context so we preferred to select the occurrences considering their syntactic and semantic nature. The analysis was carried out in several steps. Firstly, all the e-mails were carefully read and were classified into two different groups according to the writers' origins. Secondly, the lexical variations found were noted down and, later they were classified in the different causes of variation. Finally, the total number was calculated as well as the percentages of use.

After this, we contrasted the results, which were classified in tables, and, finally, we explained the conclusions of this research. This study of lexical variations in business e-mails is one aspect of a larger research study, which is focused on the analysis of the computer mediated communication in a workplace context among non-native English speakers with different cultural backgrounds.

3. Results and discussion

We mainly found two classifications for the lexical variation in the corpus: noun phrase clusters and discourse style. As it is shown in Table 1, the total occurrences of the variation in the use of noun phrases detected in the thirty e-mails written by Pakistani workers were 15. The compound words made by an adjective and a noun (ADJ+N) had a higher frequency of



variation (40%), followed by the compound nouns made by two nouns (33%). In the thirty e-mails written by the Chinese businessmen we obtained more variations in the different categories. We observed that the use of invented names, i.e. the writers invented names to adapt to clients.

Noun phrase clusters	Pakistan occurrences (percentages)	China occurrences (percentages)
N+N	5 (33%)	4 (11%)
N+N+N	2 (13%)	4 (11%)
N+ADJ+N+N	-	2 (6%)
N+N+N+N	-	1 (3%)
N+PREP+N	1 (7%)	-
ADJ+N	6 (40%)	-
First name invention	-	24 (69%)
ADJ+N+N	1 (7%)	-
TOTAL	15 (100%)	35 (100%)

Table 1. Noun phrase clusters in e-mails from Pakistan and China.

The non-native writers varied the writing of most of the noun clusters as a consequence of their mother tongue influence. They imitated the way they express in their mother tongue and changed their way of communication. There is one exception to this cause, the invention of first names. This was caused by a sociolinguistic influence. They imitated the European names in order to adapt their communication to the receivers of the message. We could see some of the variations found in the Pakistani e-mails and the implication of variation, they used different ways to communicate as we can see in Example 1:

Example 1 :

N+N: chiller liquid.
ADJ+N: foreign principals.
N+N+N: family laser company; opening demo Center.

In the e-mails written by Chinese businessmen we can see examples of different ways to use noun phrase clusters and first name invention as we can see in Example 2:



Example 2 :

N+N+N+N: Chinese New Year Holiday, Laser company China office.
 N+N: China factory, Chinese boarder.
 N+N+N: China custom clearance, Hong Kong and China clients, Asia countries.
 First name invention: Cason, Florence, Williams, Winney.

The highest number of occurrences found in the Chinese group refers to the invention of first names. Chinese writers choose an occidental name to sign their e-mails in order to facilitate the European or American readers the comprehension of their names, because Chinese names are usually very difficult to pronounce. This is a very common practice that has cultural connotations because Chinese people are very respectful and considerate so this is a way of showing it.

In Table 2 the occurrences due to several discourse variations in which lexical elements are involved. We grouped these variations under the label discourse as they affect several aspects:

Discourse variations	Pakistan occurrences (percentages)	China occurrences (percentages)
Stylistic ornamentation and politeness	5 (28%)	5 (10%)
Lexical calques	4 (22%)	2 (4%)
Abbreviations	5 (28%)	30 (62%)
Exaggerations	2 (11%)	0 (0%)
Reduplication	2 (11%)	0 (0%)
Direct and imperative style	0 (0%)	10 (20%)
L1 adaptation	0 (0%)	2 (4%)
TOTAL	18 (100%)	49 (100%)

Table 2. Discourse variation in e-mails from Pakistan and China.

Pakistani writers do not vary the way they express such much as the Chinese writers. Pakistani businessmen varied the way they abbreviate and the stylistic ornamentation and calques (28%). Chinese businessmen vary in the way they use abbreviations (62%) and in the use of direct and imperative language (20%). The occurrences found due to the stylistic ornamentation, the lexical calques, the exaggeration, the direct and imperative style and the L1 adaptation were caused by the influence of the mother tongue of the writers. Other occurrences found in this category, as abbreviations and reduplications were caused by a sociolinguistic cause, the business environment of the writers changed the way they communicate. We can observe several examples of the occurrences found in the e-mails from Pakistan in Example 3:



Example 3 :

Lexical calques: In the largest interest of Laser machine company, I am pleased to extend the hand... We need to attend the problem.

Stylistic ornamentation and politeness: In the largest interest of Laser machine company, I am pleased to extend the hand..., kindly select the space from the floor plans, I would like to bring to your notice my disappointment.

Abbreviations: Please allow me to tell u his type...

Reduplication: ...as well after many many meetings.... I have repeatedly called several times.

Exaggerations: I am the only one in 200 Million population of Pakistan who knows laser machine, He fell in love with the samples of CDS and this going to open a new market to us, He is a poker player and a master of bluffing.

The examples we found in the Chinese e-mail are ones shown in Example 4:

Example 4 :

Lexical calques: No need to make it worry, the behind message...

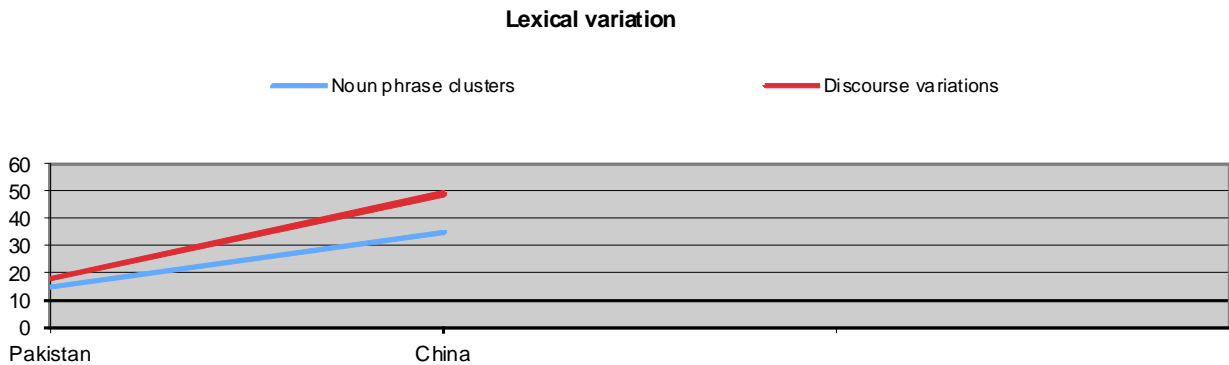
L1 adaptation: Don't leave this argument between you and me, This kind of argument do not bring a harmony business relation, My concern is more deep in behind.

Abbreviations: Pls find out and..., your proposal is not a solution needed to wait for after CNY holiday, Pls advise yr fty exact address, tks, your G2 rsult samples.

Politeness expressions: Please Kindly.

Direct and imperative style: We want all the parts sent us with the next Big M. shipment together, We have no room for Big m., it's not make sense to have room for production, Ok, we have tried everything now. I think its time to get some one here R., you are already in china, come to ningbo and sort this out, I want to fix the work schedule as well.

In Graph 1 we contrasted the results obtained in the two different classifications of lexical variations:



Graph 1. Contrast of lexical variation in the e-mails written by non-native English speakers.



As it can be observed, the variations produced by non-native English speakers with a high level of this second language are quite evident. They change the way they communicate. We can observe that the variations produced by the second language writers (Pakistani) are not frequent; nevertheless, the variations produced by the foreign language writers (Chinese) are higher. We also observed that most of the variations occurred due to the influence of the mother tongue, although some other variations were caused by sociolinguistic causes, which were considered in this study due to the business environment of the writers. They are forced to write in a certain way but they do not use standard English, they vary the way they communicate. This fact shows that the English language changes and varies depending on the genre but also on the communicator.

4. Conclusions

When we contrasted the two groups, we found that the group of e-mails from China showed a higher percentage in complex noun phrases than the group of Pakistan. The reason for this is the clear influence of the mother tongue in China, compounding is very commonly used among Chinese when speaking their first language as well. The speakers tend to create new words imitating their mother tongue, as they need to name what they do not know; even when English offers a lexical solution for this, the Chinese speakers of English choose to form a new word. We also observed in the answers to these e-mails that their interlocutors understood them; the variation in the use of the English language is not an obstacle for communication.

When contrasting the rest of the occurrences found in the discourse variation between the two groups of writers, we observed that the lexical feature that showed more cultural influence in the Chinese group of writers was the invention of first names and the writing style. However, the style used by the Pakistani writers is more neutral even though we have detected some ornamented style expressions with some cultural influence. Business English writing tends to be concise and more direct so this group adapts a more standard business style than the Chinese.

Furthermore, the Chinese group used a direct and imperative writing style. This way of writing is very influenced by the Chinese language, especially Mandarin. The overall style tended to be brief and direct with the frequent use of the modal verb *must* that is considered imperative. This was a socio-cultural influence because Chinese languages are very direct, the style is synthetic, modal verbs are hardly ever used; therefore the use of this modal might sound too commanding for the European and American counterparts. Finally, it was observed that the fact that Pakistani writers use English as a second language, i.e. English is considered relevant in their society, improved the way they communicate, varying less the way they express. On the contrary, Chinese writers, who learnt English as a foreign language, vary the use of English; they suffer interference in their linguistic production. In this sense, language contact is a valuable asset to be considered.

This study could not evaluate all the aspects related to lexical variations, we only focused on some aspects, further research should be carried out in order to classify and understand the causes of the variations that can be observed when writers with different cultural and linguistic background use a second or foreign language. Furthermore, some outcomes from this research might also be topical subjects for further studies to analyse social media and the implications of English as the lingua franca in a globalised world.



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