



BELF: Subject matter or linguistic correctness in e-mail communication

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Abstract: *The English language has for a long time occupied a central position on a global scale and been used by speakers of various linguistic backgrounds for successful communication. This has especially been proven in practice by the world of business, with an overwhelmingly large number of corporations operating across state borders and linguistic and cultural barriers. With the change of field and medium, it is inevitable that the language itself is going to change and adapt to new needs and applications. Electronic communication is the main means of correspondence between such internationally operating companies, and this paper took it up to investigate how the medium influenced the language of e-mail messages between business people with different native languages. 59 e-mail messages between a company from Bosnia & Herzegovina and a company based in Romania were gathered and manually tagged for syntactic variation. To answer the question of whether BELF favoured linguistic purity over matter or vice versa, we looked into grammar, syntactic structures, vocabulary, e-mail openings, and request-making strategies. All these parameters were considered as indicators of BELF formality/informality. The conclusions reached here are generally in line with the way in which BELF was characterised by some of the most important investigators in the field. Significant variations from regular grammatical standards were displayed in the language at hand, and BELF was here marked as being semi-formal, with some aspects leaning towards informality and other towards formality. Overall, it seems that business people have no regard for linguistic purity, while they value the main point of the message, facts and numbers to a much greater extent.*

Keywords: BELF, E-mail correspondence, grammar, vocabulary, formality

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1. INTRODUCTION

"A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country" (Crystal, 2003, p. 3). The language that has for a long time occupied this widely recognized special role is definitely English. For achieving the global status, the language needs to be taken up by other countries around the world. Crystal mentions two ways in which this can be done, namely, by giving English the position of an official language, or the second language in a country, or by making it a priority in foreign language teaching.

Another factor contributing to the status of English as a worldwide language is the globalisation. With so many different countries being closely connected by various influences such as politics and economy, the need for a common language is enormous. The area in which this need is most appreciated, besides the international academic communities, is the business community (Crystal, 2003). Therefore, English as the global language appreciated by business communities is the main concern of this paper. Given that English is nowadays spoken by more ESL and EFL speakers than native ones, we deem it appropriate to concern ourselves with the use of English as a foreign language, particularly among business people who do not share the same mother tongue, the language known as BELF. BELF is characterised as a neutral communication code used for conducting business within the global discourse community (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005).

Due to a number of developments, Business English has undergone some major shifts over time, mostly due to the realisation that there is a gap to be bridged between the academy and the globalized business world. English for Business Purposes (EBP) is nowadays the term most commonly used for this field, but it is a relatively recent development and has emerged from the broader and mainstream studies of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Bhatia & Bremner, 2012).

The most recent and also the currently ongoing development which has changed the world of Business English is the technology, with the Internet revolutionizing the way enterprises communicate. Computer-mediated communication, as Jackson (2007, p. 10) points out, was for a very long time considered only a subfield of business communication, but this distinction is being erased by the blending of multimedia, as mediated communication "is infused into nearly any business communication context, perhaps even coming to dominate certain areas such as public relations" (as found in Bhatia & Bremner, 2012).

With a change in the way in which language is conveyed and disseminated, it is implied that, just as the business trade itself, language will

inevitably reflect those developments. Nickerson (2005) addresses this change and reports on a comment by St John (1996, p. 15): "There is a definite need to understand more of the generic features of different events such as meetings, to identify common features of effective communications, to understand the role of cultural influences and the ways in which language and business strategies interact".

With various tools for quick communication, the style becomes direct, simple and dense, and an instant answer is frequently expected. As cited in Carrió & Muñiz, several studies report that, regardless of how rigid the guidelines of certain texts are, the use of English by international writers engaging in exchange of business ideas will cause changes in writing (Ädel & Erman, 2012; Carrió & Muñiz, 2010; Crossley & McNamara, 2009).

With the electronic media being widely used in business communication, and most of it being in a written form which is easily shared and accessible, we deemed it appropriate to investigate electronic communication and the type of language it uses. The "media richness hierarchy" developed by Daft and Lengel (1984), which classifies types of communication tools according to their capacity to convey information as correctly as possible, claims that e-mail is only behind face-to-face communication and the telephone, and e-mail communication is the central subject of this paper, as this type of communication possesses specific characteristics in a business context, as it has been pointed out by several researchers such as Nickerson (1999) and Gimenez (2006), and furthermore, with the advent of e-mail, the conventions of traditional written discourse were abandoned and replaced by communicational features which closely resemble those of spoken interactions (St John, 1996).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As found in Carrió and Muñiz (2013), the largest English speaking population in the world is located in China and India (Bolton, 2003; Crystal, 2001, 2008; Jiang, 2002; Jenkins, 2003), which explains the interest of many researchers who focused on business communication in those countries, and the fact that English is spoken as a second and foreign language rather than first, makes it an even more interesting subject of inquiry.

In order to gauge different characteristics of business communications, a great body of research exists on both spoken and written business discourse and on several subtypes or media which is used for dispersing such language, extending from memos and faxes over business letters, to electronic mail. Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken (2007) give an exhaustive overview of business communication research, providing the most important researchers in the field. A major amount of research has been dedicated to general discursive

practices rather than just surface textual features of the genre, including the spoken genre such as negotiations (Charles 1996; Gimenez 2006), business meetings (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997; Bennington, Shetler & Shaw 2003; Handford 2010; Poncini 2003, 2004; Rogerson-Revell 1999), advertising and other promotional artefacts (Bhatia 1993, 2005; Cook 1992; Halmari & Virtanen 2005), and certain electronic forms of communication (Gimenez 2000, 2001) (as cited in Chiappini et al., 2007). Chiappini et al. (2007) report that during the 1980s and early 1990s, the business letter was the main focus of work on written business discourse, which was an important genre of communication in business settings (James, Scholfield & Ypsiladis, 1994; Jenkins & Hinds, 1987; Johns, 1980; Maier, 1992; Yli-Jokipii, 1994) with more recent investigators in the field being Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (1999), Santos (2002), Yeung (2007).

E-mail communication, which is the sole interest of this paper in the context of BELF communication, has been of increasing and continuing interest, beginning in the 1996 (Nickerson, 2005). Sproul and Kiesler (1986) define e-mail as a medium which "uses computer text processing and communication tools to provide a high speed information exchange service" (p. 1494, as found in Markus, 1994). Markus also refers to the work of Culnan & Markus (1987) to describe e-mail as "an asynchronous medium in which a user can communicate with one or many other people in the form of a note or document, typewritten on computer terminals" (p. 505).

Kankaanranta and Planken (2010) explored perceptions of BELF held by internationally operating business professionals based on an online survey and in-depth interviews, subsequently revealing three important features of BELF discourse. Typical BELF discourse was thereby characterised as simplified English, the interviewees continually emphasizing the use of simple and clear English which does not contain complex sentence structures and phraseology, and which regards grammatical inaccuracies as quite commonplace, regular phenomena or little consequence. Firth (1996), Porcini (2002), Seidlhofer (2004), and Rogerson-Revell (2008) all agree that the core objective of BELF is to enable operative and consistent communication between non-native speakers for successful communication and therefore, linguistic mistakes and nativeness are of negligible importance. To this effect, Louhiala-Salminen (1996) posed a question in their study to see if business practitioners perceived a linguistic change in written business communication over the previous decade, and the strongest tendency among the answers pointed to the language which had become less conservative and more efficient.

This linguistic change towards a "less conservative" and more efficient communication could, in our view, be traced through its lexical and grammatical aspects. Martins (2017) summarizes lexico-grammar characteristics of BELF as pointed out by different investigators (Breiteneder, 2009; Cogo & Devy, 2008; Hülmbauer, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2004):

- Dropping definite and indefinite articles
- Omission of the third person singular present tense
- Plural of uncountable nouns
- Interchangeable use of who and which
- Extended application of semantically flexible verbs
- The regular use of invariable tag questions (p 63-64)

The lexico-grammar features of language also have an impact on the level of formality expressed between persons through their e-mail exchanges.. The perspectives on the formality of e-messages are conflicting. When e-mail was still a fairly new technological convenience, it was understandably viewed in terms of informality because of its speed, spontaneity, and privacy, however, Crystal (2006) points out that, contrary to a previous view that punctuation and spelling are loose, in business world, where e-mails are perceived as providing convenient professionalism by speeding up decision making and building strong working relationships, such standards are actually carefully observed and upheld. On the other hand, Yates and Orlikowski (1992), while comparing e-mails to memos, claim that the language of e-mails is more informal and colloquial, with spelling and grammatical errors which were considered inappropriate before, having become tolerated in this new medium. Informality or formality of language can also be traced through salutations, namely if writers use first or last names, as well as through abbreviations (such as *can't*, *don't*, etc.). For the examination of language formality/informality, it might also be useful to look at a study which concerned itself, among other issues, with making requests in one company's Swedish and Finish BELF message exchanges (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005), and found that the Finnish writers tended to make more direct requests than Swedish writers, who used indirect requests. The stronger preference for direct requests is reported to be in line with some previous research according to which straightforward forms had become a "shared value among email communicators" (Louhiala-Salminen et al., 2005, p. 416).

The goal of this paper is to collect the data from research articles which investigated electronic mail communication and provided us with the most ubiquitous features of such communication and compare those findings with e-mails collected from a construction company in Bosnia & Herzegovina which conducts its business largely with other countries in Europe. We will strive to examine the types of linguistic choices by EFL speakers in an international business environment, mainly through grammatical and lexical manifestations of EFL in order to compare them to the widely investigated BELF trends in larger communities in the world, and discover the amount of consistency or inconsistency in e-mail correspondence between employees of one B&H company and one from Romania.

3. METHODOLOGY

Bhatia and Bremner (2012) acknowledge the fact that aspects of business communication can be best revealed by analysing large quantities of authentic textual data (written or spoken). Therefore, this study aims to achieve just that, which is to analyse business communication through a corpus of authentic language in corporate environments provided in a written medium, with a focus on the producers of such language not being native English speakers. Given that business organisations are generally not very open to being placed under scrutiny by outsiders, for whichever purpose, a decision was made to attempt collecting electronic correspondence between a company in Bosnia & Herzegovina and a company based in another European country where English is also spoken as a foreign language.

Contact was made with one of the executive officers in a local company which deals with the production and installation of insulation pipelines and air conditioning for industrial plants, and he agreed to share a portion of the company's international correspondence. E-mail communication was chosen for a number of reasons, mainly because it is easily accessible in the sense that physical presence of the investigator in the company is not required for obtaining such communication, and also because the company may choose which e-mails to share, so that the risk of breaching confidentiality is minimised. Prior to forwarding the e-mails, the employees involved in the communication censored the data such as passwords and confidential amounts of money negotiated between companies. Names were not censored, but the author of this study decided to subsequently change them.

The total of 59 e-mails were received, under six different subjects. The e-mails were carefully examined in order to find all features of language which deviate from conventional English, such as grammatical mistakes and unusual sentence structures. The tagging system employed in this study is taken from Carrió-Pastor and Muñiz-Calderón, (2013), who applied the system on syntactic variation in English language used by Chinese and Indian writers in order to investigate the internal mechanisms that make a language change. Their hypothesis was that language significantly changes when spoken by non-native speakers of English in a corpus comprised of e-mails written by speakers of English as a second language, which is a similar stance to the one taken in this paper, which focuses on speakers of EFL. The tagging system relies on variations studied by linguists such as Bolton (2003), Kachru (2005), Kirpatrick (2007) and Sailaja (2009) and the system follows a classification of errors proposed by James (1998) and Dagneaux, Dennes and Granger (1998) (as cited in Pastora & Calderón, 2013). Figure 1 shows the tagging system designed to detect the syntactic variation found in the corpus:

Table 1. Table of a tagging system for syntactic variation. Adapted from: 'The Compilation of a Corpus of Business English: Syntactic Variation (p. 92-93)'. By Pastor and Calderón

Tagging of syntactic variations
Use of articles: definite<DA*>, indefinite<INDA*>
Use of pronouns: personal <PERP*>, possessive<POSP*>, demonstrative<DMP*>
Use of the verb tenses: present simple<PRS*>, present continuous <PRCONT*>, present perfect<PRPER*>, past continuous<PCONT*>, past simple<PAS*>, past perfect<PAP*>, future simple<FS*>, future perfect<FP*>
Use of adverbs: <ADV*>
Use of modal verbs: <MV*>
Use of passive voice: <PSV*>
Use of prepositions: <PP*>
Use of complex phrases: <NN*>, <NNN*>, <NNNN*>, <ADJN*>, <ADJNN*>, etc.
Use of connectors: <CN*>
Sentence structure: <SST*>

For the use of articles, in each place where an article was missing we placed the tag for the type of article which should have been written. If an article was included, but a wrong one, the tag for the wrong article was inserted. Similarly, inappropriate tenses were marked with tag for the tense which was in the e-mail, not the one which should have been used. The same procedure was followed for all other categories, with the last category of sentence structure being used for sentences which do not violate grammar but are of odd composition, and for those for which no other tag was appropriate. E-mails also contained a significant amount of spelling mistakes, but those were not tagged, in fact, we decided to disregard them completely because the nature of the medium does not make it clear whether the mistake was genuine or only an issue of typography.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 is a summary of all syntactic variations found after the e-mail messages were manually tagged, and it shows the numbers indicating how many times the variation occurred in the text and that same amount expressed in percentages. Out of 34 categories outlined by Pastor and Calderon, our corpus was found to contain only 13. The categories which were found to be variations on their standard use are: prepositional phrases, direct articles, sentence structure, present simple, past simple, present perfect, adverbs, personal pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, present continuous, passive, and the complex phrase adjective plus noun. The largest amount of variation was found in relation to the use of prepositions, with the total amount of tags being 24. It is peculiar that, in the summary of BELF characteristics by Martins (2017), prepositions were not mentioned at all. Given that BCS (Bosnian/ Croatian/ Serbian) is the native language of half of our correspondents, it was expected that prepositions will be

the category with most variation, as it had been previously noticed that EFL speakers have most difficulty with that category because it differs greatly between English and BCS. We cannot ascertain the reason for preposition variation in all the e-mails, because we do not know the grammar of Romanian language, however, it was noticed that BCS speakers use those prepositions which are correct in their mother tongues and just translate them into English. It is quite possible that this was the case with the speakers of Romanian, as well.

A close second most frequently noticed variation was the syntactic category of direct articles, and there are 18 instances of sentence structure variations. The most frequent phenomena in BELF, according to various investigators summarized in Martins (2017), was the dropping of definite and indefinite articles, and it can be said that this characteristic is confirmed by our corpus, as well, additionally because indefinite articles are the fourth most represented variation. More precisely, omission of direct articles was the most frequent characteristic in this regard, with 20 cases of DA omission and 7 cases of indirect article omission. Regarding tenses, the present simple and the past simple were influenced by their use as a part of BELF, each of them being tagged 6 times, and present perfect three times. Martins (2017) only speaks of the present simple tense, claiming that speakers often dropped the third person singular suffix, which was found to be the case only two times (*'it show us 3 different SWIFT codes'* and *'toll declaration that represent real road use'*), and the third person suffix was once inserted where it should not have been (*'what des PCL means'*). The other variations related to the present simple tense include the use of PRS where another tense was grammatically proper, and an instance of second person singular verb variation (*'you already has'*). Therefore, the characteristic of the peculiar use of the present simple tense is hereby confirmed, however, the precise variation in terms of third person singular was not as prominent as expected. The only other tense, the present continuous, was tagged only once, together with personal and demonstrative pronouns, passive, and adjective + noun structure being the least represented category.

Sentence structure variation is a very prominent feature of our corpus, but it cannot be individually categorised or divided according to most salient constructions since there are a lot of different types of constructions and most of them are quite creative (*'We will try our best that we can meet your favor'*). Other categories mentioned by Martins (interchangeable use of who and which, extended application of semantically flexible verbs, and the regular of invariable tag questions) were not present in the collection of e-mails at all.

Table 2. Variations in order of frequency

Category	N	%
PP*	24	24.49
DA*	23	23.47

SST*	18	18.37
INDA*	10	10.2
PRS*	6	6.12
PAS*	6	6.12
PRPER*	3	3.06
ADV*	3	3.06
PERP*	1	1.02
DMP*	1	1.02
PRCONT*	1	1.02
PSV*	1	1.02
ADJN*	1	1.02

For the type of vocabulary which indicates the register of e-communication between these two companies, we chose to consider abbreviations and informal expressions which include terms such as "thanks", "OK", and "nope", and phrasal verbs such as "catch up" and "check out", the results being depicted in Table 3. The table indicates that the Romanian correspondents engaged in very little use of this type of informal language, with only two instances of such vocabulary. In the B&H company's e-mails, a number of such examples is 9. Abbreviations were considered to be short versions of negation such as "couldn't", "haven't", "won't", and contractions such as "we'll", "that's", "there's", "it's". The amount of contracted versions used by B&H writers exceeds the Romanian counterparts by a large margin, with 17 such examples in total, and only 5 on the Romanian side.

Table 3. the number of informal vocabulary and abbreviations in e-mail messages by both companies

	B&H	Romanian
Abbreviations	17	5
informal vocabulary	9	2

Considering that our corpus is only a small part of a larger body of communication between two companies which are in a continuous cooperation, we believe that, if access were granted, many more consistencies would be revealed between such language and the characteristics described in literature on Business English as Lingua Franca. Nevertheless, our analysis of grammar and vocabulary clearly indicates that the language of e-communication in this particular business environment is far from the standard, prescribed use of English found in grammar books and dictionaries, with a quite significant

number of “mistakes” and deviations from what native speakers consider appropriate and “natural”. Therefore, it is evident that the perspective on e-mail communication laid out by Crystal (2006) which viewed e-mails as vessels for conveying one’s company’s professionalism with its regular use of typography and grammar, is no longer valid. Instead, we confirmed the e-mail characterisation by Yates and Orlikowski (1992) which described the new form of communication as much more informal, colloquial, and forgiving of grammatical errors. Kankaaranta and Planken (2010) confirmed this view in their study of internationally operating business professionals according to whom BELF discourse was characterised by simplified English and which regards grammatical inaccuracies mostly inconsequential. They also speak of simple sentence structures and phraseology, which, even though there was a large number of sentence structure variation within our corpus, is also the case in our correspondence. The structures may have been awkward and at times creative and reflecting the speaker’s native language, however, the general tendency was toward simplicity and clarity.

Dear Mr.Kober,

Regarding to<PP*> those invoices, in the price it is also included<SST*> manufacturing and not just <DA*>material. That's why the amount is bigger than <DA*>offered amount for <DA*>material.

But we have to invoice the intallation work. If you think that 20% is a lot, we can make it 10%, or you can suggest how much.

As we already said<PAS*>, we estimated that 20% has been installed, and please let us know if you disagree with 20%, so we can make appropriate changes in the record. If not, please send us <DA*>scanned and signed record.

Thank you

Figure 1. Example of one e-mail tagged for syntactic variation

One of the indicators for the level of formality expressed in e-mail exchanges between a domestic and a foreign company were e-mail openings, or greetings (Table 4). A manual analysis showed three types of greetings: Hello, Hi, or Dear without any first or last names, the proper and most standardly used greeting consisting of Dear Mr/Mrs plus their last name, and the other two being Hello or Dear plus the persons first name. We consider the combination of Dear plus last name to be the most formal form of greeting, the second option including the first name is less formal, and only Hello, Hi or Dear is considered to be informal. In the domestic company’s e-mails, the recipient was most frequently greeted with the combination of Dear/Hello + first name (12 times), 10 times the option without any names was chosen, and 9 times the most standard form was in use. The Romanian company’s messages, on the other hand, show a smaller amount of informal greetings (6 as opposed to 10), the use semi-informal greetings is almost the same as in the e-mails from the Bosnian

company (11 and 12), and there were 7 formal greetings in Romanian mails in total. It is evident that the mode of greeting varies largely and it is not consistent through the correspondence. It is impossible to say which company's employees were more formal/informal than the others', since numbers are approximately the same. What is important though, is that correspondences were started in different manner by Bosnian and Romanian writers, but as the correspondence continued, one of the parties adopted the other one's way of addressing, in order to show respect. It was also noticed that the greetings did not randomly vary from message to message, but that each string of e-mails had its own form of greeting, depending on who the addressee was. We conclude that the form of address depends on the parties included, as one string of e-mail used only the formal greeting, another the semi-formal, and others used the informal one. Generally, the person who initiated the communication felt which form of opening was most proper to the person they addressed, and adhered to that form throughout the rest of their communication. However, we cannot claim that these regular e-mail openings make business communication completely formal or completely informal, since some messages omitted the greeting completely, if the message was very brief and not of major importance.

Table 4. Types and frequency of e-mail openings for both companies

Greeting	B&H	Romanian
Hello/Hi/Dear	10	6
Dear/Hello + First name	12	11
Dear Mr/Mrs + Last name	9	7

In regard to the last aspect of formality, we considered the way of making requests. The e-mails from the domestic company contained a lot more requests than the Romanian ones and all but one were indirect. Some of the examples are: "Can you please check what's happening?", "Can you please help me with this.", "Can you please tell us which one to choose? Can you write it on the Invoice and send it to us.". Note that some of these do not include a question mark. The one direct request expressed as imperative was: "please send us scanned, signed and stamped document, so we can issue the invoice.". The e-mails from Romanian correspondents contained 5 requests, 4 of them being indirect, and one direct one: "Please send us the new invoice.". The increased preference for indirect requests with modal initials and various want/desire statements, places our correspondents closer to the Swedish company's employees in the study by Louhiala-Salminen et al. (2005), and therefore, simultaneously goes against the shared value of minimalist e-mail politeness discovered in some previous research (Alatalo, 2002; Mulholland, 1999; Nickerson, 2000). The study suggests that politeness plays a secondary role in these routine situations and that "both the requester and requestee can be seen as being engaged in a collaborative activity in which the exchange of information is equally important to both of them" (p. 416), which we find to be true also for the subjects in this paper,

however, for some reason, they chose the more polite and less-face threatening option of request making, unlike the majority of correspondents in the aforementioned Finish study. More data is needed in order to get to the bottom of this phenomena, such as interviews or surveys with the employees which would help us discover the reason for their linguistic choices and levels of politeness.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyse the language of a corpus of electronic messages exchanged between the speakers of English as a Foreign Language, more precisely, the EFL spoken for business purposes. Composers of these messages were employees of one company based in Bosnia & Herzegovina, thus, the native speakers of BCS, and a company based in Romania, with Romanian as their native language. It was our goal to investigate if Business English employed in these two Balkan countries displays similarities or differences with BELF as it was characterised by various researchers on a more global scale. As measurements for characterising the language of e-mails we gathered, we chose to look at grammatical and syntactic variation, vocabulary, e-mail openings, and the way in which e-mail authors made requests, and used these parameters as indicators of the level of formality of BELF. Vocabulary and grammar strongly indicate a correlation with some of the most important previous research, as there was a tendency to disregard accuracy in favour of conveying the message. As we previously stated in the literature review part, investigators such as Firth (1996), Porcini (2002), Siedlhofer (2004), and Rogerson-Revell (2008) agree that the core objective of BELF is to enable operative and consistent communication between non-native speakers for successful communication. Our corpus of e-mails tells us that linguistic mistakes and nativeness are not important when it comes to international business dealings, the main objective is to get the information across and to receive feedback from the other party so as to ascertain that the business transaction has or will be successful. A much greater focus is on hard and fast facts, numbers, passwords, addresses, and similar data. If grammar and vocabulary is to indicate the level of formality, we can say that BELF in our case is semi-formal, with regular formats of openings, e-mail body parts, and closings. Informal vocabulary items such as "OK" have been used by both parties, but in other areas such as greetings and request making, a certain level of formality was, indeed, maintained. This study was limited with regard to our access to some of the background information, as we considered it too imposing to request interviews or send questionnaires which would more precisely reveal the nature of these business persons' relationships and their attitudes toward business communication. However, we still consider that by only looking at raw data such as these e-mail messages we received, some valid and insightful conclusion could, and have been made.

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