BUSINESS ENGLISH AND FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTICS: TEACHING PRACTICAL ENGLISH IN PERFECT HARMONY WITH THEORY

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Abstract

For teachers of Business English and other English for Specific Purposes (ESP) areas one of the most topical tasks today is to help future specialists master the necessary language means not just as a multitude of units, but as a system of communication devices aimed at solving any problem arising in professional interaction. That's why we include in the teaching process not only lexical, grammatical and stylistic aspects of professional discourse, but also such aspect as developing various skills of effective rhetoric influence on a partner. To this end some adapted methods of functional linguistics prove to be helpful, which makes the focus of the present paper.

Keywords: Business English, methods of teaching ESP, functional analysis of discourse, rhetoric effectiveness of speech.

INTRODUCTION

Today teachers of Business English strive for developing not just general speech habits of their students, but rather their rhetoric skills. Doing business with the view of complex economic and political processes in the world requires specific abilities for sophisticated communication in different communicative registers, especially being in contact with foreign businessmen. The current economic crisis makes it a challenge to maintain business relationships and establish new ones for the sake of sorting out the numerous predicaments that businesses face nowadays, and at the same time keeping to the principle of ‘fair play’. Still professional targets spur people of business to make a special emphasis on promoting their products and services, attracting investors, proper dealing with partners and customers, as well as on opposing competitors and unfriendly mass media sources.

Besides, unsuccessful outcomes of important talks sometimes take place due not so much to the complexity of the issues themselves as to poor presentation or negotiation skills of the parties. All sorts of newly born and established communicative training courses do offer generally accepted techniques for business people to be able ‘to speak like Obama’, ‘to negotiate agreement without giving in’, ‘to persuade people to act as you want them to’ and the like. But though these ambitions per se deserve support (given they are not used for wrongdoing), one can not deny that learning a limited set of communication devices is insufficient for achieving really challenging goals in business interaction.

In this respect linguistic theory, functional linguistics in particular, proves to be helpful, as it discloses the purposes and functions of language units in social settings, reveals their pragmatic loading and effects on people’s feelings and opinions; it explains the language “life” proceeding from meaning and function to form [1], [2], [3].

Thus the purpose of the present paper is to discuss the opportunities that the functional linguistics approach opens within this general precept.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Experts in business interaction have always pointed out the importance of communicative effectiveness of professional activities, of the partner-oriented discourse planning, which should drive the speaker to
taking into close consideration the possible reactions on the part of the speech addressee. According to Michael McCaskey from Harvard School of Business, “as you examine misunderstandings between two managers, you will often find that what fouls the channels of communication is their mutual assumption that they are using the same words to mean the same things… What makes communication problematic is that people fail to recognize the personally distinctive ways in which others use words” [4]. In this respect a generalized judgment put forward by professor Olga Aleksandrova from Moscow State University accounts for the significance of functional analysis, as “it is impossible to denote the meaning of the communicative unit (a word, a word combination or a sentence) only with the help of a number of elementary components. But, according to the psycholinguistic investigations, a word does not possess any fixed meaning, there is always the multiform system of bonds” [5]. That is why we start teaching Business English with convincing students that in order to be efficient they have to assess the functional potential of the forms in which their thoughts and intentions are worded.

Besides understanding the partner’s incentives and some individual properties, indispensable for successful communication is also the speaker’s competence in matters of intercultural interaction, as it is common knowledge that being persuasive in your own culture does not guarantee being persuasive in other cultures [6]. Therefore, the basics of functional linguistics make a good instrument that helps disclose what lies behind this or that way of formulating people’s positions in certain circumstances and within certain cultural contexts.

Functional linguistics started being elaborated at the beginning of the XXth century within linguistic structuralism; but as by that time a vast amount of descriptive linguistic data had been accumulated, it became evident that time had come to search for more profound explanations of language structures activity. Thus, very soon the new tendency developed into a specific academic school focused mostly on how (and later, why) the described units function.

It is assumed that the ground work for functionalism was done by Ferdinand de Saussure, Otto Jespersen, Jan Baudouin de Courtenay and others who posed a definite question of the interconnection between the semantic potential of language units within the language system and the actual meaning they acquire in speech under the influence of linguistic and non-linguistic factors of communication.

Later such position grew into the ‘teleological’ principle substantiated by the Prague Linguistic Circle (the Prague School), according to which language should be analysed as a teleological – purposeful – system of means of expression specially designed for communication. Among the founding members of the Prague School were such personalites as Vilém Mathesius (President of PLC until his death in 1945), Roman Jakobson, Nikolay Trubetzkoy, Sergei Karcevskiy, Jan Mukarovsky, etc. The first results of the members’ cooperative efforts were presented in joint theses prepared for the First International Congress of Slavists held in Prague in 1929. These were published in the first volume of the then started series Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague. The Thèses outlined the direction of the work of the Circle’s members. Such important concepts as the approach to the study of language as a synchronic system which is, however, dynamic, functionality of elements of language, and the importance of the social function of language were explicitly laid down as the basis for further research [7].

Since then functional theories of language may be viewed as dominating in linguistic studies, as even more recent pragmatic and cognitive directions have, in fact, been elaborating the functional principles of language analysis and are closely related to them.

The functional approach in linguistics has been substantially developed by S. Dik, T. van Dijk, R.P. Fawsett, M.A.K. Halliday, W.L. Chafe, G. Leech, J. Svartvik, O.V. Aleksandrova, G.A. Zolotova, V.A. Zvegintsev, E.S. Kubryakova, N.A. Slyusareva and many others whose works reveal the multisided functional interaction of various components of the multilayered, dynamic and flexible system of the natural human language. Various language units functions have been regarded in terms of their role as communication tools tailored for a twofold purpose: to perceive the world and to share the worldview with other people.

In the wake of theoretical investigations, quite numerous applied functional concepts have appeared as an attempt to find better ways of teaching and learning foreign languages, especially stimulated by the all-embracing globalization processes. The effectiveness of the functional approach to, for instance, improving students’ literacy has been proved and admitted, as can be seen from [8], [9], [10], [11] and other works.

No less useful is functionalism for enhancing eloquence, as it develops a more profound and delicate linguistic feeling with students and helps them elaborate a more systemic and meaningful perception of speech – both their own and the communicating partner’s. Introducing elements of functional analysis into
teaching methods, we show students the multisided semantic and pragmatic interconnection of definite linguistic elements comprising a discourse unit.

METHODOLOGY

The functional approach is pursued in teaching practically all aspects of English for Specific Purposes (even if it is not a teacher’s deliberate intention). From the very first lessons while training pronunciation we have to explain at least the main functional aspects of phonetics, such as:

- semantic significance of sounds oppositions, like short vs long vowels (not to confuse, for instance, ‘butter’ and ‘barter’, ‘spot’ and ‘sport’, etc.), half open vs wide open vowels (‘set’ – ‘sat’, ‘led’ – ‘lad’), voiced vs voiceless consonants, particularly in the final position (‘pence’ – ‘pens’, ‘site/sight’ – ‘side’), etc.,
- pragmatically relevant prosodic characteristics, like the inviting effect of the rising tone of closing phrases vs the dismissing and usually undesirable effect of the falling tone and so on.

These features of English phonetics need special attention in Russian speaking audience as there are no similar phenomena in the Russian language, where vowels are short and final consonants mostly tend to be devoiced without causing trouble in making out the meaning. That’s why curious and sometimes ridiculous (or even offensive) semantic mistakes can be caused by a mere mispronunciation of only one sound – not a harmless incident during important business talks with foreign counterparts!

Teaching English grammar is also impossible without resorting to functional analysis as, firstly, future specialists have to master the language structure which is essentially different from that of their native tongue. When they grasp the idea of functional loading of the units and models they study, it naturally facilitates the process of knowledge digestion. A typical example is the use of the Present Perfect Tense which Russian speaking students can disregard using instead Simple Past verb forms (better matching the Russian past tense structures) if they are unaware that the Present Perfect form has the inherent meaning of the existing result of the action completed.

Secondly, we cannot ignore the communicative similarities and/or differences between grammar units and models. For example, in the process of internalizing the use of ‘shall’ in the meaning of obligation (so characteristic of the institutional discourse), students should acquire a clear-cut idea of the semantic and pragmatic properties this verb incorporates into a phrase as compared, say, to ‘will’ or ‘must’. So, we give a functional substantiation to pieces like:

1) ‘The Agent shall provide an adequate organization for sales and, where appropriate, after-sales service, with all necessary means and personnel, in order to ensure the execution of his obligations throughout the Territory under this agreement’ – where ‘shall’ assigns the pragmatic meaning of obligation as inevitable duty;

or

2) ‘In carrying out their obligations under this agreement the parties will act in accordance with good faith and fair dealing’ – where ‘will’ suggests a voluntarily realized intention.

In the lexicon study the functional approach is no less expedient. The book published by the English linguistics department of Moscow State University, Introduction to Functional Anglistics (1998) stated that “the functioning of words as such cannot be discussed without reservation, without taking into account additional information, the variety of specific connotations which cling to them” [12]. It is within this framework that students are taught to make the proper choice of a synonym or nomination variant considering the lexeme connotations, compliance with the author’s purport, the partner’s likely impression, and so on.

Among various aspects of ESP from the functional perspective quite a labour-consuming one is discourse analysis when presumably all main linguistic devices used by the author are to be assessed as a unified and coherent system of interrelated means of pragmatic impact.

For instance, at a lesson of English for Business Communication we discuss pieces like the Transcript of a Press Conference on the International Monetary Fund’s World Economic Outlook (Washington, April 22, 2009), and state the following points.

Asking about the economic situation in Russia and its neighbours, a journalist, referring to the IMF assertions that (Caucasian) Georgia had no economic downturn (despite its appeals for economic
assistance), behaved, truly speaking, quite provocatively. His question was: "... how much of a problem is this for the IMF, the political pressure to cook the books? And does it increase in the crisis?" [13].

One can hardly expect phrases like "political pressure" and "cook the books" to be amicably perceived by the IMF officials (notwithstanding the credibility or noncredibility of the statement itself). No wonder, the head of the World Economic Studies Division of the IMF gave a sharp answer:

MR. DEPRESSIN: Let me take the questions in turn. Let's start with Russia. Russia is being hit by a trifecta of shocks. First, you've had the large decline in global trade. Second, you had the tightening of credit, the troubles in the banking system. Third, you had the drop in raw material prices and oil prices. So Russia, like the CIS as a whole, is experiencing the largest reversal of fortune, so to speak, among all the regions in the world [ibid].

Leaving aside the actual economic problems in Russia, we have to point out that the linguistic characteristics of the given paragraph have acquired the following vivid peculiarities as compared to the previous speeches of the officials at the conference:

- the increased tempo of speech due to syntactic parallelism and shortening of sentence structures, and their stylistic colouring, which was not typical of the previous answers;
- the use of personal pronoun "you", avoided in reference to representatives of other countries, because it makes the addressee feel his personal involvement in the critical state of things in his country,
- the inclusion of the nomination "trifecta of shocks", which enhances depressive pragmatics and was never applied to any other country irrespective of the state of things (in some cases evidently worse than in Russia) in their economy.

So, it is clear that reference to "the largest reversal of fortune among all the regions in the world" was made rather as a reciprocal rebuff to the journalist's indelicate remark than as an objective estimate of the situation in Russia. And still we admit that such a way of presenting information forms a definitely negative and evidently biased opinion on the question discussed.

All the above confirms that future participants in any area of the international arena have to acquire good knowledge of rhetoric devices and understanding of language functional potential. It is only natural that for teachers of foreign languages developing their students' communicative competence is of critical importance. But this competence is not confined to an extensive individual vocabulary, discourse clichés and fluency in speech. No less vital is the rhetoric effectiveness of speech. Otherwise, as we see, even quite knowledgeable professionals may fail in accomplishing their goals – like the above journalist who, instead of sorting out the information he was after, received negative feedback.

Back in 1937 Dale Carnegie in his famous book How to Win Friends and Influence People cited J.D. Rockefeller who considered the ability to deal with people “as purchasable a commodity as sugar or coffee” and was ready to “pay more for that ability than for any other under the sun” [14]. No doubt, he was not so naïve as to throw money away.

That is why the ESP programmes at the leading Russian universities which educate specialists for international activities (namely, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia and the People’s Friendship University of Russia) comprise quite a number of relevant aspects.

Thus, we introduce elements of functional analysis working, for instance, at the well-known Market Leader course (which is one of the best ever created Business English courses) containing very good examples of cross-cultural business interaction, such as the video resource named Alliance [15]. The story has its setting ‘between two continents’, figuratively speaking, as it is about a planned merger of two airline companies – the American TransWest Airlines and the Hong Kong-based Air Pacifica. Being well aware of the natural complications on this road, the management of the companies hire an American consultancy specializing in this kind of deals.

It is remarkable how, from the very first steps, already in her opening presentation, the representative of the consulting group Anna Valdez wins the audience with her high professionalism and, above all, outstanding communication skills. After a warm welcome she starts outlining the possible difficulties of going global for both companies, gradually intensifying the impression of the inevitable hardships of the task and the necessity for the partners to be open to a whole lot of innovations, not always easy-going. Such phrases as high risk, brutal facts, failure, only one third has a future, falls apart, differences in culture, differences in management styles and others of the like are surely aimed at preparing the listeners for the coming commitments.
But in order not to produce a totally distressing effect, the lady at the same time resorts to the positive thinking attitude (peculiar to Americans, as is known). The rhetoric of unity and shared interests is often supported by the personal pronoun *we*; here and there Anna drops in references to *long-term success, the success we all want it to be*, *avoid making the same mistakes, the right balance, managing diversity*, and finishes her speech with a promise of *an exceptionally successful alliance* in case the partners accept a *willingness to change*, which met a unanimous approval of the audience.

This presentation usually makes a gripping first impression on our students. But then we have to draw their attention to the way it is structured, worded and delivered — these are the facets comprising the general effect. It is evident that in terms of functional loading such samples of Business English discourse make a worthwhile object of analysis from the angle of not only their lexical and syntactic structures, but also of their rhetoric and stylistic properties. Students should be well aware of quite a number of aspects, such as:

- the basic communication strategy (that of cooperation),
- the supplementary discourse strategies (those of self-presentation, control of the topic, semantic foregrounding, intensifying or reduction of pragmatic strain, etc.),
- the communication tactics implementing the above strategies (generalization, attracting or diverting attention, mitigation, exemplifying, reiteration, etc.),
- the rhetoric figures of speech and stylistic devices implementing the above tactics (rhetorical questions, metaphors, hyperboles, inversions, irony, lexical and syntactic parallelism, etc.)

For Business students not to be embarrassed with difficult linguistic terms it is recommended to change them for more recognizable or non-terminology equivalents: ‘redundancy’ seems preferable to ‘pleonasm’, ‘junction’ – to ‘anadiplosis’, and so on.

In the further parts of the video course there are many more episodes analyzing which we disclose the functional loading of particular lexical and structural units, stylistic devices, the systemic character of their combination aimed at actualizing the proper semantic and pragmatic meanings.

Special attention is paid to the inappropriate use of linguistic means leading to communicative abuse. Here, besides one’s personal features, counts another critical factor of communication between people of different origin — intercultural differences. Thus, for instance, in the story of the said alliance we see clear distinctions between the debating manners of the American negotiator (open, determined, self-assured, sometimes pushy) and his Chinese counterpart (composed, polite, sometimes indirect but resolute). At the early stage of their talks not everything went smooth. Students always take pleasure in playing the proposed episodes as participants in the depicted events, but feeling already quite sophisticated communicators, they make the necessary changes in the characters’ parts leading them to a more successful outcome.

Consideration for national mentality is indispensable for mutual understanding between peoples. So future businessmen and politicians who plan to work on the international scene should spare no effort trying to learn as much as possible about their would-be partners’ national customs and traditions, bearing in mind the peculiar functional significance of language units, ethnically specific communication models and the possible aftereffects of their inappropriate usage.

**CONCLUSION**

Polishing the ability to provide a sophisticated combination of different level linguistic means, their coherent interaction and, most importantly, competent use of functional analysis, on the one hand, definitely elaborate students’ skills in building up efficient discourse and presenting any professional matter in a most advantageous view. On the other hand, these qualities form sort of mental ‘defence’ against a possible negative influence on their minds in case of an outward attempt of psychological manipulation. Functional analysis of texts exemplifying both efficient and inefficient business communication enhances alongside students’ communicative skills their general professionally relevant competences. For future businessmen, lawyers, politicians, diplomats and other specialists who plan to participate in international affairs the functional approach to business English is highly recommendable.

**REFERENCES**