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A contrastive analysis of metadiscourse features in business e-mails written by non-native speakers of English

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Abstract

Metadiscourse is usually studied in terms of a cross-cultural exploration of interpersonality, mainly in academic English, but we believe that this approach could be applied to other genres. The main purpose of this study is to compare some metadiscourse features used in digital business communications. More specifically, we focus on the interactional metadiscourse devices categorised as boosters. We analysed and compared a corpus of one hundred emails written by two groups of non-native speakers of English working in an export company and using English to communicate in a business environment. One group was composed of workers from Spain and the other was composed of workers from China. Our aim was to analyse the differences in the use of boosters and the causes of variation in their use, which may be related to the need to employ assertiveness or politeness in business contexts.

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1. Introduction

The use of an international language such as English gives rise to differences that may be noticed when speakers with different mother tongues communicate with each other (Kachru, 1985, 1990, Carrió-Pastor & Muñoz-Calderón, 2012, 2013, Carrió-Pastor, 2013). We may consider English to have standard norms, but if we examine texts written by speakers with different mother tongues synchronic variation can be observed.

This occurs because writing in a language is an individual act. This can be seen when writers choose one term over another, use specific expressions to express their thoughts or overuse assertive phrases. In this sense, we believe the way we write is distinct and personal whether we are writing in our mother tongue or using an international language.

Writers find themselves involved in a continuous negotiation with language, a continuous back and forth, in order to transmit meaning and ideas to their counterparts. Cultural influence on writing is a notion that is closely associated with many other concepts such as freedom, creativity, and style, but it should be emphasised that culture influences both whether and how individuals express their thoughts. The fact is that writers often repeat expressions they have heard before in their own culture and use idioms or concepts from their own language. This results from the fact that we conceptualise cultural features in different ways and this is reflected in writing. Every writer processes reality in a unique way, and the transmission of this reality is, in turn, bound by a degree of subjectivity.

Writers may be able to conceptualise the same idea, but how that idea is communicated might differ depending on factors such as culture, social status, academic background, family education, mother tongue, genre, self-esteem, and so on. A large body of literature shows that there are meaningful differences between native speakers and non-native speakers of a language (Kachru, 1985, 1990, Carrió-Pastor, 2013).

Some speakers tend to engage in more analytic modes of thinking and others tend to engage in more holistic modes of thinking. It is important to note that there are differences in the discourse produced by writers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, even though they may share the same knowledge of the specialist content when expressing their thoughts on this. Kachru (1985) identifies different circles of English speakers taking into account their mother tongues.

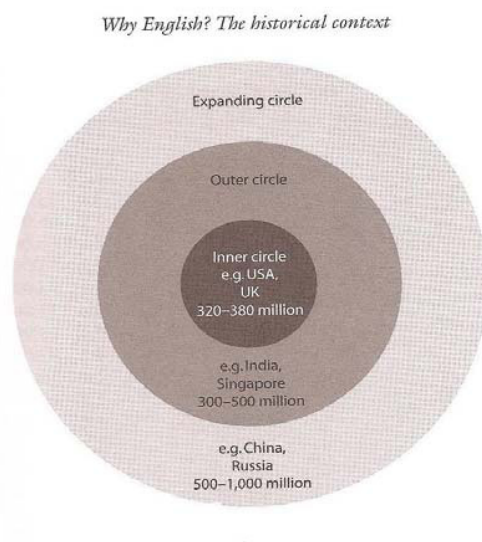


Figure 1. Different speakers of English (Kachru, 1985).

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