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"*Preparation is everything*": Meetings in professional contexts in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the results of an extensive survey of 1,010 professionals across four key sectors of Hong Kong's economy and follow-up interviews with a representative cross-section of 31 of the respondents surveyed. In addition, meetings-related books aimed at professionals are examined to compare their focus and contents with the perceived needs of the professionals in this study. The survey and the interviews were part of a large-scale project investigating professional communication in English in Hong Kong. This paper focuses on meetings as one form of professional communication. The kinds of meetings professionals in Hong Kong engage in are examined along with those aspects of meetings-related communication which the subjects found particularly difficult at one extreme (e.g., listening to different accents, interrupting effectively, and presenting an effective argument) through to those aspects which they perceived to be unproblematic at the other extreme (e.g., taking notes, following a discussion, and expressing opinions). Possible explanations for the survey and interview findings are discussed and their implications for English for specific purposes are explored by comparing the study's findings with the meetings-related skills foregrounded in business English textbooks and meetings-related textbooks generally.

1. Introduction

Meetings, both formal and informal, play an important role in any professional context. Today, such meetings might be face-to-face or conducted via telephone or videoconferencing (including computer-mediated videoconferencing). In an age where the use of texting and emails is ubiquitous in business and professional contexts, meetings which permit real-time verbal interactions between the participants remain a key genre in professional and business contexts. In the largest survey of its kind (1,010 respondents), a research team in Hong Kong has investigated the use of English for professional purposes in Hong Kong (Evans, 2013). One of the discourse types covered in the study was meetings. Professionals from a range of occupations took part in the survey, followed by individual semi-structured interviews with a representative cross-section of 31 survey respondents.

This study aims to analyse the survey results and the subsequent interviews to discuss the status of meetings in Hong Kong professional contexts, the kinds of meetings professionals engage in, the purposes of these meetings, those aspects of meetings which the professionals found problematic and those which they found to be relatively problem-free, and how these meetings are perceived from a professional communicative competence perspective. It also reviews meetings-related books aimed at professionals to assess the extent to which they meet the perceived needs of the professionals in this study.

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2. The genre of business meetings

Previous research on the genre of business meetings, including both authentic and simulated meetings, has examined the cultural, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, generic, discoursal and formal aspects of meetings. A number of these studies have been based on transcribed data collected during meetings in multicultural and/or multinational contexts. This kind of data makes it possible to describe and compare the actual language use of the meeting participants and their respective communicative styles. One such study, Poncini (2002, 2004), recorded and analysed the meetings held between an Italian company and its international distributors from 15 different countries. The study examined how the use of language "reflects and construes the business relationship between the participants" (Poncini, 2002, p. 354) in terms of both language and function choices. Poncini makes the case that the participants' choice of linguistic features serves to build solidarity and common ground to achieve their shared goals. These linguistic features include personal pronouns, specialised lexis, evaluative lexis, shifts in frames (Goffman, 1976) and the relative positioning of the participants (Poncini, 2002, p. 355). In a study of Chinese bilinguals in simulated decision-making meetings, Du-Babcock (2006) analysed the language used and found different topic management practices in Cantonese (first language) and English (second language) meetings, and a positive relation between language proficiency and topic management. In general, the bilinguals "with higher second-language proficiency participated at a higher rate and felt more information was exchanged" (p. 37), by which is meant that more of them spoke in the meetings. In New Zealand workplaces, an analysis of the language used in some Pākehā meetings showed that criticisms were expressed in a direct, contestive and confrontational way (Holmes, Marra, & Schnurr, 2008, p. 206), while in Māori meetings, disagreement and criticism were handled differently and were more likely to be "indirect, implicit, and group-oriented" (p. 214). Virkkula-Räisänen (2010) analysed the language employed in a business meeting conducted in English between Finns and Chinese. The findings showed that participants with high language skills assume the role of "language expert" in directing the discussion, holding and exercising power, and occupying a "gatekeeping position" (p. 526), and confirm the essential role of (English) language in role alignment, identity construction and interpersonal relationships in the meeting (p. 528). In a study comparing the discourse content of two Chinese–British business welcome meetings held by the same British company, Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2003) observed that, considering the status and face concerns of the Chinese participants, the British chairman's welcome speech was not sufficiently other-ingratiating and self-deprecating.

Some studies have examined the goals of business meetings and the strategies employed to achieve them. Vuorela's (2005a, 2005b) study was based on eight hours of audio-recorded intercultural business meetings conducted in English between a Finnish supplier and a British buyer who were engaged in negotiating a sales deal. She found that the meetings were organised according to the sellers' goals versus the buyers' goals and specific discursive strategies were employed by the speakers to realise these goals; namely ideational goals (conscious avoidance and achievement), textual goals (interruption and topic change) and interpersonal goals (response, back-channels and humour) (Vuorela, 2005a, 2005b, p. 76). Another study looked at the role played by small talk and found that it is an important "feature of workplace culture" and, in the context of meetings, can serve to maintain solidarity and collegiality between the chair and participants (Mullany, 2006, p. 72).

Other studies have investigated the language used to perform specific functions in business meetings. For instance, Rogerson-Revell (2008) found a range of phonological, syntactical and lexical anomalies in her study of intercultural business meetings between native and non-native speakers of English, all of whom were members of the actuarial profession from 30 European countries. However, despite the anomalies, the interactions were orderly and meaningful as both sets of speakers adopted the strategies of message content focus and highly contextualised language avoidance (p. 357) to achieve understanding. A focus on message content meant that both sets of speakers were explicit and provided detailed information when communicating and so avoided a reliance on the context and shared understanding to convey their messages. Hence, although Rogerson-Revell's (2008) study identified "inappropriate choice of vocabulary items or prepositions, inaccurate formulation of negative clauses, phonemic misinterpretations and misplaced word and sentences stress" (p. 351) in meeting talk, she rarely found "explicit signalling of misunderstanding" (p. 352), "direct calls for help" or other repairs in the data. Instead, she found instances of laughter, humour, admitting to a lack of linguistic competence so as to diminish the seriousness of the linguistic difficulty (p. 353) and participants ignoring linguistic anomalies due to their focus on the message rather than the form (p. 352).

The above studies have largely based their findings on recordings of intercultural business meetings and analyses and discussions of the language used by the various participants. These findings have provided useful insights into language use in business meetings and the speakers' communicative styles. In this study, the data examined are different because they are derived from a review of meetings-related books aimed at professionals, among others, plus a large-scale survey and interviews with professionals. These two instruments were designed to elicit the views of professionals in Hong Kong on their personal experiences of participating in meetings in their respective contexts and so examine business meetings from a different perspective.

3. Methodology

The study reviewed a representative cross-section of meetings-related books aimed at professionals, among others. These included research monographs aimed at both academics and professionals, practical meetings guides aimed at anyone who takes part in meetings in business and professional contexts, and business English books aimed at learners of English who