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"We'd be prepared to do something, like if you say…" hypothetical reported speech in business negotiations

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of hypothetical reported speech (HRS) in business negotiations from the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Business English (CANBEC[1]). The aim of the article is to investigate the role of this discursive device as part of negotiating and to explore the relevance of the findings for the teaching of Business English. HRS was analysed in negotiating sequences from four external meetings in terms of where it occurred, what functions it performed and how it was used as a strategic negotiating tool. The findings showed that HRS was used at key stages of the negotiation, in particular within bargaining sequences, where it was used primarily as a persuasive device, but also to perform certain bargaining 'moves' more indirectly and to do relational work, such as showing affiliation. Negotiators used HRS strategically in combination with 'formulations' and 'accounts' to move the negotiation forward in pursuit of their goals. The article concludes with a discussion of the teaching implications of the findings and makes some concrete suggestions for teaching negotiating.

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1. Introduction

Negotiating is among the most commonly taught communication skills in Business English and features in most Business English textbooks (e.g., Baade, Holloway, Scrivener, & Turner, 2009; Cotton, Falvey, & Kent, 2005). In teaching negotiating skills, the focus is usually on 'functions', such as making and responding to proposals or agreeing and disagreeing. Reported speech, however, is not usually taught as part of negotiating, but tends to be dealt within lessons devoted to grammar and written language. It is therefore, perhaps, surprising that reported speech was found to occur frequently in naturally-occurring business interactions involving negotiations; especially imaginary or 'hypothetical' direct reported speech, as in the example quoted in the title of this article:

Extract 1

Erm but you know we're prepared to do something like if you say "Well look I'm pretty sure that we're gonna be up to sixteen by Christmas time…"

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[1] This research has made use of CANBEC (the Cambridge and Nottingham spoken Business English Corpus) which forms part of the Cambridge English Corpus (CEC). The CEC is a multi-billion word computer database of contemporary spoken and written English. It includes British English, American English and other varieties of English. It also includes the Cambridge Learner Corpus, developed in collaboration with the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. Cambridge University Press has built up the CEC to provide evidence about language use that helps to produce better language teaching materials.

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Rather than functioning as a report of a previous conversation, direct reported speech is used here to imagine what the customer (the addressee) might say. Such uses of direct reported speech will be referred to as hypothetical reported speech (HRS). The finding that such uses of reported speech are frequent in negotiations suggests that reported speech does indeed have a place in teaching negotiating skills, but as a functional device, rather than a grammatical structure.

The noticeably frequent use of this discursive phenomenon in negotiating discourse was first identified in a study of HRS in a 1-million-word corpus of workplace meetings, the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC)[2] (Koester & Handford, 2013). Hypothetical reported speech was found to occur in almost all the meetings in the corpus across a variety of business sectors and meeting types, but it was striking that a considerable number of the examples identified in the corpus searches were from meetings where negotiation occurred.

This raises the question of whether HRS plays a specific role within negotiation discourse. The current study, therefore, focuses on the use of HRS within negotiations in CANBEC and seeks to answer the following questions:

1) Where in the negotiations does HRS occur and what functions does it perform?
2) What role, if any, does HRS play as a negotiation 'tool', and how is it deployed strategically by negotiators to achieve their goals within the negotiation?
3) What are the implications of the findings for how we teach negotiating?

The first two questions overlap, but whereas the first focuses on the local structure and functions of HRS in the different stages of the negotiation, the second takes a more global view of its role in relation to the strategic goals of the negotiators. Both questions are important for teaching negotiating skills: learners need practical knowledge of the forms and functions of 'negotiating language' and of where in the negotiation to use it. But in order to use such language flexibly and appropriately, they also need to consider how they can deploy it strategically to fulfil their goals within the negotiation.

Before exploring these questions, relevant research on hypothetical reported speech and on business negotiations is reviewed, followed by an overview of the data and methodology. The implications of the findings for teaching will be considered in the final section of the article.

2. (Hypothetical) reported speech in institutional and workplace interactions

The use of reported speech in discourse has been researched extensively (see Koester & Handford, 2013 for a full literature review) and the phenomenon of hypothetical reported speech has also received some attention (Buttney, 1997; Jones, 2010; Mayes, 1990; Myers, 1999b; Sams, 2010). A common theme in these studies is the insight that direct reported speech in conversation is not a verbatim, factual reproduction of another's words, but "first and foremost the speaker's creation" (Tannen, 2007, p. 21). The term 'reported speech', is therefore misleading, but will nevertheless be retained here as it is commonly used throughout the literature. The functions of direct reported speech (DRS) that have been identified include dramatisation, involvement, evaluation and evidentiality (Baynem, 1996; Buttney, 1997; Holt, 1996; Tannen, 1989, 2007).

While most studies have examined DRS in narratives, it has also been found in non-narrative discourse, where it typically performs rhetorical functions such as providing evidence and putting forward arguments (Couper-Kuhlen, 2007; Mayes, 1990; Myers, 1999a, 1999b). Turning specifically to HRS, Myers' (1999b) study of 'unspoken speech' or 'hypothetical reported discourse' in focus group discussions provides a detailed analysis of the use and function of HRS in this context. Myers (1999b) distinguishes three types of implication about the reported utterance: that it is imaginary, possible (or conditional) or impossible, and he identifies three main functions: 1) modelling possible responses, 2) proposing counter-arguments and 3) 'thought experiments'. These rhetorical functions of HRS allow the participants in the focus group discussions to enact different points of view and thus articulate sometimes opposing positions.

Koester and Handford (2013) found that HRS was used most frequently in non-narrative contexts in the CANBEC Corpus of Business Meetings, and identified three main function types:

1) rhetorical functions, for example putting forward arguments and expressing/sharing opinions;
2) identity functions, whereby the speaker enacts his/her role or competence through imagined dialogue and
3) interpersonal functions, such as performing off-record evaluation.

In all the examples analysed, the function of HRS was found to be intrinsically linked to professional context and communicative goals, and therefore such a link would also be expected in the use of HRS within negotiations. HRS also tended to be embedded within a sequential pattern, where it was preceded by a frame shift and followed by an evaluative summary, illustrated in extract 2:

Extract 2

[2] © Cambridge University Press.

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