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Problem-solving discourse on an international construction site: Patterns and practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the discursive realisation of on-site problem-solving encounters in a large international construction project in Hong Kong. Specifically, the analyses focus on professional English as a lingua franca interactions between the engineers from Japan who are full-time employees of the company heading the joint venture, and contracted Hong-Kongese foremen and engineers. A combination of methods and several data sources are used to interpret the interlocutors' communications and relationships, and show how certain items, for instance *problem*, *issue* and *if*, as well as evaluative items such as metaphors and idioms, index discursive practices and patterns during problem solving. These data sources include fully transcribed spoken interactions, interviews with the participants and expert informants, and researcher field notes. The results shed light on the key intertextual role the contract plays in the context of construction industry problem solving, the various bodies that are involved in addressing complex problems, and the importance of the foreman and on-site engineer relationship.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on how permanently employed professionals from Japan and contracted professionals from Hong Kong working together on a large construction project in Hong Kong (hereafter HK) discursively construct and deal with problems in English. It is a response to the relative dearth of work into the discursive representation of problem solving, and indeed on any naturally occurring spoken interactions, in the construction industry (for exceptions see Angouri, 2012; Baxter & Wallace, 2009; Gluch & Raisanen, 2009; Handford, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Handford & Matous, 2011; Holmes & Woodhams, 2013; Tsuchiya & Handford, 2014). This is despite the sector accounting for around 10 per cent of global GDP (PricewaterhouseCoopers report, 2010), making it one of the biggest industries in the world. In terms of the research that has been conducted on spoken construction communication, unlike many other professional face-to-face contexts (e.g., see Handford, 2010; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Koester, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2005), the field tends to be categorised as inherently challenging, and sometimes adversarial. A variety of reasons has been offered to account for this, including the complexity of the projects, the uniqueness of each project, conflicting interpretations of contracts, the range of different stakeholders involved and the potential incompatibility of their goals combined with the temporariness of their

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relationships (Dainty, Moore, & Murray, 2006; Emmitt & Gorse, 2003), the male-dominated culture and the masculine, competitive genderlect of the participants (Baxter & Wallace, 2009; Emmitt & Gorse, 2003; Loosemore & Galea, 2008), and the potentially rigid, ethnocentric cultural expectations of different groups (Handford & Matous, 2011; Loosemore & Al Muslmani, 1999).

Another issue to consider is the distinctive nature of on-site problem solving in the construction industry in comparison to other workplaces, such as problem-focused meetings in the pharmaceutical, IT or manufacturing industries (see Handford, 2010). Through our observations, field notes, interviews and recordings (see methodology section below), it became clear that on-site problems are often highly unpredictable and require an immediate response: each project is unique, and while digging in the ground, for instance, unexpected objects or obstacles may be encountered. In business, in contrast, many problems may be predictable, and agendas can be drawn up to discuss such problems in meetings, and long-term strategies can be developed. Furthermore, it was explained to us that different levels of seniority would largely define the type of problem the engineer is required to deal with: junior engineers handle daily on-site issues related to the construction itself and communicate regularly with the foreman, whereas a senior engineer has to manage the demands of the different stakeholders, for example the client. Enabling young engineers to be competent on-site problem solvers was raised as the main concern of the company in charge of the project, and their desire for advice and training (see Handford, 2012) accounts for their willingness to support this research. Considering all these factors, how the on-site professionals deal with problems in their daily work is therefore of considerable interest, and through researching this area, ecologically valid recommendations for improving communication can be made.

Before providing a brief review of research into problem-solving discourse, we should clarify that although we often use the phrase 'problem solving', we are not implying that solutions to problems are always reached; indeed, this is often not the case, as decisions may be postponed, ignored or reinterpreted (Boden, 1994). A linear problem–solution–evaluation discourse pattern is presented in the work of Hoey (1983), and its constituent lexicogrammar in academic settings has been explored using corpus linguistics and discourse analysis by, for instance, Flowerdew (2007). A similar description of this pattern is explored in management and organisation research (Henry, 2001; Lipshitz & Bar-Ilan, 1996; Pounds, 1969; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004). Within the context of spoken business interactions, Holmes and Stubbe (2003) explore the discursive realisation of both linear and circular problem-solving patterns (see also Handford, 2010; Koester, 2006).

While the present study is unusual in that it analyses on-site problem solving, the study is also noteworthy from a Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF) perspective (Gerritsen & Nickerson, 2009; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2005; Nickerson, 2005), as it analyses communication between Japanese and Hong-Kongese engineers using English as a lingua franca (see Handford & Matous, 2011, for a corpus-informed study of the lexicogrammar used in this context). Studies of BELF interactions have typically taken place in European contexts (for example, Firth, 1996; Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen, 2010; Louhiala-Salminen & Kankaanranta, 2005; Poncini, 2004; Rogerson-Revell, 2007, 2008). Furthermore, several BELF studies analyse data from simulations (e.g., Planken, 2005) or with business students (e.g., Nickerson, Gerritsen, & van Meurs, 2005), rather than naturally occurring professional interactions (Rogerson-Revell, 2008). In contrast, the data analysed here was recorded in Asia with professional engineers going about their daily work, or in the words of Nickerson, "real communication involving real business people[1]" (2005, p. 370). Other studies that have analysed BELF construction communication in Asia include Handford & Matous (2011); Handford, (2014a), (2014b), (2014c); and Tsuchiya & Handford (2014).

The problem-solving discourse in this BELF setting is also compared to that in more widely researched English L1 professional contexts. In English L1 problem-solving encounters, corpus studies have shown certain lexicogrammatical features tend to reoccur at specific stages of the problem-solving process, indexing specific discursive practices (Handford, 2010; Handford & Koester, 2010; Koester, 2006). For instance, the statistically significant keywords *problem* and *issue*, and clusters featuring them (see Handford & Matous, 2011), often invoke the first stage of problem solving, when a particular problem is pinpointed. The keyword *if* and its clusters constitute the second stage when potential solutions are generated, and while all stages may feature modalised forms and hedging, such forms are particularly evident at this stage. The evaluative stage, where a decision may be reached, often features metaphors and idioms (although evaluation can also occur at each of the stages), as well as deontic modals. Table 1 summarises the stages, typical practices and frequent language of problem solving in L1 business encounters.

Given that the speakers in this study are all L2 users of English, with self-professed variable levels of English proficiency, we can ask whether we might expect to see more restricted usage of linguistic resources than professional settings involving L1 users of English, for instance in terms of metaphors, modality and hedging. The paper will therefore discuss how the discourse in this BELF problem-focused context and that in English L1 problem-focused business contexts compare.

The paper will specifically address these two questions:

1. What language items, discursive practices and patterns are evident in on-site problem-solving encounters in this construction project?
2. What is the relationship between the findings from Question 1 and the particular professional context in which they occur?

[1] It is debatable whether engineers are 'business people'. Rather than 'BELF', a more appropriate label for the types of interactions analysed here, and indeed in other professional contexts, might be 'PELF' (Professional English as a Lingua Franca).

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