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Investigating Pragmatic Failures in Business Letters of Kazakhstani Professionals

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Abstract

In recent years, the economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan has undergone considerable changes and development. As a consequence, many international business transactions are carried out between the representatives of different languages and cultures. This article focuses on pragmatic failures detected in the collected corpora of 100 business letters written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals to their international partners. A number of examples has been identified which clearly demonstrates noticeable discrepancy between cultural and linguistic contexts of speech units making communication process complicated. In the study, we have identified several reasons for pragmatic failures in communication through business correspondence including a mixture of different cultural standards of the structural and linguistic processing of business correspondence, a mixture of different genres in one business text with a combination of several communicative purposes, a lack of language skills of the authors of business letters in English (spelling, grammar, lexical errors), etc.

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1. Introduction

In the current worldwide trade context, many companies are involved in international business activities. In this setting, effective cross-cultural communication is becoming an integral part of contemporary business world. Since, as many researchers assert, sometimes the cultural norms of the target language and the first language writing conventions are transferred to the second language resulting in pragmatic failure (Ziran & Zhuang, 1986; Ya &

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Ling, 2002; Ya, 2001; Zamborlin, 2007; Zhenbin, 2007, etc.), i.e., miscommunication and misunderstandings or “the failure to the inability to understand what is meant by what is said” (Thomas, 2006, p. 24). Taking into account the area of cross-cultural communication breakdown Thomas (2006) identifies two types of pragmatic failure, i.e., pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. In most cases pragmalinguistic failures occur “when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2”, whereas sociopragmatic failures are “the result of a failure to identify a situation correctly” (Umale, 2005, p.20). These communication breakdowns are especially crucial in business communication since improper interpretation of business messages may lead to the failure of business transactions, waste of financial asserts, or the legal responsibility. For example, in accordance with the ELISE (1996-1998) and the ELUCIDATE (1999-2000) projects’ findings the lack of cross-cultural skills of European trade managers become one of the main reasons of a considerable business loss (Hagen 2001). Some scholars (Black, Gregersen & Mendenhall, 1992; Adler, 2002; Ferraro 2010) believe that communication breakdowns in intercultural settings are mostly caused by the inability to decode and recognise “different ways of thinking and behaving, rather than by inadequate professional practice (Garcia-Yest, 2013, p. 197).

The purpose of this study is to explore pragmatic failures and communication breakdowns in business letters written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals to their international colleagues. The research is aimed at identifying possible reasons of detected pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures explained by specificity of national and cultural features of the letters’ authors.

This paper will first introduce the reader with the research methodology and the main findings of the analysis in relation to the communication strategies used by Kazakhstani business professionals. Extracts will be quoted from the corpora to illustrate the most striking examples. This article will end with the main conclusions, followed by an examination of the relevant limitations and suggestions for further research and study.

2. Methodology

In this paper the collected business letters are written in English by Kazakhstani business professionals, who are working in international, national and foreign companies to their English-speaking business partners. The pragmatic failures are investigated qualitatively from contrastive text linguistic and pragmalinguistic perspectives. In general, between January 2013 and November 2014, 550 business letters were collected and analysed, which turned out to be written in 4 financial, 5 manufacturing, and 3 service companies located in Astana, Almaty, Atyrau and Aktau. Out of this number, 100 business letters were selected where different types of communication breakdowns had been identified.

3. Results and Discussion

In this study, we identified some most frequently occurred pragmatic failures arising during the implementation of the discursive strategies and communicative intentions of Kazakhstani business professionals in the context of intercultural settings. These communication breakdowns were most clearly represented in the texts of business correspondence written in English by Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking business professionals.

In this study, a pragmatic failure is understood, on the one hand, as the construction of statements out of context, situation and traditions of a particular cultural and linguistic space and, on the other hand, misinterpretation of statements of partners communication in decoding the meaning of these statements. On the basis of existing classifications of the main causes of communication failures (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1986; Thomas, 2006). The following factors of communicative and pragmatic failures are relevant to our study:

- The lack of language competence of business professionals
- National and cultural differences of participants of business communication, i.e. cognitive aspects of individual business communicators, who belong to different national cultures
- Various pragmatic factors (discursive failures)

We have identified a number of examples which clearly demonstrate noticeable discrepancy between the cultural and linguistic context of speech units, which make the process of communication more complicated. Pragmatic

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