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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 & Muñiz-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.
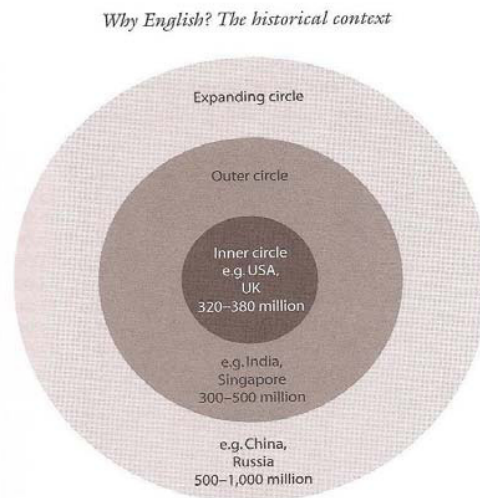

Figure 1. Different speakers of English (Kachru, 1985).

One aspect that may vary according to the mother tongue of the writer is metadiscourse (Hyland, 2004, Mur Dueñas, 2010, 2011). Metadiscourse plays a key role in knowledge construction by managing the interactions between readers and writers, who often come from the same discourse community and possess shared cultural and rhetorical practices. 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. Metadiscourse has been divided into interactive and interactional categories by several researchers (Thompson, 2001, Hyland, 2005, Hyland & Tse, 2004, Mur-Dueñas, 2011), depending on the writer-reader relationship built into the text. Items in interactive metadiscourse categories aim to organise the information depending on the needs and expectations of the reader, whereas interactional metadiscourse features seek to stimulate interaction between the writer and the reader.

In this paper we focus on boosters, the linguistic devices that increase the illocutionary force of speech acts, emphasize certainty about a proposition or confidence in an assertion, express authorial commitment to a proposition or close off alternative viewpoints by strengthening the asserted position. They are also used to emphasize the writer's certainty. Several classifications of the words or phrases that can be classified as boosters have been made. For example, Hyland (2005) labelled the following words as boosters: obvious, obviously, very, extremely, far, full, never, certain, certainly, sure, find, must, realize, really, surely, think, truly, true, without doubt, etc. More recently, Mur Dueñas (2011) compiled a longer list of words identified in a corpus of academic papers on business management. The list of boosters varies depending on the context or on the specific field of the writings analysed.

In this study, we consider the identification and analysis of the boosters used in a different genre: digital communication, specifically e-mail communication. We hypothesized that the different genre and context might give rise to variation in the use of boosters and when we add in the fact that there are different underlying mother tongues, these metadiscourse devices could indicate different ways of communicating assertion or certainty. It might also be possible to identify different functions of boosters when used in digital communication.

The main purpose of this study is to contrast some metadiscourse features when used in cross-cultural business communication. More specifically, we focus our study on the analysis of the interactional metadiscourse devices categorised as boosters. Our aim was to analyse the differences in the use of metadiscourse features and to consider whether the causes of variation may be related to the need to employ assertiveness or politeness in a business context. The research questions of this study are as follows:

1. Can any differences/similarities in the use of boosters be found when comparing business e-mails written in English by Chinese and Spanish employees?

2. Are there any differences/similarities between the boosters identified in this study and those identified by other researchers which can be attributed to assertiveness or politeness?

2. Method

In this study, we analysed and compared a corpus of 100 e-mails written by two groups of non-native speakers of English who worked in an export company and used English to communicate in a business environment. One half of the corpus consisted of fifty e-mails written by workers from Spain and the other was composed of fifty e-mails from Chinese workers.

After the selection of the e-mails and the compilation of the corpus, we identified manually the boosters used by the Spanish and Chinese writers. The list obtained was compared with the boosters identified by Hyland (2005) and Mur Dueñas (2011). The results were double-checked with the WordSmith 5.0 software and the examples of the boosters identified in the corpus. The results and our analysis of them are described in the next section, followed by our conclusions.

3. Results

A total of 16,373 words were analysed and the frequency of the boosters found are displayed in the following tables. The total data set identified in the corpus can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Data extracted from the corpus.

Sub-corpus	Number of words	Occurrences of boosters	Average per e-mail
Chinese e-mails	8,131	507	4.65
Spanish e-mails	8,242	436	4.00
Total	16,373	943	4.32

The items obtained were divided into three sets: the first consisted of the boosters identified by Hyland (2005) that were found in our corpus. The second was composed of the boosters identified by Mur Dueñas (2011) found in our corpus, and the third, those boosters found in the corpus but which were not listed in these two studies. Table 2 shows the results for the first group (those identified previously by Hyland (2005) in academic writing); the results highlighted in bold are the most frequent found in the corpus:

Table 2. Occurrences found of the boosters identified by Hyland (2005).

Boosters identified by Hyland (2005)	Chinese e-mail writers	Spanish e-mail writers
Obvious	0	0
Obviously	0	0
Very	**42**	**23**
Extremely	1	0
Far	3	6
Full	3	6
Never	0	3
Certain	0	0
Certainly	0	0
Sure	0	6
Find	3	6
Must	**6**	**11**
Realize	0	0
Really	2	2
Surely	0	1
Think	**9**	**0**
Thinks	0	0
Truly	0	0
True	0	0
Without doubt	0	0

Doubt	0	1

As can be observed, Spanish or Chinese writers of English used some of the boosters more frequently, with these items highlighted in bold. For example, Chinese writers employed *very more* while Spanish writers showed a preference for *must*. Also, some of the boosters identified by Hyland (2005) are not used by any of the e-mail writers. Table 3 shows the boosters identified by Mur Dueñas (2011) in academic papers on business management. In this case, the specific area of knowledge is the same, but the genre is different:

Table 3. Occurrences found of the boosters identified by Mur Dueñas (2011).

Boosters identified by Mur Dueñas (2011)	Chinese e-mail writers	Spanish e-mail writers
Determine	0	0
Show	12	13
Demonstrate	0	0
Reveal	0	0
Highlight	0	0
Confirm	**18**	**26**
Emphasize	0	0
Conclude	3	0
Hold	3	0
Underscore	0	0
Establish	0	0
Assert	0	0
Prove	2	2
Know	**29**	**40**
Clearly	0	0
Significantly	0	0
Generally	0	0
Largely	0	0
Particularly	0	0
Indeed	0	0
Widely	1	0
Highly	3	1
Primarily	0	0
Consistently	0	0
Strongly	0	0
Actually	0	0
Mostly	0	0
Especially	1	0
Extensively	0	0
Entirely	0	0
Essentially	0	0

Dramatically	0	0
Substantially	0	0
Always	2	2
Fully	2	1
Considerable	0	0
Clear	5	4
Vast	0	0
Evident	0	0
Substantial	0	0
Evidence	0	0
Fact	0	0
Majority	0	0
Assertion	0	0
Conclusion	0	2
In fact	0	0
For the most part	0	0
Most	3	0
Of course	2	2
To a large extent	0	0
In effect	0	0

The occurrences highlighted here are the boosters confirm and know. Both are used quite frequently in the corpus, but the Spanish group uses them more frequently than the Chinese group. It is also important to note that many of the boosters identified by Mur Dueñas (2011) were not found in our corpus.

Table 4. Boosters identified in the corpus analysed.

Boosters identified in this study and not included by Hyland (2005) and Mur Dueñas (2011)	Chinese e-mail writers	Spanish e-mail writers
Strong	2	0
Specifically	3	1
Will	**64**	**167**
Solve	6	2
Need	**32**	**18**
Immediate	3	0
Check	12	14
Assist	**12**	**0**
Improve	2	0
Recommend	7	4
Best	**52**	**71**
Better	1	7
Good	9	8
Bad	4	0
Clear	5	0

Important	3	4
Seriously	1	0
Kindly	**22**	**4**
Consider	7	0
Definitely	1	0
Totally	1	0
Urgently	1	0
Clear	4	4
Most	0	2
Pretty	0	3
Finally	0	3
Urgent	4	3
Urgently	0	1
Update	2	4
Maximum	2	1
Important	3	4
Real	3	4
Finally	0	3
Inform	**5**	**10**
Successfully	0	2
Specially	3	2
Agree	5	3

The boosters identified in the corpus are specific to business English and the direct manner of communication involved in e-mails. Of the boosters found, it is worth highlighting the use of will, need, assist, best, kindly and inform as boosters. These words were used quite differently by the Spanish and Chinese writers of the e-mails, as can be seen in Table 4, with these items highlighted in bold. Graph 1 shows all the boosters identified in our corpus, enabling a comparison to be made of their use by the two groups of e-mail writers.

Graph 1. Comparison of the occurrences of the boosters found in the corpus analysed.
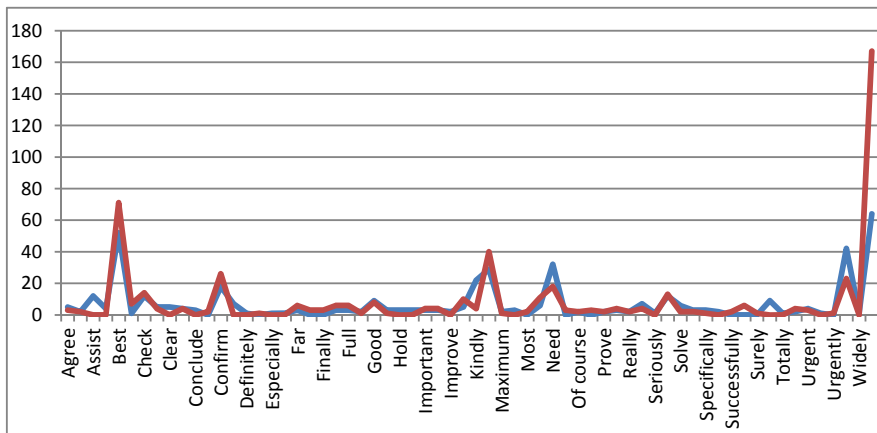
Graph 1 shows that non-native speakers of English, Chinese and Spanish writers in this case, use some of the boosters identified in a quite different way. The genre and specific context is the same, but the groups of writers demonstrate different booster preferences in this corpus.

4. Conclusions

As was stated in the introduction, boosters are metadiscourse devices that increase the illocutionary force of speech acts, emphasize certainty about a proposition or confidence in an assertion, express commitment to a proposition or close off alternative viewpoints by strengthening the position of the writer. In business English they are very important in order to emphasize the writer's certainty about facts, which in most of these cases, concerned commercial deals.

In the corpus analysed, variation in the use of the following boosters between speakers of different mother tongues was found, as was seen in Graph 1: very, must, think, confirm, know, will, need, assist, best, kindly and inform. This means that speakers with different linguistic backgrounds use boosters in a different way. As was seen in Tables 2 and 3, many of the boosters identified in previous studies are not used in business e-mails. In this sense, it is the genre used to communicate which marks the difference. It may also be noted that Spanish writers of English show a preference for greater assertiveness when communicating in business English as the boosters chosen by this group of writers show. Further studies could involve comparisons of these findings with the analysis of texts produced by writers with other mother tongues, in order to explore the influence of the mother tongue on speakers of English.

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