

THE LINGUISTIC REALISATION OF INTERPERSONAL MEANING IN BUSINESS CONVERSATIONS BY MONOLINGUAL AND BILINGUAL STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract:

In this article we review some basic concepts of the management of interpersonal relationships in conversational interaction and discuss the strategies deployed by third-year Romanian and Hungarian business students studying English at the Faculty of Economic Studies of “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca. In terms of the theoretical model, we base our application on Brown and Levinson’s face-management construct and Spencer-Oatey’s rapport management model. The latter is a broader approach than the interpersonal politeness system, since it analyses the strategies for the realisation of interpersonal meaning not only at the level of face-threatening speech acts but also in relation to “sociality rights”, in several interrelated domains. The application is both a quantitative and qualitative interpretation of a corpus of conversations elicited from the subjects in the same role-play situation. As baseline, we refer to the findings of a similar experiment by Maier (1992) with native speakers of English having work experience in business. Their communicative behaviour provides us with standards that are assumed to be appropriate in the culture whose language is used, in a case of asymmetrical power relationship. Our findings indicate that the Romanian students’ communicative style sounds much more direct and therefore more informal than that of the Hungarian respondents, whose indirect and formal style is closer to the relational strategies engaged by the baseline group. At this point in our research though, we think it would be merely speculative to contend that the Hungarian students are more sensitive to the use of interpersonal strategies simply because they are bilingual. This appears to be more like a transfer of speech behaviour from L1 to L2. Further, we attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the relational management model to a business communication syllabus and mention some activities from the corresponding course book, which is meant to raise our students’ awareness of the importance of relational communication and to develop their ability to reflect on how the choice of language both defines and is determined by personal relationships, social conventions and cultural assumptions.

Keywords: Face; Politeness; Rapport management; Sociality rights; Pragmatic competence.