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The Content of Business Communication

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Materials writers and teachers of ESPs are frequently inhibited by the problems of dealing with and evading technical content. But the nature of the problems differs in different varieties, and technical information is exchanged in order to achieve different purposes. The interrelationship between the content and the functions by which it is expressed are of primary significance.

Denet (1980) writes of Legal Language

Words are obviously of paramount importance in the law: in a most basic sense, the law would not exist without language. Compare the roles of language in medicine and law: to practise medicine is primarily (though not exclusively) to work with physical substances, to relate to human bodies as physical objects. To practise law, on the other hand, is to relate to people as social beings, as "language animals" (Steiner, 1968; Winch, 1958). (p448)

Very much the same argument can be applied to business communication. This note develops the point.

I do not suggest that medical English is *only* concerned with requesting, giving and responding to technical information. Doctor-patient interviews (Coulthard and Ashby 1975) show that the doctor must be able to translate his terminology into the layman's frame of reference and to make sense of the layman's non-technical description of his symptoms. But his primary need is for doctor-doctor or doctor-nurse registers, and this is reflected by the bulk of published medical ESP material (see

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for instance Maclean 1975), and doctor-patient interviews are relatively simple constructs in comparison to, say, a business negotiation, which may spread over several days.

Obviously the business person needs to command the relevant technical information in order to assess the value of the deal being offered and to negotiate a mutually acceptable price. But his verbal behaviour may make only marginal references to this content. And the rhetorical strategies he employs will be drawn from his everyday experience. Kennedy et al (1982) write

We live in an age of negotiating. Almost all aspects of our lives are subject to some form of negotiating. Everybody negotiates, sometimes several times a day. We are so used to negotiating that we do not realize what we are doing.

Nations negotiate, governments negotiate, employers and unions negotiate, husbands and wives negotiate (so do lovers and mistresses), and parents negotiate with their children. Pick up any daily newspaper and mark all items that have anything to do with negotiating. You might be surprised at their number. (p1).

This implies that the business ESP teacher can make a considerably greater transference from the everyday register than his heavily technical ESP colleague.

The point that has to be borne in mind when teaching all ESPs is that information is (almost) never given for its own sake, and it almost always serves an interactive function. The readers/hearer infers this function from the context. If a man comes up to me in the street and announces 'Sir, I am unemployed, my wife is sick and our six children haven't eaten for two days', and thrusts his palm at me, interpret this as a request for charity. I have the options of acceding, or of refusing. I do not simply remark 'how unfortunate' and move on, unless I wish to refuse and to interpret the ambiguity inherent in a declarative statement to my advantage. But if he tells me that he is employed, his wife in perfect health, and his children thriving, I must look for a new interpretation. Perhaps he has taken pity on my own wretched appearance and is offering me a job, or wishes me to follow his own path to a fulfilling life. If I am unable to find a reason for this information, then I have to assume that my informant is insane.

So the question that needs to be asked of any ESP, and more particularly of a particular fragment of discourse, is *why* the information is exchanged. This point can be tested by looking at a single business letter.

Dear Harvey,

Has it really been months since we met? I've realized belatedly that things have been very quiet and thought you should know my schedule in case you'd like to talk further :

- I will be available here through April 19.
- I have seminars at the Villa Andreotti from May 20 through May 24.
- On May 25 I leave for 1½ months of seminars in Hong Kong. (See enclosed.)
- I'll return mid-July.

If there's anything you'd like to chat about please telephone me and perhaps we could arrange another meeting. Meanwhile, I hope, all goes well with you and with your program.

All best wishes,

Paul K. Paron.

(Letter : 2 April 1984)

The writer, a management consultant, has once previously met with the reader to discuss the possibilities of selling his seminar to the reader's company. The letter is unsolicited. It realises three obvious functions :

- a. it reestablishes contact.
- b. it suggests a meeting.
- c. it provides information about the writer's Professional activities.

Why does the writer go into so much detail about his professional activities? He is not merely providing entertainment (compared, say, to a letter home : Dear Mother, I thought you'd like to know that tomorrow I'm off to Hong Kong..). This information has two functions; first, to indicate the opportunities for arranging a meeting and hence to sell his seminar, and second, to project a dynamic image. In other words, it constitutes a sales letter.

It might be objected that this letter is untypical in that it is not characterised by a technical terminology. A number of answers can be made. First, as has been indicated, the information given is of less significance than the purpose for which it is given. Second, every type of business, and perhaps every company, has its own list of technical terms. The teacher cannot hope to teach more than a basic business vocabulary; which in any case is available in the several excellent business dictionaries on the market (for instance, the *Longman Dictionary of Business English*). Third, it perfectly demonstrates the rhetorical structure of a letter designed to convey good news. Himstreet and Baty (1976, 81) advise

1. In the first sentence, present the most pleasant aspect of the communication.
2. Follow with details or explanations.
3. Close with a sentence that either reminds the recipient of the pleasant thought or looks positively to the future. (p. 39).

This structure can be applied across a range of business correspondence. A syllabus does not need to make rigid distinctions between sales letters, letters allowing a refund, letters of credit, etc, any more than between letters issuing from engineering companies, banks, insurance companies, supermarkets.

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