Cross-Cultural Analysis of English and Italian Economic Discourse: Expressing Opinion and Attitude
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Abstract - What is common to all languages is a communicative function, which is the primary need of human beings to exchange ideas, to express their attitudes and share their beliefs with each other in order to be mutually appreciated for who they are, what they do and what they believe in. In economic discourse, the main difference between two languages lies in discourse domains and different cultural contexts that influence the way of expressing attitudes and opinions. Our research comprises analyses of textual corpora of English and Italian business communication, professional and scientific papers. The results pinpoint similarities and differences in symbolic structures and functions of expressing attitudes and opinions in English and Italian economic discourse. The common thread interwoven in the discourse of business communication is the primary function of both languages to maintain social and business relationship, while in professional and scientific economic discourse, the primary function is to inform.

Index Terms: business communication, cultural background, English and Italian economic discourse, attitude, opinion

I. INTRODUCTION

In our paper the main hypothesis is that in a competitive business environment of the European integration and of globalization to speak several foreign languages is a crucial prerequisite of a successful business transaction or event. The starting point is that today’s business environment can be best described by the word ‘reengineering’ defined by Hammer and Champy [1]: “the fundamental rethinking and radical redesign of business processes to achieve dramatic improvements in critical, contemporary measures of performance, such as cost, quality, service and speed”. In such a business environment where national boundaries are losing their meaning as economic frontiers with more and more organisations crossing national borders, teachers and students of language for specific purposes (LSP) should broaden their views on culture and subculture as “probably the most important aspects in this change to global behaviours”[2]. We have narrowed our research to those English and Italian textbooks that comprise authentic materials on business communication, professional and scientific papers from books, journals, newspapers and magazines, and on websites.

The objectives of this paper are: (1) to review the influence of the Internet on business language and culture: Anglo-Saxon vs. Italian, (2) to review the concept of traditional categorization of language knowledge vs. communicative competence, (3) to pinpoint the similarities and differences in expressing attitudes, opinions and beliefs in English and Italian.

The paper concludes with recommendations for further development of this teaching methodology.

II. INTERNET, BUSINESS LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: ANGLO-SAXON VS. ITALIAN

All innovations and discoveries have always been building blocks for creating for-the-time-being ‘new realities’ [3], nowadays collected in the World Wide Web of human achievements, discoveries and innovations, accessible to us just by one click on the Internet.

We started with the generally accepted hypothesis that every communication presupposes a speaker (a creator of a message) and at least one listener (an active recipient as a reactor to the message) to meet its objective. Should they not interact actively, there would be lack of understanding, and the purpose of such a communication is questionable. Every book has its author (a creator of his/her characters and settings) and its readers (re-creators of the author’s characters and settings), and so does the IT – a creator and a user.

Our perspective is that of a user of the Internet and English and Italian as foreign languages for specific purpose. Our aim is to teach our students to use them effectively and to meet their ends with one objective in mind “Preparing Tomorrow’s Business Leaders Today” [4]. However, we are aware that in most cases, it was the users who misused the inventions, because of lack of understanding and fear of changes. The question is: How to cope with such rapid changes and acute lack of time we are all faced with, when just one wrongly formulated e-mail sent by a click to the other side of the world might
ruin our business transaction or could cause serious communication barriers?

For better or for worse, should there be just for the users, and their needs analyses there might be no electricity, no quantum physics, no telegraphs, no telephones, no broadcasting technology, no artificial intelligence, no Internet, no Web sites… But they are here, and we must be ready to teach and learn simultaneously and keep pace with changes and state-of-the-art technologies. Each new invention has two sides of the coin that of a creator and that of a user. All of us, as users, should learn how to take the best part of it. Thus, although the Internet enables us, as users, to navigate, surf, search, and have a better perspective than our predecessors, we must be aware that “the link is simply a mechanism to enable Hypertext to come into being. And, as with all the tools, it has to be used wisely if it is to be used well – which in the first instance means in moderation” [5]. Consequences of the Internet are even more rapid globalization and using English worldwide by most businesspeople whether native or non-native speakers. Side-effects are neglecting other tongues, the conflict between globalization and localization where cultural differences might turn into hurdles and communication barriers if their existence is ignored.

One of the main characteristics of Business English as the accepted medium for international business transactions, conferences, meetings, presentations, socializing, or report-writing is the emphasis on performance. In some cases, most participants, if not all, are non-native speakers of English which implies that the English language they use as a medium of communication at international conferences/meetings is not culture-bound. However, in addition to fluency in speaking, strategies for clarifying and checking unclear information, clear pronunciation and delivery in English, businesspeople should be aware of the language and culture of the host country in which they operate their business, present their projects/services.

The Lewis Model [6], classifies different cultures according to three ‘poles’ representing different types of behaviour: Multi-active – warm, emotional, loquacious, impulsive (Southern Europe, Latin America and Africa); Linear-active – cool, factual, decisive planners (Britain, the USA, Germany, Switzerland); Reactive – courteous, amiable, accommodating, compromiser, good listener (Japan, Vietnam, China, Korea, Thailand).

According to reference [6] Italians belong to ‘multi-active culture’ that means that they are essentially collectivist and at the same time ‘particularist’ - they believe that personal relationships and friendships should take precedence over rules and regulations. They believe in social or company hierarchy, and respect status. People like to do many things at the same time; they are flexible, good at changing plans and happy to improvise. Being emotional, loquacious and impulsive, Italians cannot be imagined speaking their mother tongue without using their body language and hand gestures to punctuate an expression and give their attitudes and opinions a shading that the word or phrase itself lacks. Therefore, it is said that a non-native Italian speaker should learn, even by simply watching them, what their hand signals mean. Thus when Italians speak English, they involve their body language and hand gestures too, which is a part of their cultural background.

Contrary to Italians, generally speaking, Anglo-Saxon culture is ‘linear-active’. People belonging to ‘linear-active cultures’ are at the same time essentially individualist and ‘universalists’ – they think rules apply to everybody. They are not afraid of confrontation but will compromise when necessary to achieve a deal [7]. Being cool, factual, decisive planners, their body language is more controlled and hand gestures very moderate while expressing their attitudes and opinions.

As for the varieties of World English of today’s global village, each non-native speaker contributes to strange accents, structures and body language, facial and hand gestures typical for his or her cultural background and mother tongue. Therefore, not only do the ‘World Englishes’ sometimes confuse the native speakers, but there are quite a number of books on the topic of Managing Across Cultures, with examples of North Americans, British and other native-speakers being faced with a bust of their business negotiations and transactions abroad, just because they have taken their English for granted, completely ignoring the language of a host country, and the existence of its different cultural background, traditions and values.
III. TRADITIONAL CATEGORIZATION OF LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE VS. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Traditionally, categorization of language knowledge comprises four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is mainly focused on three aspects: grammatical knowledge (vocabulary, morphology and syntax); textual knowledge (cohesion, rhetorical or conversational organization); functional (ideational, manipulative, heuristic and imaginative). It also includes sociolinguistic knowledge (knowledge of varieties, registers and cultural references). However, the four skills with only a notion of cultural references are not enough to accomplish "specific purpose language ability, but are rather the means by which that ability is realized in the performance of tasks in actual language use situations, including LSP tests" [8]. According to the reference [8], the focus should be on the interaction between specific purpose language ability and a specific situational context in which that ability is engaged.

The term communicative competence was originally formulated by Hymes and consists of language knowledge and ability for use [9/10]. It is the concept that involves judgements about what is systematically possible (what the grammar will allow), psychologically feasible (what the mind will allow), and socio-culturally appropriate (what society will allow) and about the probability of occurrence of a linguistic event and the way it may be accomplished. Whether a language user will apply his or her communicative competence to achieve communicative success depends on additional elements such as background knowledge, discourse domain and strategic competence. Background knowledge is based on past experience which he or she will use to evaluate the current input or situational context and may predict the outcome of his or her reaction or response. Discourse domain as defined by Douglas and Selinker [11] is an internal interpretation of context as a cognitive construct created by a language learner/user for inter-language development and use. If discourse domain provides a language learner/user with sufficient contextualization cues, it would enable him or her to recognize them in the environment, identify the situation and his or her role in it. Insufficient and ambiguous cues can cause insecurity and poor communicative performance. Strategic competence will help the language user evaluate a communicative situation (i.e. identify the situation and his or her role in it) and appropriateness of his or her response, decide how to respond to the communicative situation, and select the elements of language and background knowledge to reach the set goal and carry out the plan. According to Bachman and Palmer [12] strategic competence is a mediator between the internal traits of the language user’s background knowledge and language knowledge and the external characteristics of the situational context, controlling the interaction between them.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EXPRESSING ATTITUDES, OPINIONS AND BELIEFS IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN

Attitudes are the opinions and feelings that we usually have about something, the way we behave towards someone or in a particular situation when this shows how we feel - positive/negative attitude, aggressive attitude, the country’s attitude of mind (= the way of thinking) during the crisis [13]. Attitudes and behaviours are learned through our interactions with the social world that we live in. From anthropological point of view, culture creates us and we create culture. At an early stage of our life, we are immersed in the culture we belong to and the sounds and resonance of our mother tongue shape our attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours. For example, emerging from a ‘multi-active’ culture, our way of expressing our attitudes and beliefs with a lot of hand gestures might confuse those belonging to ‘linear-active’ or ‘reactive’ culture and vice versa. Therefore, when we want to learn any foreign language and accomplish communicative competence, contextual clues of cultural background should not be neglected.

Here we have focused on similarities and differences between Business English (emerged from linear-active cultures) and Business Italian (emerged from multi-active culture) in expressing their opinions in business environment:

A. OPINIONS:
   (i) ASKING FOR AN OPINION

(BE) What’s your opinion of...?
(BI) Quale opinione avete della crisi che...?
(BE) What’s your position on...?
(BI) Qual è la Sua posizione sul fatto che...?

(BE) I’d like to hear your views on...?
(BI) Vorrei sentire il vostro parere...?

(ii) GIVING STRONG OPINIONS:

(BE) I firmly believe that... (sincerely, strongly)
(BI) Credo fermamente che... (sinceramente, fortemente)

(BE) It’s quite clear that... (evident)
(BI) È ovvio che... (È evidente che...)

(BE) It’s my considered opinion that... (I have thought a lot about the subject)
(BI) È una mia opinione personale... (Ho riflettuto molto su questo fatto)

(iii) GIVING NEUTRAL/TENTATIVE OPINION

(BE) In my opinion/ From my point of view....
(BI ) Secondo me... / Dal mio punto di vista...

(BE) It is my opinion that...
(BI) Secondo la mia opinione...

(BE) As far as I am concerned...
(BI) Per quello che mi riguarda...

(BE) I would say that...
(BI) Dirrei che...

(BE) I think it would be fair to say that...
(BI) Credo sia giusto dire che...

(BE) As far as I am concerned...
(BI) Per quello che mi riguarda...

(BE) I would say that...
(BI) Dirrei che...

(BE) I think it would be fair to say that...
(BI) Credo sia giusto dire che...

In the above examples, modal auxiliary ‘would’ in English is used for softening statements. It makes them more tentative. They sound more diplomatic and avoid offending the listener. In all the above phrases personal pronoun ‘I’ and possessive adjective ‘my’ is stressed, implying that it is MY opinion and it is an open-end suggestion giving space for other options.

Compared to English, Italian phrases show that the language user’s attitude is that of an authority – he or she does not leave much space for a different opinion.

B. AGREEING

(i) STRONG AGREEMENT

(BE) I completely agree... (Thoroughly, entirely)
(BI) Sono pienamente d’accordo... (assolutamente, completamente)

(BE) I do agree with your point of view...
(BI) Sono d’accordo con il vostro punto di vista...

(BE) I have the same opinion ...
(BI) Sono della stessa vostra opinione...

Using emphatic ‘do’ in English emphasizes the verb that follows. In this case it expresses our attitude of being in complete agreement on something. In Italian, to convey the message of a complete agreement, the language user will use his or her hand gestures to punctuate an expression and give his or her attitude a shading that the word or phrase itself lacks.

(ii) NEUTRAL AGREEMENT

(BE) I agree...
(BI) Sono d’accordo...

(BE) I think you are right...
(BI) Penso tu abbia ragione...

(BE) I think we can accept your position on that...
(BI) Credo che possiamo accettare la vostra opinione sul fatto che...

Both English and Italian phrases, if modal auxiliary ‘can’/‘possiamo’ is replaced with ‘could’/‘potremmo’ (We could accept your position on that / Credo che potremmo accettare la vostra opinione sul fatto che...), denote less certain attitude of a language user.

(iii) PARTIAL AGREEMENT

(BE) I agree with you on the whole, but it could be said that...
(BI) Sono d’accordo con Lei su tutto, ma ritengo che si dovrebbe ribadire...

(BE) To a great extent I would accept your views, but...
(By and large)

(BI) Condivido ampiamente (largamente) la Sua opinione, ma...

(BE) I agree in principal, but...
(BI) In linea di principio sono d’accordo, ma...

C. DISAGREEING
changes, state-of-the-art technologies and scientific shock. However, living at the cutting edge of rapid social values and behaviours. Any differences can cause culture group we belong to. They shape our attitudes, beliefs, completely immersed in the cultural context of a social first sounds are those of our mother tongue and we are to be mutually appreciated for who they are, what they do and differences. To be ready means to be equipped with discoveries, we do not have time to waste and whether and differences. To be ready means to be equipped with 2010, int.conference@fl.uni-mb.si

The International Language Conference on The Importance of Learning Professional Foreign Languages for Communication between Cultures need of human beings to exchange ideas, to discoveries, we do not have time to waste and whether and differences. To be ready means to be equipped with operating and living in this global world of ours.

V. CONCLUSION REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The leading idea of our research is that what is universal to all languages is their communicative function. Each mother tongue serves as a medium to satisfy the primary need of human beings to exchange ideas, to express their attitudes and share their beliefs with each other in order to be mutually appreciated for who they are, what they do and what they believe in. At an early stage of our life, the first sounds are those of our mother tongue and we are completely immersed in the cultural context of a social group we belong to. They shape our attitudes, beliefs, values and behaviours. Any differences can cause culture shock. However, living at the cutting edge of rapid social changes, state-of-the-art technologies and scientific discoveries, we do not have time to waste and whether ready or not, we are thrown onto the fast track of changes and differences. To be ready means to be equipped with appreciation for differences. And, to appreciate different cultural contexts means to understand them and be aware of their similarities and differences. Thus, although it is great to have English as lingua franca, our proposal is that other languages should be given equal importance in education. In a business environment with more and more organisations crossing national borders, speaking several languages can contribute that we better understand and appreciate each other. Besides conducting negotiation or meeting in English while doing business abroad, when businesspeople greet or use just a few simple phrases in a language of a host country, they are better accepted, appreciated for their attempt to show appreciation, and may contribute to a successful business transaction. However, by using the verb ‘to speak’, we have in mind accomplishing communicative competence or as reformulated by Bachman and Palmer [12] communicative language ability that consists of language knowledge and strategic competence.

In our opinion, both we, as teachers of language for specific purpose (LSP), and our students should broaden our views on cultural and sub-cultural aspects of a language in order to achieve the ‘authentic language performance’. We find that the Lewis Model [6], presented in this paper offers a useful classification of different cultures. The three ‘poles’ representing different types of behaviour: Multi-active, Linear-active and Reactive, may serve as signposts on the fast track by offering us contextual clues for teaching, learning, operating and living in this global world of ours.

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