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## **Analysing formality and informality in the speech act of requesting in emails from the field of maritime English**

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## I. Abstract

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The globalization of trade and the removal of linguistic barriers led to the development of English for Business Purposes (EBP), as used in the business world and its communication processes. Email correspondence promotes the interconnectedness of society as communication happens directly and faster. Speech acts of requesting are performed to express writers' intentions and to involve readers in an action. Written registers allow issuers and receivers to cooperate and negotiate meaning in a polite way when exchanging information. Among EBP, subareas of language study are developing, such as Maritime English, which intertwines communication among the diversity of actors involved in the shipping industry in the process of exporting and importing. It is a fact that differences in language and culture affect communication. The aim of this paper is to examine whether the degree of formality and informality varies according to the knowledge of the shipping process and the domain of the target language to avoid misunderstandings and create fluency in all maritime procedures. Formal and informal features of requests will be studied in correspondence between a Vietnamese and a Spanish company in a maritime transaction. The preliminary results of the research show that depending on the expertise of the development of trade, the command of the language, and the importance of the written statements, requests are more direct when operations are better controlled by the actors involved, and indirect when there are more doubts in those operations. Hence, to achieve the necessary business flow, it is crucial to command the situation by both senders and receivers.

**Keywords:** direct request, indirect request, formality, informality, email correspondence, maritime English.

## II. Introduction: Theoretical Background

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«English for specific purposes ESP refers to language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular social groups» (Hyland 2007, 379). ESP is a movement inside the field of English language teaching which emerged several years ago from the development of the scientific and technical world, the invention of the computer and the need for international communication (García Mayo 2000). English for specific purposes has made a significant contribution to understanding how language is used in particular communities (Hyland 2007).

It was a gap between the academy and the globalized business world that compelled the development of English for Business Purposes (EBP). Communication is not only a way of joining words in a grammatical and coherent form but, more crucially, it is trying to impact and negotiate meaning on the members of a specific community (Bhatia and Bremner 2012). Thanks to the trade and commerce globalization, business people feel the need to «operate across national, linguistic, cultural, and socio-political boundaries» (Bhatia and Bremner 2012, 421). Accordingly, EBP became an independent branch of study inside the field of ESP. The globalization caused a world without linguistic barriers: «people with different linguistic backgrounds communicate in English that is considered as *Lingua Franca*» (Carrió Pastor and Muñiz Calderón 2012, 5). *Lingua franca* is the term referring to the communication in the same language, between people whose mother tongues differ (Pettersson 2015).

Not only the language is influenced by globalization; also the system of communicating is (Pettersson 2015). Mediated communication dominates certain areas within public relations of business enterprises (Bhatia and Bremner 2012). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, email replaced written memos, telephones, and even face-to-face communication. Many commercial enterprises use email writing as the main channel of communication to transmit information (Mousavi 2012). With the evolution of the Internet, the mode of communication among businesses has changed involving a transformation in the trade itself (Carrió Pastor and Muñiz Calderón 2012). In email correspondence, the communicative events often occur faster, more directly, and simply (Pettersson 2015). Nonetheless, since the mode is written, its nature allows users to edit and revise their messages (Duthler 2006), it offers «the opportunity to edit, not only for grammar and mechanics but also for pragmatic clarity and politeness» (Biesenbach-Lucas 2007).

## 2.1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics pays attention to the use of language in communication and the intention of society when producing utterances in particular contexts. The most relevant theory inside pragmatics is the speech act theory. Speakers do not merely use language to say things, but to do things and utterances can be divided into: locutionary act – literal meaning of the utterance, illocutionary act – propositional content of the utterance, perlocutionary act – the effect the utterance has on the hearer (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010a).

As an addition to the speech act theory, Grice (1979) suggests that people in interaction assume that the speaker is saying what it is needed to be said, what is believed to be true, at the appropriate



time in the interaction, and in an adequate moment (Schauer 2009). In order to cooperate in this interaction, it is necessary to be polite to maintain and enhance interaction by means of minimising confrontation and being cooperative (Salvesen 2015).

## 2.2. Speech act of requesting

Requesting is a speech act commonly performed by humans (Zarepour and Saidloo 2016). Requests «impose the speaker’s interests on the hearer» (Cenoz and Valencia 1996, 4). The act of request has been frequently studied since it is useful in everyday communication (Alzeebaree and Yavuz 2017). The purpose of a request is to implicate the hearer in an action that matches the speaker intentions (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010b). Trosborg (1995) classifies requests in a taxonomy based on two strategies: direct – where utterances imply literal meaning – and indirect – whose utterances differ in meaning and context (Alzeebaree and Yavuz 2017).

The taxonomy proposed by Trosborg (1995) can be divided into four major categories shown in

Table 1 in a situation where the speaker asks the hearer to speak English.

**Table 1.** Taxonomy of request strategies (Trosborg 1995)

REQUEST STRATEGIES	
CATEGORIES	EXAMPLES
<u>A. DIRECT</u>	
Obligation	You must/have to speak English
Performatives	I would like to ask you to speak English
Imperatives	Speak English (please)
<u>B. CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (HEARER-BASED)</u>	
Ability	Can/Could you speak English?
Willingness	Would you speak English?
Permission	May you speak English?
Suggestory formulae	How about speaking English?
<u>C. CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (SPEAKER-BASED)</u>	
Wishes	I would like you to speak English
Desires / Needs	I want / need you to speak English
<u>D. INDIRECT</u>	
Hints	I cannot understand another language than English

Direct forms make reference to those utterances in which the speaker creates the illocutionary act explicitly by using performatives, imperatives, and obligation expressions. Conventionally indirect (hearer-based) forms denote more polite requests by using modal verbs and suggestory formulae. Conventionally indirect (speaker-based) comprise requests where



the speaker expresses its wishes or needs. Finally, indirect requests are conveyed by implicit forms (Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010b).

Moreover, sometimes requests are affected by internal modification devices, which appear in the same request head act as can be observed in *Table 2*.

**Table 2.** Taxonomy of peripheral modification devices in requests (adapted from Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan 2010b)

**MODIFICATION DEVICES**

TYPE	SUB-TYPE	EXAMPLES
INTERNAL MODIFICATION		
	OPENERS	<i>Do you think you could open the window?</i>
	SOFTENERS	<i>Could you kind of open the window?</i>
	INTENSIFIERS	<i>You really must open the window</i>

Internal modification devices can be divided into different sub-types depending if they are openers – introduce the request and seek cooperation, softeners – mitigate the force of the request , or intensifiers – aggravate the force of the request.

### 2.3. Maritime English

The written mode of email correspondence allows not only to communicate across international boundaries but also to analyse the use of language in communication. Inside this framework, email correspondence lets shipping trade to be an economic global phenomenon that leads to deeply develop Maritime English as a branch of English for Specific Purposes. It is a fact that poor communication is linked to problems such as accidents and misunderstandings. Therefore, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the Maritime industry established English as the common language for «bridge-to-bridge and bridge-to-shore» as well as for administration (Robinson 2013). Thus, «the nature of English being a living world language derives from the centuries-long experience of its use in different spheres: business, administration, finance, trade which facilitated significantly its application as a lingua franca at sea» (Demydenko 2012, 250).

Maritime English is understood as the language used at sea, in port, and offices by people working in the shipping industry (Bocanegra-Valle 2012). Hence, Maritime English satisfies the communicative needs of today’s shipping industry including a fleet of multilingual, multicultural, multinational and multi-ethnic people through email interchange (Bocanegra-Valle 2015).

The aim of this study is to examine email correspondence in order to analyse the degree of formality and informality, regarding



information exchange in the field of Maritime English. The conclusion will point to whether the degree of formality or informality differs according to the knowledge of the shipping process and the domain of the target language to avoid misunderstandings and create fluency in all maritime procedures.

### III. Method

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants were 2 Vietnamese individuals with English as a Second Language working in their home countries. Considering the limitations of the study which did not allow a large number of variables in the investigation, the age and gender of the participants will not be discussed. However, what seemed interesting for the research was their occupation role. Both were working in an office that arranges maritime exportation and importation around the word, focusing mainly on the process of quoting, customs procedures, documentation, and stuffing/picking or discharging. Participants were under the pseudonyms of Participant 1, Participant 2, as it can be observed in **Table 3**, which presents an overview of the number of emails that each one wrote. Participant 1 was involved in all the transaction and had had other contacts with the Spanish company, while Participant 2 was introduced in the conversation when it was necessary to create documentation.

**Table 3:** Participants identified by pseudonym and emails written

PSEUDONYM	EMAILS
Participant 1	29
Participant 2	15

The two participants were engaged in two different exportation shipments from Spain to Vietnam. Three different containers had been loaded into two different vessels. The purpose of the email messages was to exchange information, maintain a good relationship, and coordinate shipments.

#### 3.2. Data collection and analysis

The data presented in the study consisted of 44 business emails that contained a variety of requests made to coordinate the stuffing of the containers on the vessel, arrange all the documentation, and follow shipment until the vessel arrived at the port of discharge. Two types of requests were identified – requests for action and requests for information.

The present study aimed to investigate the speech act of requesting reproduced in business correspondence in the field of Maritime English, following the analytical framework of Trosborg (1995). Her taxonomy for requests, previously illustrated, consists of four different categories where the requests can be classified depending on their directness or indirectness.

#### IV. Results

Two different sets of conversations were analysed taking into account the different participants and the table previous explained by Trosborg (1995). Results are going to be presented in two different tables (*Table 4* and *Table 5*) according to each participant; and below the examples of each category indicating the type of request underlined in the correspondence and the set of conversation it belongs. Finally, *Table 6* indicates the types of modification devices found in the requests analysed.

Table 4. Results of Participant 1

##### PARTICIPANT 1

CATEGORIES	TOTAL
<u>A. DIRECT</u>	
Performatives	4
Imperatives	33
<u>B. CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (HEARER-BASED)</u>	
Ability	7
Suggestory formulae	2
<u>C. CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (SPEAKER-BASED)</u>	
Desires / Needs	1
<u>D. INDIRECT</u>	
Hints	4

Email examples:

Example 1. A. Direct – Performatives – Set 3, Email 1

##### EMAIL 1



Dear Laura,  
Hope you are doing well.

Just got the new inquiry that I would like you to quote us the offshore and onshore services for the shipment details

POD: Hochiminh port (HCM City) or Cai Mep port (Vung Tau), please offer for 2 options for client consideration.

\*\* Please also adv the name of loading port, transit time, frequency, shipping line name & validity.

Your prompt action would be highly appreciated.

Should you have question, please inform us.

Name of Participant 1

Example 2. A. Direct – Imperatives – Set 2, Email 5

#### **EMAIL 5**

Dear Laura,

Please re-check the schedule of for LINE Z, why the gap from Closing time (11/06) and ETD (21/06) is so far? Please check if ready date 01 Jun, can you catch the schedule ETD 07 Jun of LINE Z?

As per your below message, LINE P carrier have soonest schedule, right? Please adv.

Name of Participant 1

Example 3. B. Conventionally indirect (Hearer-Based) – Ability – Set 1, Email 6

#### **EMAIL 6**

Dear Laura,

Any news for this inquiry? Can we have the rates within today?

Name of Participant 1

Example 4. B. Conventionally indirect (Hearer-Based) – Suggestory formulae – Set 3, Email 9

#### **EMAIL 9**

Dear Laura,

Well noted, thanks for your rates on stuffing/vanning/securing.

How's about the charges for LTHC + B/L + ISPS + Seal + Wharfage + VGM+Export customs? Last time, you offered in lumpsum charge, now you should break down and adv us the separate charge, right?

Name of Participant 1

Example 5. C. Conventionally indirect (Speaker-Based) – Desires/Needs – Set 2, Email 1





**EMAIL 1**

Dear Laura,

Any news? we need to reply client now, kindly revert URGENT. Thanks.

Name of Participant 1

Example 6. D. Indirect – Hints – Set 1, Email 1

**EMAIL 1**

Dear Laura,

Referring to below message from my colleague, We have an inquiry for exwork shipment from Spain to HCM port

Please adv all relevant charges, Transit time, frequency and validity.

Please consider the suitable port of loading and offer us the best freight soon..

Should you need any information, please freely let me know.

Appreciated for your any feedback

Thanks

Name of Participant 1

**Table 5.** Results of Participant 2

**PARTICIPANT 2**

CATEGORIES	TOTAL
<u>A. DIRECT</u>	
Performatives	1
Imperatives	21
<u>B. CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (HEARER-BASED)</u>	
Ability	3
Permission	1
<u>C. CONVENTIONALLY INDIRECT (SPEAKER-BASED)</u>	
Desires / Needs	1
<u>D. INDIRECT</u>	
Hints	1

Email examples:

Example 1. A. Direct – Performatives – Set 2, Email 21

**EMAIL 21**

Dear Laura,

Regarding to 1st & 2nd shipment, client is worry that cargo will be damaged in transit, so they asked us to provide some more pictures

of VANNING/SECURING cargo inside containers for checking, can you provide us soon?

Thanks & Awaiting for your news.

Name of Participant 2

Example 2. A. Direct – Imperatives – Set 2, Email 15

**EMAIL 15**

Dear Laura,

Consignee on Mbl is ok now. However, pls make sure all information on description of goods/ packages/ cbm between M/bl & H/bl must be matched together. Pls issue draft H/bl for our checking again to avoid any incurred charge, thanks a lot

Name of Participant 2

Example 3. B. Conventionally indirect (Hearer-Based) – Ability – Set 2, Email 22

**EMAIL 22**

Dear Laura,

We mean if you did the dunnage & lashing cargo when stuffing, can you send pictures to customers to see and tranquilize?

Name of Participant 2

Example 4. B. Conventionally indirect (Hearer-Based) – Permission – Set 2, Email 26

**EMAIL 26**

Dear Laura,

May we know if you have got any update from shipping line for this vessel, it has been departed as plan ETD BCN 31 May or any delay? Pls check & advise us within today because we need to update to our customer for status cargo for their following

Name of Participant 2

Example 5. C. Conventionally indirect (Speaker-Based) – Desires/Needs – Set 2, Email 26

**EMAIL 26**

Dear Laura,

May we know if you have got any update from shipping line for this vessel, it has been departed as plan ETD BCN 31 May or any delay? Pls check & advise us within today because we need to update to our customer for status cargo for their following

Name of Participant 2

Example 6. D. Indirect – Hints – Set 2, Email 17





**EMAIL 17**

Dear Laura,

1. Pls kindly see our comment as attached file per our remark by red words. For this shipment, pls correct type of freight is FREIGHT PREPAID on H/bl help us ( We will collect O/F and all destination surcharges from third party ( notify party ) at our side, so you don't need to collect O/F from shipper on behalf of us, pls note )

2. We have corrected FREIGHT PREPAID by hand first on H/bl + M/bl to sign & stamp as your request. Pls refer as attachment

Name of Participant 2

**Table 6.** Results of the use of softeners in direct imperative forms

CATEGORIES	TOTAL	
	PARTICIPANT 1	PARTICIPANT 2
<u>A. DIRECT – IMPERATIVE SOFTENERS</u>		
HELP	4	2
KINDLY	5	
FREELY	2	

Email examples:

Example 1. A. Direct imperative softeners – Help – Participant 2 – Set

2, Email 19

**EMAIL 19**

Dear Laura,

Your invoice is ok now. As per schedule, ETD BCN is today – 31 May 2018, pls help to check if the vessel has been left out of Barcelona already or not? Pls update the status for us soon

Name of Participant 2

Example 2. A. Direct imperative softeners – Kindly – Participant 1 – Set

3, Email 2

**EMAIL 2**

Dear Laura,

As per incoterm 2010, Exwork charges is inclusive the job of loading cargo onto truck at shipper premise, please help to re-check and adv if below charges have included loading charge or not? If not, kindly also offer to us soon.

Name of Participant 1



Example 3. A. Direct imperative softeners – Freely – Participant 1 – Set 1, Email 5

**EMAIL 5**

Dear Laura,

\* Client asked to give the free time at destination is 14 days of demurrage, please check and try to negotiate with shipping line if they can match with client requirement?

Should you need any information, please freely let me know.

Appreciated for your any feedback within today!

Name of Participant 1

**V. Discussion and conclusion**

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The entire world is connected through international trade. Consequently, the shipping industry is very important in the export and import flow of cargo all over the continents. Hence, the knowledge of the processes of overseas shipments by forwarders is crucial to link, without any breakdown, all the blades of the procedure.

The aim of this article was to analyse the formality and informality expressed in Vietnamese correspondence, according to the information exchanged to arrange three maritime exportation traffics, with the purpose of identifying if the directness or indirectness when writing depends on the knowledge of both the exportation process and the language.

With regard to the type of direct request, each participant uses them, being the request most performed along the email correspondence. In some cases, Participant 1 and Participant 2 adopt direct performative requests; however, it is the direct imperative request the one most employed. In addition to the above-mentioned features, direct imperative requests, with the 3 softeners found, are also frequently used among the forms selected by correspondents. The findings of this study, noticeably, point towards an adoption of directness when an action is needed, independently if it is the first time interchanging information between addresses. Thus, concerning requests for action it is shown that *performatives* and *imperatives* are the most commonly used; therefore, this suggests that the senders have enough clarity of what they need. In contrast, when requesters need some information, softeners are written to mitigate the imposing effect. Hence, when the questions are performed with a softener, it insinuates that participants waver in their request.

The results of the second taxonomy, conventionally indirect (hearer – based) show considerable variation in its use compared with the direct request. More formal requests are performed in this

parameter, however, only *ability* questions are employed by both participants. Moreover, Participant 1 uses sometimes *suggestory formulae*, and Participant 2 *permission request*. The findings reported above seem to suggest that requests for information are written more politely since the knowledge needed in that step is not clear at all for correspondents. Thus, imposition is avoided in order to achieve as much information as possible to clarify the process.

At first glance, it seems that conventionally indirect (speaker-based) and indirect requests are not much practiced along correspondence since Participant 1 only uses 1 conventionally indirect (speaker-based) and 4 indirect questions; and Participant 2 uses one of each of the previously mentioned categories. A possibility that appears more plausible for the present results seem to be the misunderstanding an indirect request can cause, since meaning can differ depending on the reader perspective. When arranging a shipment it must be straight and precise as a mistake means an extra cost in the transaction. As a result, it can be important to avoid indirectness either to make requests for action or information, since it can be confusing and imprecise. Ergo, being too much polite might disturb the shipment flow.

Using more direct than indirect strategies does not mean that Vietnamese people are impolite in their requests, but straight up to the point they need to know. As a whole, it can be discussed that requests for action are created with *performatives* and *imperatives* which go directly to the point as participants have in mind what to order. Whereas requests for information are more polite and indirect since they need clarification and all knowledge is not at their side. In conclusion, in order to be more fluent when arranging all the exportation and importation process, both the sender and receiver must master the steps needed. Hence, indirectness should be avoided and polite directness used to achieve a good cooperation.

Referring to the limitations of the present study it is important to mention that only 44 emails have been analysed. As a consequence, it is mostly Participant 1 that intervenes. Age, cultural background, and gender have not been considered. Therefore, although the current study is based on a small sample, the findings suggest the importance of studying the phenomenon further to introduce all variables in order to broaden the results discussed.

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