A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH TO THE EPISODIC STRUCTURE OF SALES NEGOTIATIONS: OBSERVATIONS ON BUSINESS ENGLISH STUDENTS’ MENTAL PATTERNS OF DISCOURSE TRANSACTIONS

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- Introduction.
- Aim & research questions.
- The model of analysis.
- The data used.
- Results.
- Conclusions.
1. Introduction.

- Pragmatics has generously contributed to the development of linguistic research into the field of English for Specific Purposes, encouraging researches to consider business discourse as a specific type of social interaction and business speech events as specific genres, *i.e.* Steuten (1996): DEMO.
1. Introduction.

- Speech events can be grouped into: (a) written genres and (b) spoken genres.

- The underlying assumption of this perception is that each genre is typified by a specific framework in such a way that particular instances of the same speech event will share the same broad pattern but may show differing aspects concerning the general structure.
1. Introduction.

- Using a technological metaphor, genres seem to be, in general terms, recorded in the different files making up the speaker’s communicative competence mental database.

- Such pre-existing knowledge structures stored in memory have been called: *dynamic schemata or scripts*. 
What is a script?

- By scripts we mean “a dynamic background knowledge structure stored in memory involving event sequences”. (Yule 1996: 86).

- The concept of a script is simply a way of recognising some expected sequence of actions in an event.
We have scripts for what normally happens in all kinds of speech events:

- General speech events.
• Specific speech events:
Participants in conversation behave as if they were computer users.
2. **Aim.**

- Drawing on the assumption that sales negotiations are a specific type of spoken genre, the aim of this piece of qualitative research is twofold:

3. To analyse the scripts that a sample of European Business English students have regarding the discourse structure of sales negotiations, by comparing different versions of the same negotiation.

4. To bring students to the point of awareness at which the necessity of acquiring certain discourse structures and resources is evident.
2. The research questions.

- Do the students sampled share the same script of a sales negotiation?
- Can we perceive any relevant differences in students’ expectations about the episodic structure of a sales negotiation?
- If so, what are the reasons that may serve as an explanation to such differing views and performances?
2. The research questions.

- To what extent does the script upon which the students sampled base their expectations concerning the episodic structure of a sales negotiation resemble that of the proposed ideal model of negotiation?
3. The model of analysis.

*Spoken Discourse Analysis:* Sinclair & Coulthard (1975); Burton (1981); Francis and Hunston (1992).

3. The model of analysis.

- The discourse structure of an interaction draws our attention to pre-existing background knowledge stored in memory that allows us to recognise and understand the part language plays in spoken discourse, that is, the way it is organised through the syntagmatic axis to convey meaning.
Fig. 1: The discourse structure of sales negotiations.

Sales negotiation (Rank or level 1)

\[\downarrow\]

Transaction (Rank or level 2)

\[\downarrow\]

Exchange (Rank or level 3)

\[\downarrow\]

Move (Rank or level 4)

\[\downarrow\]

Act (Rank or level 5)
3.1 The discourse structure of sales negotiations.

- The interaction involved in a business negotiation can be described as an ordered sequence of thematic episodes linguistically realised by topic-oriented discourse transactions.
Fig. 2: Discourse transactions in business negotiations.

- Relationship building.
  - Agreeing procedure.
  - Exchanging information.
  - Questioning.
  - Options.
  - Bidding.
  - Bargaining.
  - Settling and concluding.
- Final greetings.
3. The model of analysis.

- Spoken discourse is *self-monitored*.

- *Preferred structure & despreferred structure*.

- *Skilful flouting & unskilful flouting*. 
4. The data used.

- The sample:
  - 32 European speakers
    - 16 Spanish
    - 16 Erasmus
  - Level of English: intermediate-proficiency.
4. The data used.

- The students had three things in common: (a) they were students of Business English, (b) they had received no previous training in negotiating skills, and (c) they ignored the purpose of the study.
- The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire and an open role-play which consisted in selling/buying a house.
- English was used as the *lingua-franca*. 
4. The data used.

16 negotiations were videotaped.

- 4 S
- 4E
- 8 S&E
5. Results.

- All the students were able to identify the speech event under study as a *sales negotiation*. 
Do the students sampled share the same script of a sales negotiation?

- Students’ background knowledge of the discourse structure of sales negotiations:
  - Relationship building.
    - Agreeing procedure.
    - Exchanging information.
  - Questioning.
  - Options.
  - Bidding.
    - Bargaining.
  - Settling and concluding.
  - Final greetings.
Can we perceive any relevant differences in students’ expectations about the episodic structure of a sales negotiation?

- Once the Exchanging information transaction is finished, students seem to have different views about the discourse routes that should be taken:

  Exchanging information.

  - Questioning.
  - Options.
  - Bidding.
  - Bargaining.
If so, what are the reasons that may serve as an explanation to such differing views and performances?

- One of the essential features of spoken discourse is that it is self-monitored.

- Context factors:
  - Different approaches to negotiating.
  - The external circumstances in which the negotiation is embedded.
  - Different negotiating styles, *i.e.* collaborative or confrontational.
  - Cultural approaches which may differ with regard to the emphasis placed on particular transactions of the negotiation.
If so, what are the reasons that may serve as an explanation to such differing views and performances?

- Students’ communicative competence is very poor regarding the way the discourse of sales negotiations is organised.

- In none of the negotiations was the *Agreeing procedure* transaction carried out.

- The *Exchanging information* transaction seems to project, in the vast majority of cases, the *Bidding* and *Bargaining* transactions.

- The *Options* and *Questioning* transactions were chosen by a clear minority and deprived of their original collaborative function.
To what extent does the script upon which the students sampled base their expectations concerning the episodic structure of a sales negotiation resemble that of the proposed ideal model of negotiation?

- We have found no evidence to prove that the students are aware of the existence of an ordered topic-oriented episodic structure in sales negotiations.

- This has enabled us to identify the presence of a free sequence of discourse transactions in the negotiations sampled.

- In contrast to the preferred structure suggested in the model of analysis, the sample of negotiations reveals a dispreferred structure. And this is the result of unskilful (unintended) flouting, rather than skilful (intended) flouting.
6. Conclusions.

- The poor background knowledge structure students have regarding the episodic structure of sales negotiations gives rise to two negative effects:
  - Students give the wrong impression of themselves as abrupt, impulsive, and rude.
  - The use of a confrontational negotiating style, rather than the collaborative one proposed by the The Harvard Negotiating Project, tends to be favoured.
The questionnaire.

The aim of this questionnaire is to find out how much you already know about business negotiations.

*Please fill in the blanks:*

1. **Personal details:**

   Name............................................................. Date of birth....................................................
   Home address..................................................... Tel.:..........................................................

2. **Academic qualifications:**

   Please tick off the most appropriate answer:

3. **What is the aim of a negotiation?**
   to win; b) to reach an agreement; c) to encourage agreement.

4. A **business negotiation can be divided into ..........stages.**
   three; b) five; c) eight.

5. **When negotiating, you use a:**
   competitive style?; b) collaborative style.
The questionnaire.

6. When negotiating, it is much better to:
   a) avoid making concessions; b) come to a compromise solution.

7. When rejecting an offer, you use:
   a) a direct strategy; b) an indirect strategy.

8. When interacting with the other party, you:
   a) interrupt whenever you want to take the floor; b) wait until the other party has finished speaking or you are given the floor.

9. When the other party is speaking, you:
   a) listen attentively and show your interest by means of supporting verbal and nonverbal signs; b) you give the impression that you have switched off, but in fact you are listening and paying attention to what is being said.

10. When interpreting the other negotiating party’s language:
    a) you only pay attention to the literal meaning of words (“what is said”); b) you try to interpret the communicative intention of your interlocutor’s messages and the effect they may have on you (“what is meant to be said”).
The role-play.

Sellers were given role-card A:

**ROLE-CARD A**: imagine that you want to sell your house. You put the following property for sale classified ad in last week’s Costa Blanca News:

- **Aguas de Busot.** Semi-detached house in El balcón de Aguas housing with views over the sea and the pinewoods. 10 minutes from El Campello, 20 minutes from Alicante or Benidorm. 1st floor: lounge/dining-room with open fire, spac. Kitchen, 15m2 conservatory, 15m2 inner patio. 2nd floor: 2 double-bedrms, includ. Balcony. 1 bathrm with skylight. Also double boxrm and 2-car garage. All mod. Cons. Ideal for retired couple or for those who love a healthy life in the countryside. For only 12.000,000pts. Payment facilities.

- **Payment**: the house has a mortgage loan of 5,000,000 pts. 4,500,000 of which remain to be repaid to BBVA. If the client subrogates to your mortgage loan, you are willing to give him/her a discount of 1,000,000 pts. If the client prefers to pay cash, you will be prepared to give him/her a discount of 500,000 pts. But this discount is subject to the commission that you will be charged by the bank for anticipated cancellation.

- **Location**: the Doctor’s surgery is next door to your house. The Sports Centre is at 1 minute's walk. This includes an Olympic swimming-pool. The village has some basic shops, bars and a Social Centre. The house is fully furnished. If the client wants the house with furniture, you will be prepared to negotiate this and offer him/her reasonable prices for the pieces of furniture (sofas, tables, chairs, electric household furniture, beds, mattresses, etc.).
The role-play.

Buyers were given role-card B:

**ROLE-CARD B:** Imagine that you want a house in the countryside because you are fed up of the hustle and bustle on the coast. You are very fond of cycling and jogging. You have seen this advertisement in Costa Blanca News:

- **Aguas de Busot.** Semi-detached house in *El balcón de Aguas* housing with views over the sea and the pinewoods. 10 minutes from El Campello, 20 minutes from Alicante or Benidorm. 1st floor: lounge/dining-room with open fire, spac. kitchen, 15m² conservatory, 15m² inner patio. 2nd floor: 2 double-bedrms, includ. Balcony. 1 bathrm with skylight. Also double boxrm and 2-car garage. All mod. Cons. Ideal for retired couple or for those who love a healthy life in the countryside. For only 12.000,000pts. Payment facilities.

- You just have 4,000,000 pts cash. You like the house but you would like a discount of 3,000,000 pts. A toilet and another bedrm.