

Research Article

A Study on the Role of Linguistics in Business Communication with reference to Information Technology Sector

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the role of linguistics in business communication in Information Technology (IT) sector with reference to the communication skills of human resources comprising both the genders, linkage between communication skill and attrition, turn-taking and the ability of the team cohesiveness in group meetings with the client. Linguistic ability is one factor which influences turn-taking but domain expertise is the critical factor which enables a person to contribute during the discussions. Though English is the normal business language in Information Technology (IT) sector, the ability of an individual to present cogently technical aspects during a meeting depends on various factors.

Keywords: Team Cohesiveness, Turn-taking, Linguistic ability, Domain expertise, Business Language

1. Introduction

Communication is an essence for organisational governance and operations. In Information Technology sector communication is extremely critical for the success of the project. Project communication is purely technical and hence linguistic competence is crucial for the success of the project. Apart from routine communication, technical documents need to be compiled as part of the project. Even the source code needs to be commented if any business logic is modified and the person reading the source code should be able understand the changes incorporated into the code. Similarly technical meetings happen almost every day in IT sector. Technical team comprising of different roles participate in the meeting. These meetings can be internal or with the customer. Each team member handling the project needs to appraise the project module handled by him/her. There cannot be strict rules for turn-taking. One cannot dictate as to who should pitch in during the technical meeting or a discussion since during a meeting multiple aspects will be discussed and it is difficult to direct the team member to answer the queries. Moreover, in Information technology companies the meetings happen either over telecon or video conference. In teleconference (telecom) one can direct a person to answer since the participants are not visible, this will be known clearly during video conferencing and may create a reputational issue. In IT sector, resources are placed on the project after client interviews and the client will expect a reply from the concerned team member. Against this backdrop the authors has conducted a study on turn taking during meetings where both the genders have participated.

2. Related Work

The article does make reference to other works done on the same topic. The term, turn, can be defined as “a single contribution of a participant in a conversation, preceded and followed by speech from other participants”, It is, however, fairly difficult to analyse turn-taking precisely in data because of its complexity. The study of turn-taking was pioneered by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson who tried to abstract the “context-free” rules about the organisation of turn-taking from “context-sensitive” conversational data. In their article, turn-taking was explained as “the distribution of talk among the parties” or “the sequences in which the talk shifted from one to another or was retained by a single party” and several important notions were presented such as “transition-relevance place (TRP),” which is the point at which the speaker can change or “local management system” in which turn-taking is locally managed “on a turn-by-turn basis”. Also, basic rules for turn-taking were presented.

A Study on the Role of Linguistics in Business Communication with reference to Information Technology Sector

At the initial TRP, 1) if the “current speaker selects next” technique is used, then “the party so selected has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak”;

2) if the technique is not involved, then “self- selection for next speakership” may be instituted; and

3) if the 2) above does not work, the current speaker may continue “unless another self-selects”. In business meetings, different dynamics may work for native speakers and non-native speakers; for example, those in a higher position or with more business expertise may take turns more easily and hold the floor longer. These factors further entangle turn-taking behaviours in business scenes.

Skehan pointed out three core elements: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Since the current study investigates oral communication ability in business meetings, fluency was chosen as the main element to measure the participants’ linguistic ability. Fluency is regarded as the “processing of language in real time” or as “an impression on the listener’s part that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently”. The measurement of fluency, however, has been controversial. For example, Riggensbach maintained that speech rate and the number of unfilled pauses were the most predictable indicators of fluency. In contrast, Towell, Hawkins, and Bazergui pointed to the mean length of run (how many words are spoken without a pause) as the best indicator. Fujii and Tomoda reported, however, that this is not necessarily a useful measure for second language learners as the number becomes too small and difficult to compare. Among possible elements, Lennon singled out two key areas important for fluency: speech-pause relationships and frequency of occurrence of dysfluency markers such as filled pauses (non-word vocalisations). He also pointed out three elements as core indicators of fluency: speech rate, (filled) pauses, and mean length of run. In this study, speech rate is used mainly to discuss the fluency of the participants.

The success of IT sector is based on the effectiveness and timely communication. Communication includes both verbal and written modes. It is not just technical prowess of the human resources who are part of the project, but their communication skills are crucial for the project success. Technical communication is always challenging since the technical aspects need to be written cogently so that it can be understood by the reader. In IT sector there are support teams within the organisation they to play an important role in the business. Many IT companies work on onsite-offshore model which means that their business is carried out both in India and overseas. Since the business operations are controlled from India the human resources should possess linguistic competence to understand the nuances of the requirements to be handled. IT Support team interface with the customer for connecting the network between local organisation and the customer organisation situated abroad. When the IT support team communicate it will be a technical exchange of information and thus linguistic ability of the resources are important. One more aspect is that though the resources are qualified with personal certifications, they falter when they communicate. They either provide less information or fail to provide a correct information. For example, a project manager states that the desktop should be configured with appropriate software. Here the missing information is the list of software that are required to be installed. Similarly, a project manager sends a request to connect to the customer network mentioning the internet protocol (IP) address. Here the IP address alone is not sufficient and the correct information is missing.

3. Research Methodology

The article proposes an exploratory research approach to understand the factors that contribute to turn taking and business linguistics. Both male and female genders were considered for the study. Since English is used as a business language, the study focused on whether the linguistic ability or the domain expertise dominates during the meeting. The study also considered whether the team leader or the manager has a role in influencing the team members to participate effectively.

4. Data Collection and Sample Size

The researcher has chosen sample size of 60 persons from three IT companies who regularly participate in meetings in Chennai. The representativeness of the sample size comprises of 20 personnel from Company I, 24 personnel from Company II and 16 personnel from Company III.

5. Data Analysis

Primary data was collected from the respondents comprising of both genders based in Chennai. Table 1 provides the age wise classification of the respondents.

S.No	Age Band	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
1	25-30	27	45
2	31-35	24	40
3	36-40	6	10
4	>40	3	5

Table 1

From the above mentioned table1, it could be interpreted that the majority of the respondents, 45% of them come under the age group of 25-30 years and also 40% of the respondents come under the age group of 31-35 years, 10% of the respondents come under the 36-40 years age group and 5% of the respondents are above 40 years Gender classification of the respondents who participate in the meetings along with their age are captured in Table 2 (a) and Table 2(b) respectively.

Total male respondents: 31

S.No	Experience	Male respondent	Percentage %
1	25-30	15	48
2	31-35	11	35
3	36-40	3	10
4	>40	2	6

Table 2 (a)

Total female respondents: 29

S.No	Experience	Female respondent	Percentage %
1	25-30	18	62
2	31-35	9	31
3	36-40	2	7

Table 2(b)

Table 3(a) and Table 3(b) provides the details of the factors that contribute to participate in meetings and turn-taking, provided by the respondents.

Total male respondents: 31

S.No	Factors	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
1	Domain expertise	20	64
2	Linguistic ability	3	10
3	Domination by Manager	3	10
4	Unable to speak fluently	3	10
5	Speak with incorrect grammar	2	6

Table 3(a)

Total female respondents: 29

S.No	Factors	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
1	Domain expertise	15	51
2	Linguistic ability	4	14
3	Domination by Manager	7	24
4	Unable to speak fluently	2	7
5	Speak with incorrect grammar	1	3

Table 3(b)

A Study on the Role of Linguistics in Business Communication with reference to Information Technology Sector

From the above table it could be interpreted that the majority of the respondents, 64% male and 51% of female have mentioned that domain expertise is important. While 10% of male and 14% of female have identified linguistic ability as a contributory factor for communication. For the sake of convenience, the researcher has not classified the respondents based on their roles in their respective organisation.

The respondents were asked to provide feedback on their communication skills during team meetings and meeting with the customer. The responses were collected on a five-point Likert Scale and the values are tabulated below in Table 4.

S.No	Respondent's feedback	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
1	Highly Dissatisfied	18	30
2	Dissatisfied	15	25
3	Neutral	3	5
4	Satisfied	5	8
5	Highly Satisfied	19	32
	Total	60	100

Table 4

From the above table, it is evident that 55% of the respondents are either dissatisfied/highly dissatisfied with their communication skills. 40% of the respondents are satisfied/highly satisfied with their communication skills.

Hypothesis

I. In order to understand the relationship between linguistic ability and gender, hypothesis was postulated and the same was tested at 5% level of significance.

The above responses were classified based on the gender as shown below in table 5

M=Male and F=Female

M	F	Total
10	8	18
9	6	15
1	2	3
2	3	5
9	10	19
31	29	60

Table 5

The details of chi square testing are tabulated below in Table 6

O	E	O-E	O-E ²	O-E ² /E
10	9.3	0.7	0.49	0.052688
9	4.65	4.35	18.9225	4.069355
1	0.5166667	0.4833333	0.233611	0.452151
2	1.0333333	0.9666667	0.934444	0.904301
9	4.65	4.35	18.9225	4.069355
8	3.8666667	4.1333333	17.08444	4.418391
6	2.9	3.1	9.61	3.313793
2	0.9666667	1.0333333	1.067778	1.104598
3	1.45	1.55	2.4025	1.656897
10	4.8333333	5.1666667	26.69444	5.522989
			Total	25.56452

Table 6

The other details for the test are:

r = 5	c = 2	r-1	4
		c-1	1
Table value	9.488		

Since the calculated value is greater than the table value the null hypothesis is rejected and there is relationship between their linguistic competence and gender. Similarly, attrition due to poor communication skills also takes place in IT sector. Communication forms the bedrock of the project and if there is a misunderstanding of technical aspects either there will be rework or penalty. There will also be schedule overrun.

Technical jargons used during the meetings with the customers are to be understood in a correct perspective. The details of attrition due to poor communication are mentioned below in table 7

S.No	Respondent's feedback	Number of respondents	Percentage %
1	Strongly Disagree	12	20
2	Disagree	11	18
3	Neutral	0	0
4	Agree	10	17
5	Strongly Agree	27	45
	Total	60	100

Table 7

II.Hypothesis testing was carried out to understand the relationship between communication skills and attrition and was tested at 5% level of significance.

The above responses were classified based on the gender as shown below in table 8

Male	Female	Total
6	3	9
8	1	9
0	0	0
9	12	16
8	13	26
31	29	60

Table 8

The details of chi square testing are tabulated below in table 9

O	E	O-E	O-E ²	O-E ² /E
6	3.1	2.9	8.41	2.712903
8	4.1333333	3.866667	14.95111	3.617204
0	0	0	0	0
9	4.65	4.35	18.9225	4.069355
8	4.1333333	3.866667	14.95111	3.617204
3	1.45	1.55	2.4025	1.656897
1	0.4833333	0.516667	0.266944	0.552299
0	0	0	0	0
12	5.8	6.2	38.44	6.627586
13	6.2833333	6.716667	45.11361	7.179885
			Total	30.03333

Table 9

A Study on the Role of Linguistics in Business Communication with reference to Information Technology Sector

The other details for the test are:

r = 5	c = 2	r-1	4
		c-1	1
Table value	9.488		

Since the calculated value is greater than the table value the null hypothesis is rejected and there is relationship between their linguistic competence and attrition.

Team cohesiveness was also checked with both the genders and their responses were recorded below in Table 10

S.No	Respondent's feedback	Number of respondents	Percentage %
1	Very poor	7	12
2	Poor	14	23
3	Satisfactory	25	42
4	Good	6	10
5	Very Good	8	13
	Total	60	100

Table 10

It can be inferred that 23% of the respondents have mentioned that their team cohesiveness is poor and 12% have opined that their team cohesiveness is very poor. 42% of the respondents were satisfied with the team cohesiveness and 23% of the respondents have mentioned that team cohesiveness is either good or very good.

III. Hypothesis testing was carried out to understand the relationship between communication skills and attrition and was tested at 5% level of significance.

The above responses were classified based on the gender as shown below in table 11

Male	Female	Total
5	2	7
7	1	8
10	15	25
6	5	11
3	6	9
31	29	60

Table 11

The other details for the test are:

r = 5	c = 2	r-1	4
		c-1	1
Table value	9.488		

Since the calculated value is greater than the table value the null hypothesis is rejected and there is relationship between gender and team cohesiveness.

In order to measure the participation in the meeting and evaluate their linguistic ability, holding time and number of words spoken were calculated. A stenographer was deployed to take note of the words spoken and monitor the corresponding time taken. The linguistic ability was measured in terms of fluency which was calculated by dividing the number of words spoken during the meeting by the holding time.

Six meetings were analysed and the team was reviewing a technical requirement in 5 meetings and in one meeting the team was hiring a candidate for the post of marketing manager. The team members provided feedback pertaining to the technical review and also for hiring a candidate. All the notes were taken down by the stenographer. Few of the participants had linguistic weakness in technical meetings whereas in the meeting for hiring the domain expertise of the team was lacking in order to select a suitable candidate. Few of the participants did not speak the full sentence and at times nodded their heads in agreement or just said Yes or No in reply to team member's queries.

6. Summary and Conclusion

Based on data analysis domain expertise is an important factor business meeting, the role of linguistic ability cannot be diluted. Linguistic ability varies with gender and hence this is also can important factor. More samples should be selected to study the pattern for turn-taking and participants role during meetings. The team used signals like nodding their head and showing their thumbs-up in agreement instead of speaking a full sentence. The results of the study need to be compared with other places within Tamilnadu in order to understand the pattern better. There is no difference between native and non-native speakers during communication and during turn-taking. Also, the manager plays an important role in directing the team members during the meetings. Though all team members are equally skilled, managers want a specific team member to speak during the meeting, unless the client puts forward a pointed question to a concerned team member. The possibility of bias of the manager towards a team member do exist during turn taking and participating in the meetings.

In business there are other aspects which need to be considered. There will be conflicts between teams, intergroup coordination, intercultural teams' coordination, grievance handling and training. In order to handle the above tasks, communication skills are essential for achieving success. Linguistic competence in IT sector cannot be compromised. An individual can possess a high level of technical skill but if he does not have communication skill, his knowledge will not be of any use to the organization. The resource needs to share his work with his colleagues so that others can take it forward. In IT sector, the projects are handled by groups and team coordination is very important. The resource should be well versed in technical communication. Also due to the complicated nature of IT projects, a large amount of documents need to be prepared explaining the design and installation of the developed software. Even if there is a small slip in the communication, the installation process will fail. In marketing, there is maximum use of language. Marketing linguistics is a separate branch and there too communication plays a significant role. Consumer's attitude is also regulated by language.

Business communication also comprises of corporate communication. Their communication includes communication with shareholders, regulatory authorities and the government. For each type of communication, there will be a separate template which will be structured with sentences to suit the needs of the communication. The sender needs to enter the details like date, subject matter and other finer details in between the spaces provided. In business communications there are not challenges as compared to technical communication. Team cohesiveness is also an important parameter in IT sector. Most of the IT projects comprises of team members with different backgrounds and each one has a specified role. In order to complete the project milestone as per the schedule team cohesiveness is a reckoning factor. Business risks are associated with all business and communication related to risk management needs to be handled with caution. There are multiple stakeholders in business and if there is a unavoidable event/incident, the organization needs to communicate about the impact of the incident and what actions have been taken to mitigate it. Thus, risk communication requires extra skill and should be handled with care. Business continuity is the core for any business and the choice of words should usher positivity rather than stressing the impact of the incident. Similarly in the communication pertaining to company's performance, the strengths of the company should be reflected along with the challenges faced should be highlighted. Thus, the role of linguistics in business communication is very critical and this forms the basis of business management. One can safely conclude that linguistics and management are akin to two sides of a coin. One can excel in management with strong technical knowledge, but if he does not have linguistic competence, his communication will not be effective and the requirements will not get translated into tangible output. Thus, linguistics and management gets integrated in different areas of management and in each area of management communication forms an important part and it forms the desideratum of business.

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A Study on the Role of Linguistics in Business Communication with reference to Information Technology Sector

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