

# Integrating approaches to analyzing English e-mail correspondence in an import-export business

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## **Abstract**

It has been suggested that skills in email communication be incorporated into pedagogy, but one problem in achieving this is the paucity of studies of business emails. This research reports findings from a corpus-based analysis of business email negotiations, conducted as a case study. The study explores turn-taking patterns, speech acts and interactional metadiscourse markers in a case of business negotiation via emails to observe the dynamics of business interaction and buyer-seller relationships which vary across time and stages throughout the course of e-negotiations. Findings reveal the one-to-one turn taking pattern at the in-business negotiation phase where important decisions are made, but when problems occur both parties cooperate as can be seen in many-to-many turn taking patterns in the final shipping phase. Representative, directive and expressive acts conveyed by the seller prevail those used by the buyer during the initial contact, but later the buyer seems to express several types of speech acts more frequently. Engagement and attitude markers are used most frequently in the middle stage of the negotiation when the business relationship is critical while self-mentions are preferred in the final shipping stage which aims at solving problems. Business English learners should be made aware of the interactional linguistic features available in the English language and be given a chance to exercise them. Ideas on teaching business interactional discourse are suggested in the discussion.

**Keywords:** business English, emails, turn-taking, speech acts, interactional metadiscourse

# การผสมผสานกลวิธีในการวิเคราะห์การโต้ตอบจดหมายอิเล็กทรอนิกส์ ในธุรกิจนำเข้าและส่งออก

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บทคัดย่อ

การสื่อสารผ่านจดหมายอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เป็นเรื่องที่มีความสำคัญในการเรียนการสอนภาษาแต่การศึกษาในเรื่องดังกล่าวยังมีไม่มากนัก งานวิจัยแบบกรณีศึกษานี้มุ่งวิเคราะห์การเจรจาธุรกิจผ่านจดหมายอิเล็กทรอนิกส์เพื่อศึกษารูปแบบการผลักดันส่งสาร วัจนกรรม อภิวาทกรรมแนวปฏิสัมพันธ์ เพื่อสังเกตการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์และการแสดงความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างผู้ซื้อและผู้ขายซึ่งแปรผันตามระยะเวลาของการเจรจา ผลการวิจัยทำให้เห็นถึงรูปแบบการมีปฏิสัมพันธ์แบบหนึ่งต่อหนึ่งในขั้นการเจรจาที่ต้องตัดสินใจ เมื่อการเจรจาเข้าถึงช่วงท้ายซึ่งทั้งสองฝ่ายประสบปัญหาในการจัดส่งสินค้ารูปแบบการเจรจาเปลี่ยนไปเป็นลักษณะแบบพหุภาคี ในช่วงแรกของการเจรจาผู้ขายใช้กลวิธีในการบอกกล่าว การพูดสั่งหรือขอร้อง และการแสดงความรู้สึก มากกว่าผู้ซื้อ ซึ่งเมื่อเวลาผ่านไปกลับแสดงกลวิธีทางวัจนกรรมที่หลากหลายมากกว่าผู้ขาย สัญลักษณ์แสดงควมมีส่วนร่วมและการแสดงออกด้วยทัศนคติพบมากที่สุดในช่วงระยะกลางของการเจรจาซึ่งเป็นช่วงเวลาที่ความสัมพันธ์กำลังเปราะบาง การอ้างอิงตนเองพบบ่อยมากในช่วงท้ายของการเจรจาเมื่อทั้งสองฝ่ายต้องร่วมกันแก้ปัญหา ผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษธุรกิจควรทราบคุณสมบัติทางภาษาศาสตร์แนวปฏิสัมพันธ์เหล่านี้และฝึกใช้คุณสมบัติทางภาษาศาสตร์ดังกล่าว งานวิจัยนี้อภิปรายผลโดยนำเสนอข้อคิดในการสอนวาทกรรมเชิงปฏิสัมพันธ์ทางธุรกิจ

## Introduction

Business interactions between English non-native speakers are becoming more common due to the wide spread of English as a business lingua franca (Gimenez 2001: 170). Ninety percent of all international business communication is done through emailing (Jensen 2009: 6). Email correspondence is fast, convenient, and - most importantly - recorded, so has evidentiary value. However, not all international traders share the rhetorical conventions regarding issues of rapport, relationship-building and formality (Bjorge 2007: 76). It is suggested that the interactional skills in business email communication be incorporated in pedagogy and into educational syllabuses (Cho & Yoon 2013). The question is how this can be done when very few

studies have been conducted (Jensen 2009: 5). The objective of this study is to showcase interactions in business email communication at different stages. These can be observed through turn-taking sequences, speech acts and interactional metadiscourse markers in English. This study is significant in its reflection on business interactions. Without studies of this kind, pedagogy of business communication can never be well implemented in business English classrooms.

### **Turn-taking and speech acts in service encounters**

Interaction analysis (IA) focuses on the stages and sequences of interaction and the links between interactional structures and the organizational context (Putnam & Fairhurst 2001). A sequence of turn-taking not only reveals stages and sequences of interaction but also topic shifts and speech length or floor dominance, all of which are manifestations of power and therefore important strategies for bargainers to manipulate their negotiations (Fairhurst & Cooren 2004: 135). Studies of turn-taking are also related to speech act theory in nature as a turn initiator has to make each utterance clear what speech act is intended, so the hearer can perceive the illocutionary meaning from the act performed and correspond accordingly. Koester (2006), for example, found functions such as phatic talk, requesting, making arrangement at different stages in business interactions. Paltridge (2006) notes that a question initiating a turn in service encounters likely conveys a directive rather than an interrogative function.

While propositions such as assertions and reports in business emails as can be realized by the ‘representative’ speech acts, proposals such as requests, offers and commitments are common and natural in service encounters (Paltridge 2006: 57). Analyzing illocutionary force of statements can be done by looking at the level of speech acts to understand the intentional meaning of the speaker. The acts of order, request, invite according to Searle’s (1976) classification could be labelled ‘directive’, while those such as guarantee, promise could be labelled as ‘commissive’, and thank, welcome, congratulate could be grouped together as ‘expressive’. Searle (1976) also refers to the ‘declarative’ act which functions to declare

the official change in the status of the hearer, but this is less likely in business communication, and they are not found in the study.

In face-to-face service encounters, turns are taken almost simultaneously, and each speaker's turn most likely conveys one clear act, so the hearer can perceive the illocutionary meaning and respond to it accordingly with the suitable adjacency pair part – i.e. answer follows question in the same way that acceptance follows offer. Email messages however are conveyed at delayed time and different place and they can be longer as one turn in an email message includes more than one acts, and writer expects more than one responding utterances from the reader – i.e. having one statement to apologize for the mistake, one to report the cause of the problem, yet another one to offer compensation for the loss or damages that incur from that mistake (Grussendorf 2009: 62).

At the micro lexical level, the variety of speech acts in emails are realized by the interactional metadiscourse markers (Jensen 2009). Directives, for example, can be realized by imperatives and polite requests (Can/Could you...?) while commissives can be realized by the use of first-person pronoun and root modals and expressives are realized by positive and negative attitude markers. These interpersonal linguistic features are interconnected with speech acts. They are discussed in the following section.

### **Interactional metadiscourse in business communication**

The concept of metadiscourse originally proposed by Harris (1959) basically refers to discourse about discourse. This can be viewed from two perspectives of integrative and non-integrative approaches to investigating text organisation (Ädel 2006: 175). The integrative approach largely including interpersonal elements is later developed by Hyland (2005) into two dimensions of interactive and interactional aspects of textual interaction. Interactive metadiscourse expresses the extent that writers make judgement on readers *based on their appreciation of the reader's likely knowledge and understanding* (Hyland 2005: 44). Interactional metadiscourse, on the other hand, involves the reader as a discourse participant working *collaboratively in the development of the text* (Hyland 2005: 44).

Both interactive and interactional metadiscourse are given attention in the study of academic texts (e.g. Kim & Lim's (2013), Khedri, Heng & Ebrahimi's (2013) study of research articles, Gordon & Luke's (2015) study of group supervision, Lee & Subtirelu's (2015) study of classroom discourse). It is the interactional metadiscourse that is at the focus in the study of business discourse. Such studies include Koester's (2006) corpus-based analysis of American and British Office Talk (ABOT), Jensen's (2009) study of discourse strategies in business email negotiation, Yang's (2010) study of interpersonal business negotiations, Fu's (2012) study of interactional metadiscourse in job postings, Cho & Yoon's (2013) analysis of the final reports on company performance, Koester's (2014) analysis of trade negotiations, Alyousef's (2015) analysis of finance texts and Carrió-Pastora & Calderón's (2015) studies of business email communication. The interactional metadiscourse framework includes hedges, boosters, affective attitude markers, self-mentions and engagement markers, all of which dominantly appear in several speech acts required in business communication: requests, offers, making inquiries and giving advice (Emmerson 2013).

In business negotiation, traders negotiate their budget to determine what they want versus what they can afford. Achieving this aim involves lots of techniques in positioning oneself with one's customers strategically (Pinet 2011). In a supplier-customer encounter, Koester (2006: 96-97) found that hedges help to mitigate the seller's imposition on the customer while selling goods and services. In typical sales encounters, sellers are expected to do the talking and make offers, while buyers are expected to ask questions and refuse first offers (Bülow 2009: 145). Sellers may as well exaggerate needs of their products through the use of boosters in order to create demands, while buyers may play down the needs and at the same time attempt to raise good relationship and engagement with their seller to keep the price low. Even if the customers are not interested in the goods and services being offered, he or she tries not to appear rude by using of hedges, attitude and engagement markers. Self-mentions are commonly found in business negotiations, as they allow the speaker to emphasize that the statements are personally involved rather than institutionalized and distant (Santos 2002:

181). Unfortunately, the study of metadiscourse in business settings is still in its infancy due to difficulty of having access to business communication data such as emails, the problem raised by Bargiela-Chiappini et al. (2007: 141-142).

### **Phases in business email negotiations**

Business people from different cultures have different approaches towards formality and politeness in their negotiations (Dignen & McMaster 2013: 127). In high-context cultures as in Mediterranean Europe and some countries in Asia such as China, Japan and Thailand, people's personal lives have an effect on almost all business interactions, so asking for health and family is typically part of business talk (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007: 135, Collins 2008: 206, Yang 2012: 101). In low-context cultures such as in the United States, Germany, Scandinavian countries and Korea, people are more direct and prone to get down to business more quickly (Collins 2008: 207). In written business discourse, Chakorn (2006) found that native speakers of English tend to introduce the main request early on in their business letter while Thais do so in the middle part of the letter. However, research has also shown that the low-context cultures predominantly found in collectivist societies and the high-context cultures mainly found in individualist societies are in fact discrete poles on a continuum and should not be viewed in a dichotomy (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007: 134). Even with individuals from the same culture, perceptions and expectations on business formality can be transient, so vary case by case.

It is likely that the progression from formal or indirect to interpersonal styles can be observed during the course of business negotiations. Charles (1996) found that the role of the buyer and the seller, as well as the differences between the old and new relationship negotiations matter. Hedging, understatement and indirectness were found to be common among buyers and sellers in their first negotiations, but when they had known each other for a while, they tended to use bald-on-record strategies expressing satisfaction with business relationship or enthusiasm towards preferable deals. In unfavorable situations, they turn conflicts into mutual problems, and

try to solve them together. Studies on business negotiations should therefore focus on verbal interaction and stages in problem-solution process (Jensen 2009: 10). Drawing upon Charles' (1996) progression from new to old relationship negotiations, Jensen (2009) further categorizes business email communication into three phases during the three months of a new business contact to observe the progression of buyer-seller relationship at different stages. These include (1) the contact phase, (2) the negotiation phase, and (3) the in-business phase.

This section reviews the linguistic features concerning interactions, and phases in business negotiations. The next section explains the process of business data collection and techniques concerning how business interactions can be explored in the three phases and in the light of three linguistic dimensions.

## **Research methodology**

The year 2015 is when business in Thailand felt sudden drops in sales due to the country's slowdown in the tourism sector following the military coup which took place a year earlier. The researcher was asked to participate in a company's plan to promote more effective operation in the purchasing department to survive the crisis. During the time, there was one case that came in as a new contact, so the researcher asked for permission to scrutinize this case closely. The case was permitted only on the condition that all terms related to business names, products, prices and quantities be encoded. The company asked to see the encoded data before a consent form was given. Written observations were recorded in the daily log. Interviews were conducted with the company manager twice during the course of email communication and once after the period ended. The purpose is to find out analytical viewpoints from professional informants regarding the arising business issues.

The study covers a period of 89 days from August 25, 2015 to November 21, 2015, during which the relationship progresses from initial contact between two unknown traders towards a more personalized communication. The Thai importer is looking for a new supplier of music

teaching materials for young learners to be distributed in Southeast Asia, so makes a direct contact to an American exporter. The American seller produces only one series of product while the Thai buyer is a trade dealer of many suppliers from overseas.

To make the study deep and contextualized, this research is conducted in a small case study with no intention to generalize findings to business negotiations in general. This single-case study analyzes turn-taking patterns, occurrences of Searle's (1976) speech acts conveyed at different phases and the use of Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse features in business correspondence of 88 emails. All the emails, which run in chronological sequence, were written by an American seller with her sales assistant and shipping agent and a Thai buyer with his American freight forwarders. All the professionals in this scenario collaborated to move this shipment from the United States to Thailand. The shipment was quoted in Free on Board (FOB) incoterms, commonly used for small international purchases (Reuvid & Sherlock 2011: 325, Weiss 2008: 123). This requires the seller to ship the merchandise to the port of departure in the U.S. and the buyer to arrange for onward carriage to Thailand.

The emails were separated into three periods: (1) contact, (2) in-business negotiation and (3) shipping phases. This is adapted from Jensen's (2009) contact, negotiation and in-business phases. The contact phase includes 15 emails of 2,196 words where the buyer requested for product catalogues, price quotation, and the seller gave general advice and introduced herself. This follows exactly the routine of what Grussendorf (2009: 38) had suggested in first business contact. The in-business negotiation phase includes 18 emails of 1,815 words starting from the detailed discussions of special trade terms and conditions to be approved as a licensed dealer, to launch and distribute the product, to bargain for good value, to settle payment in advance. Communication that takes place after the payment is received is then part of the shipping phase, e.g. tracing goods in transit, acknowledging receipt of goods and payment, making complaints and filing insurance claims. Without a logistics problem, this phase would be rather short, but when the problem occurs, dealing with it entails



complaining, apologizing, explaining the cause and consequence of the problem, giving clear instructions to shipping agents, and negotiating for logistics solutions. This covers 55 emails of 4,093 words being written at this final stage.

Because the total number of words in the three phases are different and the main purpose of this study is to compare between the buyer's and the seller's frequent use of different types of speech acts and interactional metadiscourse markers (henceforth IMMs) in the same scenario, the frequency of occurrences of speech acts and IMMs are normalized for the benefit of comparison. Considering the small corpus size of 8,104 words and 88 emails all together, the average number of words is actually 92 per a single email text. The frequencies of speech acts and IMMs are therefore normalized per 100 words to make it as close as possible to the actual text as suggested by Biber, Conrad & Reppen (1998: 263). Since the role that the writer holds as buyer or seller is most important regarding the bargaining power at different stages (Bülow 2009: 151), the linguistic data in this study are triangulated by the researcher's written observations and interviews with an insider informant as suggested by Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2011) and Dressen-Hammouda (2012).

The analysis is done in three levels: turn-taking patterns, speech acts and verbal interaction realized by the frequency of IMMs used in different functional contexts. The pattern of turn taking in email messages is adapted from that of Marcoccia's (2004) and Vonderwell & Zachariah's (2005) analysis of the turn-taking in a webchat. Retrospective arrows are used to link between a current turn and the previous one the turn intends to respond or address to. Each turn is then separated into speech functions and acts. According to Searle's (1976) classification of speech acts, giving information, assertion and report are categorized as representative act; the functions of order, request, offer, invite are categorized as directive act; the functions of guarantee, promise are put under commissive act; those concerning positive and negative evaluative comments realize an expressive one. To find out different speech acts, a turn in email messages is separated based on its communicative purpose at the clause level marked by double vertical lines ||.

Speech acts are annotated by a square bracket [...] within a turn as shown below.

It was great to speak with you and learn a bit more about ET TOYS [Expressive]. || As mentioned, your trial account starts today and you can access it via the following link: [Representative]. || I would recommend using Chrome, and you can use incognito mode to access the account. Feel free to log in as a student to test it out first [Directive]! || I look forward to working with you [Commissive], || and please don't hesitate to send any questions you may have. [Directive].

At word level, all the occurrences of IMM in the raw corpus data are annotated with the tagsets which are abbreviations of IMM types following Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse framework. The tagsets are put in triangular brackets as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Tagsets of interactional metadiscourse markers (IMMs).

IMMs	Tagsets	Function/form	Examples of metadiscourse markers (IMMs)
Hedges:	<H:GR>	Modal auxiliaries	<i>can, could, may, might, should, would</i>
	<H:LX>	Lexical hedges	<i>a bit, maybe, possible, probably, rather, seem</i>
Boosters:	<B:GR>	Emphatic 'do'	[I] do [understand]
	<B:LX>	Lexical boosters	<i>absolutely, always, certain, much, really, very</i>
Attitude markers:	<A:NN>	Evaluative nouns	<i>apologies, best, enthusiasm, interest</i>
	<A:VV>	Evaluative verbs	<i>apologize, appreciate, like, hope, prefer, want</i>
	<A:AJ>	Evaluative adjectives	<i>best, disappointed, nice, perfect, sorry</i>
	<A:AV>	Evaluative adverbs	<i>hopefully, ideally, preferably, unfortunately</i>
	<A:XC>	Exclamation marks	<i>Oh!, Oops!</i>
Self-mentions:	<S:PN>	1 <sup>st</sup> person pronouns	<i>I, me, mine, my, (exclusive) we, our(s), us</i>

IMMs	Tagsets	Function/form	Examples of metadiscourse markers (IMMs)
Engagement marker:	<E:PN>	2 <sup>nd</sup> person pronouns	<i>you, your(s), (inclusive) we, our(s), us</i>
	<E:QS>	Direct questions	<i>?</i>
	<E:DR>	Directive speech acts	<i>Could you ...?, Feel free to ..., Let me know...</i>
	<E:OM>	Obligation modals	<i>be supposed to, have to, must, ought to, should</i>

IMMs in all the email messages were annotated manually to avoid possible error which may arise from automatic tagging. For example, *could* used in requests as in ‘*Should we ship this to ...?*’ should be tagged as an engagement marker <E:DR>, instead of a hedge <H:GR>. The epistemic reading of *can*, *could* and *should* is realized by its use “*with non-human subjects and/or with main verbs having stative meanings*” (Biber 1999: 485) as in ‘*This order should be taken now*’. The emphatic *do* (e.g. I *do* believe that ...) is a grammatical booster (Carter & McCarthy 2006: 73, Jensen 2009: 9), and has to be annotated manually. The tagsets are then retrieved by a concordancer AntConc Version 4.3.2.

This study is exploratory by nature, so the following research questions are open-ended.

1. What are the turn-taking patterns found at different phases in this email communication?
2. Which speech acts are used dominantly at different phases in this email communication?
3. How frequently are IMMs used at different phases in this email communication?

## Findings and discussion for research question 1

The first research question aims to find out the turn-taking patterns of the three phases in this email communication. These are shown in Figure 1. The numbers on the left column show the overall sequence of turns in each phase of the negotiation, and the ones on the top row indicate the sequence

of each writer's individual turns. Each person's contribution to the talk is coded differently. Sellers are referred to as S1, S2 and S3, while S1 is the main negotiator of the seller's team. Buyers are referred to as B1, B2 and B3, while B1 is the leader or the decision-maker of the buyer's group. Only main parts of the talk are selected for comparison between interactional turn-taking patterns across the three phases.

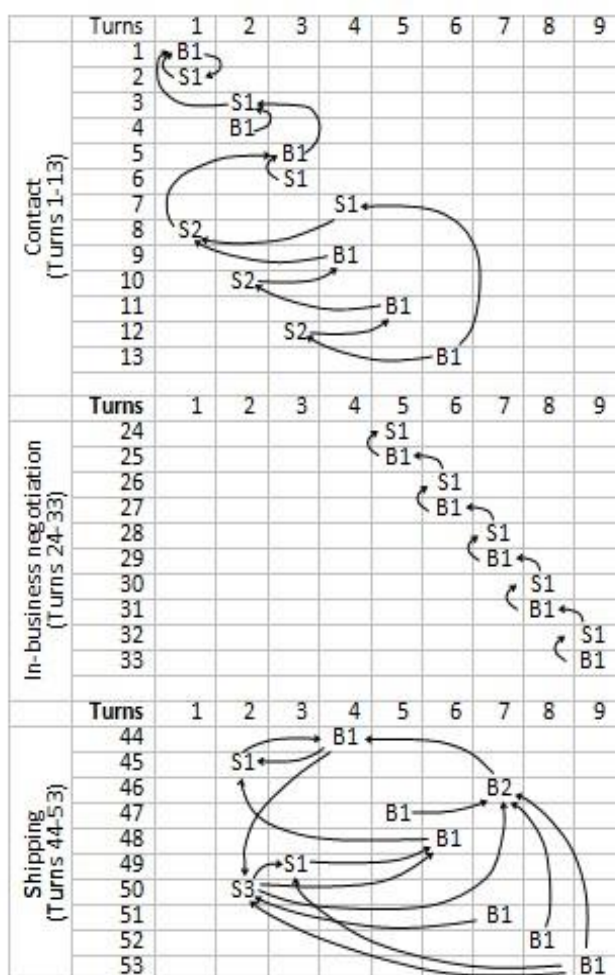


Figure 1. Turn taking patterns in the three phases

The turn-taking pattern in emails is different significantly from that in face-to-face conversation in terms of the temporal dynamics of the communication. A turn initiator can never know whether his or her turn will be responded to and when. It is the subsequent writer who determines the

interactivity by responding to the earlier turn. This makes the email threads retrospective rather than progressive (Marcoccia 2004: 119, Crystal 2006: 140).

This transaction is initiated by the buyer who expresses his interest in importing the products from seller 1 who then introduced the buyer to seller 2, her sales representative. It is quite common for the seller 1 who is a decision-maker to allow another salesperson to participate as a mediator in the initial contact phase (Pinet 2011: 54). Once seller 2 arrives at the scene, seller 1 then fades away to let seller 2 explain product specifications to the buyer. This is the stage at which seller 1 can filter out buyers who cannot accept the detailed conditions of the products being spelt out initially. At this point the buyer-seller turn-taking is one-to-one for a short while, but after few turns the buyer then refers back to seller 1 again to seek for final decision as he is aware that seller 1 is the decision maker.

During the more serious deal making at the in-business negotiation phase, the conversation is one-to-one throughout between seller 1 and buyer 1, both of whom are the decision makers of this transaction. This tidy one-to-one interactional pattern is to be expected given the role of a buyer who makes requests and asks for information and a seller who responds to the requests and gives information. No intervention by others is found. It is clear only two negotiators have the authority to talk at this stage.

Once both agree that a business deal be made, the final step is to have the goods delivered to the buyer's country. This is when the communication starts to be complex as it involves more people who are responsible for carriage of the merchandise, turning the one-to-one to many-to-many turn taking pattern at this final stage. We can see from the above interaction turn-taking pattern that buyer 2 and seller 3 are the keynotes of the goods transportation. Both of them are actually the logistics agents working for each side. That is why quite a few turns are directed to them at this shipping phase. Noticeably, most turns are initiated by buyer 1 as he is the leader of the buyer's team and he is worried that the delivery of the paid shipment may not come in time due to the logistics problem and miscommunication. Buyer 1 then persistently ask for cooperation from all the freight forwarding agents of both sides to solve problems concerning delayed

transportation of this shipment. This logistics problem is discussed in the findings for research question 3.

## Findings and discussion for research question 2

The second research question aims at finding dominant speech acts at different phases in this email communication. To answer this question, turns are marked as representative, directive, commissive or expressive according to their speech functions, and the raw frequency of occurrences of speech acts are counted. As the frequencies are based on the unequal number of words in different turns, occurrences of speech acts are normalized per 100 words to be aligned with the actual average number of 92 words per a single email text (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998: 263). The normed frequencies are shown in Figure 2.

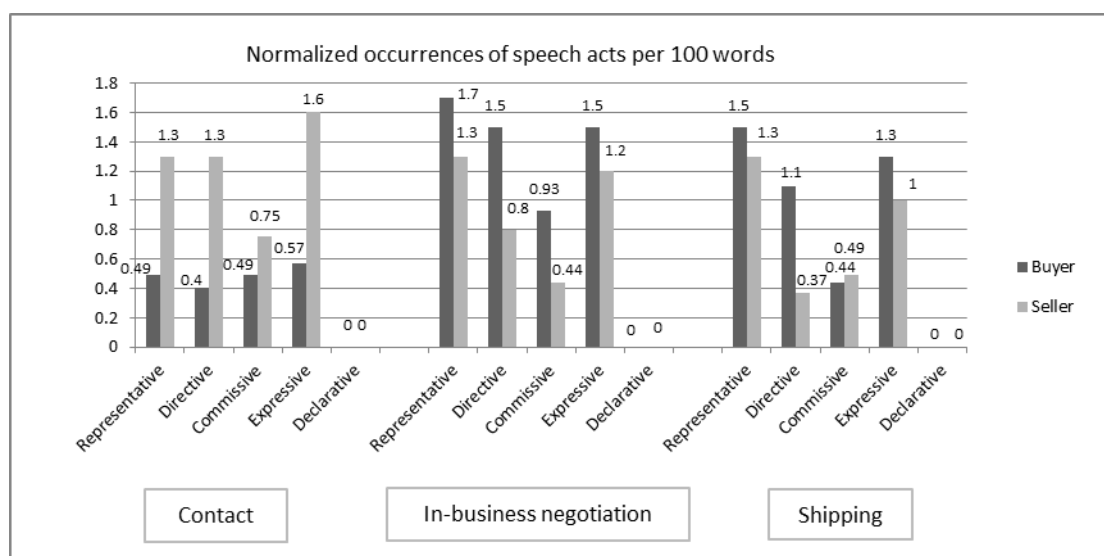


Figure 2. Frequencies of speech acts in the three phases

Findings from the Figure 2 reveal that all the speech acts in the initial contact phase are conveyed more by the seller especially representative, directive and expressive ones which are used much more. This is not surprising given the role of a service provider who are expected to do the talking (Bülow 2009: 145) by giving information through representative acts, asking for the buyer's need through polite requests, and expressing good

feelings through expressive acts. But when the communication moves on to more serious negotiations in the second phase, it was the buyer who expresses these acts more frequently especially the directive and commissive ones. The directive acts are found when the buyer makes polite questions asking in more details of the business deal, while the commissive acts play an important role in expressing his promise to do his best as a an official dealer according to his business plans and strategies to distribute the seller's products in his local market. In the final shipping phase, the buyer's commissive acts drop remarkably while directive acts continue to be used dominantly more by the buyer. While the main use of the buyer's directive acts in the second phase is to make polite requests as part of the deal negotiation, the main function in the final shipping phase is to call people into actions concerning the transportation of this shipment. The buyer is the one who are affected directly from the delay of the prepaid merchandise. The cause of the delay is discussed in the findings for research question 3.

### Findings and discussion for research question 3

The final research question is how frequently IMM are used at different phases in this email communication. The progression in normed frequency of IMM from the contact phase to the in-business negotiation phase and the shipping phrases can be illustrated in the following Figure 3.

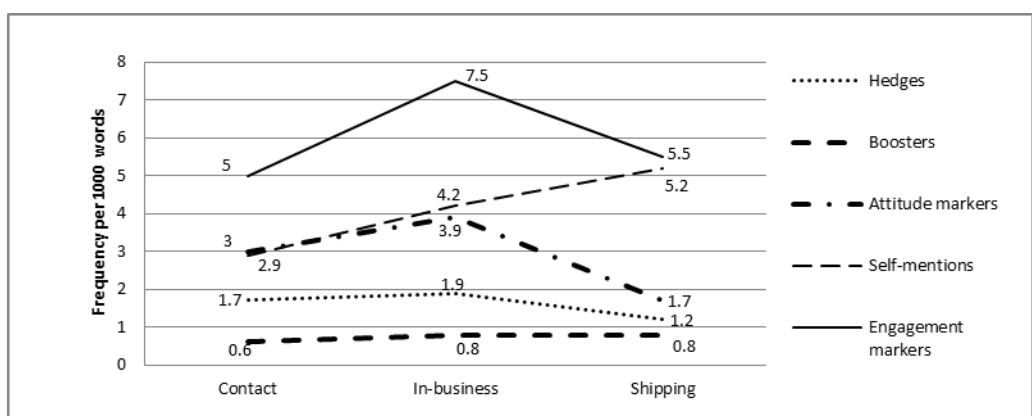
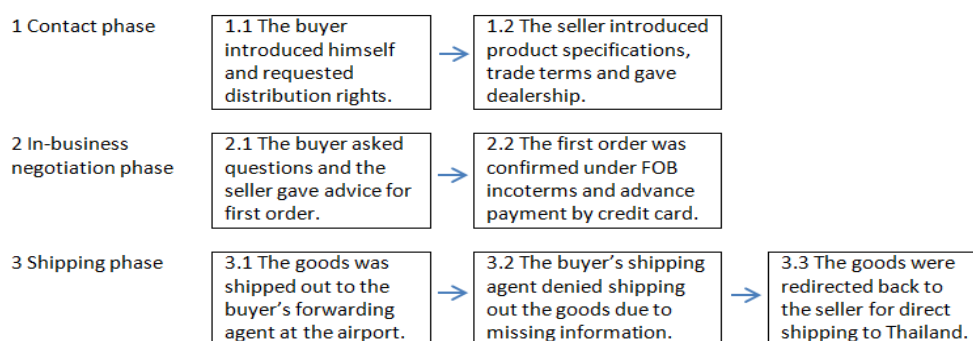


Figure 3. Density of each type of IMM in relative frequency per 100 words.

The above Figure 3 shows that all IMMs increased in frequency when the communication progressed from first contact to in-business negotiation. This suggests the inclination from institutional towards interpersonal discourse during the first half of business dealing. However, once the communication moved on to shipping phase where problems occurred, hedges, attitude and engagement markers dropped, while only self-mentions increased. Figure 4 below shows some important events in each phase summarized from the daily log.



**Figure 4.** Selected events recorded in the daily log.

The difference between the buyer and the seller's use of IMMs was not in terms of overall frequencies alone, but functions in contexts in which they appear at different stages. The comparative frequencies between those IMMs used by the buyer and the seller are shown in Table 2. Following Table 2 are selected examples of use of IMMs in different typical contexts found in the corpus.



**Table 2** Frequency of use of interactional metadiscourse markers per 100 words

	Contact			In-business negotiation			Shipping		
	Buyer	Seller	<i>p</i> value	Buyer	Seller	<i>p</i> value	Buyer	Seller	<i>p</i> value
H:GR	.65	1.6		1.54	.96		.67	.98	
H:LX	.49	.85		.62	.79		.36	.37	
	<b>1.14</b>	<b>2.45</b>	<i>0.019</i>	<b>2.16</b>	<b>1.75</b>	<i>0.527</i>	<b>1.03</b>	<b>1.35</b>	<i>0.531</i>
B:GR	.16	0.0		0.0	0.0		0.0	.30	
B:LX	.16	1.07		1.08	.70		.59	.79	
	<b>.32</b>	<b>1.07</b>	<i>0.032</i>	<b>1.08</b>	<b>.70</b>	<i>0.345</i>	<b>.59</b>	<b>1.09</b>	<i>0.225</i>
A:NN	.40	.53		.77	.52		.79	.30	
A:VV	.49	.85		1.23	1.31		.79	.49	
A:AJ	.81	2.35		.62	1.92		.28	.49	
A:AV	.08	.21		0.0	.09		0.0	0.0	
A:XC	.16	.32		.15	.70		0.0	.18	
	<b>1.94</b>	<b>4.26</b>	<i>0.002</i>	<b>2.78</b>	<b>4.54</b>	<i>0.046</i>	<b>1.86</b>	<b>1.46</b>	<i>0.492</i>
S:PN	<b>3.88</b>	<b>1.13</b>	<i>0.001</i>	<b>4.32</b>	<b>4.10</b>	<i>0.827</i>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>6.58</b>	<i>0.035</i>
E:PN	3.48	5.56		3.70	6.54		4.32	2.99	
E:QS	0.0	0.0		.62	.70		.79	.37	
E:DR	.49	1.30		1.54	.87		1.11	.37	
E:OM	0.0	.11		.15	.17		.16	.30	
	<b>3.97</b>	<b>6.97</b>	<i>0.036</i>	<b>6.02</b>	<b>8.29</b>	<i>0.054</i>	<b>6.38</b>	<b>4.03</b>	<i>0.018</i>
IMMs	<b>11.25</b>	<b>15.88</b>	<i>0.006</i>	<b>16.36</b>	<b>19.38</b>	<i>0.32</i>	<b>14.22</b>	<b>14.51</b>	<i>1.45</i>

### The contact phase

The seller's more frequent use of hedges than the buyer's is not surprising as hedges especially modal grammatical devices are signals of academic language, formality and negative politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987, Biber et al. 1999: 489). In offering services, the seller's proposal was written very formally and politely as suggested by Pinet (2011: 31). In line with what Koester (2006: 96) have found, hedges are frequently found in service encounters when a speaker gives instructions and explain procedures to make them sound simple and uncomplicated.

- I<S:PN> **was wondering**<H:LX> if you<E:PN> **might**<H:GR> have some time this week or next that we<E:PN> **may**<H:GR> meet online ... we<E:PN> **may**<H:GR> be able to talk on webcam, if you<E:PN> like. [Seller2]

However, different from Jensen's (2009) findings, the seller also used boosters significantly more than the buyer (1.07 vs. 0.32/100 words). The seller's use of boosters is mainly to express her appreciation of the buyer's interest in her products, his eagerness to become her dealer and to make

him become confident in her logistics team. Using boosters this way creates friendship and solidarity as part of the positive politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987).

- Again, **very<B:LX> nice<A:AJ>** to meet you!<A:XC> [Seller1]
- They [our logistics team] are **wonderful<A:AJ>** and **very<B:LX>** responsible. [Seller1]

The seller's appreciation of the buyer's offer can be observed not only in her use of boosters, but also positive attitude markers (e.g. *good, best, wonderful*), which are found significantly more (4.27 vs. 1.94/100 words) and they are often used with boosters as in *very nice*, shown in the above example. This is not surprising given the role of boosters to intensify evaluative comments in service encounters (Koester 2006: 98).

The buyer uses first-person pronouns significantly more than the seller (3.88 vs. 1.13/100 words) to introduce himself, his business and the marketing activities he has been doing over the past few years. This functions rhetorically to create business credentials by implying that he is experienced and therefore capable of promoting sales for the seller should he be appointed her official dealer. However, the second-person pronoun 'you' is used more by the seller (5.56 vs. 3.48/100 words). This is because most occurrences of 'you/your' are semantically associated with the functions of commitments, suggestions and recommendations, which are strongly related to seller behavior (Graham 1990, Bülow 2009), making it naturally the addressee-oriented character of the text as mentioned by Fu (2012:409).

- I<S:PN> have enabled **your<E:PN>** account and will list **you<E:PN>** soon as a dealer ... [Seller1]
- If **you<E:PN>** care to meet her [seller2], **you<E:PN>** could<H:GR> see all the products before **you<E:PN>** order. [Seller1]

No direct question was found at this contact phase. This does not mean that the buyer has no questions to ask. Rather, questions politely came in the guise of requests for instructions how trade accounts can be opened. It is the seller's task then to give all the directives required for what buyer needs to do in his first transaction. Though the frequencies of these directive

acts are very close between the buyer and seller, their functions are different. While the act of requesting is natural and commonly performed by the buyer, giving directions is more likely the language of the seller.

- Could you<E:PN> please let us<S:PN> see your<E:PN> catalogues, details of trade terms and how we<S:PN> can place order with you<E:PN>?<E:DR> [Buyer1]
- Let<E:DR> me<S:PN> know if I<S:PN> can be of further help. [Seller1]

Only at this phase can we observe statistically significant difference in the frequent use of IMM between the buyer and the seller judged by the p-value less 0.05. The seller's use of IMM dominates that of the buyer and almost in all types of IMM. At this phase, both parties seem to be happy about their first contact, especially the seller who seems to be more expressive by using a greater variety of IMM types. Negotiations at early stage tend to be smooth when trade negotiators start with positive experience (Pinet 2011: 170). According to the interviews, the benefit of smooth communication is twofold. If the deal is made, the seller will be able to open the new market and the buyer will gain advantage over other local competitors concerning the greater variety of products.

### **The in-business negotiation phase**

The difference between the buyer and the seller's use of hedges was not so much about frequencies but functions. While the buyer mainly uses hedges in conveying negative politeness in his requests, the seller incorporates them into her suggestions concerning what the buyer needs to purchase and in what quantity. Negotiating sales volume is important, for the seller wants to sell her products but at the same time does not want the buyer to feel that she is putting too much burden on the buyer's inventories (Pinet 2011). This function then gives the seller the upper position as the one who gives guidance because of her product knowledge. As power is relative to contexts (Brown & Levinson 1987: 78), this strategy facilitates the seller to achieve goals in business negotiations (Vuorela 2005, Koester 2006: 97). About half of the seller's hedges were used to quantify such suggestive statements.

- [...] am **wondering**<H:LX> if it is **possible**<H:LX> to have her contact information so that I<S:PN> **could**<H:GR> seek consultation from her regarding the use of your<E:PN> products. [Buyer1]
- It's a good<A:AJ> size, versatile and very<B:LX> complete. **Maybe**<H:LX> five for your<E:PN> shows?<E:QS> [Seller1]
- The Birdy Bag is used to ... so to have one on it's own is **probably**<H:LX> not needed. [Seller1]
- **Personally**<H:LX>, I<S:PN> **suggest**<H:LX> you<E:PN> order more ... as that's our<S:PN> most popular item ... [Seller1]

At this phase, the seller seemed to opt for informal attitude markers to make the relationship closer, emphasizing that both parties belong to some group and share some wants, a strategy in conveying positive politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987: 103-106). Examples include her use of colloquial attitude markers such as *cool*, *okay* many times and a phrase such as *'Good you caught that'*, used when the buyer remarked that she has not yet put his URL in her website. She also gives compliments and makes judgment about the buyer's plan to promote her products at a trade fair as in her expressive act *'That really makes me happy!'*. These speech functions enable the seller to use IMM types not only in higher frequency but also in greater variety of IMM types. This is in line with the findings from research question 2 confirming that the seller is most expressive at this phase compared to the other two phases.

- I<S:PN> would<H:GR> be **delighted**<A:AJ> ... and **very**<B:LX> **much**<B:LX> **appreciate**<A:VV> your<E:PN> interest<A:NN> in Magic Boxes. [Seller1]
- How **wonderful**<A:AJ> that you<E:PN> **are wanting**<A:VV> to promote Magic Boxes at your<E:PN> booth at the Fair next month. That **really**<B:LX> makes me<S:PN> **happy**<A:AJ>!<A:XC> [Seller1]

About half of all the occurrences of the first person pronoun found in the buyer's emails at this phase are used with root modals, suggesting that the buyer is ready to commit himself to doing what he is supposed to do as an appointed dealer. The seller's use of self mention pronouns, on the other hand, does not correlate much with modal verbs, but lexical main verbs (e.g.

hope, know, want, believe, suggest) for the purpose of encouraging, and building rapport with and confidence for the buyer.

- I<S:PN> can<E:OM> promote your<E:PN> products through my nation-wide network ... [Buyer1]
- I<S:PN> may<H:GR> have to<E:OM> have them shipped by airfreight just for this order [Buyer1]
- The reason I<S:PN> suggest this is that Magic Boxes is a new way of thinking about learning ... [Seller1]
- I<S:PN> want<A:VV> to make sure you<E:PN> are okay<A:AJ> with your<E:PN> order. [Seller1]
- I<S:PN> hope<A:VV> this is helpful to you. Please let<E:DR> me<S:PN> know if you<E:PN> have any questions. [Seller1]

The reader mention pronoun *you* was also used more by the seller (6.54 vs. 3.7 per 100 words). Evidence from concordances showed that when the pronoun is used in the conditional if-clause construction, functional difference can be found. The occurrences of ‘you’ in the conditional if-clause construction such as ‘*if you like*’, ‘*if you allow*’ conveys negative politeness (Brown & Levinson 1987: 162) rather than actually impose conditions on the buyer, so turning a directive statement into that of a conditional suggestive one. According to Santos (2002: 183), if-clauses can be used as adverbial-clause hedges to substitute directives and interrogatives to make them appear more polite. The buyer, on the other hand, uses conditional statement mainly to express trade conditions rather than to hedge.

- I<S:PN> can email you<E:PN> our<S:PN> logo if you<E:PN> allow me<S:PN>. [Seller1]
- If you<E:PN> are okay<A:AJ> with it, we<S:PN> can start on your<E:PN> order after I<S:PN> receive your<E:PN> credit card information. [Seller1]
- There I<S:PN> could<H:GR> promote Magic Boxes if you<E:PN> could<H:GR> ship this order in time and all your<E:PN> brochures and fliers to me. [Buyer1]

At this phase, the difference between the frequencies of IMMs between the buyer and the seller is not statistically significant, though the seller seems to use greater variety of IMM types. The buyer does not seem to

make much attempt in negotiating extensively over prices, quantities and trade terms as found in most cases (Gimenez 2001, Vuorela 2005 and Jensen 2009). The buyer admitted during the interview that simply launching new products at a national trade fair is already a success for him as this may lead to the point where a contract for sole distribution rights could be signed in the future.

### The shipping phase

Hedges and boosters were used only slightly more by the seller. Though the frequency is not statistically significant, their functions are clearly different. The buyer tended to use lexical boosters to highlight the urgency of this delayed shipment while the seller used them to express her empathy on the delivery problem. Showing empathy is a common function among sellers during trade negotiations (Jensen 2009: 14).

- I<S:PN> **do**<B:GR> believe that it should<H:GR> arrive to us<S:PN> on Tuesday. [Seller3]
- We<S:PN> are **so**<B:LX> sorry this shipment is not getting to you. [Seller3]
- This shipment is **very**<B:LX> important and urgent [Buyer1]
- Could<H:GR> you<E:PN> please<H:LX> send my shipment back to Scott within today as we<E:PN> **really**<B:LX> have no time?<E:DR> [Buyer1]

Both parties were now more intent on having the merchandise delivered in their first transaction than to focus on expressing excitement or appreciation as they did in the earlier two phases. This can be seen in the seller's marked reduction in frequency of attitude markers at this stage (1.46/100 words) compared to the earlier two phases (4.26 and 4.54/100 words). Looking closely at concordances, it was found that more than half of occurrences of attitude markers used by the buyer concerned expressing gratitude and appreciation. This is to be expected given the task of the buyer to trace the transportation of pre-paid shipment under FOB terms, which put the responsibility on carriage from the port of departure on the buyer (Reuvid & Sherlock 2011: 325, Weiss 2008: 123). No wonder the buyer at this stage was the one who initiated turns in line with the findings for research question 1, to elicit others to take actions for fear of delay, damage, or loss of goods in

transit. Asking for assistance and cooperation from people concerned in solving logistics operations cannot be done without qualifying directive speech acts. This explains why directive speech acts were used most frequently by the buyer at this phase, in line with the findings for research question 2.

While most of the buyer's attitude markers express gratitude, nearly half of the seller's attitude markers appeared in unfavorable contexts as realized by the words such as '*frustrated*', '*frustrating*', '*apologize*', '*unfortunately*' and '*anxious*'. This suggests that the delivery of goods had not proceeded smoothly. The complication was that the buyer's forwarding agent refused to ship the goods to Thailand claiming that the goods had not had enough shipping information for consolidation with other shipments. The buyer then asked that the merchandise be shipped back to the seller's shipping agent so that he could arrange for a direct dispatch to Thailand himself. This caused the lengthy email chains in this shipping phase, making it the largest section compared to the previous two phases.

- I<S:PN> **appreciate**<A:VV> you<E:PN> help. [Buyer1]
- I<S:PN> know you're doing your<E:PN> **best**<A:NN> [Buyer1]
- I<S:PN> can only imagine how **frustrating**<A:AJ> this must<E:OM> be for you. [Seller1]
- I<S:PN> **apologize**<A:VV> for missing Domenic call earlier [Seller3]

First-person pronouns were commonly used with auxiliaries including *have* (in present perfect tense), *be* (in progressive form), *will* and *be going to* (in conveying futurity and intention). Together they functioned to inform what has been done, what is being done, and what will be done to sort out the delivery problem as suggested by Grussendorf (2009: 62). This shows the seller's awareness of the situation, her team's involvement with the problem, and their intention to take care of the problem as part of the seller's duty.

- I<S:PN> have finally spoken to ... and it seems<H:LX> **we**<S:PN> have reached an impass ... [Seller3]
- **We**<S:PN> are trying our<S:PN> **best**<A:NN> to make this work for you. [Seller3]
- I<S:PN> am going to ship your<E:PN> order FedEx International Priority ... [Seller3]

Only at this shipping phase can we find second-person pronouns being used more by the buyer. His use of nominative ‘you’ was clearly related to the function of requesting and directing as in ‘*do you*’, ‘*could you*’, ‘*can you*’, in line with the more directive acts shown in findings for research question 2, while accusative *you* were related to the thanking function, as in ‘*thank you*’. Again, this shows that the buyer is very much worried and seeks cooperation from people concerned to expedite this shipment as he is the one who is liable for the possible loss, delay and damages of the paid cargo in transit.

- Did **you**<E:PN> manage to speak to Scott?<E:QS> [Buyer1]
- Can<H:GR> **you**<E:PN> help me<S:PN> by fetching this shipment back to you<E:PN> ... [Buyer1]

Both the buyer and the seller reserved the use of the inclusive *we* to express that they both are stakeholders in the delay of this shipment. Both realized that the unfavorable condition will have negative impact on them in their future relationship. According to the interview, if this shipment does not arrive in time for the product launch at the Fair, it is the buyer’s loss of sales and marketing opportunity and the seller’s loss of future orders from the buyer. The use of inclusive *we* here functions to create the atmosphere shared by all participants in the discourse community (Carter & McCarthy 2006: 285), in this case the shared understanding of the situation and the hope that the problem will soon be resolved.

Another kind of engagement marker which was found to be used more by the buyer concerns the use of direct questions with the comparative frequency of 0.79 vs. 0.37 per 100 words. Directives including imperatives and requests are also essential at this phase as they function to direct what needs to be done to expedite the shipping process, so they too were used significantly more by the buyer (1.11 vs. 0.37 per 100 words). Nearly half of the buyer’s directives appear in the collocational patterns ‘*please tell me*’, ‘*let me know*’ and ‘*keep me updated*’, suggesting that the buyer was concerned about the delay of this shipment. Obligation markers were found to be used more and in greater lexical variety (e.g. *have to*, *need to*, *must*, *be*



*required to*) by the seller and her team suggesting what they need to do to solve this logistics problem (Grussendorf 2009: 62).

- Pls **tell<E:DR>** me<S:PN> if the invoice you<E:PN> sent to me<S:PN> yesterday exactly<B:LX> the same as the one that comes with this shipped order. [Buyer1]
- If he does he will **have to<E:OM>** tell me<S:PN> exactly<B:LX> what because with me<S:PN> shipping it to them, a domestic shipment, we<S:PN> produce no paperwork. [Seller3]
- So your<E:PN> packages did<B:GR> arrive back to us<S:PN> today but they will **need to<E:OM>** be repackaged so they will not shipped out this morning. [Seller3]

Finally the seller's shipping agent managed to fetch back the shipments, had them repacked and dispatched directly from the seller's warehouse in the U.S. to the exhibition venue in Thailand bypassing consolidation at the airport warehouse where the problem occurred. The shipments arrived a few days later after the opening of the trade fair, but still in time for display at the exhibition venue. The products were sold successful, and the buyer received new orders from his local customers at the fair.

## Conclusion

The turn-taking analysis in this study reveals that interaction in the initial contact phase aims at building rapport and introducing each other as part of the preparation for further negotiations. It is natural at this stage to find all the speech acts concerning giving information, asking for customer's needs and expressing goodwill being used more frequently by the seller given the role of a service provider (Koester 2006, Paltridge 2006). The first stage of the negotiation functions interpersonally and involves more than one seller as noted by Pinet (2011: 54). It is the second phase however that the deal is actually made and this is the only stage at which the two main negotiators meet face-to-face in a one-to-one turn taking pattern. However, in the shipping phase when problems occur, the conversation turns to many-to-many and directive speech acts play an important role in seeking cooperation from people concerned in solving the problems.

The increasing frequency of IMMs from the contact phase to in-business negotiation phase seems to suggest closer relationship between the buyer and seller as the communication continues, in line with Charles' (1996) patterns of progression in relationship from a corporate level to a more personalized level and Jensen's (2009) findings showing a reduction of institutionalized *we* and an increase in use of the first person pronoun '*I*' during the course of email communication. Note that the seller's exclusive *we* used in the second phase (e.g. *our products*) was converted to the inclusive *we* in the third phase (e.g. *our concerns*), and that most IMMs especially attitude markers (e.g. *wonderful, happy*) and engagement markers (e.g. *could you ...*) increased from the first to the second phase.

While Jensen's (2009) findings ended at the in-business phase, with no miscommunication or problems involved, this study extended the findings further to cover email communication during the shipping process, the phase at which we observe noticeable drops in three of the five types of IMMs due to logistics problems in delivery of the merchandise. This suggests that the use of IMMs cannot be viewed under the progression in time dimension alone, but contexts in which they appear; that is, whether the communication is smooth and contextually stable or aimed at solving problems. When problems occur, IMMs play completely different roles. Upon reduction of engagement markers in the third phase, self-mentions increased but they are used in different functions. While the seller's use of first person pronoun at the in-business negotiation phase occurs with lexical mental verbs such as *believe, know, hope* to express mutual understanding, her use at the shipping phase appears with modal auxiliaries and doing verbs as in '*I'm going to ship your order ...*' in reporting her physical actions taken in solving the problem.

One important factor that needs to be considered in business negotiations is bargaining power which is dynamic and reversible depending on situation (Brown & Levinson 1987: 78). In this study, the buyer is the one who initiates the transaction. The buyer, when interviewed, admitted that the seller is dominant in this negotiation as he is in need of the seller's new products to be launched at a trade fair so he does not negotiate much. It

would be interesting to see what the findings would be should the person initiating this transaction be the seller. Observation of turn-taking, speech acts and IMMs when viewed together can help us to see not only the business relationship but also the power of negotiation between the two business negotiators at different stages, and this can only be viewed when more case studies are conducted in the future. Certainly, more case studies are needed in the study of business interaction. This study is conducted within a limit of one case study with its intention to investigate some selected aspects of interactions, so its findings should not be overgeneralized.

With regard to pedagogical implications, it is hoped that this integrated study of interactional linguistic devices in business communication give light to business English instructors and course developers. Findings from this study should give ideas on what kind of contexts triggers certain types of speech acts and interactional linguistic features. Learners need to be aware of the interactional linguistic tools available in business communication, and be aware of the contexts when these tools can be used appropriately. They too need the chance to exercise them in the right contexts.

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