

## BOOK REVIEW

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### THE NEW AND THE FAMILIAR IN DIGITAL BUSINESS DISCOURSE

**Erika Darics (Ed.).** DIGITAL BUSINESS DISCOURSE (2015), London: Palgrave Macmillan. 274 pp., ISBN 978-1-137-40556-2 (HB).

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This edited volume consists of the editor's introduction and 12 individual chapters. The chapters are grouped into three parts: new technologies and new modes of communication which are discussed in Chapters 1 to 4; new conventions associated with the new modes of communication discussed in Chapters 5 to 8; and theoretical and methodological approaches to digital business discourse in Chapters 9 to 12. The content of the chapters will be reviewed next and followed by comments on the book and some concepts in it.

Chapter 1, written by Camilla Vásquez, deals with interactive strategies that are used in online consumer reviews to include their readers as active participants in the dyadic production of discourse. By drawing on 1,000 online reviews sampled from five different websites, the study tracks a range of linguistic resources for engaging their readers such as discourse markers, imperative structure and second-person pronouns, and questions and answers. While this discursive analysis identifies a number of interesting features of online consumer reviews, the analysis and results could be more helpfully presented, for example, by classifying the data according to the topic, the purpose, the nature of the message such as positive or negative, and reporting the choice of discursive resources in relation to the relevant contextual factors.

In Chapter 2 Katerina Girginova deals with the discursive construction of business organisations in the private Tweeting practices of ten CEOs. The 2086 Tweets of the CEOs are found to relate to their organisations and are classified into five flows which are content sharing, activity coordination, membership negotiation, institutional positioning, and self structuring in the ascending order of the percentage points of each flow. Through these apparently private Tweeting practices, the CEOs exhibit images of their organisations and their Tweets are therefore constitutive of their organisations. This chapter also has an interesting discussion of certain keywords in the Tweets such as “great” which conveys a positive attitude, and women in society and the workplace which reflect societal reality and values.

Chapter 3, written by Kris M. Markman, reports on two simulations of persuasive interaction in the workplace via instant messaging. Users of instant messaging break their utterances down into multiple components and transmit them in successive chunks. What is interesting about such utterance chunking is that each chunk as a grammatical structure is linked to the next grammatically. This technology-enabled feature of instant messaging allows users to create a speech-like style of interaction and hold the floor in the interaction for various rhetorical purposes. It would be useful to compare the way successive chunks or transmission units as they are referred to in this chapter are organised in instant messaging with the possible completion points in naturally occurring conversations (Brown & Yule, 1983) to explore the discursive management of turn-taking in instant messaging.

In Chapter 4, Nives Lenassi focuses on register, passive voice, and verb forms in business emails written by Italian native speakers. On the basis of a corpus of 275 authentic Italian business emails, she demonstrates that while the body of an email may be formal using conventional written expressions and patterns to transmit the business message, the salutations and closings are quite often informal in the sense that spoken language features are used. The study also reports a heavy use of passive voice and nominalisation as a means of achieving formality and impersonality in business emails. Verb forms are also found to be crucial in Italian business emails, in particular when the message is complicated. For example, emails that are written to negotiate conflict situations or promote certain activities tend to be longer and employ a larger variety of verb forms/tenses. This study attests to the complexity of Italian business emails and the importance of linguistic accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness in significant business transactions, which is highly relevant information to teaching and training in business communication. It should be noted that while extralinguistic factors are mentioned as contributors to linguistic choices, their link can be spelt out more clearly, for example, topic/transaction and its effect on the choice of register, voice, and tense.

Chapter 5 by Karianne Skovholt explores the discursive construction of leadership in virtual teams by zooming in on a team leader’s email interactions

with her team members and out-group partners at a Norwegian company. The team leader promotes trust and in-group solidarity through her choice of positive addressing devices, metaphors, and emoticons. She issues her directives to her team members mainly by means of indirect speech acts such as expressing them as declaratives, wishes, and hopes rather than imperatives. In contrast, she uses more direct speech acts such as interrogatives when emailing requests to out-group co-workers. Notable in the chapter is an explicit comparison with research on traditional modes of business communication, for example, leadership in face-to-face workplace conversations, to highlight the impact of the new mode (email) on workplace communication, including emoticons as a new resource for mitigating face threat in speech acts. This awareness is shared by the following three chapters and thus resonates with the focus of the section on new conventions of digital-mediated communication.

In the co-authored Chapter 6, Bernie C. N. Mak and Carmen Lee deal with swearing in instant messaging among co-workers in Hong Kong trading firms. Unlike the leadership discourse in Chapter 5 where power is enacted more implicitly, the superiors seem to project their power by using swearwords in English (their second language) along with issuing directives to their subordinates in task-directed instant messaging. Swearing is also used among peers in relational and social talk. By swearing at an outsider, peers release their emotions and indicate the sharing of those emotions. What makes swearing in instant messaging different from face-to-face swearing is that the former seems to be strategic and intentional while the latter spontaneous and accidental because swearers need to type their swearwords and emoticons on the keyboard. The proposal in the chapter that swearing be interpreted as a device to strengthen colleagues' mutual engagement in the community of practice where it is used is also worth noting. Swearing may thus perform both transactional and relational functions in the back-stage of the workplace.

In Chapter 7 Kristy Beers Fägersten deals with an example of crisis discourse and management on a corporate intranet forum. In addition to providing the forum users a space for airing their views, the digital platform also allows them to use emoticons to mitigate their speech acts such as disagreements and to use approval postings to feed back on their colleagues' posts. The latter function is helpful for wider participation, especially by less vocal users. The chapter concludes with an interesting discussion of the forum activities which may be germane to a face-to-face meeting, thus invoking the concept of interdiscursivity (Bhatia, 2004).

Valerie Creelman in Chapter 8 shifts the focus from internal to external communication and the impact of online communication on brand image. On the basis of a principled comparison of the original post by a popular athletic wear company in its blog announcing a recall of its faulty pants with customers' landslide negative responses, she demonstrates how the company's rhetorical strategies fail to sooth customer discontent even though they have followed current crisis management and image restoration theories. For one thing, the

original post underestimates customers' background knowledge that is constitutive of the crisis. For another, it overlooks the weight of the prior texts that are archived in the blogosphere, including the company's earlier texts and the original post and other customers' posts. Through referencing and quoting the prior texts, customers amplify their discontent to render the company's crisis management counterproductive. The chapter makes a convincing call on companies to carefully consider the dynamics of digital communication and provide effectively proactive webcare.

Chapter 9 begins the third section which concerns theoretical and methodological approaches to digital business discourse. In an attempt to explore how companies respond to digital culture, Steven A. Edelson, Philip Kim, Ron Scott, and Julie M. Szendrey propose the construct of digital emotional literacy (DEL), which is defined as "the ability to perceive, understand, and manage the emotions of both senders and receivers in a digital media context" (p. 197). They also argue that DEL can be learned and applied in a number of functional business areas such as marketing, management information systems, and human resource management.

Chapter 10, co-authored by Craig T. Maier and David DeJuliis, proposes adapting communicology as an approach to researching digital business discourse. In this approach, digital business discourse is regarded as a "human practice" rather than a "purely technological process" (p. 209). This approach involves the researcher facilitating the practitioner in describing their experiences of using digital business discourse (description), reducing the narrated experiences to their essential elements (reduction), and then interpreting their meaning (interpretation). Communicology can thus enable professionals to be critically aware of their lived experiences to improve their productivity and wellbeing and researchers to attend to the human in the digital-mediated world.

In Chapter 11 María Luisa Carrió-Pastor attempts to illustrate a move-analysis of business emails by Indian speakers of English. The data for the study are authentic and the rhetorical moves it generates are interesting. One big issue with the study is the need to clarify the criteria for identifying rhetorical moves in the data. Another one is the comparison of its results with those in other studies, in particular Bhatia (1993). As there is no mention of whether the emails are examples of promotional genres, which Bhatia (1993) illustrates, it is difficult to be convinced by the results the study reports.

Finally, Chapter 12, written by the editor Erika Darics, concludes the volume with the "deanex method" (p. 250) for researching digital business discourse. The method consists of three stages, namely, deconstruction, analysis, and explanation, and focuses on surface textual features that function as contextualisation cues. The deconstruction stage basically involves identifying the contextualisation cues. The analysis stage is performed by revising the original cues and comparing the revision with the original to gauge the effect. The explanation stage is to explain the transactional and relational functions of the cues in the specific communication. This

chapter also illustrates the deanex method by successfully applying it to two instant messaging conversations. More details seem necessary for implementing the second stage in real practice as producing a revision requires noticing textual features that contextualise the interaction, which may not always be apparent for a non-initiated researcher or practitioner.

On the whole, this volume provides very insightful information on various new modes of communication in our digital age. It is both reassuring and inspiring. Reassuring because all the 12 individual studies reviewed above show that digital business discourse research has been building on, appropriating, and extending existing theoretical concepts and methods and identifying similarities to more traditional modes such as face-to-face conversation and business letters. It is also inspiring in that we are urged to engage in more theoretical discussions of the new modes against the backdrop of current genre and multimodality studies (Sindoni, 2015). The range of new features identified for the new modes of business communication requires us to adapt and create new approaches and constructs to describe, analyse, and explain them, in particular with reference to their transactional as well as relational functions (Koester, 2010). As Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini, a renowned researcher of business discourse studies, rightly points out in her foreword, this volume has played a significant role in taking us into the world of digital business discourse.

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