The Language of Business Meetings
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The Language of Business Meetings

Michael Handford
University of Tokyo
For Mayu
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Series editors’ preface

This book makes a substantial contribution to the growing body of research on business communication. It uses a unique spoken corpus, the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC), to study the language of business meetings.

Business meetings are an important part of ordinary working life for many people, and these meetings take place, increasingly frequently, in English. They are not the easiest of situations to study. Meetings are often confidential, may include a large number of people, and frequently involve discussion of people, events and values that are referred to in inexplicit terms. They also vary considerably depending on factors such as the size of the company, the purpose of the meeting and the relationships of the people involved. Obtaining recordings of meetings, then, necessitates a personal relationship with the organization concerned, both to establish trust and to gain an understanding of the issues and relationships that are important in each meeting event. It is difficult to satisfy these requirements and still collect the large quantity of varied data that a detailed study of business meetings needs.

As principal researcher on the CANBEC project, Dr Michael Handford succeeded in collecting one million words from a variety of business contexts. This is a corpus large enough to make authoritative statements about language frequency, but small enough for the author to have familiarity with each of the texts in it and the relationship with the producers of the texts, as mentioned above. This dual perspective is a key feature of this book. Dr Handford is able to investigate the corpus as a large collection of pieces of language, treating them as independent of their original contexts. Looking at the corpus in this way, he obtains frequency lists of words and clusters, and by comparing CANBEC with a more general corpus of spoken English (The Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse English, or CANCODE) also identifies the items that are the relatively most frequent in the business meetings. Each identified word and cluster then
forms the basis for further study, with its role in achieving particular discursive strategies identified from its use in multiple contexts. The focus on what is typical allows also the identification of the unusual. Creative language use, which is a theme in current approaches to spoken discourse, forms the basis for one chapter (Chapter 7).

Dr Handford also treats the corpus as a group of individual discourse events, each situated in a social context, and undertakes a qualitative interpretation of a large number of individual episodes. He notes that, in such meetings, goals and relationships are not static categories but are constantly shifting. An approach that is attuned to subtle changes in footing is a necessary corollary to the quantitative work. The two perspectives intersect under the themes of interpersonal and relational meanings and the indexing of discursive strategies.

The book ends with a chapter on teaching, and here also Dr Handford takes a refreshingly personal stand. Rather than holding up native speaker interaction as the model for all non-native speakers, he deconstructs the notions of ‘expert’ and ‘novice’ speaker, noting that expertise in business or technical matters may intersect with degrees of language proficiency in the language in interesting and often unexpected ways.

The Language of Business Meetings will be of interest to researchers, teachers and materials writers concerned with the language of business and language in the workplace, as well as those concerned with researching the interface between corpus and discourse studies. Offering a rich and detailed study of an important area of Applied Linguistics, Dr Handford’s book is a valuable addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics series.

Carol A. Chapelle and Susan Hunston
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In writing this book, I have come to profoundly appreciate the following cliché: ‘I am responsible for all its faults, but whatever value the work has is thanks to the help, education and encouragement of others’. While I was highly fortunate to be asked to develop the CANBEC corpus, the corpus itself is very much the brainchild of Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy. I thank them for allowing me to be part of their work, and continue to learn from their rigour, stamina and enthusiastic openness of mind towards spoken discourse.

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Transcription conventions

Dialogue
...
noticeable pause or break of less than one second within a turn
=
sound abruptly cut off, e.g. false start
+
speaker’s turn breaks and continues
[ ]
words in these brackets indicate transcriber’s comments
()
pauses of one second or longer (the number of seconds is indicated)

Speakers
S1
speaker
S1?
transcriber’s best guess at speaker
SM
unidentified male speaker
SF
unidentified female speaker

Features of speech
gotta
 got to
gonna
 going to
wanna
 want to
d’ya
 do you
wouldn’ta
 wouldn’t have
dunno
 don’t know
cos
 because
aggro
 aggravation
yep
 yes
t’
 the
’em
 them
’specially
 especially

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