1 *CANBEC: Corpus and context*

The term 'business meetings' can provoke many reactions, some of
them not very positive. This seems especially true for those who spend
a considerable amount of their working lives talking, listening and
not listening in meetings; and yet Boden's (1994: 8) assertion that
talk, and especially talk in meetings, is 'the lifeblood of organizations'
still seems valid, despite recent advances in electronic communication.
Managers regularly have meetings with subordinates to review, check,
delegate and plan tasks and duties. Colleagues regularly meet to solve
or defer problems, and sometimes to create them. Representatives
from different companies meet at all stages of the inter-organizational
relationship, and face-to-face introductions and discussions are still
widely seen as a requisite step in developing such a relationship. This
book is an exploration of the language people use in business meetings,
and how this language may relate to and constitute the immediate
and wider contexts[1] in which the meeting unfolds. In other words,
it examines how people in commercial organizations communicate
'in order to get their work done', that is, 'business discourse as social
action in business contexts' (Bargiela-Chiappini et al., 2007: 3).

As Bargiela-Chiappini et al.'s (ibid.) comprehensive survey of the
field of business discourse shows, this is a growing, important and
exciting area of interdisciplinary analysis. The contribution this book
hopes to make is to show how a fully transcribed, ethnographically
informed corpus of real business meetings can be described and inter-
preted using insights and methods from discourse analysis, not least
in the inferential extraction of recurrent meeting practices and their
realization through language. Other disciplines used in the interpreta-
tion of the data include applied linguistics, corpus linguistics, genre
analysis, conversation analysis, pragmatics, linguistic anthropology,
and various aspects of the umbrella term 'business studies', including
management studies and organization studies. The findings presented
in this book show some of the constraining and enabling language and
conventions that are repeated across different business meetings by
different speakers in different businesses. CANBEC, the Cambridge
and Nottingham Business English Corpus, is the corpus that will be
examined in detail over the forthcoming chapters.

2   *The Language of Business Meetings*

CANBEC comprises various genres of business discourse, but this study will analyse the 912,734 fully transcribed words of authentic internal and external meeting data, taken from 64 meetings recorded in 26 companies in the UK, continental Europe and Japan, including several multinationals as well as many smaller enterprises. Data were provided by the manufacturing industry (for example, makers of pharmaceuticals, vehicles, industrial equipment and foam), the service industry (including hotel and pub chains), the IT industry and the financial industry. Meeting topics include sales, marketing, technical issues, procedure, logistics and strategy. The majority of speakers are from the UK (226); there are 35 speakers from other countries, and approximately 10 per cent of the speakers in CANBEC use English as an L2. Most of the recordees are male (79 per cent), and a majority are either upper or middle managers. A more detailed description of the corpus is given in the following sections.

Throughout this study, the meeting portion of CANBEC will be analysed in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How can meetings be classified as a genre, and what are the characteristics of this genre?
- What are the statistically significant words and multiword clusters in meetings?
- What role does such language play in the construction of meetings?
- What practices does this language seem to invoke?
- What are the important interpersonal language features in meetings?
- What language is used in problem-solving, hypothesizing and evaluating?
- What turn-taking practices seem prevalent in meetings?
- How can these findings inform teaching and the design of teaching materials?

In addition to these questions which are dealt with in succeeding chapters, several themes run through the book. These include issues of power, obligation, face and speaker goals. Another theme concerns how business-meeting discourse compares to other registers, particularly everyday English. How language relates to the communities of practice in which it is used and signals membership is also a recurring theme. For example, in extract 1.1 between the sales director (S2) and a trainee sales manager (S1), the director is discussing the difference between inexperienced and experienced sales staff. In order to contextualize extracts, relevant background information on the meeting in question and on the participants is provided for all meeting extracts (see section 1.3 of this chapter).

(**1.1**)

> *Internal meeting*
> Relationship of speakers: manager–subordinate
> Purpose: giving and receiving information/advice
> Topic: sales

S2: +because (2 seconds) I suppose with more junior sales people they're afraid you know they think "Oh I've gotta give discount you know because otherwise I won't get the deal".

S1: Hmm.

S2: And= but I think if you hold your own (1 second) as a quality supplier+

S1: Hmm.

(1 second)

S2: +erm … people have respect for it.

The extract is interesting from a language perspective, because it shows S2 fulfilling his role as a manager through the expository evaluation of the difference between staff members within the company's community of sales staff in terms of how they communicate with clients.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the collection of the data, the constituency of the corpus, the transcription and anonymization processes, and the issue of size and generalizability.

1.1 Data collection

CANBEC, like CANCODE (the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse English[2]), was conceived, proposed and is jointly directed by Professors Ronald Carter and Michael McCarthy at the University of Nottingham. Both corpora form part of CIC (the Cambridge International Corpus), which at the time of writing totals more than a billion words. CANCODE was a unique corpus at the time of its creation, because it was to contain only spoken data from a range of mostly informal contexts, and the intention with CANBEC was to develop a smaller corpus of purely spoken business discourse. Whereas CANCODE totals five million words, the target number of words for CANBEC was set at one million. Both projects were funded and supported by Cambridge University Press, with whom copyright for the data resides.

In 2001, I was employed as the sole corpus compiler, and was responsible for arranging and collecting the appropriate amount and

type of data, organizing and carrying out transcription and anonymization of the data and developing a categorized database.

The most challenging part of the CANBEC enterprise was persuading companies to allow recording, with roughly 95 per cent of companies who were approached refusing permission. Companies were especially concerned about confidentiality. Despite written assurances and agreements guaranteeing thorough, systematic anonymization, most companies refused to allow microphones in their buildings. In other cases, feedback and a training session on effective communication were offered in exchange for permission to record, but this was also often rejected. Occasionally, after recordings had been made, the company asked to have the tapes back, because it was felt the conversations were too sensitive, or involved potentially illegal advice or decisions. Despite these issues, mainly through personal contacts, or contacts of contacts, the corpus was successfully compiled.

Cambridge University Press and Michael McCarthy, Ronald Carter and Svenja Adolphs at the University of Nottingham gave the following guidelines for what would be an appropriate sampling strategy:

- Recordings should be from a range of different private and publicly owned companies (for example, multinational corporations) in terms of size and type of business, including the manufacturing, service and financial sectors.
- There should be no recordings from NPOs or NGOs, public or government-funded institutions, such as universities or hospitals, nor should there be communication between professionals and laypeople, as between a lawyer and client. This was partly because such recordings already form part of CANCODE, and partly because these organizations are generally not profit-oriented to the same degree as 'traditional' businesses.
- Recordings should involve a range of speakers in terms of position, job, age and background.
- The majority of speakers should be British L1-English speakers, but up to 20 per cent could be 'non-native' English-speaking employees of companies to allow for comparisons.
- Recordings should mainly be from the UK, given that CANBEC is complementary to CANCODE. A further reason concerned the costs of travelling overseas to record data.
- Up to 20 per cent of the data could be from academic business contexts, such as business lectures in a university business department[3].
- Relevant background information about the speakers and their companies should be collected.

- The audio recordings must be carefully transcribed according to Cambridge University Press transcription codes, and fully anonymized so as to protect the speaker and the institution's identity.
- The use of video recordings was rejected because of the potential intrusiveness in meetings, and the probability that companies and participants would be unwilling to be recorded. There are also obvious anonymization and confidentiality issues with video data.

Another thorny issue concerning the actual recording procedure was whether the person making the recording should be present at the recording, or whether the equipment should be handed over to the participants who would then switch the machine on and return the tapes to the researcher. The latter approach was the one adopted by the team for the *Language in the Workplace* corpus project (LWP) in New Zealand, which provided the data for Holmes and Stubbe's (2003) book *Power and Politeness in the Workplace*. The approach chosen for CANBEC was to have the researcher present in the room, looking after the equipment and taking notes on the proceedings, while trying to be as anonymous as possible.

Discussing the Observer's Paradox, Labov (1972) reasons that the presence of a researcher constrains the production of language being researched, yet it is necessary for the researcher to systematically observe the unfolding discourse in order to fully understand it. However, unlike Labov's research, during CANBEC recordings the researcher was not actively involved in the discourse, and the presence of a microphone on the table during a meeting 'is not likely to cause much consternation' (Farr, 2005: 134) in our technological world. Furthermore, it was reasoned that having the researcher present would secure data which was more complete. In the absence of the researcher, the participants might not turn the equipment on until a meeting had formally started, thereby missing any crucial pre-meeting discourse (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005), or they might forget to turn the tape over, or they might turn it off if some delicate topic were to be discussed, and then forget to turn it on again. These problems did actually arise on the few occasions when the researcher was not present and responsibility for the recording was handed over to the employees of the company, and have been reported as systematic issues of the approach taken during the LWP research project (Stubbe, 2001). As has been reported by Duranti (1997), on asking participants about the effect of having an observer present, all responded that they forgot after a few minutes that he or she was present. It may be the case that this is a feature of observing goal-driven institutional discourse, in that the participants focus on achieving their goals, and

therefore the presence of the researcher becomes irrelevant to their task in hand.

Probably the greatest advantage of having a silent witness present at the CANBEC recordings was that any points of interest or possible confusion for the analyst which arose in the course of the real-time dialogue could be addressed in a subsequent follow-up session with an available and suitable participant. While it was also possible to contact participants via email after listening to the recordings or reading their transcripts, the danger here was that there was sometimes a considerable time lag. Therefore, the point in question may have been forgotten by the participants. Such points included non-linguistic issues, but more usually specialized terms, most often nouns that were industry- or company-specific, and also what seemed to be deliberately non-specific, highly deictic uses of language, for example the turn by the chair in extract 1.2.

(**1.2**)

Internal meeting
Relationship of speakers: peer
Purpose: task-/problem-oriented; planning
Topic: technical; procedure

S1:   We just find it very hard to you know agree that that's possible with the people in this room so why don't have a chat afterwards with with you know who and er we'll sort that out.

By asking follow-up questions it was possible to clarify such details, but confidentiality, a respect for the individual's and the company's privacy, and the possibility of being seen to be prying also had to be borne in mind.

A related issue concerned obtaining more general background information. Some companies were happy to provide information on the company and the speech activity itself – for example, agendas, relevant emails, company management structures, organizational charts and strategic company goals – whereas others were not. While such documents usually cannot be reproduced in this study because of confidentiality issues, they have provided ethnographic information which allows for a thicker description of the data. Obtaining speaker information in terms of age, position, seniority in the company, first language and so on was not difficult, and generally the participants filled the information sheets out themselves or jointly with the researcher. Participants were also encouraged to contribute to decisions about meeting topic, purpose and speaker position in the

company, thereby ensuring a level of emic input in the categorization process. This provided an insider's view of what was happening, which would not have occurred had the researcher been solely responsible for choosing the categories.

Such contextual information allows for a level of interpretation that a purely quantitative approach would not allow; in the field of business communication, solely quantitative approaches have been seen as inadequate in accounting for what is going on (Murphy, 1998). Indeed, to the uninformed outside observer, business discourse can range from seeming indeterminate to outright unintelligible. The issue of context will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

1.2 Corpus constituency

This section describes the companies, meetings, speakers and number of words that make up the CANBEC corpus. Figure 1.1 shows that a wide variety of company sizes was involved in the project, ranging from multinationals with over 50,000 employees to small businesses with a few employees. In terms of the types of business the companies were involved in, the following industries are most represented: manufacturing, pharmaceutical, IT, leisure, finance and consultancy. The total number of 26 companies who participated were located mostly

Figure 1.1   Company size
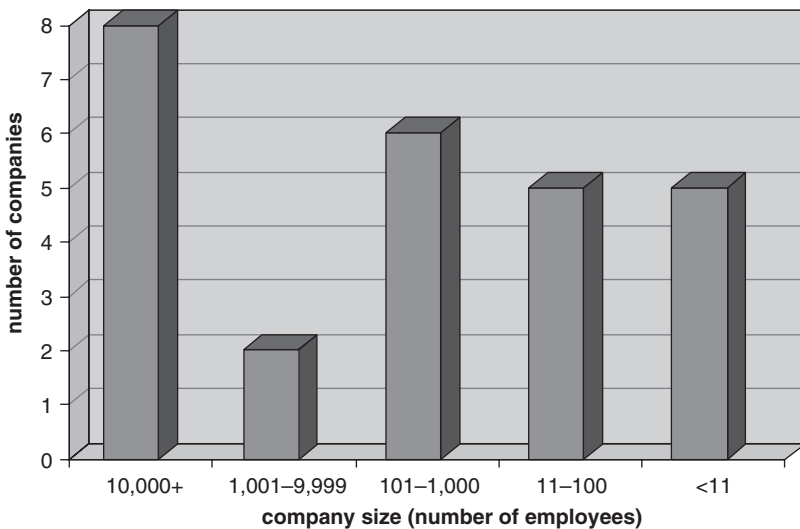
within the UK, although data were also collected in Japan, Ireland and continental Europe.

For all meetings, in addition to company size, type and location, information was collected on the departments where the recordings were made, the date of the recording, and whether the meeting was spontaneous or scheduled, face-to-face or otherwise. The number of speakers present and their individual profiles (for instance, their age, first language, level in the company, title and department) were consistently noted. As stated above, the majority of speakers in the corpus are British (226 out of a total of 261), although the non-British speakers are from 16 other countries, representing each continent of the globe.

One of the distinguishing features of CANBEC is the amount of external (inter-organizational) data, as the lack of such data in other comparable corpora attests. This totals just under 250,000 words, while the internal (intra-organizational) data comes to just over 670,000 words. Although parity between the two data types would have been ideal, the presence of both – even in unequal quantities – allows for interesting comparisons and discussions. Section 1.3 outlines the three contextual aspects that are arguably the most useful and relevant in understanding meetings, and are therefore provided for each corpus extract in the book: the relationship of the speakers, the purpose of the meeting and the topic of the meeting.

1.3 Contextual information

Relationship of the speakers

The relationship of the speakers in business meetings is often the most relevant contextual factor in understanding unfolding business-meeting discourse. In internal meetings, which are categorized as either manager–subordinate or peer meetings, the relationship was decided by considering the goal of the meeting and the institutionally sanctioned power relation between the speakers. This means that, while meetings tended to be categorized according to the status of the speakers, the social action being performed was also relevant. For example, in extract 1.3, a managing director and owner of the company (S3) is having a meeting with a technical manager (S2). Without looking at the data, we may assume that this is a manager–subordinate relationship. However, the managing director is asking advice from the technical expert about costing services, and therefore their official positions within the company are not as relevant as might be initially expected. This meeting was therefore categorized as

a peer meeting. Peer meetings would also usually involve colleagues of the same or similar management status.

(**1.3**)

Internal meeting
Relationship of speakers: peer
Purpose: giving and receiving information/advice
Topic: technical

S3: But if that's daily then you need to do+
S2: [clears throat]
S3: +per per twenty four hour period.
(3 seconds)
S2: Yeah.
S3: Isn't it.
S2: Okay.
S3: Is that right? Am I getting my maths right?
S2: Yeah.
S3: Because I don't wanna screw up on this one.
S2: You'd have to look at the graph at exactly the right time.

For relationships in external meetings,[4] the contractual status of the two companies was interpreted as the key distinguishing factor. This distinction divides the data into either contractually bound or non-contractually bound relationships. Contractually bound relationships involve two organizations which have a formal, legally binding agreement concerning the nature of their business. In non-contractually bound meetings there is no legally binding contract. Instead, their business may be on a one-off or ad hoc basis, or the meeting may be exploratory, with one or both businesses looking to check the viability of starting a formal, contractually bound relationship. Both relationships may take the form of a partnership or alliance, in which the individual parties are joint principals in the business, or it may be a client–vendor (or subcontractor) type of relationship, in which the client will tend to direct or make requests to the vendor. A related distinction is that of Charles' (1996) analysis of sales negotiations, between established-relationship negotiations and new-relationship negotiations. The relationship between participants in this latter type closely resembles that of certain non-contractually bound meetings in terms of being new or ad hoc, although Charles' distinction refers solely to sales negotiations, whereas CANBEC involves other meeting purposes and topics as well (for example, 'planning' or 'reviewing').

While categorization of the relationship of speakers is extremely useful, it is essentially a heuristic device that imposes a structure on a dynamic, changing reality. This reality may change in the course of a speaker turn, and also over the long term. Gee et al. (1996: 68) argue that the ideology behind modern western corporations 'blatantly blurs traditional identities e.g. between "workers" and "managers"'. In inter-organizational discourse, the identities of brands, companies, manufacturers, subcontractors, distributors and clients have similarly become blurred over time (Klein, 1999). Nevertheless, differences are apparent in the actions business people are sanctioned to perform, and the language employed to perform them, which can be interpreted from a relationship perspective.

Meeting purpose

It is possible to categorize meetings in terms of purpose, goal or function in several ways (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 63), as was indeed the case with the participants' feedback on the meetings. It should be noted, however, that this was the most problematic of the various categorizations to apply to the data, and a high degree of fuzziness seems inevitable. The classification developed by Holmes and Stubbe (ibid.) outlines three main meeting types:

- planning, or prospective, meetings (forward-oriented)
- reporting, or retrospective, meetings (backward-oriented)
- task-oriented, or problem-solving, meetings (present-oriented)

While most meetings in CANBEC would fit easily within this categorization, certain external meetings in particular would not. For instance, buying, selling and promoting a product, and exploratory meetings, which often involve giving and receiving information and/ or advice, are arguably supposition-oriented, in that they are largely concerned with hypothetical situations and possible outcomes (such as the potential development of a relationship between the companies). Therefore, they can resemble an early or pre-stage of negotiations, a form of communication usually associated with inter-organizational discourse. Interestingly though, participants themselves never used the word 'negotiation' to categorize any recorded encounter in CANBEC. To further complicate matters, many internal meetings, particularly between managers (or peers – see below), exhibit characteristics akin to negotiations, in that they involve the resolution, or negotiation, of conflicting interests, at least for part of the meeting. This is also compatible with Charles and Charles' (1999: 80) definition of a negotiation as 'a situation where the power relationship is symmetrical