

DOCTORAL THESIS

A discourse analysis of trade negotiations

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A Discourse Analysis of Trade Negotiations

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Abstract

Despite their centrality in business communication, trade negotiations have not received much attention from linguists, especially the emic studies that take a conversation analysis (CA) approach. Guided by the theoretical and methodological principles of CA, and based on the previous studies of social interactions and linguistic politeness, the author studies the negotiation structure and linguistic strategies which display the nature of trade negotiations and language use in institutional contexts. The research aims to identify the participation frameworks, collaborative completions, linguistic manifestations (e.g. the sociopragmatic preference for making request, and metaphorical application) and their association with interpersonal and business relationships in trade negotiations (between business strangers, friends and partners).

The findings provide significant insights into the understanding of the interrelationship between interpersonal relationship and business communication in the Chinese business contexts. The Chinese trade negotiators use different negotiation patterns and linguistic strategies to realize their various negotiation aims under different relationships. As the interpersonal relationship develops, Chinese business negotiators of varied relationships prefer to (1) apply more social-related interacting elements discursively in trade negotiations by reiterating them, extending them, and even overlapping them with other work-related elements, and the interaction patterns are getting more complicated and less formatted; (2) apply more politeness strategies and involve more facework in requests, and the generic preferences for politeness and (in)directness in requests are not necessarily related in a linear fashion or ranked intrinsically; and (3) apply more metaphors as various politeness strategies in speech acts with preferred patterns, regulating and framing the politeness strategies largely by using various linguistic forms. In trade negotiations, business negotiators take up different social and institutional roles and appropriate linguistic devices to act according to the business contexts and interpersonal situations. Generally, four central elements integrate with the Chinese communication and business politeness: being relevant, being appropriate, being contextually sensitive, and being felicitously sociable. In a relative way, the Chinese conversational structure and politeness strategies are characterized as a dynamic and developmental flux with low-predictability.

These findings improve the traditional assumptions on social interactions and linguistic politeness theories. The research should be seen as a pioneer one, and more research work in the same direction can be conducted in order to have a thorough understanding of language and culture.

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