

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.

Table of Contents

Contents	Page
Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix
List of Abbreviation	x
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
1.1 The Social Background	1
1.2 The Research Background	3
1.3 Research Objectives	7
1.4 The Rationale of the Study	8
1.5 Summary	10
Chapter 2 Literature Review and Descriptive Framework	12
2.1 Relevant Research on Business Negotiation	12
2.1.1 Definition of Negotiation	13
2.1.2 Current Discourse Studies of Business Negotiations	15
2.1.3 Current Studies of Interpersonal Communication	18
2.2 Relevant Studies of Negotiation Structure and Patterns	21
2.2.1 Prescriptive and Descriptive Models	21
2.2.2 Social Conversational Structure and Speech Elements	24
2.2.2.1 Conversational Structure and Patterns	24
2.2.2.2 Conversational Speech Elements	28
2.3 Negotiation Language and Culture	29
2.3.1 Business Negotiation Language	30
2.3.1.1 The Studies of Request	32
2.3.1.2 The Studies of Metaphor	36
2.3.2 Politeness in Communication	39
2.3.2.1 The Studies of Politeness Theory	39
2.3.2.2 Brown and Levinson's Politeness Strategies	42
2.3.2.3 The Studies of Interpersonal Politeness System: Western vs. Asian	44
2.3.3 Chinese Business Contexts	48
2.3.3.1 Chinese Business Culture	49

2.3.3.2 Chinese Relationship (Guanxi)	51
2.3.3.3 The Key Values of Facework and Politeness in the Chinese Society	53
2.4 Summary	57
Chapter 3 Research Scope and Methodology	58
3.1 Introduction	58
3.2 Research Scope	58
3.3 Research Methodology	60
3.3.1 The Data and Transcription Conventions	61
3.3.2 Subject Selection and Recording Procedures	63
3.3.3 Analysis Procedure	65
3.4 The Division of Interpersonal Relationships in Trade Negotiations	66
3.5 Summary	69
Chapter 4 The Structure of Interpersonal Trade Negotiations	70
4.1 Introduction	70
4.2 The Global Structure of Trade Negotiations	71
4.2.1 Opening Stage	72
4.2.1.1 Salutation	73
4.2.1.2 Greeting	78
4.2.1.3 Introduction	82
4.2.1.4 Seat Allocation	87
4.2.1.5 Drink Serving	89
4.2.1.6 Small Talk	93
4.2.2 Negotiating Stage	100
4.2.2.1 Business Initiation	100
4.2.2.2 Information Inquiry	105
4.2.2.3 Problem Resolution	110
4.2.3 Closing Stage	116
4.2.3.1 Opening-up Closure	117
4.2.3.2 Ending	119
4.3 The Conversational Structure of Trade Negotiations	122
4.4 The Impact of Interpersonal Relationship on Trade Negotiations	126
4.5 Summary	129
Chapter 5 Requests and Politeness Strategies in Trade Negotiations	131
5.1 Introduction	131

5.2 Requests and Politeness Strategy	132
5.2.1 Requests and Politeness Strategies in Trade Negotiations	132
5.2.1.1 Bald on Record	133
5.2.1.2 Positive Politeness	138
5.2.1.3 Negative Politeness	143
5.2.1.4 Off-record Politeness	149
5.2.1.5 The Dynamics of Politeness Strategies in Trade Negotiations	156
5.3 Generic Preference for Business Requests and Politeness Strategies	164
5.3.1 General Distribution of Politeness Strategies in Business Requests	165
5.3.2 Interpersonal Variation in Request Strategies and Politeness	167
5.3.2.1 The Linguistic and Politeness Preference of the BS Group	168
5.3.2.2 The Linguistic and Politeness Preference of the BF Group	171
5.3.2.3 The Linguistic and Politeness Preference of the BP Group	173
5.4 The Impact of Interpersonal Relationship on Business Requests and Interpersonal Politeness System	176
5.5 Summary	179
Chapter 6 Metaphors as Politeness Strategies in Trade Negotiations	181
6.1 Introduction	181
6.2 Metaphors as Politeness Strategies	182
6.2.1 FTAs	183
6.2.2 Metaphors as Politeness Strategies in FTAs	185
6.2.3 Linguistic Realizations of Metaphorical Expression in FTAs	192
6.2.4 Distribution of Metaphors in Trade Negotiations	195
6.3 Negotiators' Generic Preferences for Metaphors in Trade Negotiations	196
6.3.1 Metaphors Used by the BS Group	198
6.3.2 Metaphors Used by the BF Group	203
6.3.3 Metaphors Used by the BP Group	207
6.4 The Impact of Interpersonal Relationship on Metaphors in FTAs	214
6.5 Summary	218
Chapter 7 Conclusion	220
7.1 Introduction	220
7.2 Summary of the Key Findings	221
7.3 A Cultural Perspective on Conversational Structure	224
7.4 A Cultural Perspective on Request	226
7.5 A Cultural Perspective on Metaphor	227
7.6 A Cultural Perspective on Interpersonal Business Communication	229

7.7 Significance	231
7.8 Limitations	234
7.9 Summary	236
References	238
Appendices	250
Curriculum Vitae	302