



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

***FORMALITY SHIFTS IN MANAGEMENT MEETINGS***

**MUHAMMAD DANISH BIN MOHD JOHARI**

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## **FORMALITY SHIFTS IN MANAGEMENT MEETINGS**

**By**

**MUHAMMAD DANISH BIN MOHD JOHARI**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in  
Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**August 2016**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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**Chairman : Afida binti Mohamad Ali, PhD**  
**Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication**

Studies on Business English (BE) are becoming a growing interest with the trend in past studies moving from the importance of BE to improving it. The main objective of this study is to analyze formality shifts in management meetings. It's specific objectives include the analysis of linguistic devices, language strategies, and the effects of power-play in order to see how all of these contribute to formality shifts in the meetings. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) provided a theoretical framework to analyze the overall formality of a setting but lacked sufficient explanation on the factors of formality. This study adapted their framework and also from past studies on formality such as by Rogerson-Revell (2007). Conversational Analysis (CA) was used to analyze the transcribed data. Findings revealed that informality is caused by an increased in shared context which creates shorter and more casual turn takings as seen through the use of small talk and humour caused digression during a meeting. Furthermore, discourse markers were used to shift the meeting to being formal. Interestingly, the shift from formal to informal in a meeting was dependent on the manager's participation. Meetings had more formality when the manager was present as lower ranked participants were less informal in the attempt to manage rapport. In conclusion, the participants' position in the company determines the manner of speech being used in a meeting which results in the linguistic devices that cause change in a meeting's formality.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

## PERUBAHAN FORMALITI DALAM MESYUARAT PENGURUSAN

Oleh

MUHAMMAD DANISH BIN MOHD JOHARI

Ogos 2016

**Pengerusi : Afida binti Mohamad Ali, PhD**  
**Fakulti : Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi**

Kajian terhadap Bahasa Inggeris dalam Perniagaan, atau *Business English (BE)* kian menarik perhatian dan telah bergerak daripada kepentingan BE kepada penambahbaikannya. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk menganalisis perubahan formaliti dalam mesyuarat pengurusan. Ia objektif khusus termasuk analisis peranti linguistik, strategi bahasa, dan permainan kuasa (*power-play*) untuk melihat bagaimana semua ini menyumbang kepada formaliti perubahan dalam mesyuarat. Heylighen dan Dewaele (1999) menyediakan kerangka teori untuk menganalisis formaliti keseluruhan suasana tetapi tidak mempunyai penjelasan yang cukup kepada faktor-faktor formaliti. Kajian ini mengadaptasikan rangka kerja mereka dan juga kajian lepas mengenai formaliti seperti dengan Rogerson-Revell (2007) dalam usaha untuk membangunkan teori formaliti yang termasuk faktor formaliti dan informaliti. Analisis perbualan, atau *Conversational Analysis (CA)*, telah digunakan untuk menganalisis data yang ditranskripsikan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kekurangan formaliti disebabkan oleh peningkatan dalam konteks berkongsi mewujudkan perolehan giliran yang lebih pendek dan lebih kasual seperti yang dilihat melalui ceramah kecil dan jenaka kerana ia meningkat konteks berkongsi dalam mesyuarat. Tambahan pula, penanda wacana digunakan untuk mendapat perhatian peserta untuk mengalih formaliti mesyuarat tersebut. Secara menariknya, peralihan daripada formal kepada tidak formal dalam mesyuarat adalah bergantung kepada penyertaan pengurus. Suatu mesyuarat mempunyai lebih banyak formaliti apabila pengurus itu hadir kerana peserta yang berpangkat lebih rendah kurang formal dalam usaha untuk menguruskan hubungan. Kesimpulannya, pangkat peserta dalam syarikat itu menentukan cara percakapan yang digunakan dalam mesyuarat yang menyebabkan kehadiran alat linguistik yang menyebabkan perubahan formaliti dalam mesyuarat tersebut.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

**Afida Binti Mohd Ali, PhD**

Senior Lecturer  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Chairman)

**Shamala A/P Paramasivam, PhD**

Associate Professor  
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication  
Universiti Putra Malaysia  
(Member)

---

**ROBIAH BINTI YUNUS, PhD**

Professor and Dean  
School of Graduate Studies  
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Date:

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Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of

Chairman of

Supervisory

Committee: Dr. Afida Binti Mohd Ali

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of

Member of

Supervisory

Committee: Assc. Prof. Dr. Shamala A/P Paramasivam

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

|      |                                        |
|------|----------------------------------------|
| BE   | Business English                       |
| CA   | Conversational Analysis                |
| BELF | Business English as the Lingua Franca  |
| TCU  | turn-constructional unit               |
| FTG  | Formality Time graph                   |
| OFR  | Overall Formality Ratio                |
| ELF  | English as a lingua franca             |
| EGBP | English for General Business Purposes  |
| ESBP | English for Specific Business Purposes |

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the study, problem statement, objectives and research questions, the scope of the study, the significance of the study, theoretical framework, and definition of terms. This chapter outlines this study and to help the reader understand the study of formality in small management meetings.

### 1.2 Background of the Study

Previous studies on business interactions have shown a gradual movement towards the teaching of Business English (BE) courses in relation to communication at the workplace. Williams (1988) discovered how teaching materials used in business course books were not relatable to real context. In his study on business meeting interactions, he analyzed how British engineers in senior positions would carry out negotiations with their non-native counterparts in Hong Kong. The data he gathered was then compared with the textbooks on business. Williams (ibid) identified the mismatch between the interactions that took place in real context from what was shown in textbooks.

Upon analyzing the course books used in 1988, Williams discovered that the language presented in these course books were readily comprehensible and consisted of mainly well-structured sentences without the same degree of false starts, interruptions, repetitions or asides. These texts were most likely rewritten from the actual real dialogue in order to allow students to understand the text. However, this meant that the texts were misleading the students into believing that what they read in the course books would be similar to what they would experience in real business interactions. From the transcripts, a large portion of the language contained comments, jokes, quips, repetitions, and asides. Some of the sentences were grammatically incorrect. This is hardly similar to what is found in course books as authentic business meetings also contain different manners of speech (Pearson, 1989).

Williams' study may have left many other questions unanswered, but his study may have been the starting point for studies on BE as future studies focused more on business interactions such as that by Pearson (1989). Linde (1991) further researched this area of study by analyzing the turn-taking strategies of an informal meeting to initiate or close an agenda in a small firm. From this, an informal meeting can be best described as a meeting that uses simple and short or not well-constructed turns (Linde, 1991). Topic change is relatively smooth, an agreement is achieved on what topics to discuss, and few topics are proposed and rejected or not taken up (Linde, 1991; Lerner, 2004). At times, jokes or digressions occur among participants before proceeding to the next topic in the flow of interactions in a meeting.

To understand business interactions, it is important to understand how conversations are organized in a meeting. As Swales (2006) explains, discourse communities vary as each has its own set of common goals and mechanisms of intercommunication among its members. Those from the business discourse will have their own communication style and jargon that will be foreign to non-members despite sharing the same language. To understand how a discourse community is structured, the turn-taking management is analyzed which is part of the speech exchange system. According to Schegloff (1999), each discourse community is different because the speech exchange system may vary according to the turn-taking organizations. In other words, the turn-taking organizations shape the speech exchange system thus shapes the talk-in-interaction of a discourse community.

According to Thornbury and Slade (2006), “conversations take place in real-time and in a shared context” (2006, p.11). As such, only the interlocutors involved in the conversation would understand how it should be carried out in the given context that they are in. Correspondingly, the spoken discourse in a business meeting varies from one culture to the other and previous studies have shown how many of these are becoming more multicultural (Goby, 1999; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Evans, 2013). Nair-Venugopal (2000) described how Malaysians would use localized forms of speech in a Malaysian business meeting. This briefly explains how Malaysians with their various cultures communicate in a business meeting. Apart from this, St John (1996) explains how the degree of formality differs according to various cultures and was best noticed during a business meeting. Each culture will have its own perception of formality which may govern the language use in meetings. In general, Malaysian meetings use more directives to relay out future directions of the company (Teoh, 2009). This creates an image that Malaysian meetings are carried out towards effectively achieving meeting objectives. As such, the formality of meeting plays a role as it sets the proper code of conduct which ensures that each participant does not overstep his actions in the meeting.

Formality is a key aspect of business meetings. One interpretation of formality is the speech style used by a speaker, either formal or informal speech. There are few definitions of formal speech. Richards and Schmidt (2002) defined formal speech as being careful, impersonal and mindful on the pronunciation of words as one normally does in public speeches. The Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt & Platt, 1997) has a similar definition of formal speech that it is a “type of speech used during conditions when the speaker is mindful of his choice of words and pronunciation” (1997, p.144). However, these definitions are “too general to be used as analytical tools” (Irvine, 1979, p.786). Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) argue that such a definition only explains what a formal situation is. In their argument, they explained that formal speech is one that tries to accomplish clarity without making assumptions.

In a meeting, multiple agendas are discussed upon and at times there will be insertions of humour, small talk or digressions from the main agendas. Previous studies have shown that discourse markers act as a communicative device that opens and closes

agendas (Nielson, 2012). However, do discourse markers also affect the formality of a business meeting? In a similar study, Barske (2009) provided a closer examination of discourse markers as she elaborated how they were used together with embodied actions such as waving a hand or pointing a finger. This in return would affect the overall formality.

Apart from this, Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) provided a theory to analyze formality of a situation. Their theory is used to explain the overall formality for spoken and written context. This present study is interested in analyzing formality in management meetings. Formality, in this study, is to be understood as the formal style of speech used in a particular context which can either be expressed implicitly or explicitly. Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) theory explains the overall formality of a given situation but it does not explain the linguistic devices or language strategies that affect it. Hence, this study is interested in learning what contributes to formality in a business meeting and the linguistic devices that affect formality. Due to the limitation in Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) theory on formality, this study looks at other past studies on formality to compile together pieces of knowledge on formality that might have been overlooked in these past studies.

Based on past studies, formality is based on two broad ideas. Firstly, it is a set of codes that enables us to act accordingly in a particular situation and the second deals with the language used in response to the formality of the situation (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999; Marshall & Tsekouras, 2010; Saville-troike, 2003). While Heylighen and Dewaele proposed a method to calculate formality, its application would yield accurate data if it is focussed on one setting at a time.

However, it was also described by Heylighen and Dewaele (ibid) that formality also takes into consideration situational variables such as audience size, space, time span and feedback. These variables illustrated in their study propose the idea that formality is realized upon understanding these variables. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) have shown that to only calculate the formality of a setting is insufficient as it only represents one idea or principle of formality. Their method was used to calculate the formality of a discussion in a meeting during an analysis of a pilot study. From what can be gathered, an agenda was thought to be informal when the language used is ambiguous and impolite but formal when the language used is explicitly clear while being polite (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999).

Other studies added on that language strategies such as humour and small talk used by the chairperson help to achieve meeting objectives despite shifting the formality of a meeting (Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Fung (1993) describes that a chairperson is in a position of power to use informality via an indirect manner of speech to pressure others to accept their viewpoints. Thus, power-play can be seen as influencing formality.

Therefore, this study proposes to study how linguistic devices, language strategies, and power-play shifts formality by adapting the principles of formality (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999) and Nielson's (2012) method of analysis. Nielson's (2012) method of

analysis was chosen as she studied the changes in formality by analyzing the opening, middle and closing of a meeting using a conversational analytic approach. To explain the formality of speech and the conversational features of a business meeting, this ethnographic study uses the sociological approach to analyzing conversations, i.e. Conversational Analysis (CA).

Paltridge (2010) describes CA as “a way of carrying out an analysis of spoken discourse which can help to describe the interaction and how to understand it through the language it is constructed in” (2010, p. 125). CA has been used for more than just analyzing conversations. It has been widely used in the field of medicine where it has helped in the research of aphasia patients and speech disorders (Perkins et al. 1999). CA has been used in the study of bilingualism and in the study of the social behaviour of female and male alike (Steensig, 2003). By using CA, this study would elaborate on how conversational strategies influence formality in a business meeting of a small firm during the introduction and closing of an agenda.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

The problem about studying formality in a verbal context such as a business meeting is that the only theoretical framework available lacks sufficient information to study it. Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) developed a framework that explains formality in general but it is not enough to explain the formality of a spoken context as “none of the factors of formality proposed by them has been fully confirmed yet” (1999, p.34). In 2002, Dewaele reiterated this limitation when he furthered his study on formal context. While his 2002 study provides a more detailed understanding on formality, past studies were more interested in formality on a syntactic level (Li, Cai, & Graesser, 2013; Li, Graesser, & Cai, 2014; Wei, Chen, Chen, & Chu, 2010).

Another gap in Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) framework is that its method of analysis could not be adapted to properly measure other genres. Li, Cai, and Graesser (2013) had analyzed formality on a text level by using Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) *F-score*. According to Li, Cai and Graesser (2013), *F-score* does well at analysing text but it was designed to match with Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) universal definition on formality in which it refers to the strict adherence to the rules or conventions of a given context and this adherence to these rules or conventions does not allow flexibility or spontaneity. Therefore, *F-Score* was not designed with the intention of measuring formality for specific genres but to be able to determine if a text is formal. Apart from that, *F-score* is limited to analyzing formality at the word level (Li, Graesser, & Cai, 2014). The F-score formula is as follows:

$$F = (\text{noun frequency} + \text{adjective freq.} + \text{preposition freq.} + \text{article freq.} - \text{pronoun freq.} - \text{verb freq.} - \text{adverb freq.} - \text{interjection freq.} + 100)/2)$$

Despite that, F-score has been able to produce clear results that explain the individual differences between writers within a genre (Nowson, Oberlander, & Gill, 1992).

Dewaele (2002) used *F-score* to measure formality in accordance with the definition of formal language which is language that avoids ambiguity while including as much information on the context by explicitly stating the necessary information. The results of *F-score* made it easier to understand formality in a given context as it has shown that a context is formal when there is a clear and correct understanding of the situation, when longer time is spent to reflect and to respond to the given information within a context and when the speaker has an academic background (Dewaele, 2002). Heylighen and Dewaele (1999) have provided a simple tool to measure formality in any genre and have left future studies room to explore different angles of formality.

Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) theory on formality only reveals what constitutes a formal context but it does not explain how formality can change in a spoken context as it was not their intention. Past studies have explained how language strategies such as insults and small talk can cause informality in a business meeting (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Yang, 2012). Yet, these studies do not explain the linguistic devices that highlight formality or informality. On the other hand, Svennevig (2012b) showed how it was the role of the chairperson to control the degree of formality and organization of turns in a business meeting. These past studies explain the characteristics of formality, but its findings have not been highlighted. To add on, such studies provide vague definitions for formality and limited information on what contributes to formality.

While formality can be measured in the words used by the audience, studying language strategies allows the researcher to identify which language strategy and how it contributes to the differences in formality, while the application of *F-score* would only reveal the overall formality of a context. As Rogerson-Revell (2007) has shown, humour affects the formality of a business meeting as it shifts the formality of a meeting to be informal. Although, it can also be inferred that it is the participant that uses the language strategy accompanied by the linguistic device to shift the formality. The study of power-play in a meeting would explain how language strategies and linguistic devices are used to contribute to formality, but all that is known is how someone of authority uses his power to influence others in a meeting (Rogerson-Revell, 2007; Fung, 1993). The data gathered for this study would explain how formality is influenced by those of equal power and when there is a clear difference in power in the meeting. Studying the power-play in meetings would address the gaps in past studies.

However, the problem lies in measuring and providing an adequate explanation on a meeting's formality as the trend in past studies were not focused on business meetings' formality and that Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) theory to formality may be lacking in the context of a business meeting. As such, this study looks into studying what are the linguistic devices, language strategies and the use of power play during formal, informal, and semi-formal situations.

## **1.4 Research Objectives**

1. To determine the linguistic devices that contribute to formality in management meetings.
2. To determine the language strategies that cause change in formality as observed in small meetings.
3. To determine the effects of power play on formality in management meetings.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

1. What linguistic devices contribute to the changes in formality and informality?
2. What are the language strategies that trigger change in formality?
3. How does formality reflect power play in management meetings?

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

As more business meetings are becoming more diverse in culture, Business English as the Lingua Franca (BELF) may be reserved for meetings or dealings with foreigners. Nickerson (1998) has shown that BELF is needed if it played a major role in the corporate culture. In Hong Kong, English has always been used in written communication and it is the medium for professional training and accreditation despite English being used in spoken communication being limited (Evans, 2013). The continual development of Business English (BE) courses through research are to eventually design a BE course that is well suited for its students. It is an attempt at helping the business discourse community to be more competent at using BELF in the workplace environment.

Previous studies from 1990 to 2013 have shown that researchers of BE had focussed their attention on needs analysis but at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that slowly shifted towards a more ethnographic study. They have presented us with the direction in which BE is taking and an idea as to what interests researchers in the area of business meetings. These past studies have presented us with frameworks into studying different features of language in business meetings. This would provide this study the means to understand how language affects a meeting's formality which is significant in addressing the knowledge gap in Heylighen and Dewaele's (1999) theory on formality.

Through this study, the researcher will be able to identify the conversational strategies used during a small meeting. By analyzing these conversations through this qualitative study, it will create a clearer understanding of how certain Malaysian entrepreneurs construct their speech patterns using BE. Similarly, trainers and trainees would also benefit from having a better understanding of Malaysian meetings. This study is just the beginning for more similar studies as the findings from this study can be used to form a comparison with other studies of the same genre.

This study attempted to provide an insight on how formality is used in a Malaysian business meeting. The findings of this study would benefit ESP course designers as they would have further literature to expand their corpus on BE. While the majority of studies have been on large meetings such as Nielson (2012) and Evans (2013), few studies have been on small meetings. Nor and Aziz (2010) provide an important study in relation to small meetings in the local context as their study describes more about the politeness strategies used by the chairperson. Therefore, this study would also discuss on the power play of the chairperson in regards to formality.

In addition to studying the changes in formality, it may provide ideas for an effective meeting. Since a meeting is to achieve a decision, entrepreneurs would gain an insight into what would hinder decisions being made effectively in a small meeting. The findings of this present study will be significant to future studies on discourse analysis or CA as it expands the knowledge of CA and to ESP course designers while addressing the use of BE.

### **1.7 Scope of the Study**

The participants in this study were from a private language center. The participants were the teaching staff and manager. Data was collected using both audio and video recording of the interactions held by the participants during their management meetings. This case study analyzed its findings based on each conversational turn takings and recorded non-verbal actions. The conversations were transcribed using Jefferson's (2004) transcription model. Nielson's (2012) method of analysis is then adapted to analyze the transcribed data.

While this study looked into the formality of a business meeting, it was not focused on etiquettes used to carry out a meeting. It was not entirely interested in how and which proper codes of conduct affected the changes in formality. Rather, this study focused more on the formality of language. It looked into how the manner of a language can affect the shifts in formality. By studying the formality of language or deep formality, this study would also be describing the strategies used to maintain and shift the formality in a meeting. In a way, the reader may have an idea as to what etiquettes would be used in a small meeting via reading the language strategies and linguistic devices that contribute to the changes in formality. The findings of this study did not describe etiquettes used as it is leaving it to be interpreted in future studies.

### **1.8 Definition of Terms**

#### **Turn Taking**

To understand the social patterns of a culture group, conversational analysts analyze conversations at the micro level. They study elements such as opening and closings of an interaction, embodied actions, changes in intonation and other conversational features. These features are analyzed according to each turn-taking of the speaker.

These turn-takings are a representation of the speaker's opportunity to speak. By analyzing these opportunities, it will be easier to characterize the interaction of any context.

Lerner (2004) provides an explanation to this:

“Turn-taking practices organize the allocation of opportunities to participate in conversation and the turn-constructual forms such participation take. Understanding turn-taking for conversation and other forms of talk-in-interaction is key to understanding human conduct, because most actions carried out through talking are shaped by the organization of that talk into speaking turns: it shapes how speakers compose their contributions, it shapes where they position those contribution in the on-going interaction, and it shapes when they get to participate ” (Lerner, 2004, p. 15).

Hence, it is the turn takings that provide an understanding to the context of a spoken discourse.

### **Formality**

This study defines formality as a combination of situational variables and our manner of speech. According to Heylighen and Dewaele (1999), formality is when someone pays attention to form or realizes the proper code of conduct in a setting while being mindful of his or her speech in order to provide a clear and understandable meaning of the context without having to rely on unstated assumptions. In short, formality is the explicitness of our speech and our understanding of the setting while reducing elements of ambiguity or informality (Heylighen & Dewaele, 1999).

Rogerson-Revell (2007) describes informality as being highly contextualized and that our manner of speech is casual as it exhibits elements of informality such as the use of profanity. On the other hand, there are situations whereby segments of talk are neither formal nor informal but rather semi-formal. Urbanová (2016) describes semi-formal situations as a change of speech style from a conversational style to a public-speaking style.

### **Small Meetings**

According to (Romano & Nunamaker, 2001), meetings are a “focused interaction, planned or chance, where people agree to come together for a common purpose, whether at the same time and the same place or at different times in different places”. Mina (2003) explains that small meetings or informal meetings have a smaller need to enforce protocols on participants as they are expected to be mindful of themselves and that participants have equal rights to participate. This study defines small meetings as a

planned meeting where participants are not under strict protocols and have an equal right to participate in the meeting.

## **1.9 Summary**

In this chapter, a brief introduction on BE and how it is used in business meetings have been provided. Due to the high interest in studies done on business meetings, there are many aspects of learning about the business context as there are limited studies on them. This chapter has explained the rationale to study business meetings and how carrying out this study may fill a void in knowledge. This chapter has explained what formality is and how it has been analyzed in the past. Lastly, this study has explained its scope and its significance to carrying it out in the context of small Malaysian management meetings.

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