

POWER, CONFUSION AND OFFENCE: A SMALL-SCALE SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF EMAIL COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH WITHIN SELECTED GERMAN COMPANIES

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Abstract. *The advent of increasing job mobility and globalisation, along with pragmatic group language policy, has created a situation in which many German multinational companies now regularly employ English-speaking teams of mixed nationality. This has serious ramifications for the efficiency of internal communication as intercultural difficulties relating to hierarchy, appropriacy and directness compound the existing language problems. Common complaints in the corporate environment include an inability to 'read between the lines', confusion about project stage timings, responsibilities and urgency of requests, as well as bilateral accusations of rudeness and inappropriacy of tone. Email communication is a key element of corporate communication and it is also an area that is often overlooked in the ESL classroom as students favour speaking practice exercises as a better use of time. This small-scale piece of action research was aimed at exploring the complexity of the skills involved in effective email writing. By conducting Systemic Functional Linguistics analysis of a series of responses to a prompt email, I was able to illustrate the fact that competent email communication in English requires far more than grammatical accuracy and a wide range of vocabulary. In fact, some of the skills required for sensitive communication are at times better developed in students at a lower level of language proficiency.*

Key words: *Systemic functional linguistics, email communication, business English, methodology*

1. INTRODUCTION

The recent economic crisis has had a serious impact on European companies, challenging what harmony had developed over the good years that preceded the collapse of the financial services firm Lehman Brothers and the subsequent 'credit crunch'. Multinationals were suddenly cutting investment, restructuring departments and saving money wherever possible¹. Small and medium-sized businesses were under pressure. Internal communication within companies, while always important, became critical, as unpopular management decisions had to be swiftly and uniformly applied within tight timescales. The required coordinated action relied on clear and functional communication.

¹ Vipin Gupta, "Corporate response to global financial crisis: A knowledge-based model". *Global Economy Journal*. Volume 11, Issue 2 (2011) Article 8, pp. 1–15 (San Bernardino: Berkely Electronic Press, 2011)

My research focused on a group of businesspeople, all of whom reported communication difficulties when communicating via email in English in their working lives. Email language samples were taken from within a variety of organisational structures: a major German multinational, a traditional German *'mittelstand'*, or medium-sized firm, and a German branch of a British enterprise. Included in the study were excerpts from semi-structured interviews with professionals in the fields of retail, manufacturing and law. Even though these companies are based in Germany, a great deal of internal communication takes place in English, sometimes even between German first language speakers because of group language policies favouring Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF). This situation is far from unusual. In the modern workplace, BELF is perceived as a “pragmatic ... neutral and equal alternative”² between employees of mixed nationalities. Hampering smooth communication, however, are the complex intercultural difficulties relating to differing conceptions of hierarchy, appropriacy and directness³. Common complaints in the corporate environment include the inability to ‘read between the lines’, confusion about timescales and urgency of requests and even rudeness and inappropriacy of tone.

The complex nature of European social interaction is well-documented and in this regard it is interesting that Michael Halliday, the founder of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) claimed that “linguistic structure is the realization of social structure”⁴. In other words, language use is driven by social pressures. What could in some environments be interpreted as a polite request for information, could, depending on the social context, be perceived as a threatening assault on independence or a strong signal of distrust. In order to make sense of written communication then, every possible contextual clue is useful. Zdzisław Wąsik⁵, shows how specific speech acts may be traced back to their roots in human needs, how the linguistic function of boasting maybe interpreted as coming from a “need for dominance” or “need to share things with others”. Envisioning the act of communication as predominately a biological process means that ethnographic study of the community in question may help to remedy miscommunication at work.

2. METHODS, ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

This is a small scale mixed-methods action research study with a limited scope. I have a small number of regular classes from which I have selected participants at levels B1 - C2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages⁶. Participatory

² Anne Kankaanranta and Leena Louhiala-Salminen, “What language does global business speak? - The concept and development of BELF”. *Iberica*, (26), pp. 17-34. (Barcelona: *Iberica*, 2013)

³ Susanne Ehrenreich “English as a business lingua franca in a German multinational corporation: meeting the challenge”, *Journal of Business Communication*. Volume 47. Number. 4, pp. 408–431 (Blacksburg, VA: the Association for Business Communication, 2010.)

⁴ Michael Halliday. “An interpretation of the functional relationship between language and social structure”. Unpublished manuscript. / First printed in: M.A.K. Halliday *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. pp.183–193. (London: Edward Arnold, 1978)

⁵ Zdzisław Wąsik. “On the biological concept of subjective significance: A link between the semiotics of nature and the semiotics of culture”, *Sign Systems Studies*. Volume 29. Issue 1, pp. 83–106. (Tartu, Tartu University Press, 2001)

⁶ Coste, Daniel; North, Brian; Sheils, Joseph; Trim, John. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. (Strasbourg: Council for Cultural Co-operation Education Committee Modern Languages Division, 2001.)

Action Research can be defined as “a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes”⁷. Three key ontological claims associated with action research are that knowledge is context-bound, relational and co-created in the holistic resolution of real-life problems.

The study also draws on the concept of constructivism as an ontological position. Ernst von Glasersfeld⁸ (1989, p. 162), described constructivism as having essentially two key principles: “(1) knowledge is not passively received but actively built up by the cognizing subject; (2) the function of cognition is adaptive and serves the organization of the experiential world, not the discovery of ontological reality”.

I collected 36 written samples from 18 students in the form of email responses over a period of two weeks. These emails were in response to a prompt email. Each student was also given a context explanation that gave the background to the prompt email and explained the task that was required of them. The participants were asked to write two emails in reply to the prompt. The first was spontaneously written and the second was delayed and written after a discussion and language analysis session.

In order to access the perceptions of the participants, in addition to those of the researcher, the ethnographic technique of the informal interview was applied. The first interview question was asked in open class after the spontaneous email had been written, and the second after the delayed email was complete. It is important to note at this point that participants in group classes sometimes attend with colleagues of higher or lower rank within the company, and as such may not give honest or complete answers.

Each participant was asked two questions: (1) “How did you feel when you read the prompt email?” and (2) “How do you expect Sabine to respond to your email?”. Question (1) was designed to include the emotional trigger word ‘feel’, and utilises the past simple tense to focus the participant’s mind on the past moment at which the message was decoded. The language structure was also deliberately kept simple, as I included students from an intermediate level of English (B1 on the Common European Framework) as well as stronger students, up to advanced and proficient level (C1 and C2). In turn, question (2) was focusing the participant on the fact that another agent is involved in the interaction. It employed a simple structure and was easy to read and understand. This question refers to the future, and the impact of the message the participant had sent. Expectation is a mental process, rather than an emotion, and the participants were implicitly encouraged to provide a sober, considered response.

Shorthand was used to record their responses to these questions and the transcripts are included in the appendices. This was done in order to learn something about their emotional states when replying and their interpretation of the language employed by the prompt email. This allowed me to uncover issues that were not previously obvious to me and indeed, not obvious or even shared among the students themselves. Bruner⁹ stressed the importance of “intersubjectivity” or “how people come to know what others have in mind and how they adjust accordingly”.

⁷ Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury. ‘Introduction: Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration’, in P. Reason and H. Bradbury (eds) *The Handbook of Action Research*, pp. 1–14. (London: Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001)

⁸ Ernst von Glasersfeld “Constructivism in education”, in: Husén, Torsten and T. Neville Postlethwaite (eds.) (1989) *The International Encyclopedia of Education: Research and Studies*. Supplement Vol. 1 pg 162. (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1989)

⁹ Jerome Bruner. *The Culture of Education*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996)

3. LINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION

Participants' emails were labeled as either high or low level. The low level emails were at an intermediate or upper intermediate level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (B1 - B2) and the high level emails were at advanced or proficiency level (C1 - C2). A selected group of emails were also labeled as either resistant (the writer refused to comply with some or all of the requests/instructions in the prompt email) or compliant (the writer chose to comply with most or all of the requests). I selected the following emails for closer examination:

- Prompt email
- High level compliant
- High level resistant
- Low level compliant
- Low level resistant

This paper addresses the emails through the lens of the three contextual variables in Systemic Functional Grammar: field, tenor and mode¹⁰. Field is related to the ideational metafunction and concerns the propositional content of the emails. Tenor is to do with the interpersonal aspect of communication and mode is connected to the cohesion and structure of the texts. In relation to the research question, 'How could SFL analysis of email responses to a shared prompt help me to improve students' ability to deal effectively and appropriately with sensitive correspondence?', I was looking for discreet aspects of email communication that can be noticed and learned from in the authentic situation of a day's work in the office.

3.1. Field

3.1.1. *The prompt email*

This is a circular message, sent to all regional managers within a large organisation. The intention is to inform managers of Head Office decisions and to request data. It is characterised by a relatively low level of specialisation of lexis. The human participants referred to in the email include Head Office, Sabine Meyer, the CEO and the regional managers. Non-human participants include disappointing sales figures, the attached spreadsheet, the relevant sections and efficient use of resources. The email features mental processes, referring to the decision making in the mind of Head Office "**Head Office has decided...**" and the required mental state in the regional managers "**Please be aware that...**" There are also material processes involved, giving imperatives "**Kindly complete the attached spreadsheet**", and giving more information about what has happened so far "**The relevant sections have been highlighted**" and what will happen in future "**Head Office will be working with you**". The email also includes contextual information in the form of circumstances. The writer places the action in time "as of 1st September" and gives the cause for the action "**Due to disappointing sales results**".

¹⁰ Halliday, 1978.

3.1.2. High level resistant

This email has the long term strategic goal of avoiding encroachment from Head Office onto issues of independence. The short term goal is to refuse to comply with the request. Again, there is a low level of specialisation in the lexis used. The angle of representation is now that of the German regional manager and the writer attempts to recalibrate the agenda. The human participants now include the German team (**we**), as well as the German manager **“I”**, Sabine, the CEO and Head Office. There is a range of processes here, ranging from the mental **“I was quite surprised”**, the material **“are having an immense influence”** and the behavioural **“we do not feel included”**. Circumstances are located in time **“over the past two quarters”** and in space **“in Europe”**.

3.1.3. High level compliant

The long term goal of this message is to maintain sound relations with Head Office.

The short term goal: to gain time in order to gather the required data. This is an email from a regional manager to Head Office – from a lower to higher hierarchical level. Again, the writer has chosen to use a low degree of specialisation of lexis. The writer uses the first person and takes responsibility as an agent. The human participants include Sabine, the German manager **“I”**, the team members and the CEO. The non-human participants include the data, all countries and the full report. The writer uses a range of processes to deliver a complex and well-structured message. The mental processes **“I have thought and I understand”** describe the thoughts of the writer and create a stronger bond with the reader. The verbal processes **“I’d like to assure you”** and **“I’d like to ask”**, simulate conversation. The material processes refer to past and future actions **“may give”**, **“have been consistently excellent”**. The writer uses circumstances to locate her ideas in time **“asap”**, **“this week”**, **“over the past two quarters”**, **“at an earlier date”**. She also uses a causal structure to explain her decision **“due to”**.

3.1.4. Low Level Resistant

The long term goal of this message is to maintain the independence of the regional office.

The short term goal is to bring attention to German success. This is an email from a regional manager to Head Office discussing future policy changes. Again, there is a low degree of specialisation of lexis, perhaps in this case more out of necessity than design. The writer is clearly the agent and contests control of the agenda with the sender of the prompt email. The human participants are reduced to just two people - Sabine Meyer and the German regional manager. The non-human participants include the past two quarters, the sales figures, countries, the spreadsheet. The writer uses a range of processes. The mental processes refer to the writer’s opinion **“I don’t agree”**, **“I don’t know why”**. The relational process evaluates the past performance **“don’t was good”** and the material processes refer to future actions **“you have to go more in detail, I will send”**. The writer uses circumstances to locate events in time **“over the past two quarters, for 2013”**, **“next time”**. There is also use of the causal structure **“because I think it can help”**.

3.1.5. *Low Level Compliant*

The long term goal here is to respond efficiently to Head Office's requests. The short term goal is to understand exactly what is required from the writer. This is an email conversation between a regional manager and Head Office about future policy changes. The degree of specialisation of lexis is low. The writer takes control of the agenda. The human participants are reduced to Sabine Meyer and the German team "we". The non-human participants are the sales figures, the German office, the purchasing, marketing and staffing figures and the spreadsheet. The processes are relational "**The sales figures was excellent**", Material "**We make a spreadsheet**", "**please concrete**". No circumstances appear in the email.

3.2. Tenor

3.2.1. *The prompt email*

There is a clear imbalance in power between the regional managers and Head Office (the capitalisation is not accidental). The agenda is very much set by Head Office and the imperative mood of the email underlines this. The register is formal and social distance is maximal. The absolute lack of modality in the email creates a sense of firm resolution. This is a closed stance which does not expect discussion. The email is also impersonal, as it is sent to many recipients with a generic salutation. Speech acts are declarative or imperative throughout.

3.2.2. *High level resistant*

This email is sent from a lower position in the hierarchy to a higher level. It is unclear that the writer is overly concerned by this, however. Social distance is reduced through a greater degree of personalization, as the writer refers to feelings of surprise and uses first and second personal pronouns. These are emotional elements which were absent in the initial email. Again there is no modality in the text. This creates a strong, unmoderated message. The writer has a closed stance. There is a positive appraisal (Coffin et al. 2009. Pg 382) of the German office's performance "**we have been quite successful**", "**we are confident in our abilities**" and a negative appraisal of Head Office's prompt email "**I was surprised to receive such an order**". No doubt Head Office would characterise the prompt as a polite request. Speech acts are all declarative, giving clear information (Coffin et al. 2009. Pg 29).

3.2.3. *High Level compliant*

The social roles here are those of the regional manager, who is addressing Sabine Meyer, the assistant to the CEO, directly. The social distance is still present, but moderated by the direct address of Sabine, the use of interrogatives and the use of the first person. This creates greater social connectedness than in the prompt email. The writer makes use of modality on several occasions. This is in order to create politeness "**I'd like to assure you**" and "**I'd like to ask**". It is used for permission (deontic modality) "**If I could deliver the data...**" (Coffin et al. 2009. Pg 169) and to express probability and possibility (epistemic modality) "**If you should need**" (Ibid.). The writer keeps an open stance (Coffin et al. 2009. Pg 381). Importantly, the writer is careful to avoid using evaluative language. There are various elements of personalisation of the text, notably contractions of subject-finite mood element "**I'd like**". First and second person pronouns are used "**I understand, you are requested**". There is a mix of declaratives "**I understand**" and interrogatives involved, "**is this possible?**"

3.2.4. *Low Level Resistant*

The social distance is reduced by informal register, the use of imperatives and the use of the first and second person. This email shows social connectedness, in marked opposition to the prompt email. The writer uses deontic modality for obligation “**you have to**”. There is also use of the modal for epistemic probability “**I think it can help.**” The writer shows positive appraisal of Germany’s performance “**sales figures ... are excellent**” and negative appraisal of other countries’ work “**which countries are not so good.**” There is also negative appraisal of the prompt email “I don’t agree with you”. The email is personalised by contraction of the subject-finite mood element “I don’t”; use of first and second person pronouns “**I don’t**” and “**you have to**”; colloquial/informal language “**I don’t know why I have to change anything**”. All clauses are declarative, giving information.

3.2.5. *Low Level Compliant*

The social distance is still maximal. The writer uses the formal mode of address “**Mrs Meyer**”. There is no modality in this message. The writer includes positive appraisal of the German sales figures “**the sales figures from the German office was excellent**”. There is no personalisation here. Clauses are declarative “**We make a spreadsheet**” or imperative “**please concrete**”. There is a very low degree of social connectedness.

3.3. Mode

3.3.1. *The prompt email*

This is one-way communication. This is clearly a planned and edited piece of writing. The language is also used to create a binding effect on the recipients. They need to provide information and cannot openly ignore the request.

3.3.2. *High level resistant*

There is no interactivity here. It is a spontaneous email that shows little sign of planning or editing. The function of the email is to send a strong message that the sender will not comply with Head Office’s request. The language patterns are simple, with short, unmodified noun groups – an order, our figures. The text is cohesive, blending three lexical sets: daily business “**quarters, figures, spreadsheets**”; macroeconomic context “**economic crisis, current situation in Europe**” and the language of emotion “**surprised, feel, confident**”. Thematic progression is simple and clear. The email starts with the macro-theme of the writer’s surprise at receiving the prompt email. The second paragraph starts with the hyper-theme of the special situation of the German office and the third paragraph focuses on the refusal to comply with Head Office’s request.

3.3.3. *High level compliant*

The writer asks direct questions of the reader that require a response. This creates a sense of interactivity. It is also clear that this is a delayed piece of writing as there is strong evidence of planning and editing. This is language as action. It is a clear request for more time and a promise to comply. There is greater clausal complexity here, as the writer expresses more complex ideas, balancing an interest in defending personal interests with the

need to maintain good relations with Head Office. Nominal groups are still typically short and sparse, with little modification “**current deadlines, strategic project**”. Lexical sets relate both to the writer’s mental processes “**I have thought it over**” and “**I understand**” and the business situation “**full report**” and “**the CEO**”. Pronoun reference occurs and includes clausal reference such as “**I have thought it over**” and “**is this possible?**”. Thematic progression is logical and clear. The macro-theme is the statement of understanding Sabine’s position. The email starts from this point and creates rapport. The second paragraph is a clear, freestanding promise to send the data immediately. The third paragraph is a request for more time, along with an explanation for the request. The fourth paragraph is a request for action from the reader. The final hyper-theme is a statement of availability. This keeps the contact open-ended and underlines the open stance set by the writer.

3.3.4. *Low level resistant*

The text is spontaneous, showing little evidence of planning and editing. This is language as action, a refusal to comply. The writer adopts a simple clause structure throughout, keeping nominal groups short, with little modification “**sales figures**”, “**past two quarters**”, “**the spreadsheet**”. Lexical sets relate to the business situation “**spreadsheet**”, “**sales figures**”, “**past two quarters**” and the writer’s mental processes “**don’t know**”, “**don’t agree**”, “**I think**”. Pronoun reference occurs and includes clausal reference such as “**I think it can help the other countries**”. Thematic progression is simple and clear. The macro-theme is the writer’s strong disagreement with the prompt email. This is the starting point for a combative email. The second paragraph starts with a statement of the past success of the German company and the subsequent refusal to make changes. The third paragraph is a suggestion for Head Office. The final paragraph is a promise to send the data (partial compliance).

3.3.5. *Low level Compliant*

The interaction here is monologic – one way communication. There is some evidence of planning here. This is language as action. The writer is promising to comply and requesting information. The clause structure is very simple. Nominal groups are typically short, with a marked lack of modification “**sales figures**”, “**German office**”. A simple business-focused lexical set is employed “**spreadsheet**”, “**figures**”, “**information**”. The macro theme is the success of the German operation. The second paragraph promises to comply with Head Office’s requests and the third paragraph asks for more information. Hyper-themes are unadorned and stand alone as paragraphs.

4. PROBLEM UNDERSTANDING

The prompt email has a simple structure and features a low level of lexical specialisation. This makes it simple to read and difficult to misunderstand. The writer may well be conscious of the need to reduce the possibility of deliberate misinterpretation by regional managers unwilling to comply with requests. The angle of representation is from the perspective of a strangely anthropomorphised being called ‘Head Office’. Head Office makes decisions, communicates future policy and is not to be argued with. The human participants referred to in the email include Head Office, Sabine Meyer, the CEO and the regional managers. All of

the subsequent communication is focused on these players. The regional managers are considered agentive in that they are to comply with the specific requests made by the CEO and Head Office and conveyed to them by the harbinger Sabine Meyer.

I asked the participants the following question:

- What was your initial feeling on reading the prompt email?

Of 18 respondents, only 1 felt that the message was neutral and not negative. A student at B1 level from the Manufacturing sector answered: 'I don't see the problem. In real life, Head Office asks, you send. We are Head Office. I know such emails. That is how we write'.

This response may be instructive. Firstly, this student works at Head Office in a medium-sized company and so did not need to do any intersubjective imagining to understand Sabine's position. Secondly, could it be the case that at B1 level, it is not possible to detect levels of power inequality that students at higher levels invariably pick up on?

Other students were more critical. A C2 level student from the legal sector said: "There is an unfair correlation between regional troubles and our management. She also uses the emotional word 'disappointing'. The whole thing is an imperative or an order, forcing you to do something. She could have asked more nicely."

This student showed a detailed understanding of the linguistic elements of the email, something that was lacking in the lower level students. My personal theory here is that a lifetime of language lessons has made its mark and that as a non-native but proficient speaker of English, she is actively conscious of these minutiae in daily life. Her interview response shows awareness of the implications of failure in Sabine's message, as well as the imperative speech function and the emotional word choice.

A C2 level student from the retail sector had this to say: "At first glance it sounds negative. She assumes that all the people she addresses have had disappointing sales figures. You feel insulted – this is an unjustified insult. The email gives me no chance to argue for my department. She also requests a lot of work & detail for a whole year. We have a lot to do in parallel. "Head Office will be working with you. - What does this mean? It doesn't sound promising."

This response shows long experience of the practical implications of Sabine's request. Assembling that much data is a serious task that would require manpower and time. There also seems to be an awareness of the politics of large organisations here, where the student talks about arguing for her department.

Looking at the response emails themselves, a range of approaches are visible. The high level resistant email is very territorial. The writer is very conscious of a move toward centralised planning and feels a strong need to protect regional autonomy. The email itself though, is unlikely to be successful in its goal, as the meeting of a closed stance with another closed stance will probably spark conflict and escalation. Sentences like "**we do not see any need to fill in the aforementioned spreadsheet**" are not diplomatic choices and constitute a direct refusal to cooperate. Despite the high level of English language skill on display, the strategic and political wisdom of this email is doubtful. In the student's defence, she seemed to be in full control of the situation and seemed to believe that an escalation was not the worst possible result. When asked how she expected Sabine Meyer to respond, she replied: "She will ask again. Probably more forcefully." It is important to note that sometimes good writers choose not to be diplomatic.

The high level compliant email is a complex document that employs various strategies to achieve the goals of maintaining good relations with Head Office and also buying some time to assemble the necessary data. The writer attempts to build rapport with Sabine Meyer

through personalising touches, avoids evaluative language, uses modality to moderate her message and maintains an open stance throughout. A range of processes ensures a nuanced text. The mental processes describe the thoughts of the writer and create a strong bond with the reader. The verbal processes simulate conversation. The material processes refer to past and future actions. Interestingly, the student's interview response hints at a well-developed awareness of the position that the sender finds herself in: "Well, you can't argue with Sabine. Consider her position. She simply wrote what her boss said. It's all political anyway. It would perhaps be better just to send the information and trust that the CEO has thought about it."

The Resistant Low Level email is a hostile document that seems designed more to defend the dignity of the sender than to save time, energy or defend autonomy. The writer agrees to send the information, but on his own terms: "**I will send you the spreadsheet for 2013, because I think it can help the other countries to make better sales figures.**" In this case, there seems very little to be gained by the abrasive posture adopted. The reduction of the human participants to just Sabine Meyer and the German regional manager make it a very direct showdown. It may have been worth wondering how much power Sabine Meyer actually has in this case and what could be gained by antagonising her.

The Compliant Low Level text sets out to maintain good relations with Head Office and to understand exactly what they are asking for. The knock-on effect, of course, of asking for more information may free up some time for manouvre. The writer knew this, as the interview reveals: "It will be some time. She has many emails to read." This is a case in which the political and strategic awareness of the sender outstrips language level. There is no personalisation here, as the writer mirrors the impersonal style of the prompt. For the first time in my study, I saw the use of the formal salutation "**Dear Mrs Meyer**". There was no modality and again, only two human participants. The result is a simple, most accurate and polite email that achieves its goals.

It is worth spending here a moment discussing genre and staging. The prompt email follows a clear pattern:

- P1 Salutation
- P2 Statement of company position and cause
- P3 Request for specific data
- P4 Statement of new policy
- P5 Salutation

There is no embellishment, no emotional language and no interpersonal work done by the writer. The participants were split over the appropriacy of this structure. One student stated "There is no - thank you, no -if you have further questions". This would have necessitated two extra stages at the end of the email.

Perhaps the least constructive staging is that of the Resistant Low Level email:

- P1 Salutation
- P2 Negative appraisal of Sabine Meyer's judgement
- P3 Positive appraisal of German performance and refusal to make changes
- P4 Modal Imperative (Obligation)
- P5 Offer (based on positive appraisal of German performance)

This email is a thorough rejection of Head Office's overture and will surely result in escalation.

5. PROBLEM ADDRESSING AND CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the most surprising idea to come out of my study is that high language levels do not necessarily entail well-developed communicative skills. Students who reach a high level of proficiency are not always the most successful communicators. An application of systemic functional linguistics and an understanding of pragmatics helps to show this. As a language and communication training professional, I am struck by how important this idea is and how it could revolutionise the way we do our daily work. The Compliant Low Level email here was perhaps the most effective in achieving its goals.

I have chosen to use a process writing approach in my amelioration of the weaknesses I detected in my students' writing. The idea is to place more stress on the context of the message and the desired outcome of the email. Spontaneous responses are compared to delayed drafts and students are advised to map out the various players involved in the email, the motivation behind the prompt that they have received and to establish very clearly what it is they want out of the interaction.

Such an approach could lead to radical rewriting of the more hostile emails. Here is the original and an amended version of the Resistant High Level email:

Original

Dear Sabine,

Honestly I was quite surprised to receive such an order, as you know that we have been quite successful over the past two quarters and consistently increased our figures.

We know that the still on-going economic crisis and the current situation in Europe are having an immense influence on the sales of our other subsidiaries. Nonetheless, we do not feel included in this circle as the German market is working well.

Therefore, we do not see any need to fill in the aforementioned spreadsheet. We also would like to point out that we are confident in our abilities to keep on operating independently in the future, which means that we do not require Head Office's assistance in ensuring our efficient use of resources.

Kind regards

Amended

Dear Sabine,

Thank you for your email.

We share your concern about the recent global sales results. Here in Germany we have managed to maintain a strong sales profile, although we know how challenging the market has become due to the economic crisis.

As you can see from our quarterly reports, our efficient use of resources is a benchmark. We would like to offer you our purchasing, marketing and staffing figures so that they may become group best practice in the struggling regions.

We believe that strong regional management is the best way to optimise results in divergent locations. Could we schedule a meeting to discuss any future policy changes that may be in the pipeline?

Best regards.

...

The amended email differs in many features to the original. Firstly, the emotional language has been removed. Secondly, the rapport-building phrase “we share your concern” has become the macro-theme. Reference to the context of the whole company follows. The email is still positive in its appraisal of German performance, but the negative appraisal of the prompt email is gone. This time, the strategic choice to refuse to comply has been altered and this email promises to send the data. The way that this works is that if Germany is selected as a best practice region, it is unlikely that the Head Office will oversee its activities with as much attention. The manager’s preference for regional autonomy has been stated clearly and politely and there is now a request for a face-to-face meeting.

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